

4. Does Analytical Philosophy Have Any Ideological Implication?

1. Positivism and Analytical Philosophy

What I want to argue is that analytical philosophy does indeed have some important ideological implications, but that these are not the same now as they were in the middle decades of the present century.

The leaders of the analytical movement in the immediate post-1945 period, i.e., the generation of Wittgenstein, Carnap and Ryle, often disagreed strongly about the correct methodology for conceptual analysis. Should formal-logical systematization be employed, as in Russell's philosophy of mathematics? Should the main objective be to assign crucial words and phrases in existing languages to their correct conceptual categories, or to construct new languages that will perform the same tasks as existing languages but more efficiently, more revealingly, more univocally? Should philosophers put forward theses at all, or just battle against linguistic bewitchment? Can a suitable study of English, or French, resolve philosophical problems, or do those problems transcend the idiom of particular natural languages? Indeed, because these analytical philosophers all tended, implicitly or explicitly, to agree with Schlick's programmatic claim in 1930 to be provided with 'the means of settling all so-called philosophical disputes in an absolutely final and ultimate manner',¹

¹ M. Schlick, *Philosophical Papers* (ed. H. Mulder *et. al.*), vol. 2, Dordrecht: Reidel, 1979, p. 171.

their serious disagreements could only be about the nature of this means — i.e., could only be methodological rather than substantive. Any serious disagreement of a substantive nature would have tended to discredit the claim to have within their collective grasp a conclusive method of settling all philosophical disputes. So the analytical philosophy of the later 1940s, like that of the 1930s, exhibited, on the whole, an ideological consensus in which it seemed reasonable to hold that 'there is nothing in the nature of philosophy to warrant the existence of conflicting philosophical parties or "schools"', as a highly influential book of Ayer's had put it in 1936. The analytical philosophers of those years, few as they were, tended to oppose belief in Cartesian dualism, to be positivist rather than religionist and phenomenalist rather than realist, to favour logicist accounts of mathematics and non-cognitivist accounts of moral judgements, and so on. Correspondingly modern formal logic was once associated in many people's minds not only with Russell's truth-functionalism and extensionalism, but also with his anti-Hegelianism, with his opposition to natural theology, and even with his unconventional opinions on ethical issues. And linguistic method in philosophy, so far as it exploited formal-logical techniques, was associated with the anti-metaphysical stance of the Vienna Circle.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the reception of modern formal logic into educational curricula has been rather a slow affair, and inclined to be inhibited by ideological considerations. For example, it was not firmly established in Scotland until the mid-1950s, perhaps because Hegelianism remained influential in Scotland (though not in England) for several years after the Second World War. And in the 1970s formal logic was still not as yet established in philosophical curricula in either Greece or Spain, presumably because of the military dictatorships that had been in power there

and their natural opposition to anything tainted by association with 'subversive' individuals like Russell or free-thinking groups like the Vienna Circle. Modern formal logic was also widely suspect in Roman Catholic circles in the immediate post-1945 period until the work of Bocheński and other Dominicans helped to give it respectability. It encountered much hostility from philosophers in the USSR until the 1960s and recently it was still out of favour in Chile (except among mathematicians).

2. The Post-Positivist Phase of Analytical Philosophy

For some years after the Second World War there were thus widely accepted reasons for regarding modern analytical philosophy as an academic infrastructure for positivist ideology. But these reasons disappeared when new developments began to show that conceptual analysis could issue in quite different kinds of conclusion than those hitherto familiar. John Wisdom's 1945 paper on the analysis of theistic language² was an important pathfinder here, because it illustrated how analysis might come to terms with religionism. Strawson's 1950 paper on referring³ was another powerful influence, because — by offering a rival account of definite descriptions — it effectively took away from Russell's analysis the paradigmatic status that was widely attributed to it. But there were many other changes too. Quine opposed a holistic theory of sentence-function to Carnap's atomistic one, Kripke opposed an essentialist theory of necessity to Ayer's conventionalist one, Sellars opposed a realist reconstruction of scientific theory to Goodman's phenomenalism, Plantinga opposed

arguments for theism to Mackie's for atheism, and so on.⁴

In this new atmosphere it has been only ignorant and out-of-date critics who have continued to upbraid analytical philosophy for its allegedly positivist ideology. The analytical dialogue has now been extended to cover a very wide variety of non-positivist standpoints on substantive issues. Nevertheless alongside this doctrinal pluralism there is still a certain unavoidable commitment of an ideological nature. Concerned as it is with the analysis of reasoning in every area of human intellectual activity, analytical philosophy needs to construct appropriate arguments in support of its analyses. What are the ultimate premisses of these arguments to be? They must be widely acceptable, and they must not presuppose the validity of other philosophical arguments. Nor can they report observations, or experimental data, since conceptual analysis has always been distinguished from empirical science: you may analyse or reconstruct scientific theories, but the assertion that such-or-such an analysis is the correct one is not itself a scientific theory. What analytical philosophers in fact commonly invoke as their premisses are people's naive and untutored beliefs about normative issues — about what may be inferred from what, about how a word or phrase is properly used, or about how a virtuous person would behave in a specified type of situation. Carnap, Hempel, Quine, Kripke and many other analytical philosophers have called such beliefs 'intuitions', while others, like J. L. Austin and Bernard Williams, have shared the same general pattern of argumentation while preferring not to use this particular label for their premisses.⁵

² J. Wisdom, 'Gods,' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 45, 1945, 185-206.

³ P. F. Strawson, 'On Referring,' *Mind* 59, 1950, 320-344.

⁴ References are given in L. J. Cohen, *The Dialogue of Reason*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986, p. 29.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

3. Analytical Philosophy Assumes and Consolidates Intellectual Infrastructures That Are Required in a Pluralist Society

Thus analytical philosophy presupposes a universal human competence — an ability to reason correctly about non-technical issues. Of course, on particular occasions the exercise of this ability may be hampered or thwarted by carelessness, forgetfulness, emotion or inexperience. But analytical philosophers' appeals to intuition would be pointless if such a competence were not in fact universal in normal adults. Moreover, at its best analytical philosophy helps people to exercise this competence. By its systematic exploration of reasons and reasoning analytical philosophy helps to consolidate the intellectual infrastructure that is needed for systems of social organization within which disputes are reflected in argument and counter-argument, rather than in the use or threat of violence. By virtue of its preoccupation with rationality it promotes awareness that the intellectual merit of a person's opinion does not hinge on his membership of a particular party, priesthood or hermetic tradition. And, with its interest in picking out ultimate issues for discussion, it tends to undermine any support for the view that certain accepted principles, prerogatives or presumptions are intrinsically immune to rational criticism and reappraisal. No tenets are sacrosanct for it — not even the positivism of its earlier phase.

Belief in universal rationality, however, was seriously challenged by a number of experimental psychologists in the years 1965-1980. For example,⁶ let it be accepted that the vehicle involved in a certain road accident in Smithville was a taxi-cab and that 85 % of Smithville cabs are blue and 15 % green. Let it be accepted too that a witness has identified the cab in the

accident as green and that, when he is tested over equal numbers of blue and green cabs in conditions similar to those of the accident, he gives the correct colour in 80 % of cases and the other colour in only 20 %. Then what is the probability, expressed as a percentage, that the cab in the accident was blue? There is robust experimental evidence to the effect that most statistically untutored people tend to estimate this probability as 20 %. They thus seem to rely solely on the witness's testimony and to ignore altogether the specified base-rate — namely the distribution of cab-colours. But if, when the probability in question is calculated by means of Bayes's theorem, the specified base-rate is treated as the relevant prior probability, the required posterior probability amounts to approximately 60 %. So the psychologists, Tversky and Kahneman, who originally propounded this problem, conclude that we have here at least one piece of evidence against the assumption of human rationality on which analytical philosophy depends. And many similar claims have been made about other experimental data about probabilistic reasoning, affecting not only Bayes's theorem but also the law that variance tends to decrease with sample-size, the law that the probability of a conjunction cannot be greater than the probability of either of the conjuncts, the gambler's fallacy, and so on — not to mention another group of allegedly prevalent fallacies in deductive reasoning.⁷

So we have a situation in which analytical philosophy is seen to presuppose a principle that several experimental psychologists claim to have disproved. If the psychologists are right the ideological position promoted by analytical philosophy is untenable. Indeed some lawyers have already been persuaded by it to propose that lay juries should either be abolished or so closely regulated in their decisions that in effect they cease to use

⁶ D. Kahneman and A. Tversky, 'On the Psychology of Prediction,' *Oregon Research Institute Bulletin* 12, 1972.

⁷ References are given in L. J. Cohen, *op. cit.*, pp. 151-173.

their own powers of judgement.⁸ Popular errors about factual matters, such as about the accuracy of eye-witness testimony, can easily be corrected in the courtroom. Emotional prejudices, though perhaps with greater difficulty, can be discounted. A judge, or even an expert witness, can warn the jury in a way that is appropriate to the special circumstances of the case. But a judge can hardly be expected, at each trial, to conduct a course in logic and statistics for the benefit of the jury. So, if in the normal course of events lay jurors or assessors cannot otherwise be expected to be roughly correct in their intuitive judgements of logic or probability (because their reasonings are structured by incorrect rules), the interests of justice require a radical reform of present ways of using jurors or lay assessors for juridical fact-finding. We should need to move backwards towards the medieval idea that forensic proofs must be weighed and measured in accordance with legally ordained rules. Moreover, if jurors and assessors must accordingly either belong to a logically and statistically trained élite, or have their deliberations closely controlled via the incorporation of permissible logical and statistical proof-procedures into the law of evidence, it is scarcely possible to avoid the conclusion that voters should be treated similarly, because they too, if they are to act rationally in pursuit of their several ends, need to draw inferences from facts. Nobody, it will be said, should have the right to vote unless he is either certified to have discarded his various innate strategies of fallacious reasoning or he is prepared to submit his electoral decisions to the guidance of those who have. Thus, so far as universal suffrage assumes universal rationality, an attack on universal rationality is an attack on universal suffrage.

⁸ M. J. Saks and R. F. Kidd, 'Human Information-Processing and Adjudication: Trial by Heuristics,' *Law and Society Review* 15, 1980-81, 123-160, esp. p. 134.

Fortunately, however, when the detailed structure of these psychological experiments is examined, what we find is that the proposed interpretations of the results always assume the subjects of the experiments to have understood the specification of their task in precisely the same sense as that intended by the experimenters and to have accepted that the only relevant information that they can exploit in the performance of the task is the information given them by experimenters. And there is always another way of looking at the results — namely, we can treat them as evidence about how the subjects did in fact conceive their task and about what information they did in fact exploit. Indeed it turns out that all the results are in fact open to quite plausible interpretations that make them compatible with the principle of universal rationality that analytical philosophy presupposes.⁹ For example, in the taxicab case the prior probability of a blue cab's being involved in the accident might be taken to be affected by other factors (drivers' training, vehicle maintenance, etc.) than the mere number of blue cabs. Not that mistakes are never made by the subjects: far from it. But the mistakes that are made are due to accidental factors like carelessness, forgetfulness, emotion or inexperience. They are not manifestations of a systematically flawed competence.

I conclude that the ideological implications of analytical philosophy are by no means trivial, and for two reasons. One reason is that these implications affect institutions, like universal suffrage, that are crucial to pluralistic democracy. And the other reason is that these implications conflict with claims that have been made — albeit wrongly — by certain experimental psychologists.

⁹ L. J. Cohen, *op. cit.*, pp. 149-192.