

# WHAT IS ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY?

## 1. OPENING

At the onset, a Methodological Remark: In trying to answer the question What is analytic philosophy? I shall follow two methodological principles. (1) The first was suggested by Peter Hacker and reads: ‘Any characterisation of “analytic philosophy” which excludes Moore, Russell and the later Wittgenstein, as well as the leading figures of post-War analytic philosophy [for us these are John Wisdom, Ryle, Austin, Strawson and Dummett], must surely be rejected.’ (Hacker 1996a, p. 247) The correct definition of analytic philosophy must cohere with the philosophy of its generally recognized founding fathers. (2) Any characterisation of ‘analytic philosophy’ which was massively represented in the history of philosophy in the past, must be rejected too. To be sure, Moore, Russell and Wittgenstein, and later also Ryle, Austin and their friends, were doing a type of philosophy which they consciously understood as *new*—it was intrinsically New Philosophy. The problem was only that this newness was difficult to identify and define.

## 2. MISLEADING DEFINITIONS

There is a host of definitions of analytic philosophy which fail to meet our two methodological requirements.

(a) *Analytic Philosophy is Philosophical Logic*. Many authors believe that despite all diffusion of the subject, analytic philosophy typically accepts the ‘theory of logical form as a regulating ideal relative to which all philosophical analyses are ultimately to be given’ (Cocchiarella 1987, p. 2). Originally, this understanding was introduced by Frege who persistently discriminated between true and apparent logical form. Since Wittgenstein, and partly also Russell, followed this practice, many believe that it is essential to the New Philosophy. To be sure, even the majority of the so called ‘soft analysts’, for example, Moore and Ryle, followed some axioms of the philosophical logic. There were, however, exceptions, such like John Wisdom and Friedrich Waismann. The two

had nothing to do with philosophical logic. This shows that this definition of analytic philosophy is not correct.

(b) *Philosophy of Language is prima philosophia*. Modification of this belief is the understanding, in Dummett's formulation, that

what distinguishes analytical philosophy, in its diverse manifestations, from other schools is the belief, first, that a philosophical account of thought can be attained through a philosophical account of language, and, secondly, that a comprehensive account can be only so attained. (Dummett 1993, p. 4)

The pre-analytical philosophers, in contrast, were directly interested in investigating thinking. A typical example is the philosophy of Descartes.

Dummett's main contention, with which I strongly disagree, is that analytic philosophy is post-Fregean philosophy:

Important as Russell and Moore both were, [their philosophy] neither was the, or even *a*, source of analytical philosophy. ... The sources of analytical philosophy were the writings of philosophers who wrote, principally or exclusively, in the German language. (Dummett 1993, p. ix)

On the contrary, I support the conventional view, expressed recently in Hacker 1996b, that Moore and Russell were the real founding fathers of analytic philosophy.

*Criticism of Dummett*. Fortunately, not all philosophers accept the thesis of the intrinsically linguistic character of analytic philosophy. Gordon Baker and Peter Hacker, for example, have noted some twenty years ago:

It is curious to find Dummett and Sluga joining hands in contending that Frege was the founder of analytic philosophy, *the characteristic tenet of which is that philosophy of language is the foundation of the rest of philosophy*. If 'analytic philosophy' includes the later Wittgenstein, Ryle, and Austin among its luminaries, if analytic philosophy of law includes Hart or Kelsen, if analytic philosophy of history includes Berlin or Dray, if analytic philosophy of politics includes Nozick or Rawls, then it is *not* a characteristic tenet

of the ‘school’. On the contrary, it would be denied, both in theory and in practice, by all these philosophers. (Baker and Hacker 1984, p. 7 n.)

In the last years there has been a strong tendency to accept this view. Today, even more authors are beginning to realise that what I read in Chisholm, Perry, Nozick, Kripke, Evans, Lewis, Kaplan, Putnam and Dennett are ‘conceptual analyses, which are unjustly called “language-analytical” ’ (Frank 1992, p. 419).

But it is also a historical fact that a variant of analytic philosophy has been developed which was expressly not a philosophy of language—Brentano’s school of descriptive psychology. The main innovation of this school was ‘the introduction of a new level of exactness into philosophy’ (Mulligan 1986, p. 86). Brentano did not believe that this exactness is to be introduced via analysis of language. According to him, ‘philosophy must be [simply] rigorous, scientific, exact and clear’, referring to possible counter-examples and counterfactuals. Talking about Kant’s ‘monstrous, in their arrogance, philosophems’ (Brentano 1975, p. 8) Brentano was (as if in G. E. Moore’s manner) above all against the unclarity in thinking and language. This was a tradition of ‘criticism of every sort of anti-scientific and obscure philosophizing’ (Mulligan 1986, p. 89), and nothing beyond that.

(c) *Analytic Philosophy is Anti-Speculative Philosophy*. Analytic philosophy is also not simply the opposite to *speculative philosophy*. To be sure, at the beginning, analytic and speculative philosophy were used (for example, by C. D. Broad and John Wisdom) not contrarily, but complementary with clear division in their competencies.

In truth, it was only after the Vienna romantic reading of the ideas of the *Tractatus* that the militant attitude of analytic philosophy towards speculative metaphysics was accepted. For Russell himself, philosophy essentially consists of speculations. When asked in 1960 What philosophy is?, he answered: ‘Philosophy consists of speculations about matters where exact knowledge is not yet possible.’ (Russell 1960, p. 11)

Apparently, ‘speculative’, as used by analytic philosophers, is not a descriptive term. This explains the readiness with which typically analytical philosophers often get fascinated with typical speculative philosophers. Wittgenstein’s interest in Spengler, Spranger, etc. is the best example for this.

(d) *Analytic Philosophy is Clarification*. In a famous paper, published more than a half a century ago, Henry Price used the concepts ‘clarification’ and ‘analysis’ as synonyms (see Price 1945, p. 3); to him, analytic philosophers are ‘clarificatory philosophers’. Unfortunately, this, too, is not a comprehensive definition of analytic philosophy. Indeed, while the latter was introduced as something totally new—as a revolution in philosophy—in the history of philosophy, already Epicures (among many others) ‘was so lucid a writer that in the work *On Rhetoric* he makes clearness the sole requisite’ (Diog. Laert., *Vitae philosophorum*, X,13). Later, philosophy was often seen as a clarification, for example, by the romanticists (Rousseau), by Hermann Lotze in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by the critical realist Hans Cornelius, or by the neo-Kantian Leonard Nelson.

(e) *Analytic Philosophy Consists of Analyses*. Some authors (see Hacker 1996a; Monk 1996) have recently underlined that analytic philosophy is characterised, above all, by making *analysis*.

Of course, analysis is an important part of the methodology of the New Philosophy. Nevertheless, there were exceptions. Gilbert Ryle, for example, was explicit that the New Philosophy is not occupied with analysis. (See Ryle 1949, p. 203)

Secondly, the method of analysis was introduced in philosophy not by Moore, or Russell, but already by Plato. Later, the method of analysis was often considered to be the philosophy proper. Thus, the ‘eighteen-century European philosophy, in general, and the German Enlightenment, prior to Kant’s “Critique of Pure Reason”, in particular, largely conceived of themselves as analytic philosophers’ in this sense (Engfer 1982, p. 10). This was characteristic for both rationalists (Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz), and empiricist (Locke, Berkeley, Hume). All they hoped to achieve conceptions of philosophical method with the help of mathematical methodology called *more geometrico*, or *arte combinatoria*.

(f) *Analytic Philosophy is Exact Philosophy*. Some authors accept that analytic philosophy can be defined as ‘exact philosophy’, meaning with this, above all, scientific philosophy (see Mulligan 1993, p. 133).

*Criticism*. First of all, there is an idiosyncratic use of the term ‘exact’, as used in ‘exact sciences’, which means that philosophic theories are expressed in precise terms and figures. Thus recently the term ‘exact philosophy’ was used ‘to signify *mathematical*

*philosophy*, i.e. philosophy done with the explicit help of mathematical logic and mathematics' (Bunge 1973, p. v). This certainly is not the comprehensive description of the authentic analytic philosophy.

Secondly, there were heroic efforts to build something like exact philosophy in the past which did not lead to establishing something similar to the authentic analytic philosophy. Such an attempt was made, for example, in 1877–8 in Germany with the launch of *Vierteljahrschrift für wissenschaftliche Philosophie*, under the editorship of Richard Avenarius. The program of the movement was: Philosophy must be occupied with scientific problems, the sources of which came from experience; it must be a theory of science and knowledge.

Historically, this program was a result of the final separation of church and state in Germany, reflected in the so called *Kulturkampf* in this country from after 1872. Unfortunately, after 1878, as a reaction to the increasing influence of the socialism in Germany (of the social democrats), the program was replaced by a new interest towards practical philosophy. Apparently, the authentic analytic philosophy emerged in a specific social context (which I shall discuss in § 4).

But I have also another, third, argument against defining analytic philosophy as 'exact philosophy'. One of the most prominent figures of the Oxford school of language philosophy, J. L. Austin was explicitly against the strive for exactness in philosophy.

## 2. WHAT IT IS?

Analytic philosophy can be defined at least in two perspectives: theoretical, and historical.

(a) *Historically*, analytic philosophy was introduced as a revolution in philosophy, as a New Philosophy.<sup>1</sup> This is an essential point of the British analytic philosophy, shared by the both (so called) Cambridge and the Oxford School. From this perspective, the most concise description of Russell's philosophy is: '[It] unmasked the great nineteenth-century metaphysicians as authors of a monstrous hoax played upon generations eager to be deceived.' (Berlin 1997, p. 604)

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<sup>1</sup> Some authors speak in this connection of 'philosophy's second Revolution', the philosophy of Descartes being its first Revolution (see Clarke 1997).

It is true that nowadays, ‘the movement has lost its former revolutionary ethos. It is no longer a philosophy fighting prejudices and superstitions. ... It has, to some extent, itself become an idol, enthroned in self- satisfaction and thus inviting new iconclasts.’ (von Wright 1993, pp. 41–2) This, however, is nothing but the present-day actualisation of the danger of ‘analytic scholasticism’, which was identified already by Frank Ramsey.

(b) *Theoretically*, analytic philosophy means ‘rigorous philosophy’.<sup>2</sup> Its aim is to produce theories, ideas, theses, which bear examination through *contra* arguments. Authentic analytic philosophy is ‘examined philosophy’: examined by the reason. Its best description was given by its founding father Russell in his paper ‘Mysticism and Logic’: This is a philosophy which uses ‘the harmonizing mediation of reason, which tests our beliefs by their mutual compatibility, and examines, in doubtful cases, the possible sources of error on the one side and on the other.’ (Russell 1918, p. 17) This is a procedure of ‘scientific restraint and balance’ (ibid., p. 20). In opposition, the Old Philosophy (called later, misleadingly, ‘continental’) produces theories, ideas, which do not bear such an examination. As a result, they are consistent only for sympathetic minds. Seen from counter-perspective, they quickly disintegrate.

This broad definition of the analytic philosophy suggests that it is something like an approach, not a doctrine. Recently, it was rightly noted that ‘what distinguished analytic philosophy is rather a particular way of *approaching* philosophical problems’ (Føllesdal 1996, p. 196).

This position is in accordance with the following fact. For decades it was claimed that analytic philosophy has a rather narrow subject-matter. In the last years, though, it got clear that using this approach, a wide variety of topics can be treated. As recently noted, ‘the sphere of interest of analytic philosophy began to widen out in the late fifties, and there are now few philosophical questions that have not fallen within its purview’ (Mulligan 1993, p. 139). This insight would be expendable if analytic philosophers paid more attention to Russell’s instructions that the New Philosophy ‘is, in essence, not

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<sup>2</sup> Ironically, this term was first used by Edmund Husserl in the title of his book *Philosophy as a Rigorous Science* (1910/11).

contrary to that spirit [to mysticism] . . . , but rather [to] the outcome of this very spirit as applied to the realm of thought' (Russell 1918, p. 21).

### 3. FACTIONS

A main difficulty by investigating the history of analytic philosophy is that it was essentially dualistic from the very beginning. Despite having a common strategy—philosophy must be rigorous!—the founding fathers of analytic philosophy, Moore and Russell, embraced different tactics for its realising: while Russell was scientifically oriented, Moore was mainly an analytic hermeneut (a term to be explained bellow). Indeed, they were not pure, but mainly so. Thus shortly before 1900 Russell urged Moore to embrace philosophical logic—and the latter really did so. On the other hand, despite being a scientific philosopher, Russell always believed that the New Philosophy has its own—called by him ‘analytic’—method, which, in fact, he understood as close to Moore’s analytic hermeneutics. In contrast, to the *later analytic philosophers*, Quine and Davidson (I consciously oppse them to the early analytic philosophers), Russell always was a bit analytic hermeneut. In particular, he believed that he has established a specific philosophical *method* with the help of which he can fight the old, ‘scholastic’ philosophy. Unfortunately, Russell failed to articulate it.

This dualism lies at the very bottom of the project for a New Philosophy and thus was of first rate importance for the future development of the movement. In particular, it gave rise to the later split in it in two wings: that of analytic hermeneutics, and that of reasons-supplying analytism, which I am going to discuss now.

(a) As already mentioned, *analytic hermeneutic* was introduced by Moore.<sup>3</sup> It was marked by his question: ‘What on Earth means this philosophical proposition?’ Moore thus repeatedly tried ‘to translate the proposition[s of philosophers] into the concrete’ (Moore 1917, p. 209).

This branch of the new strict philosophy was developed further during and immediately after the second world war by Wittgenstein, John Wisdom and Ryle, who

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<sup>3</sup> The very term was not used by Moore. G. H. von Wright introduced something like this term in his 1971, p. 181 n. 86.

always believed that their philosophy is something of a sly method. After 1955, Austin made a considerable retreat from this kind of analytic philosophy with his theory of speech-acts, which is something of a grand linguistic theory. About the same time, Strawson abandoned it altogether, advancing the linguistic ontology of his *Individuals*.

*Disadvantages.* Its main disadvantage was that this type of analytic philosophy easily (although not of necessity) turned into what was called in the time ‘philosophy without tears’: a general discussion of general topics. Another disadvantage: Lacking a specific subject, it was difficult to be taught in the overcrowded mass universities of the post-second world war world.

(b) *Reasons-supplying Analytism.* That is why the analytic approach to philosophy had a strong inclination to take another form: to build consistent *systems* of statements, every one of which has a reason (or ground).<sup>4</sup> No surprise on this point indeed. To be sure, it seems the most direct way to arrive at strict philosophy. In practice, it took quite different forms: of (i) philosophical logic; (ii) formal philosophy; (iii) philosophical grammar; (iv) formal ontology; (v) analytic epistemology; etc.

Historically, this form of analytism had three main forms: (1) Frege introduced it as a discipline investigating the strict deduction of mathematics, which, according to him, is identical with logic. (2) Russell developed it as an investigation of the ultimate structure of human experience, for example, in his *Our Knowledge of the External World*. (3) In the post-second world war Oxford, it took the form of investigating the structure of human concepts. This movement reached its pinnacle in 1959 with the publishing of Peter Strawson’s *Individuals* and of Stuart Hampshire’s *Thought and Action*. The period of ‘analytic anarchy’, reigning in Britain during and immediately after the ‘trouble times’ of the second world war, associated with the names of Wittgenstein, Ryle, and especially John Wisdom, and with the practice of what I already have called analytic hermeneutic, came to an end.

By the mid-1960s, the triumph of the reasons-supplying analytism became irreversible. In 1963 Michael Dummett, in his paper on (anti-) ‘Realism’, and Donald Davidson, in ‘Actions, Reasons, and Causes’, presented decisive arguments for a kind of

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. with this definition of analytic philosophy advanced by J. L. Cohen: ‘The unifying force in analytical philosophy is its engagement with the reasoned investigation of reasons.’ (Cohen 1986, p. 57)

an analytical counter-revolution. The answer of the analytic hermeneuts Ryle, Strawson (who until the mid-1950s was an analytic hermeneut) and Pears was a resignation into historic investigations: of Plato, Kant, and Russell, respectively. This tendency was topped by Michael Dummett's total historicising of analytic philosophy in his studies on Frege.<sup>5</sup>

*Disadvantages.* They are even more conspicuous than that of the analytic hermeneutics. Already before the second world war it was noted that one of the reasons for the attractiveness of analytic philosophy is that it suggests 'intellectual games with chess-like indifference. ... It is the sheer intellectual virtuosity of the performance which in large measure captivates student interest.' (Nagel 1956, p. 197)

Unfortunately, since the aim of this type of analytic philosophy is, first and foremost, to build strictly consistent systems of statements, it easily turns to a mind-game. What is characteristic of it is that the philosophical-game creates in the players the illusion that it is actually not a game, but rather something utterly 'serious'—very serious indeed.

The results are exemplars of what Ramsey has called 'analytic scholastics'. An example: when theory of thinking was replaced by theory of reference, all believed that a new age in philosophy began life. Unfortunately, the expected perspicuity didn't come. Today the 'current theories of reference are as dense and varied as reflections on the Trinity of Byzantine philology' (Danto 1980, p. 634).

#### 4. SOCIAL-POLITICAL CONTEXT

As already noted, decisive by the emergence of the real analytic philosophy was a series of social and political factors.

(a) *The Emergence of Animous Philosophical Communities.* Of special importance was the proneness to group in friendly and animous 'blocks'—this most typical product of the twentieth century.

G. H. von Wright has recently pointed out that analytic philosophy 'is yet by and large connected with Anglo-American cultural influence' (von Wright 1993, p. 634).

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<sup>5</sup> In *Wittgenstein's Place in Twentieth-Century Philosophy*, P. M. S. Hacker falsely took the reasons-supplying turn in the English analytic philosophy as the end of analytic philosophy as such (see Hacker 1996b). Besides, he states incorrectly that this took place in the mid-1970s. In fact, this was prepared in some developments from the mid-1950s and, as just shown, was made explicit in the mid-1960s.

Danto also found that ‘its spirit, tone, and technologies dominate not only in America and the Commonwealth, but throughout Western civilization, of which France is not altogether a part’ (Danto 1980, p. 615).

My claim is analytic philosophy was developed in the struggle for intellectual power between German and British philosophy in the first decades of this century. Its birth marked the victory of the latter over the former. In the literature it was already noticed that ‘Germany’s dramatic rise to power in the sixties of the last [nineteenth] century was impressive enough to make the leading British philosophers of the next generation—Caird, T. H. Green, Bosanquet, McTaggart—ardent Hegelians’ (Carr 1939, p. 70). This were the cultural grounds of the rise of the British neo-Hegelianism. Conversely, ‘in both Britain and America, the [first world] war accelerated the decline of idealism, dismissed as a German philosophy’. (Sluga 1993, p. 76) This gave rise to analytic philosophy.

To be sure, the *Zeitgeist* of the 1920s was marked off by a real race for philosophical supremacy in Europe. Paraphrasing Karl Marx, in Germany and Britain philosophers ‘united themselves’, in the same time opposing the current philosophy in the rival country. Thus, the last great German positivist, which for a long time has worked in parallel to Moore and Russell, the neo-Kantian Paul Natorp, turned to the tradition of German metaphysics (see Wetz 1993). Husserl too, after being up to 1913 essentially analytic philosopher, soon came closer to ‘speculative’ philosophy. After 1916 he moved to Freiburg where contributed decisively to grounding of the so called ‘Freiburg School’, which marked the bottom of the ‘deepening’ of the German philosophy. The most celebrated product of this school was Martin Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* (1927).

(b) *The Jena Connection*. In this context, the Anglo-Saxon fear of German intellectual invasion is easy to understand. It was especially strong between the two world wars. But also in 1971 Brian Magee and Anthony Quinton have expressed the worry that the Modern British Philosophy

moves from German Idealism to German Idealism. We started at the beginning of the century with a predominantly Hegelian orthodoxy from which a couple of brilliant young men broke away—and now in the 1970s were finding that the intelligent young have a renewed

interest in precisely those rejected philosophers: Hegel, the young Marx, and then more recent German Idealists. (Magee 1986, p. 29)

Magee and Quinton had in mind here the movement of the so called ‘radical philosophers’.

Fortunately, the worry of these two philosophers turned out to be groundless. Nevertheless, nowadays it becomes increasingly apparent that German idealism found the chance to enter the new philosophical movement—from within. What do I have in mind here? The first break came already with Wittgenstein, and this in two ways. First, he introduced in Britain the problem of ‘his Vienna’—the Vienna of Otto Weininger: how to reconcile ethics with logic. Secondly, in the *Tractatus* he considerably Fregeanized Russell’s logico-philosophy. It is not by accident that such a typically British philosopher like L. S. Stebbing regarded the *Tractatus* as essentially non-British.<sup>6</sup>

The real Teutonising of the English analytic philosophy came, however, only with the ‘full-blooded Kantianism’ (Strawson’s own words) of P. F. Strawson *Individuals* (1959), and especially with the radical Fregeanism of M. Dummett.

(c) *Analytic Philosophy and Modernity*. Ryle was the first to notice that analytic philosophy is a result of the institutional revolution which took place at the end of the last century. The main characteristic of this revolution was the radical secularising of society and education.<sup>7</sup> As a result, a new ‘professional philosophy’ emerged, the effect of which was the liberation from psychology<sup>8</sup> and also from political sciences, religious studies and economics.

In Britain, the reform in the study of philosophy can be tracked down to 1822, when ‘the system of honours and prizes’ was introduced. As Mark Pattison has noted in 1876, it turned philosophy into ‘mechanical work. . . . What the aspirant for honours requires

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<sup>6</sup> See Milkov 2003. The aftermath of these developments was a further linguisticalising of analytic philosophy in the Vienna Circle, which was canonised in America by Carnap and Tarski.

<sup>7</sup> As Ryle put it, ‘between the time when Bradley was an undergraduate and the time when I was an undergraduate the population of intellectuals, and particularly of academic intellectuals in the British Isles had changed from being a predominantly clerical to an almost entirely lay population.’ (Ryle 1956, p. 2.)

<sup>8</sup> Note in this connection the obsession of the logicians of the last century to be ‘free of any form of psychologism’.

is a *repetiteur*, who knows “the schools”.’ (Pattison 1876, p. 89) Having these developments in view, the fall of ‘speculative’ philosophy was easy to predict more than 120 years ago. As Pattison concludes at the end of his essay, ‘for speculative effort, there is no place in such a system.’ (p. 90)

Similarly, many major developments in analytic philosophy in the last fifty years were connected with institutional changes in British universities. These changes include, among other things, a dramatic rise in enrolment and the increase in number of faculties of philosophy after the World War II. All this required philosophy courses with a fixed subject in which it is evident to university authorities that there *is something* that had to be learned step-by-step: A subject that makes possible an *objective* and exact examination and jurying competing theses, papers, and books, just as it is done in the curriculum of other academic disciplines.

(d) *Ideologically*. Artur Danto has noted that the borders of analytic philosophy ‘are virtually coincident with the boundaries of capitalism’ (Danto 1980, p. 615). In this he is right. Contemporary liberal capitalism is piecemeal, down to earth, systematically proven by the reality of the market. In contrast, socialism was a grand theory, believing in a society organised according to a preliminary advanced, and accepted theory (ideology). In a sense, capitalism is analytical, the (real) socialism was (yes!) ‘speculative’.

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