WHAT IS ANALYTICAL PHILOSOPHY?
Cesare Cozzo

Professor Von Wright is a prominent analytical philosopher who has written about the very notion of analytical philosophy. Other analytical philosophers are present here and they have their ideas on this notion. As for me, I believe that it is not at all an obvious notion. Sometimes it seemed to me that analytical philosophy does not exist, or at least that there is no single common feature shared by all so-called analytical philosophers and only by them, though there are many family resemblances. Therefore I thought I might take the opportunity of this meeting in honour of Professor Von Wright and propose as one of our themes for discussion, precisely the question: “what is analytical philosophy?” The natural start is Professor Von Wright’s description of analytical philosophy.

When Professor Von Wright writes about analytical philosophy, for example in the first chapter of *Explanation and Understanding*, he says that

> The logical positivism of the 1920’s and 1930’s was a main, though by no means the sole, tributary out of which grew the broader current of philosophical thought nowadays commonly known as analytical philosophy.¹

But he immediately adds that

> it would be quite wrong to label analytical philosophy as a whole brand of positivism.²

Indeed, Professor Von Wright himself has clearly shown that analytical philosophers can develop philosophical positions which are opposed to fundamental tenets of the logical positivists, like methodological monism or the covering law theory of explanation. Although I have a direct experience of Italian non-analytical philosophers who still think that logical positivism and analytical philosophy are the same thing, I think nobody among us would deny that analytical philosophy encompasses a much wider philosophical area.

What is then analytical philosophy? In the recent essay “Wittgenstein and the Twentieth Century” Von Wright wrote:

> In spite of the many tributaries which have, in the course of the years, emptied their waters into this river, I think it is right and illuminating to call analytical philosophy the mainstream of philosophic thinking in this century. In all its heterogeneity it retains the two features which I already mentioned as typical of its origin: the emphasis on logic and the alignment with science. It is, in short, the philosophy most characteristic of a culture dominated by scientific rationality.³

According to Von Wright, analytical philosophy is the philosophical representative of Modernity in the twentieth century. It continues the tradition of the Enlightenment. The constant tenet of this tradition is that philosophy should be a rational enterprise and that natural science and mathematics are models of rationality. Sometimes this

---

² Ibidem.
leads to the idea that mathematics and natural sciences “set the pattern” for philosophic thinking.

In this frame the development of mathematical logic as a tool for the foundation of mathematics provided a rigorous (mathematical) method which a philosopher can apply, as Professor Von Wright did, beyond the philosophy of mathematics. Thus, to answer our question concerning analytical philosophy, we have to highlight the connection between analytical philosophy and philosophical logic. Von Wright describes philosophical logic with the following words:

the applications of the tools of formal logic to the analysis of concepts and conceptual structures in which philosophers traditionally have taken an interest.

Thus analytical philosophy might be conceived as the view that old philosophical theses and problems should take the form of theses and problems treated by philosophical logic. In other words philosophical logic would be “ripe philosophy”. A similar view is put forward by another Swedish logician-philosopher Krister Segerberg in a paper where he deals with a topic of which Von Wright, as Segerberg emphasizes, is the father, the logic of action.

Before the gold can be mined (the task of philosophical logic) prospectors must explore the terrain (the task of philosophy). [...] Philosophizing prepares the way for rigorous theorizing. [...] There is no difference of purview between philosophy of action and logic of action: the questions are the same, what differs is the technique.

After the gold is found and the miners start working, prospectors become superfluous in a mine. Thus the metaphor of philosophers as prospectors and philosophical logicians as miners suggests that in any particular field (e.g. the philosophy of action) philosophical logic (e.g. the study of systems like dynamic logic) ought to replace old non-formal philosophy. I don’t know whether this is what Segerberg really means. Anyway, I call it strong philosophical logicism. The idea that logical systems replace philosophical perplexities is to some extent also in the view of philosophy as “logical reconstruction” which, according to his “Intellectual Autobiography” (1972-73), Von Wright adopted in his early work on induction and probability, and then abandoned:

the end of the philosophical inquiry was to silence a felt disquietude of the mind by making us realize that there was nothing to be uneasy about. The means to this end consisted in displaying clearly certain obscure logical structures. The result of the displaying or laying bare of structures was a piece of logic: a logic of demonstrative induction, a logic of probability etc.

---

Weak philosophical logicism might be the different view that, although philosophers should try to make rigorous their thinking by exploiting the methods of formal logic, and thus philosophical logic is an important part of the philosopher’s work, still one never reaches a point in which the non-formal and non-mathematical thinking on a key philosophical notion is fully replaced by philosophical logic. Why is it impossible to reach such a point? I think that another quotation from one of Von Wright’s writings can help us:

A philosopher is concerned with fundamentals. [...] The basic concepts which he studies are mostly familiar to all of us. The words “time” or “truth” or “meaning” or “good”, for example, belong to every man’s vocabulary, and we learn to use them in childhood or early adolescence. It is only when we stop to reflect or are called upon to give an account of their meaning and use, that we feel puzzled.\(^8\)

In the quoted essay “Time, Change and Contradiction” Von Wright develops a formal theory of some temporal concepts. But the origin of a philosophical logic of time is, Von Wright says, a notion (time) which is most familiar to all of us. The aim of philosophizing, and also of a logic of time is a clarification of that pre-theoretic notion. The same would hold for a theory of truth, of meaning, of good, of justice, and so on. One can plausibly think that the non-formal reflection on these important familiar notions ought not to be only at the beginning of the formal enterprise; on the contrary it should constantly accompany the development of formal theories. Besides internal coherence, the principal way of checking whether a philosophical logic is on the right track is to compare its results with our common pretheoretical intuitions, judgments and well established practices which involve these familiar fundamental notions and precisely in this comparison there is always room for a non-formal philosophical reflection.

Without an agreement with such pretheoretical data (as we may call them) philosophical logic, though rigorous, would be empty. Without a rigorous theory, on the other hand, pretheoretical data would be blind. We need a theoretical clarification of these fundamental notions also because there are occasions in which we don’t know how to apply those notions or we are unsure. In these cases the philosophical theory can guide us. Then the theory (differently from an empirical scientific theory) generates new data in agreement with itself. Here I have in some way repeated an idea already defended in different contexts by Nelson Goodman,\(^9\) John Rawls\(^10\) and Dag Prawitz,\(^11\) the idea that between philosophical theorizing on the one hand, and intuitions, judgments, and practices involving philosophical fundamental pre-theoretical notions on the other hand, there should be a reflective equilibrium. This is a conception of analytical philosophy which is very different, and, in my opinion, more plausible than the view which I called “strong philosophical logicism”. It is a wide and noncommittal conception of philosophy, because it involves only methodological requirements: the analytical philosopher ought to be rigorous, he/she ought to make clear and precise his/her theses and concepts and ought to give precise arguments to

---


\(^9\) N. Goodman, Fact, fiction, and forecast, Bobbs Merrill, Indianapolis, New York, Kansas City, 1955, 1965\(^2\).


support them, possibly using philosophical logic as a tool in this effort to be rigorous, but also resorting to a non-formal consideration of pretheoretical data concerning fundamental philosophical notions. After all, in this sense, Analytical Philosophy is simply rigorous philosophy aiming at reflective equilibrium. Philosophical logic is an important aspect of rigorous philosophy, but one should be careful to avoid a too narrow notion of rigour. Also the notion of “logic” is changing. In particular it seems to me clear that nowadays to think of rigorous theorizing and of logic only as the study of formal systems (meant as fixed sets of formal rules) or model-theoretic structures would be narrow-mindedness.

It seems to me that also the view of philosophy as “explication of conceptual intuitions” which Professor Von Wright defends in his “Intellectual Autobiography” is similar to this conception of rigorous philosophy aiming at reflective equilibrium, especially when he writes:

To the concepts in which the philosopher takes an interest there normally answer words in ordinary language. The philosopher experiences their use as somehow unclear or in need of systematization [...] what the philosopher does in relation to language could, with due caution, be described as filling out gaps, or lacunas, in existing usage. This he cannot do by consulting usage – since there is none to be consulted. If he can be said to consult anything at all, this would be his own ‘intuitions’ about the concepts under discussion [...] But there exists a ‘negative test’. This is afforded by what the language community, by and large, accepts or regards as correct usage. This the philosopher has no right to change. It defines, so to say, the borders of the gap which he tries to fill. Thereby it determines his very problem. The violation of usage would mean a distortion of the conceptual situation and be a sign that the philosopher, not language, has gone wrong.13

Philosophy as “explication of conceptual intuitions” – Von Wright wrote – can be distinguished from the activity of a logician or mathematician and also from the activity of a natural or social scientist. But also on the latter point many analytical philosophers would not agree. In his paper on “Wittgenstein and the Twentieth Century” Von Wright mentions Brentano as one of the near ancestors of analytical philosophy and quotes from his Habilitationsschrift:

“vera philosophiae methodus nulla alia nisi scientiae naturalis est”.15

This quotation which equates the methods of philosophy and natural science makes the reader think of the revival of naturalism in american philosophy since Quine’s “Epistemology Naturalized”.16 The naturalistic view which Quine defends

“does not repudiate epistemology, but assimilates it to empirical psychology”.17

---

13 Ibidem.
14 Cfr. ibidem, p. 53.
Today many philosophers who consider themselves analytical philosophers think of their own activity in accordance with such a naturalistic conception, and thus under the banner of cognitive science run counter to the firm antipsychologistic convictions of early analytical philosophers, like Frege, Wittgenstein and the logical positivists.\(^\text{18}\)

Then we have Michael Dummett’s very different notion of analytical philosophy. According to Dummett, analytical philosophy is based on the thesis of the priority of the (non-psychologistically conceived) theory of meaning over the rest of philosophy, i.e. the thesis that

\[
\text{the philosophy of thought can be approached only through the philosophy of language}\]

This might be called \textit{language-centred philosophy}. And then the problem arises, to what extent Richard Rorty is right in describing such a \textit{language-centred} analytical philosophy as \textit{foundational philosophy}, that is

an armchair discipline capable of discovering the ‘formal’ [...] characteristics of any area of human life, [which] enabled philosophy professors to see themselves as presiding over a tribunal of pure reason able to determine whether other disciplines were staying within the legal limits set by the “structure” of their subject matters\(^\text{20}\)

Very briefly and roughly I have listed at least six conceptions of philosophy: philosophical logicism, rigorous philosophy aiming at reflective equilibrium, philosophy as explication of conceptual intuitions, naturalized philosophy, language-centred philosophy, linguistic foundationalism in Rorty’s sense. Since there is no time, I will put an end to this talk with two provocative questions. Is there a characteristic feature, which these different conceptions of philosophy have in common? What is analytical philosophy?

