

A difficulty in the foundation of Analytic Philosophy

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1. Introduction

The historian of Analytic Philosophy (AP) is faced with a twofold problem. First, it is controversial which pieces of philosophy fall under the denomination 'AP' with respect to subject matter, protagonists, methods used, positions regarding the history of philosophy, relations with science or everyday life, etc. Second, analysis as a method of philosophical investigation occurs in such multifarious ways with respect to its procedures and targets that 'analytic' scarcely is a suitable predicate to determine the specificity of a particular philosophical tradition. It has been argued that if one could solve this problem at all by determining families of partially overlapping features and pick out instances of philosophical work which have such features as belonging to AP, such a family resemblance approach should at least be supplemented by historical research to single out paradigmatic cases (Glock 2008 223).

However responsible such an approach might be, the ease with which it is often taken for granted that the historiography of AP sometimes boils down to a game of diversifying the philosophical tradition into AP and Continental philosophy (CP) could trigger one to try and find another approach in which the polemic flavour of this diversification is taken as something which should be reckoned with. Such an alternative way to deal with the abovementioned problem is to approach this game as representing a constellation in which the denominations 'AP' and 'CP' function in a programmatic declaration of philosophical values by self-styled analytic philosophers distancing themselves from a tradition which is deemed not to comply with these values. In this approach, the aforementioned denominations do not stand for distinctive philosophical traditions; as interdependent they rather signal a polemic stance which thus constitutes the Analytic-Continental Divide (ACD). In ACD each denomination is a construct intended to refer exclusively to AP as a revolutionary programme (Ryle 1956) versus

CP as its ‘Other’ (Glendinning 2006 35). This approach is well-suited to articulate prevalent controversies by employing a sort of antithetic procedure (Kant ²1787 421) which focuses on the dialectics involved in antagonistic claims concerning the self-understanding and other-ascriptions of diversifying features in the philosophical tradition by adherents of AP, rather than on systematic or historic aspects of this tradition itself. This approach seeks to establish a common ground of the seemingly contradictory assumptions which underlie these claims rather than to assess the soundness of the arguments advanced to support them.

In this paper this procedure is applied to a self-understanding and some other-ascriptions of AP in connection with some assumptions underlying its ‘fundamental axiom’ (section 2). It will be argued that these assumptions provide insufficient support for making the usual division between AP and CP (section 3).

2. The ‘fundamental axiom’ of Analytic Philosophy

The programmatic nature of the denomination ‘AP’, covering its goal and method and paying tribute to one of its founders, Frege, is apparent in Dummett’s declaration, which is received as AP’s best-known characterisation (Levy 2003 289). Dummett declares that philosophy’s goal is the analysis of thought—the study of) which is “sharply” to be distinguished “... from [the study of] the psychological process of thinking”—through the analysis of language (Dummett 1978 458). Moreover, since the declaration limits the domain of philosophy to studies which subscribe to the values it champions it is an instance of ‘Othering’, by which a segment of the philosophical tradition arbitrarily is reduced to “the idea of its own Other” (Glendinning 2006 13). This applies to Dummett’s implicit identification of the phenomenological school with CP (Levy 2003 290), none of which is an ongoing research programme in the sense in which AP takes itself it to be. Considering that a conception of AP insofar as it should conform to Dummett’s declaration hinges on the methodological connection between the analysis of thought (in an emphatic non-psychologistic sense) and the analysis of language, it are the assumptions underlying this connection that merit attention.

The idea advanced in Dummett’s declaration that the analysis of thought should proceed through the analysis of language is problematic at face value since it is not clear what here is

meant by 'analysis'. As Beany (2014) observes, "various conceptions of analysis compete and pull in different directions"; "reductive and connective, revisionary and descriptive, linguistic and psychological, formal and empirical elements all coexist in creative tension". In particular, it is unclear what in connection with Dummett's declaration is to be understood by the 'analysis of thought' over and above what is understood by the 'analysis of language'. What is clear, however, is that Dummett's declaration bears an assumption concerning a correlation which would obtain between thought and language so as to satisfy the condition that the analysis of thought should proceed through the analysis of language. On this assumption, the analysis focuses on those elements of language which are expressions of thought; it is restricted to sentences "in which we communicate [mitteilen] or state [behaupten] something" the truth of which can be assessed, i.e. declarative sentences (Behauptungssätze). The analysis which Dummett's declaration envisages neither has sentences which do not express thoughts as their objects (e.g. imperatives, optatives), nor is it interested in differences of linguistic expressions which do not affect the thought which is expressed in them (e.g. whether the expression is a sentence in the active or the passive mode). Finally, it does not take constituents of declarative sentences into account which do not contribute to the expression of a thought and which, incidentally, are deemed characteristic of poetic language (Frege 1918 33, 34-37; 1919 54).

The emphatic distinction between thought and the psychological process of thinking, moreover, marks off the purported anti-psychologism of AP. Reverting to Frege as the source of inspiration for Dummett's declaration again, this anti-psychologism is directed against the conflation of the psychological laws which govern the process of a thought's being held for true and the logical laws which govern a thought's being true (Frege 1918 30-31). Accordingly, it is the explication of the latter, with the exclusion of the former, which Dummett's declaration envisages. If the only route to the analysis of the thoughts which are governed by these logical laws should take the analysis of language as its point of departure, linguistic analysis will focus on declarative sentences insofar as they can be considered as the stating (das Behaupten) of the truth of a thought. The exclusion of the psychological aspects of these statements implies that on this account linguistic analysis should disregard all mentalistic connotations of "the grasping of the thought" in thinking, and the recognition of the truth of a thought in a judgement (Frege 1918 35), both of which the existence of a statement presupposes.

The “fundamental axiom” (Dummett 1993 128) of AP, which holds that philosophical questions are to be treated as “questions about the use of linguistic expressions” (Rorty 1967 11)—‘use’ here not to be taken in its technical ‘meaning-as-use’ sense—might by some be accepted as sufficiently presuppositionless, indeed as initially having “an air of triviality” (Smith 1989 29), so as to imply that the burden of proof lie with those who oppose it, as Rorty (1967 12) suggests. However, in view of the constraints the axiom imposes on the scope of the intended linguistic analysis it seems fair to say that the axiom “presupposes a particular framework of interpretation” of language (Beany 2014). For it is such a framework that is presupposed in the definition of AP according to Dummett’s declaration which should warrant that a distinction is made between the logic and the grammar of linguistic expressions; and that in accordance with this distinction priority, if not exclusivity is bestowed on logical grammar as the target of linguistic analysis. As such, Dummett’s declaration, rather than phrasing a mere methodological maxim is vulnerable to the objection that it is committed to “substantive philosophical theses” about the “nature of language” and the “nature of philosophy” (Rorty 1967 9).

An answer to this objection would consist in introducing the concept of ‘thought’ and explaining its correlation with language in a way which does not carry assumptions concerning their linguistic import. However, this is not what Frege does. Frege (1918 35) introduces this key concept recursively by determining thought as the object of thinking, i.e. the ‘grasping of the thought’; and he defines ‘stating’ (das Behaupten) as the declaration (Kundgebung) of a judgement, i.e. the ‘recognition of the truth of a thought’. Frege (1919 63n.) admits the difficulty caused by the split in the concept of ‘judgement’ of the concepts ‘thought’, i.e. the meaning (Sinn) of a sentence, and ‘truth’. This split, with the ensuing separation of the ‘grasping of the thought’ and judging (Frege 1919 55), poses a difficulty indeed. For, one can observe that it is because the link between thought and statement thus requires the mediation by the judgement, and hence, that the truth of a thought is carried over to the meaning of a statement only indirectly through the judgement that the inextricable bond between truth and meaning (Smith 1989 11) is severed. Frege (1919 63n.) addresses this difficulty by asserting that “one must here make a halt” with definition, stipulating that only a thought can be recognized as true (just as it was stipulated that the question of truth only can arise with respect

to a thought, and asserted that probably the “content of the word ‘true’ is one-of-a-kind and undefinable” (Frege 1918 32, 33)). The ambiguity about the logical and linguistic import of ‘judgement’ in Frege’s discourse, though, can illustrate the persistence of this difficulty (cf. Frege’s use of the word ‘thought’ in the logical sense of ‘judgement’; his urge to distinguish between “thoughts and judgement”; and his concession that the common sense meaning of ‘judgement’ is best captured by ‘act of judging’ (Frege 1918 33n., 35n., 1919 63n.)).

The above observation seizes upon metaphilosophical assumptions about language and about philosophy which underlie the fundamental axiom of AP. It challenges this axiom as suggesting, on a metaphilosophical level, that the analysis of the meaning of a statement is not exhausted by the logical analysis of the proposition which it is taken to express. In particular, that “to try to explain in general what it is to say something true ... , reference to belief or to assertion (and thereby to belief) is inescapable” (Strawson 1971 189). Specifically, the function of the judgement as it features in Frege’s discourse as the intermediary between a true statement and the truth of a thought indicates that on the level of linguistic analysis “[r]eference, direct or indirect, to belief-expression is inseparable from the analysis of saying something true (or false)” (Strawson 1971 189). Therefore, it cannot be maintained that the question of truth only can arise with respect to the meaning of a sentence but it has to be conceded that linguistic analysis can distribute the functions of meaning and truth among “the sentence or expression” and “the use of the sentence or expression” respectively (Strawson 1950 9).

3. The Analytic-Continental Divide

To clarify the relevance of the above observation for the argument of this paper. The intermediary function of ‘judgement’ in Frege’s metaphilosophical discourse, and the corollary language-logic ambiguity in his discussion of ‘judgement’ need not imply a commitment to psychologism of Frege’s explication of ‘the grasping of the thought’ (Smith 1989 25) any more than do e.g. Kant’s theory of judgement and the corollary product-process ambiguity in Kant’s discussion of the logical form of judgements (Kant ²1787 141). By contrast, the above observation allows a deconstruction of the ‘fundamental axiom’ of AP to the effect that the

constraints it imposes on the scope of linguistic analysis are shown to be unjustified. Consequently, this axiom neither provides an obvious support for the claim that “we do not need to look very far to see that not every sort of ‘analysis of language’ is here admissible” (Smith 1989 30) nor for the concern about the inclusion of some philosophers, notably Heidegger, on one hand, and the exclusion of paradigmatic representatives (Evans, Wittgenstein) on the other (Glock 2008 132; Levy 2003 289) in AP’s pantheon, even if the affinity of philosophical with linguistic terminology might induce a linguistic philosopher to think otherwise. Thus, if an analysis of language is admitted which operates with a notion of ‘negation’ (Verneinung) such that the negation of a thought is taken as not affecting its content (cf. Frege 1919 59) it is to be elucidated why an analysis of language which operates with a notion of ‘negation’ (Verneinung) such that the negation of a repressed content of a thought is taken as a condition of being conscious of that content (Freud 1925 373) should be inadmissible. In the absence of an elucidation of this sort one can hardly oppose an interpretation of a sentence like “I have not thought that.” as indicating someone’s being conscious of just that thought (Freud 1925 377).

Whatever one could say of Monk’s characterisation of Dummett’s axiom as “the basis for a piece of unashamed dogmatism” (Monk 1997 35), it points perhaps at a perspective for linguistic analysis as a critique of philosophical discourse, where ‘critique’ should be taken in the sense of the elucidation of philosophy’s own metaphilosophical assumptions.

Literature

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