

On Analytical Philosophy

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On the back of Hans-Johann Glock's book *What is Analytic Philosophy?** there is printed an appreciation by Professor David G. Stern of the University of Iowa. In the course of it he says that the book "provides a clear – and to my mind, convincing – answer to the question it raises in its title". I envy Professor Stern: I could not find in Glock's book any such answer. A skilful verbal characterisation of baroque art or architecture, without illustrations, should put the reader in a favourable position to make a good guess at whether a painting or building which he is shown does or does not exemplify that style. Similarly, a skilful verbal characterisation of analytic philosophy should put the reader in a favourable position to make a good guess at whether or not something that he reads is a product of that philosophical school. It does not seem to me that Glock's book confers on his readers that capacity. At the beginning of his last chapter Glock summarises the preceding chapter as arguing "that analytic philosophy is a historical tradition held together by ties of influence on the one hand, family resemblances on the other" [p. 231]. The idea of a family resemblance concept is Wittgenstein's. The application of such a concept is not determined by possession of some single defining characteristic, but by resemblance to the archetype in one of several different respects, as one member of a family may have the family chin, another the family nose, and so on. Probably *baroque art* is such a concept. Glock so classifies *analytic philosophy* because he doubts that it is to be applied on the strength of a single defining characteristic. But when we look at his penultimate chapter, we find that he spends much time in explaining the notion of a family-resemblance concept, but says very little of what the resemblances are between different examples of analytic philosophy and an archetypal instance of it. And so no reader could learn to recognise that kind of philosophical writing unless he was already familiar with some of the specimens of it that Glock refers to.

On page 123 of his book Glock describes me as portraying analytic philosophy as embodying the following four claims:

- (1) The basic task of philosophy is the analysis of the structure of thought.
- (2) The structure of thought must be distinguished from the structure of thinking.
- (3) The only proper way of analysing the structure of thought is by analysing the structure of the linguistic expression of thought.
- (4) The philosophy of language is therefore the foundation of philosophy.

Understood aright, this description is reasonably accurate. Philosophy does not of course define itself as the analysis of the structure of thought, as biology defines itself as the study of living organisms. As Glock acknowledges, we begin to philosophise when we first wrestle with philosophical perplexities and paradoxes that strike us. Such philosophical puzzles are generated by conceptual entanglements; it is only when we recognise their nature that we see that, to resolve them, we need to analyse the structure of our thoughts.

Glock then turns to an examination of the four claims as characterising analytical philosophy. He prefaces this examination with the following judgement:

Dummett deserves credit not just for having reopened the debate about the nature of analytical philosophy, but also for drawing attention to the important role that the contrast between thought and language has played in its career. Taken with a pinch of salt, moreover, his four claims can be portrayed as central themes in early Wittgenstein, the logical positivists, Quine and Davidson. Even if one takes into account the scope of the canvas on which Dummett paints, however, his brush-strokes are inaccurate [p. 124].

Glock now seeks to justify his accusation, in the light of the four claims as listed above.

Glock responds to (1) by granting “that thought is an important topic in the philosophy of mind”, but asking, “Why should it be *the* topic of philosophy as a whole?” [p. 124]. We have already seen the error of this reaction. Glock is assuming that I suppose that philosophy defines itself as the analysis of the structure of thought, but I do not; it is only when we come to perceive the way in which philosophical problems are generated that we realise that the resolution of any of them depends upon our grasping the structure of thoughts in general. He opposes conceiving philosophy as explaining the nature of reality to conceiving it as explaining the character of our thought about reality, and argues that founders of analytical philosophy such as Russell and Moore were primarily concerned with the former. He quotes Karen Green as saying that “what Dummett means by an account of

thought is an account of the objects of our thoughts, or an account of the world about which we think” [p. 129]. He accuses her of here trading on an equivocation between the content of our thought and its object: when the content of my thought is that Vesuvius is a volcano, the object of that thought is just Vesuvius. “Only the object, not the content, is part of ‘the world about which we think’”, Glock declares [*Ibid.*]. This criticism is simply silly. A comprehensive account of the world would not consist in a list of all the objects there are in the world: reality is to be characterised by everything true that holds good of it; the world is everything that is the case. Glock writes, “According to (1), analysing thought is not a *method* for achieving metaphysical insights into reality, it is the intrinsic *goal* of analytic philosophy” [*Ibid.*]. This elucidates what Glock means by philosophy’s “basic task”, an ambiguous phrase; understood in *this* manner, claim (1) is not one I have ever made or attributed to analytic philosophy. The goal of all philosophy is the resolution of philosophical problems. I have indeed contended that the theory of meaning is the foundation of the rest of philosophy. What does this mean? It means that the theory of meaning is prior to all other branches of the subject. Not that all philosophers must cease work on other problems until they have constructed a plausible theory of meaning, but that a philosophical theory or account can be correct only if it is compatible with a sound theory of meaning. By that I still stand.

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NOTES

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