

BAD ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY

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Most analytic philosophers agree that good philosophy ought to satisfy certain minimal requirements: it should be clear, precise, well argued, putting forward an explicit thesis and exemplify the principle that truth emerges more readily from error than from confusion. Everyone agrees that it should be also interesting, relevant, reasonably original, rigorous, and that it should advance theoretical or critical proposals on the problems and puzzles which have shaped the analytic tradition or which are the object of current concern. Many philosophers are confident that when these basic desiderata are met, analytic philosophy cannot be bad. Nevertheless we all know that there is bad analytic philosophy. This should not really be a surprise, but it is an unpleasant truth.

One might think that the existence of bad analytic philosophy is simply a perspectival effect due to the fact that the label “analytic philosophy” designates today, as Hans Johann Glock has argued, more a number of family resemblances than a set of definite properties. It covers quite a number of styles and doctrines. Some analytic philosophers like metaphysics, others hate it; some cherish formal methods, others dislike them; some like “the armchair”, others don’t, and virtually all the traditional fields, from aesthetics to the philosophy of religion, are now represented. It is almost unavoidable that those who practice a certain style tend to consider as less interesting those who practice another style. Indeed the very fact that analytic philosophy has become more or less mainstream philosophy and that it has lost some of its traditional stereotypes (*e.g.* lack of interest in the history of philosophy and the conviction that logic and the philosophy of language occupy center stage) has loosened the normative power of the associated standards. In spite of these differences it remains true that analytic philosophy is recognisable, as Donald Davidson said, not as a “doctrine or method” but as “a tradition and an attitude”. The tradition may be wide, both historically and geographically, and the attitude may sometimes be hard to identify, but it would be wrong to say that there is simply no agreement at all on what good analytic philosophy can be. Why then can analytic philosophy be bad? What can we do about it?

One simple answer is that the standards are not met in certain so-called “analytic” writings. A.J. Ayer used to call “good prose” the kind of philosophical writing which he contrasted with “the sort of nonsense we get from Germany and now also from France”¹, but it is not rare that this sort of nonsense is produced by philosophers who have, or aspire to, the reputation of being “analytic”. Here analytic philosophy, like Vuitton bags or Prada shoes, is a victim of its own success. Like with all counterfeit, the only thing to do is to detect it.

Conversely, poor analytic philosophy may also result from analytic philosophers’ excessive confidence in their standards. A lot of what conforms to analytic philosophers’ “professional” style can lead to routine and unoriginal writing. In the words of one critic of Oxford linguistic philosophy, H.D Lewis, “clarity is not enough”. We are all familiar with many papers which satisfy good argumentative standards, or which display all the marks of logical rigour, but which are dull and unoriginal. Too much of it is fashion led and weighed down by a certain amount of scholasticism. This too is an effect of the expansion of analytic philosophy. The phenomenon is reinforced by the increased competition for jobs and the need to publish more. Quine used to complain about this back in 1974². He regretted the times of his youth when analytic philosophy was done only by “the dedicated and the best”, when

¹ Quoted by H.J. Glock, *What is Analytic Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 170

² W.V.O. Quine, “Paradoxes of Plenty”, *Daedalus*, 1974, 103, 4 repr. in *Theories and Things*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 1981

there were very few jobs and no “publish or perish”, when only carbon copies of papers circulated and when there were few journals (he did not know about Gourmet Reports, journal rankings or about the internet). Some great minds have lamented that 90% of contemporary philosophy, including analytic philosophy, is bullshit. Presumably they do not include their own work in the statistics. Perhaps they would like, while preserving the advantages of the market, to come back to the time when analytic philosophy was practiced only by the happy few in some privileged centers. In today’s academic world this amounts to wishful thinking, like in those polls which report that 94% of academics believe that they are better than their average colleague. Elitism is an option, but from the times of the Vienna Circle to those of the mass universities of today it has never been part of analytic philosophy’s spirit, which is close to the traditional ideal of democratic science and well encapsulated in Peirce’s maxim: “In order to be deep it is sometimes necessary to be dull”.

But we certainly do not want dullness all the time and we do not want to get democracy out of boredom. Indeed truth, which comes in only one guise, is boring, whereas error is multifarious. It has to be said that a lot of analytic philosophy is tedious, and much of it is poorly written. So should we renounce the search for truth and allow for a little more room for error for the sake of elegant and intelligent - and not only clear - prose? No goal is dearer to the heart of analytic philosophers than the search for truth. It’s the message, not the medium which counts. They hate rhetorical flourishes, which are good enough for continental philosophers and literary spirits. Style is reputed to have no importance when only truth and argument matter. But scorn for style too can be wrong. As Bernard Williams remarked : “ In a way that will be familiar to any reader of analytic philosophy, and is only too familiar to all of us who perpetrate it, this style tries to remove in advance every conceivable misunderstanding or misinterpretation or objection, including those that would occur only to the malicious or the clinically literal-minded. This activity itself is often rather mournfully equated with the boasted clarity and rigour of analytic philosophy.”³ Even within the search for truth, style matters. Elegance and conciseness make it easier to see the truth, and in order to be deep it is sometimes necessary to be dry. Many of the great analytic philosophers are also great stylists. Is it too much to ask to today’s practitioners of analytic philosophy to recommend them to write better? Part of the problem lies in the fact that analytic philosophy is now international, and that Globish is tending to replace English. Although there is excellent analytic philosophy in Italian, French, German, Spanish and other languages, it is easier and more rewarding to work in the *lingua franca*. But this too has a price. Michael Dummett once complained that books written in “Academospeak” fail to use the proper resources of literate English and are thus impoverished⁴. The reply to this, as he noted, is that English is now *bound* to be pidginized, and one might even advance arguments about linguistic justice to the effect that this all to the good⁵. Does that prevent those for whom English is not their native tongue from writing well and with style in philosophy? Not everyone can be a Joseph Conrad or a Kazuo Ishiguro, but *pace* Dummett there are a lot of people whose mother tongue is not English who write good philosophy in English.

It is often said that analytic philosophers’ quasi-Calvinist confidence in their predestination through their reverence for truth, clarity and argument makes them arrogant. I do not mind arrogance, if it is appropriate, but I would suggest to them that, if they want to find signs of their possible election, they should also look for their style⁶.

³ “ Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline” , in *Philosophy as Humanistic Discipline*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008 , p. 282

⁴ Michael Dummett, review of Pasquale Frascolla, *Wittgenstein’s Philosophy of Mathematics*, *The Journal of philosophy*, XCIV, 7 ,July 1997, pp 559-589

⁵ See Philip Van Parijs, *Linguistic Justice for Europe and for the World* , Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011