

# Analytic and Linguistic Philosophy

Contributed by Mohammad Shadmani  
Tuesday, 29 May 2007

Analytic and Linguistic Philosophy, 20th-century philosophical movement, dominant in Britain and the United States since World War II, that aims to clarify language and analyze the concepts expressed in it. The movement has been given a variety of designations, including linguistic analysis, logical empiricism, logical positivism, Cambridge analysis, and "Oxford philosophy." The last two labels are derived from the universities in England where this philosophical method has been particularly influential. Although no specific doctrines or tenets are accepted by the movement as a whole, analytic and linguistic philosophers agree that the proper activity of philosophy is clarifying language, or, as some prefer, clarifying concepts. The aim of this activity is to settle philosophical disputes and resolve philosophical problems, which, it is argued, originate in linguistic confusion.

## II APPROACHES

A considerable diversity of views exists among analytic and linguistic philosophers regarding the nature of conceptual or linguistic analysis. Some have been primarily concerned with clarifying the meaning of specific words or phrases as an essential step in making philosophical assertions clear and unambiguous. Others have been more concerned with determining the general conditions that must be met for any linguistic utterance to be meaningful; their intent is to establish a criterion that will distinguish between meaningful and nonsensical sentences. Still other analysts have been interested in creating formal, symbolic languages that are mathematical in nature. Their claim is that philosophical problems can be more effectively dealt with once they are formulated in a rigorous logical language. By contrast, many philosophers associated with the movement have focused on the analysis of ordinary, or natural, language. Difficulties arise when concepts such as time and freedom, for example, are considered apart from the linguistic context in which they normally appear. Attention to language as it is ordinarily used is the key, it is argued, to resolving many philosophical puzzles.

## III EARLY HISTORY

Linguistic analysis as a method of philosophy is as old as the Greeks. Several of the dialogues of Plato, for example, are specifically concerned with clarifying terms and concepts. Nevertheless, this style of philosophizing has received dramatically renewed emphasis in the 20th century. Influenced by the earlier British empirical tradition of John Locke, George Berkeley, David Hume, and John Stuart Mill and by the writings of the German mathematician and philosopher Gottlob Frege, the 20th-century English philosophers G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell became the founders of this contemporary analytic and linguistic trend. As students together at the University of Cambridge, Moore and Russell rejected Hegelian idealism, particularly as it was reflected in the work of the English metaphysician F. H. Bradley, who held that nothing is completely real except the Absolute. In their opposition to idealism and in their commitment to the view that careful attention to language is crucial in philosophical inquiry, they set the mood and style of philosophizing for much of the 20th century English-speaking world. For Moore, philosophy was first and foremost analysis. The philosophical task involves clarifying puzzling propositions or concepts by indicating less puzzling propositions or concepts to which the originals are held to be logically equivalent. Once this task has been completed, the truth or falsity of problematic philosophical assertions can be determined more adequately. Moore was noted for his careful analyses of such puzzling philosophical claims as "time is unreal," analyses that then aided in determining the truth of such assertions. Russell, strongly influenced by the precision of mathematics, was concerned with developing an ideal logical language that would accurately reflect the nature of the world. Complex propositions, Russell maintained, can be resolved into their simplest components, which he called atomic propositions. These propositions refer to atomic facts, the ultimate constituents of the universe. The metaphysical view based on this logical analysis of language and the insistence that meaningful propositions must correspond to facts constitute what Russell called logical atomism. His interest in the structure of language also led him to distinguish between the grammatical form of a proposition and its logical form. The statements "John is good" and "John is tall" have the same grammatical form but different logical forms. Failure to recognize this would lead one to treat the property "goodness" as if it were a characteristic of John in the same way that the property "tallness" is a characteristic of John. Such failure results in philosophical confusion.

## IV WITTGENSTEIN AND THE LOGICAL POSITIVISTS

Russell's work in mathematics attracted to Cambridge the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who became a central figure in the analytic and linguistic movement. In his first major work, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921; trans. 1922), in which he first presented his theory of language, Wittgenstein argued that "all philosophy is a critique of language" and that "philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts." The results of Wittgenstein's analysis resembled Russell's logical atomism. The world, he argued, is ultimately composed of simple facts, which it is the purpose of language to picture. To be meaningful, statements about the world must be reducible to linguistic utterances that have a structure similar to the simple facts pictured. In this early Wittgensteinian analysis, only propositions that picture facts—the propositions of science—are considered factually meaningful. Metaphysical, theological, and ethical sentences were judged to be factually meaningless. Influenced by Russell, Wittgenstein, Ernst Mach, and others, a group of philosophers and mathematicians in Vienna in the 1920s initiated the movement known as logical positivism (see Positivism). Led by Moritz Schlick and Rudolf Carnap, the Vienna Circle initiated one of the most important chapters in the history of analytic and linguistic philosophy. According to the positivists, the task of philosophy is the clarification of meaning, not the discovery of new facts (the job of the scientists) or the construction of comprehensive accounts of reality (the misguided pursuit of traditional metaphysics). The positivists divided all meaningful assertions into two classes: analytic propositions and empirically verifiable ones. Analytic propositions, which include the propositions of logic and mathematics, are statements the truth or falsity of which depend altogether on the meanings of the terms constituting the statement. An example would be the proposition "two plus two equals four." The second class of meaningful propositions

includes all statements about the world that can be verified, at least in principle, by sense experience. Indeed, the meaning of such propositions is identified with the empirical method of their verification. This verifiability theory of meaning, the positivists concluded, would demonstrate that scientific statements are legitimate factual claims and that metaphysical, religious, and ethical sentences are factually empty. The ideas of logical positivism were made popular in England by the publication of A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* in 1936. The positivists' verifiability theory of meaning came under intense criticism by philosophers such as the Austrian-born British philosopher Karl Popper. Eventually this narrow theory of meaning yielded to a broader understanding of the nature of language. Again, an influential figure was Wittgenstein. Repudiating many of his earlier conclusions in the *Tractatus*, he initiated a new line of thought culminating in his posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations* (1953; trans. 1953). In this work, Wittgenstein argued that once attention is directed to the way language is actually used in ordinary discourse, the variety and flexibility of language become clear. Propositions do much more than simply picture facts. This recognition led to Wittgenstein's influential concept of language games. The scientist, the poet, and the theologian, for example, are involved in different language games. Moreover, the meaning of a proposition must be understood in its context, that is, in terms of the rules of the language game of which that proposition is a part. Philosophy, concluded Wittgenstein, is an attempt to resolve problems that arise as the result of linguistic confusion, and the key to the resolution of such problems is ordinary language analysis and the proper use of language.

#### V RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Additional contributions within the analytic and linguistic movement include the work of the British philosophers Gilbert Ryle, John Austin, and P. F. Strawson and the American philosopher W. V. Quine. According to Ryle, the task of philosophy is to restate "systematically misleading expressions" in forms that are logically more accurate. He was particularly concerned with statements the grammatical form of which suggests the existence of nonexistent objects. For example, Ryle is best known for his analysis of mentalistic language, language that misleadingly suggests that the mind is an entity in the same way as the body. Austin maintained that one of the most fruitful starting points for philosophical inquiry is attention to the extremely fine distinctions drawn in ordinary language. His analysis of language eventually led to a general theory of speech acts, that is, to a description of the variety of activities that an individual may be performing when something is uttered. Strawson is known for his analysis of the relationship between formal logic and ordinary language. The complexity of the latter, he argued, is inadequately represented by formal logic. A variety of analytic tools, therefore, is needed in addition to logic in analyzing ordinary language. Quine discussed the relationship between language and ontology. He argued that language systems tend to commit their users to the existence of certain things. For Quine, the justification for speaking one way rather than another is a thoroughly pragmatic one. The commitment to language analysis as a way of pursuing philosophy has continued as a significant contemporary dimension in philosophy. A division also continues to exist between those who prefer to work with the precision and rigor of symbolic logical systems and those who prefer to analyze ordinary language. Although few contemporary philosophers maintain that all philosophical problems are linguistic, the view continues to be widely held that attention to the logical structure of language and to how language is used in everyday discourse can often aid in resolving philosophical problems.