

I. Introduction: The Rise of Analytic Philosophy of Religion

There is little need to explain or defend the unique status which human language has occupied and continues to occupy in most fields of human endeavor. Certainly no other human device or invention has influenced the development of human civilization more than human language. Language is doubly important for any intellectual or philosophical pursuits – including, and perhaps especially, philosophy and the philosophy of religion. Every major investigation into any of the many areas of the philosophy of religion and every one of the many disputes among different schools of thought and different individual thinkers have depended upon the sophistication and complexity as well as the subtleties and fine details that human language allows. The same is true, of course, to a greater or lesser extent, for all philosophical inquiry; however, the use of language to engage in any intellectual pursuit poses unique and serious questions – both methodological and substantive.

CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS AND LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

Perhaps the most fundamental and significant role that language has in any area of inquiry is the role that it plays in the process of conceptual analysis – the analysis and clarification of the fundamental concepts, categories, and distinctions used in any inquiry. Bracketing and avoiding for the moment any mentalistic or ontological questions and concerns about the nature or existence of concepts or ideas, it is unarguable that whatever the nature of such concepts and categories, our only philosophical access to them is through language – through the names, terms, words, or sentences in terms of which such concepts are formulated, expressed, and communicated. Thus, any attempts at conceptual clarity and understanding, as well as any attempts at understanding and resolving conceptual confusions and disagreements, depend upon language and linguistic analysis.

Much of twentieth-century analytic philosophy has focused upon linguistic analysis for the purpose of conceptual analysis. An investigation into the nature and status of language and the theories of meaning and reference for the words, phrases, and sentences of which language is composed is directed at a clarification and better understanding of the “underlying” concepts. The same has also been true of much of twentieth-century analytic philosophy of religion. Twentieth-century

Anglo-American analytic philosophy is characterized by a central and essential dependence upon language and linguistic analysis; however, in comparison with other periods in the history of philosophy, analytic philosophy's concern with language is best explained as the result of an increase in emphasis upon and recognition of the importance of language.

LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS AND THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

Certainly other periods in the history of philosophy and major figures in earlier periods in the history of philosophy have engaged in linguistic and conceptual analysis. For example, when Aristotle undertakes what is perhaps the most important and crucial part of his philosophical inquiry into the nature of substance (ousia) at the beginning of Book Lambda of his *Metaphysics*, he engages in what most contemporary analytic philosophers would recognize as straightforward linguistic analysis, giving examples of how we talk and how we describe different events and activities to clarify and drive home the distinction between substance and predicates. Again, in *On Interpretation*, Aristotle develops a theory of meaning for propositions in which he adopts the distinction between a sentence and a proposition – a distinction that most people associate only with twentieth-century positivism. A sentence is meaningful not by “natural means,” Aristotle says, but by “convention.” And, he continues, “every sentence is not a proposition; only such are propositions as have in them either truth or falsity. Thus a prayer is a sentence, but is neither true nor false.” (17a)

Similarly, most of the medieval scholastics were continually engaged in conceptual analysis. As most scholars are well aware, the scholastics were particularly concerned about language and its importance for any attempt to describe God or to apply any of the traditional theistic predicates to God. For example, in his *Summa Theologica* (1.13.5), Thomas Aquinas goes to great lengths to develop a theory of analogy to explain how we can meaningfully attribute the same predicates, such as “good” or “wise,” to both men and God. Aquinas pays careful attention to our use of language, and he uses the distinctions found in language to clarify the ways in which we use language to talk about humans in contrast with the ways in which we use language to talk about God. Again, most contemporary analytic philosophers (while perhaps not agreeing with Aquinas's resulting doctrine of divine analogy) would recognize this line of inquiry as simple, straightforward linguistic and conceptual analysis. Thus, it is easy to demonstrate how various figures and periods in the history of philosophy and theology have been concerned with and engaged in conceptual and linguistic analysis.

THE RISE OF LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

In the twentieth century, the accompanying specific problems of meaning, reference, proper names, descriptions, meaningfulness, and communication have all become explicit parts of that general concern. There is no doubt, however, that for much of the English-speaking world of philosophy, the first half of the twentieth century saw the concern with problems associated with the meaningfulness of language and with the clarification of concepts reach an unprecedented height. The increased emphasis on linguistic and conceptual analysis is one of those rare instances in the history of philosophy that can be

clearly and undisputedly traced both to its initial sources and to the continuing influences that kept linguistic and conceptual analysis at the forefront of the philosophy of religion for over a half a century. The rise of analytic philosophy resulted from what Gilbert Ryle has called “The Revolution in Philosophy”¹ and what Richard Rorty has called “the Linguistic Turn.”² The period is what has become known as “the Age of Analysis.”³

Although there are many similarities in methodology, interests, emphases, and results among various philosophers who are commonly regarded as belonging within the analytic tradition, analytic philosophy is not and has never been monolithic. There are also widespread and significant differences among analytic philosophers concerning their methodology, interests, emphases, and results. All in all, analytic philosophy has been a very heterogenous “movement.” Although there are some common themes, there is also as much variety among analytic philosophers in their fundamental philosophical commitments and positions as there has been among idealists or realists or theologians; consequently, it is misleading to talk about “analytic philosophy” as a single movement in philosophy without recognizing the significant differences among analytic philosophers. This variety has very important repercussions for the philosophy of religion – some of which are more serious and threatening than others. As we shall see, some forms of analytic philosophy have proven to be very sympathetic to the philosophy of religion and have actually provided a philosophical mechanism for responding to other more radical and hostile forms of analytic philosophy. The only way to understand and appreciate the different ways in which the philosophy of religion has been impacted by analytic philosophy is to examine some of the most significant differences among some of the leading figures of what is commonly called analytic philosophy to see how these differences impacted the philosophy of religion.

THE LINGUISTIC TREES AND THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOREST

It is a common misunderstanding among the “uninitiated” – among those who view analytic philosophy unsympathetically from “the outside” – that it is *only* concerned with language. Some critics complain that analytic philosophy has abandoned any semblance or pretext of “doing philosophy” in any traditional sense by addressing the really important, traditional problems of philosophy that determine how people live their lives. As we shall see, only in rare instances of some few individual analytic philosophers is there some modicum of truth in this accusation. The work of figures within the analytic tradition is representative of the classic adage about the difference in perspective between seeing the trees and the forest. Often, the very detailed and sometimes technical work of analytic philosophers focuses upon specific and individual trees with little or no attention given to the more general, sweeping, and admittedly more satisfying view of the forest. However, in nearly every occasion, and certainly in the occasion of the major figures in the analytic tradition, there is some interest in some philosophical

¹ Gilbert Ryle, *The Revolution in Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1957).

² Richard Rorty, *The Linguistic Turn* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

³ Morton White, *The Age of Analysis* (New York: Mentor Books, 1955).

problem of larger scope, some aspect of which is approached by, or understood by, or attacked by, or defended by the analysis of language and concepts. "Doing" analytic philosophy takes both its name and its method from the sciences in which analysis is understood as the process of understanding larger problems or compounds in the world by dividing them into their smaller components. The idea is to understand the whole by understanding the more manageable parts, and even in those cases where the whole might be greater than the sum of its parts, such a claim is recognized and understood only by a careful analysis of the parts. In general then, analytic philosophy has little sympathy for the approach to philosophy that is based upon a priori reasoning and that results in general metaphysical theories that ignore the "dirty work" of careful attention to particular details.

Generally, with only some possible rare exceptions, the concern among analytic philosophers with linguistic and conceptual analysis has seldom been regarded as "an end in itself"; rather, analytic philosophers have used the analysis of language and concepts to try and "get at" philosophical issues and problems, which, in most cases, are the same traditional philosophical problems with which philosophers have been concerned since the time of Thales. It is true that, on the whole, certain patterns emerge from the works of many analytic philosophers that are generally unsympathetic to certain approaches to philosophy and to certain kinds of philosophical theories. Such a pattern is particularly easy to identify in the case of philosophy of religion. As a result of the influence of analytic philosophy in the English-speaking philosophical world, philosophy of religion definitely changed its character from what it had been in the nineteenth century. To understand this change and how and why it took place, we need to understand a little about the history of philosophy and how and why analytic philosophy itself developed.⁴

ABSOLUTE IDEALISM AND THE RISE OF ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY

John Stuart Mill, a giant of a philosophical figure in England in the middle of the nineteenth century, had continued in the tradition of "British empiricism." However, following his death in 1873, English philosophy was quickly dominated by Neo-Hegelianism, one of the leading proponents of which was F. H. Bradley at Oxford. According to Bradley, since the only "real" thing that exists is the Absolute and everything else is an illusion, what appear to be individual, discrete objects in the world – for example, my truck and my fishing rods – are really "internally" and "organically" related into a cosmic whole.

⁴ There are several detailed treatments of the rise of analytic philosophy and philosophical analysis, including A. J. Ayer, *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984); John Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy* (London: Duckworth, 1957); Gilbert Ryle, *ibid.*; G. J. Warnock, *English Philosophy since 1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958); Morris Weitz, *Twentieth-Century Philosophy: The Analytic Tradition* (New York: Macmillan, 1966); and Morton White, *ibid.* See also *The Revolution in Philosophy*, edited by D. F. Pears (New York: Macmillan, 1955), and J. O. Urmson, "The History of Analysis," *La Philosophie analytique* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1962). Translated and reprinted in Rorty, *ibid.*, pp. 294-301.

THE DOCTRINE OF INTERNAL RELATIONS

Bradley's speculative monistic and holistic view of things is built upon a theory of internal relations according to which every genuine characteristic or predicate of an object is "internal," that is, essential, to the nature of that object. The theory of internal relations serves as an illustrative example and precursor of the kind of philosophical inquiry that was to develop with the rise of linguistic analysis. Of what does the identity of an object consist? What makes one object different from or similar to another? From all appearances, a fishing rod is a different object from a pickup truck, but, Bradley claims, that is just so much the worse for appearance. In his famed major work, *Appearance and Reality*, Bradley insists that such appearances are deceiving and that "underneath" and in "reality" everything is one. The One is spiritual. The One can be known only through reason and not through sense experience. The problem with our common understanding of the world, according to Bradley and the other Neo-Hegelians, is that we do not understand how everything is internally related, and what appear to us to be differences between different objects are simply the result of our ignorance and our failure to understand the Absolute. All predicates, characteristics, and relations are defining of an object according to the doctrine of internal relations; so, for example, not only what we normally regard as the individual, physical characteristics of an object but also its location in space and time are all essential parts of what makes an object what it is. A particularly illuminating metaphor that can be used to explain the doctrine of internal relations is in the lines from Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem "Flower in a Crannied Wall," in which the speaker says to the flower,

Flower in the crannied wall,
I pluck you out of the crannies,
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,
Little flower – but *if* I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is.

The suggestion in the poem is that the flower is essentially related to everything else in the universe – spatially and temporally and causally – to the most distant stars and to the most ancient times. If one is to understand completely the flower, then one must understand what is responsible for the flower being the flower, that is, the flower's connectedness and relatedness to everything else. To understand one thing is to understand the entire universe because of the organic monism which makes everything One. Everything is what it is because of its relation to everything else; so, everything is essentially the same thing – the organic Whole, the Absolute.

So far as the philosophy of religion is concerned, the rise of Neo-Hegelian, absolute idealism in England and the United States at the end of the nineteenth century was important for at least two reasons. First, the content or substance of the theory of absolute idealism provided a philosophical counterbalance to the rise of science and the accompanying materialism and mechanism that was beginning to spread across Europe and the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. Secondly, the completely a priori method and grand, general, sweeping



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