

Cambridge University Press
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 Hans-Johann Glock
 Excerpt
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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Analytic philosophy is roughly 100 years old, and it is now the dominant force within Western philosophy (Searle 1996: 1–2). It has prevailed for several decades in the English-speaking world; it is in the ascendancy in Germanophone countries; and it has made significant inroads even in places once regarded as hostile, such as France. At the same time there are continuous rumours about the ‘demise’ of analytic philosophy, about it being ‘defunct’ or at least in ‘crisis’, and complaints about its ‘widely perceived ills’ (Leiter 2004a: 1, 12; Biletzki and Matar 1998: xi; Preston 2004: 445–7, 463–4). A sense of crisis is palpable not just among commentators but also among some leading protagonists. Von Wright noted that in the course of graduating from a revolutionary movement into the philosophical establishment, analytic philosophy has also become so diverse as to lose its distinctive profile (1993: 25). This view is echoed by countless observers who believe that the customary distinction between analytic and continental philosophy has become obsolete (e.g. Glendinning 2002; May 2002; Bieri 2005).

Loss of identity is one general worry, loss of vigour another. Putnam has repeatedly called for ‘a revitalization, a renewal’ of analytic philosophy (e.g. 1992: ix). And Hintikka has maintained that ‘the survival of analytic philosophy’ depends on a fresh start based on exploiting the constructive possibilities in Wittgenstein’s later work (1998). Searle is one of analytic philosophy’s most stalwart and uncompromising advocates. Yet even he concedes that in changing from ‘a revolutionary minority point of view’ into ‘the conventional, establishment point of view’ analytic philosophy ‘has lost some of its vitality’ (1996: 23). Small wonder that those more sceptical about analytic philosophy have for some time now been anticipating its replacement by a ‘post-analytic philosophy’ (Rajchman and West 1985; Baggin and Stangroom 2002: 6; Mulhall 2002).

Such a combination of triumph and crisis is by no means unprecedented. But it provides a fitting opportunity to address the nature of

analytic philosophy from a fresh perspective. In the 1970s, Michael Dummett opened a debate about the historical origins of analytic philosophy with his claim that it is 'post-Fregean philosophy' and that it is based on the conviction that the philosophy of language is the foundation of philosophy in general. Over the last fifteen years the pace of the debate has quickened. In addition to Dummett's *Origins of Analytical Philosophy* there have been several historical surveys of analytic philosophy (Skorupski 1993; Hacker 1996; Stroll 2000; Baldwin 2001; Soames 2003), detailed treatises on more specific aspects (e.g. Hylton 1990; Stadler 1997; Hanna 2001), and at least six collections of essays on the history of analytic philosophy (Bell and Cooper 1990; Monk and Palmer 1996; Glock 1997c; Tait 1997; Biletzki and Matar 1998; Reck 2002). If Hegel is right and the owl of Minerva takes flight only at dusk, analytic philosophy must be moribund. Now, death by historical self-consciousness may not be a bad way to go. Still, even if the analytic enterprise is to be wound up, the process ought to be less one-sided.

So far the debate about the nature of analytic philosophy has focused on two questions: who should count as the true progenitor of analytic philosophy? And at what point did the analytic/continental divide emerge?¹ There has been no sustained attempt in English to combine such *historical* questions with an elucidation of what analytic philosophy *currently* amounts to, and how it differs from so-called 'continental' philosophy. The first part of Jonathan Cohen's *The Dialogue of Reason: an Analysis of Analytical Philosophy* delivers on its sub-title. But it stands alone in its focus on the present, and it explicitly sets aside the historical dimension (1986: 6–7). Moreover, it has little to say about continental philosophy. Yet contemporary Western philosophy is notoriously divided into two traditions, analytic philosophy on the one hand, and continental philosophy on the other. In spite of more than forty years of attempted dialogue and synthesis, this rift is still very real, both philosophically and sociologically. Therefore an account of analytic philosophy should also contrast it with the main alternatives, and not just at the point of its emergence.

The relative neglect of the current status of analytic philosophy is surprising, and not just because of analytic philosophy's general reputation for being ahistorical. From Dummett onwards, the historical questions have been intimately linked to the question of what analytic philosophy is, and to passionate fights for the soul and the future of analytic philosophy.

¹ Dummett 1993; esp. chs. 2–4. Hacker (1996: chs. 1–2; 1997) and Monk (1997) join battle with Dummett on the first question, Friedmann (2000) implicitly contradicts him on the second.

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Introduction

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Most participants in the debate have tended to identify analytic philosophy with the kind of philosophy they deem proper, and I hope to show that this tendency has led to various distortions.

My ambition is to approach the issue in a fashion that may appear to be at once more analytic and more continental. More analytic in that it scrutinizes the status and purpose of demarcations between philosophical traditions, in that it assesses the pros and cons of various definitions of analytic philosophy in a dispassionate way, and in that it discusses some of the conceptual and methodological problems surrounding the debate. Although I shall not disguise the fact that I am an analytic philosopher, I want to tackle the issue without assuming that analytic philosophy must at any rate equal good philosophy. To put it differently, my main project in this book is to contribute to *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive* metaphilosophy. In this respect my project differs from the explicitly apologetic projects of Cohen (1986: 1–2), Føllesdal (1997) and Charlton (1991). This is not to say that I refrain from defending analytic philosophy against some objections. But I also press criticisms that strike me as well founded and conclude by suggesting ways in which contemporary analytic philosophy might be improved.

In any event, my views on how analytic philosophy should be pursued will be based on a prior attempt to understand what it actually amounts to. My approach to that issue may appear more ‘continental’ in that it pays attention to the historical background and to the wider cultural and political implications of analytic philosophy and its evolving conflict with other styles of philosophizing. I am not, however, exclusively or even primarily interested in the roots of analytic philosophy, but in what it *presently amounts to*, including the current state of the analytic/continental divide.

My perspective is also continental in a literal sense. As a German who has spent most of his working life in Britain, I can ill afford to be linguistically challenged, and I am aware of contemporary analytic philosophers outside of the Anglophone world. As is common in diasporas, these philosophers show a great degree of self-awareness, and over the last twenty years they have founded various associations and journals devoted to the promotion of analytic philosophy. The ‘mission statements’ of these ventures are an important source of information about the current self-image of analytic philosophy, and so are some writings for, against and about analytic philosophy that are available only in exotic languages like French, German and Italian. Due to the large scale of this investigation, I shall occasionally be forced to pronounce on historical, exegetical and

substantive issues without sustained argument. Some controversial claims will be defended in footnotes, but others will be backed simply by references to relevant literature. I hope, however, that it will become clear how my views on the general questions to which the book is devoted depend on my views on these more specific issues.

I WHY THE QUESTION MATTERS

As the title makes clear, my main focus is on ‘What *is* analytic philosophy?’ rather than ‘Where does analytic philosophy come from?’ Nevertheless, the second question will loom large, not just for its own sake but also because of its implications for the first. But do these two questions matter? In one sense, it is patently obvious that they do. Most professional philosophers hold strong views about them. Many of them confine the airing of these views to polite or impolite conversation. But there have also been statements in print on what analytic philosophy is, not least by those who officially declare the topic to be ‘unrewarding’ (e.g. Williams 2006: 155). These statements provide a second rationale for engaging with the issue. While most of them are instructive and interesting, many of them are false. And I know of no better reason for a philosopher to put pen to paper than the need to combat false views, irrespective of whether these are held by philosophers, scientists, historians or laypeople.

But should one try to replace these incorrect answers by correct ones, or should the questions of what analytic philosophy is and where it comes from simply be dismissed as unanswerable and confusing? Of course, the ultimate proof of that pudding is in the eating. But it is instructive to ponder whether one should give answering these questions a try.

Marx famously remarked ‘En tout cas, moi, je ne suis pas marxiste.’ Many people since have felt that labels for philosophical positions, schools and traditions are just empty words, superfluous at best, distracting and confusing at worst. Indeed, this sentiment has been particularly vivid among some eminent analytic philosophers, albeit for different reasons. Some early pioneers were suspicious of schools because they felt that all differences of opinion between philosophers could be resolved through the advent of analytic methods. In this spirit, Ayer wrote that ‘there is nothing in the nature of philosophy to warrant the existence of philosophical parties or “schools”’ (1936: 176, see also 42). Such hopes have faded. But even contemporary analytic philosophers associate schools and -isms with dogmatism and procrastination.

Thus Dummett deplores the analytic/continental divide as follows:

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Why the question matters

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Philosophy, having no agreed methodology and hardly any incontrovertible triumphs, is peculiarly subject to schisms and sectarianism; but they do the subject only harm. (1993: xi)

The most sustained analytic attack on dividing philosophers into schools or positions is earlier and hails from Ryle.

There is no place for 'isms' in philosophy. The alleged party issues are never the important philosophic questions, and to be affiliated to a recognizable party is to be the slave of a non-philosophic prejudice in favour of a (usually non-philosophic) article of belief. To be a 'so-and-so ist' is to be philosophically frail. And while I am ready to confess or to be accused of such a frailty, I ought no more to boast of it than to boast of astigmatism or *mal de mer*. (1937: 153–4)

There is a salutary message here, and not just for those who vilify Ryle as a narrow-minded and pig-headed 'logical behaviourist'. In the first instance, Ryle's professed 'repugnance' is directed at those who not only apply philosophical labels to themselves and their adversaries, but who employ them as weapons of philosophical argument. Such a procedure is annoying and widespread in equal measure, especially when it employs 'dismissal-phrases' (Passmore 1961: 2) such as 'crass materialism', 'naïve realism', 'wild idealism' or 'scholasticism'. Even where a clear sense attaches to a philosophical 'ism' and a particular thinker or theory definitely fits the bill, the argumentative weight must be carried by the reflections in favour of or against the position at issue.

Regrettably, we shall see that after World War II Ryle himself engaged in some of the most divisive 'them and us' and by implication school-building rhetoric in the history of the analytic/continental divide (ch. 3.1). More importantly, there is also a less unsavoury use of philosophical labels. We can classify thinkers, works, positions, or arguments without polemical or dialectical intent, namely for the sake of clarifying what their import is and what is at stake in any controversies to which they may give rise. Ryle concedes that

for certain ends, such as those of biography or the history of cultures (though not those of philosophy itself), it is often useful and correct to classify philosophers according to certain general casts of mind or temperaments. (1937: 157)

He has in mind dichotomies such as those between the 'tender-minded' and the 'tough-minded' (James 1907: 10–19, 118–20), between 'inflationists' and 'deflationists' (Berlin 1950), or between 'prophetic' and 'engineering' philosophers.

However, it does not go without saying that such classifications have no place in philosophy itself. For one thing, it is debatable (and will be debated

in chapter 4) whether there are hard and fast divisions between philosophy, the history of philosophy and the wider history of ideas. For another, even if there are clear and stable barriers between these disciplines, why should labelling not play a legitimate role in all of them? It would be wrong to reject that suggestion by appeal to the point I conceded just now, namely that philosophical labels carry no argumentative weight. Ryle for one would presumably concede that arguing is not the only activity in which philosophers legitimately engage. They also describe, classify, clarify, interpret, gloss, paraphrase, formalize, illustrate, summarize, preach, etc. Whether all these other activities must ultimately stand in the service of argument is a moot point. What is incontrovertible is that philosophy does not reduce to argument, even if the latter is conceived in a very catholic sense.

In fact, Ryle's rejection of 'isms' is based on two distinct lines of thought. According to the first, there cannot be different philosophical schools A and B which oppose one another on very fundamental issues of principle or method. For in that case supporters of A would have to present proponents of B neither as engaging in a *different kind* of philosophy, nor even as engaging in *bad* philosophy, but rather as *not doing philosophy at all* (and vice-versa).

So the gulf would be one between philosophers and non-philosophers and not between one set of philosophers and another (Astronomers do not boast a party of anti-Astrologists) . . . The members of the opposing school, championing as they do a philosophy which has the wrong general trend, are the victims of a mistake in principle, no matter what acumen they may exercise in questions of detail. Accordingly every school of thought which is conscious of itself as such must and does maintain that the opposing school or schools of thought are in some way philosophically unprincipled. For they are blind to those principles which make its philosophy *a* philosophy and *the* philosophy. (1937: 158, 161)

Alas, this argument rests on an assumption that is not just questionable but wrong. Ryle takes for granted that philosophy is on a par with the special sciences in that a sufficiently fundamental disagreement, notably one on principles, tasks and methods, simply disqualifies one of the disputants from being a practitioner of the subject. Unlike the special sciences, however, philosophy lacks any generally accepted methodological framework. The very nature of philosophy is itself a contested philosophical issue, and views about this issue are philosophically controversial. Although the investigation of the proper aims and methods of philosophy is nowadays known as 'metaphilosophy', it is not a distinct higher-order discipline but an integral part of philosophy itself (Tugendhat 1976: 17–18; Cohen 1986: 1).

The natural sciences have to establish their own fields and methods no less than philosophy. However, at least since the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, they have done so in ways which have been increasingly less controversial, with the result that disputes about the nature of the subject no longer play a significant role. Even in times of scientific revolutions, scientific debates do not usually concern questions such as what astronomy is. And an introduction to that subject will not be a survey of warring schools on this issue – as it might well be in philosophy.

There are two interrelated reasons for this tendency towards consensus. Someone who has different views about the *subject matter* of a particular science is simply not engaged in that particular field. And although there is methodological debate during scientific revolutions, someone with *radically* deviant *methods*, who for example totally disregards observation and experiment in favour of aesthetic considerations, simply ceases to be a scientist. In contrast, disparate intellectual activities, tackling different problems by incompatible methods and with different aims are still called philosophy. There are, for example, philosophers who would maintain that philosophy should strive neither for knowledge nor cogency of argument but for beauty and spiritual inspiration. Whether anyone who consistently avoids arguments of any kind still qualifies as a philosopher is another moot point. But there are philosophers, including analytic philosophers, who would deny Ryle's claim that the principles of 'any reputable "ism" are established, and only established, by philosophical argument' (1937: 162; see ch. 6.5 above).

This takes us to Ryle's second argument against the existence of genuinely distinct and genuinely philosophical schools and traditions.

The real root of my objection is, I think, the view that I take of the nature of philosophical inquiry. I am not going to expound it in full, but a part of the view is that it is a species of discovery. And it seems absurd for discoverers to split into Whigs and Tories. Could there be a pro-Tibet and an anti-Tibet party in the sphere of geography? Are there Captain Cook-ites and Nansenists? (1937: 156)

Well, yes, as it happens. There are supporters of Alfred Cook and supporters of Richard Peary regarding the question of who first reached the North Pole – Dr Cook-ites and Pearinists, if you please. And there were those who accepted and those who rejected the idea that there is a great land mass around the North Pole, that El Dorado exists or that there is a large continent in the Pacific Ocean. There is room for fundamentally opposing views *within any* area of inquiry, however factual or scientific it may be. In

the special sciences, such disputes are eventually settled. Those who still believe that the earth is flat or that π is rational will be disbarred from serious astronomy or mathematics, respectively. But even in the sciences this demarcation is not always clear cut. I for one am hesitant to decide whether, for instance, Lysenkoism or intelligent design theories are simply unscientific, or whether instead they are bad, ideologically motivated, science. I am not hesitant in affirming that no such katharsis has taken place in philosophy. There is literally no position on vaguely philosophical issues that has not been adopted by someone who is generally regarded as a philosopher.

Ryle's arguments for the futility of philosophical labels fail, therefore. This leaves a more general worry. Surely, what matters is not how a particular philosopher or work should be labelled. Who cares whether someone is an enthusiastic Hegelian, a moderate Bradleian, a last-ditch logical positivist, an unswerving pragmatist, a paid-up externalist, a callow consequentialist, or a ruthless eliminativist? What counts, surely, is the *content* of the work, what the philosopher actually wrote and whether the arguments are convincing and the conclusions true!

There is a clear danger in placing excessive weight on philosophical taxonomy and doxography. At the same time, classifications are indispensable to human thought. In order to make sense of things, whether they be material phenomena or intellectual productions, we need to distinguish them by their relevant features. And we do so by applying labels according to certain principles. Historical, exegetical and metaphilosophical investigations are no exception to this rule. Contrasts like Eastern vs Western philosophy, ancient vs medieval vs modern philosophy, empiricism vs rationalism, analytic vs continental philosophy, or labels like 'Thomism', 'Neo-Kantianism' or 'postmodernism' may be simplistic, potentially misleading and downright ugly. Yet some contrasts and some labels are essential if we are to detect important similarities and differences between various thinkers and positions, and if we are to tell a coherent story about the development of our subject. One can hardly engage in an assessment of the historical development and the merits of analytic philosophy without some conception of what it amounts to. What we need, therefore, is not a puritanical avoidance of classifications, but classifications that are scrupulous and illuminating.

Of course, some labels may have acquired so many different uses and connotations that their use casts more darkness than light. Lamenting the radically disparate explanations of the term 'deflationism', Wolfgang Künne counsels:

How the question should be approached

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In view of this terminological chaos, I propose to put the term ‘deflationism’ on what Otto Neurath once called, tongue in cheek, the *Index Verborum Prohibitorum*. (2003: 20)

Whether or not this is the way forward in the case of ‘deflationism’, however, it is not an attractive option with respect to ‘analytic philosophy’. The term is used much more widely than ‘deflationism’. Furthermore, that use has itself become an important part of the history of twentieth-century philosophy. Thirdly, whereas ‘deflationism’ is often employed with a *specific* meaning introduced *a novo*, ‘analytic philosophy’ is for the most part used consciously as a label with an established meaning, albeit one that may be vague. Fourthly, this vagueness notwithstanding, there is a general agreement on how to apply the term to an open class of cases. Finally, while there are several potentially clearer alternatives to the label ‘deflationism’, no such alternatives exist in the case of ‘analytic philosophy’. For these reasons clarification rather than elimination should be the order of the day.

2 HOW THE QUESTION SHOULD BE APPROACHED

There remains a strong *prima facie* case for the idea that analytic philosophy constitutes a distinct philosophical phenomenon, whether it be a school, movement, tradition or style. Peter Bieri has recently proposed the following gruelling experiment. For a whole month, read the *Journal of Philosophy* in the morning, and then Seneca, Montaigne, Nietzsche, Cesare Pavese and Fernando Pessoa in the afternoon. Slightly altering Bieri’s set-up, and making it even more sadistic, devote the afternoon sessions to Plotinus, Vico, Hamann, Schelling and Hegel, or to Heidegger, Derrida, Irigaray, Deleuze and Kristeva. I think that Bieri’s thought-experiment is illuminating. Yet it points in the very opposite direction of the conclusion he favours. According to Bieri, the distinction between analytic and continental philosophy is ‘simply a nuisance’ that cannot be tolerated (2005: 15). By contrast, I think that three things emerge from the proposed juxtapositions: first, there is at least some overlap concerning the problems addressed; secondly, at least some of these problems are philosophical by commonly accepted standards; thirdly, what goes on in the pages of the *Journal of Philosophy* is a distinctive intellectual activity, one that differs from the activities (themselves diverse) that the other figures engage in.

Small wonder then that the labels ‘analytic’ and ‘continental philosophy’ continue to be widely used. This holds even when it is suggested that the distinction is not a hard and fast one. In reviews, for instance, it is commonplace to read not just that a book or author is typical of either

the analytic or continental movement, but also that X is unusually sensitive or open minded ‘for an analytic philosopher’ or that Y is uncharacteristically clear or cogent ‘for a continental thinker’. The analytic/continental distinction colours philosophical perception even among those who do not regard it as absolute. More generally, there is no gainsaying the fact that the idea of a distinct analytic philosophy continues to shape the institutional practice of philosophy, whether it be through distinct journals, societies, job advertisements or institutes (see Preston 2007: ch. 1). For instance, it is common and perfectly helpful to explain to students that a particular department or course is analytic in orientation.

At a time when the analytic/continental contrast was emerging, R. M. Hare maintained that there are ‘two different ways’ in which philosophy is now studied, ways which ‘one might be forgiven for thinking ... are really two quite different subjects’ (1960: 107). And even though Dummett seeks to bridge the analytic/continental divide, this ambition is predicated on the observation that ‘an absurd gulf has formerly opened up between “Anglo-American” and “Continental” philosophy’; indeed, ‘we have reached a point at which it’s as if we’re working in different subjects’ (1993: xi, 193).

This *status quo* may be neither desirable nor stable. It *may* turn out that either analytic or continental philosophy are pursuing the path of the righteous, in which case followers of the other side should simply follow suit. Alternatively, it *may* transpire that there is a premium on philosophy constituting a unified endeavour, as Western philosophy did until at least the beginning of the twentieth century (see Quinton 1995b: 161). If philosophy works best as a cohesive discipline or at least a single area of discourse, barring factions and communicative barriers, then heads should be banged together, irrespective of whether one side has a monopoly on philosophical wisdom.

But even if the analytic/continental division is regrettable on philosophical or other grounds, it remains real. It must be a starting point for any attempt to get clear about the phenomenon of analytic philosophy, if only for the purpose of overcoming or deconstructing it. The question then is not whether it is legitimate and fruitful to inquire into what analytic philosophy is, but how this should be done.

Some characterizations of analytic philosophy are clearly intended as definitions of some kind, in the sense that *ipso facto* those included do and those excluded do not qualify as analytic philosophers (e.g. Cohen 1986: ch. 2; Dummett 1993: ch. 2; Hacker 1996: 195; Føllesdal 1997). Others are formulated baldly and without qualification – ‘Analytic philosophy is ...’, ‘Analytic philosophers do ...’, ‘An analytic philosopher