

Looking Back on 20th Century Analytic Philosophy

In fall of 1967, as a new member of the UNC philosophy department, I attended the very first Chapel Hill Colloquium. David Falk was the department chair, and our department secretary, Claire Miller, began her long and impressive career in Colloquium management. On this anniversary occasion, I have been asked to look back at what was happening in “analytic philosophy,” which in this context includes areas featured in Friday night sessions--especially metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of mind. I am going to begin by sharing stories about my own philosophical education in the 1950s, and then I will go on to note changes in the philosophical landscape as I began teaching in the 1960s.

During my senior year at the University of Michigan, in Ann Arbor, my home town, Charles L. Stevenson, was away visiting at Harvard, where he had earned his Ph. D. He was well-known for his book, Ethics and Language (1944), which offered a sophisticated exposition of the non-cognitivist view that moral judgments express one’s approval or disapproval and are used to influence the attitudes of others. He had been hired at Michigan after being denied tenure at Yale because some senior faculty objected to his “positivist” views in ethics. As his temporary replacement, the Michigan department imported from Cambridge, England, the cherubic yet distinguished author of The Mind and Its Place in

Nature, Scientific Thought, and Five Types of Ethical Theory, Charlie Dunbar

Broad. A scientist turned philosopher, Broad had an interest in psychical research and the paranormal. I recall he gave a paper to the department entitled “Phantasms of the Living and Phantasms of the Dead.” And so my first course in ethics, intimidatingly labeled “advanced ethics,” consisted in C. D. Broad reading a manuscript detailing in turn the moral philosophies of Spinoza, Butler, Hume, Kant, and Sidgwick. There was no discussion. Helpfully, he read each sentence twice, including the jokes. His dense style precluded taking summary notes. I quickly learned to write down the first half of a sentence with the initial reading and then the second half during the repeat.

At Michigan I took a course from Paul Ziff, the avowed purpose of which was to use philosophical analysis to “determine the place of reason in religion.” Paul, an accomplished artist, was an interesting and provocative teacher, and I learned a great deal from him about doing philosophy critically. I was understandably delighted when, in 1970, three years after I arrived at UNC, he joined this department.

At Michigan, Ziff was a research assistant in the Language and Symbolism Project. He brought an interest in linguistics to the treatment of philosophical problems, as evidenced in his account of meaning in his 1960 book Semantic

Analysis. While the study of verbal expressions has long been a means of investigating concepts, the mid-20th century saw a sharpening of focus on language. At the first Colloquium in 1967, Paul Grice gave a paper entitled “Philosophy of Language.” Philosophical interest in technical linguistics received a significant boost with the publication in 1957 of Noam Chomsky’s Syntactic Structures, which linked linguistics to cognitive psychology. (I spoke with him briefly when we stood in line for a Selective Service physical exam at a Boston Naval facility. At that time students who passed generally received a deferment.) Chomsky did his work as a Harvard Junior Fellow (1951-55), a prestigious status which has no formal degree requirements. Fellows were required to be male until 1972 when Martha Nussbaum was named the first female Junior Fellow.

When Ziff moved to Harvard, he urged me to apply there for graduate work. One of his reasons was that John L. Austin, the world’s smartest philosopher--in Ziff’s estimation at that moment--would be giving the William James Lectures, his ground-breaking examination of performatives entitled “How to do Things with Words.” In 1955 a large and excited crowd turned out for Austin’s first lecture; but by the time the series entered what he called “the dry deserts of precision,” only a few aficionados occupied the front rows.

Nevertheless, his sojourn at Harvard did stimulate a brief but salutary, and in my case influential, interest in what was then called Ordinary-Language Philosophy.

The preeminent figure at Harvard was the logician Willard Van Orman Quine, famous for his bold rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction. At the department's annual reception for faculty and graduate students, quaintly labeled an "At Home," Quine exhibited a sly sense of humor as he talked about his summer travels. One year he opened with the understated announcement: "Europe—is an interesting place." The next year he quipped that "Japan is a country where the women are gift wrapped." The following fall he explained that he went to New Zealand to confirm his long-held hypothesis that "when you have seen one geyser you have seen them all."

Also at Harvard Professor Donald Williams presented a year-long course in old-school ontology and cosmology in which he enthusiastically discussed mereology, causation, space, and time, as well as what he called "the elements of being." These fundamental elements are not atoms or quarks but "tropes," instances of qualities that are themselves, not universals, but particulars. An instance of red in one necktie is distinct from the otherwise identical red of the next necktie on the rack. He considered it a virtue of his view that if objects are bundles of tropes there is no need to introduce a quality-less and unknowable

“substratum” to individuate them. He, and many others, assumed that, although the concept of a bare particular is nonsense, the concept of a quality that remains once the offending substratum is eliminated is clear. After all, we sense qualities directly. Never mind that such properties, lacking a “substratum,” essentially don’t belong to anything. In my 1968 paper, “Particulars and their Qualities,” *The Philosophical Quarterly*, I argued that both tropes and Russellian universals are fatally flawed conceptual counterparts to the troublesome concept of a “substratum” or “bare particular.” Bundle theories are fraudulent substitutes for what I call “qualified particulars.”

I mention this issue to illustrate Austin’s insightful admonition from his Sense and Sensibilia lectures (edited by G. J. Warnock and published as a book in 1962) concerning the concept of sense data employed by A. J. Ayer in his Foundations of Empirical Knowledge (1940). I quote--

“One of the most important points to grasp is that these two terms, ‘sense-data’ and ‘material things,’ live by taking in each other’s washing—what is spurious is not one term of the pair, but the antithesis itself.” Austin then adds: The case of ‘universal’ and ‘particular’, or ‘individual’, is similar in some respects though of course not in all. In philosophy it is often good policy, where one

member of a putative pair falls under suspicion, to view the more innocent-seeming party suspiciously as well.” (p. 4).

The champion of sense-data at Harvard was Roderick Firth, who gave a paper to this Colloquium in 1968 entitled “Skepticism and the Reconstruction of Knowledge.” In class Firth wielded the traditional Argument from Illusion first to introduce a sensuous “given” in perception, and then to lead students down the steep and slippery slope from Naïve Realism, to Representative or Causal Realism, and finally to Phenomenalism. On his view, statements about material things could be translated into statements about systems of actual and possible appearances. As Firth’s grading assistant, I had the pleasure of coaching the precocious future writer Susan Sontag when she succeeded me in that role. Professor Morton White states in his memoir of his time at Harvard that Susan wrote to him in 1959 saying that, although she failed to appreciate the “deadpan witticisms” and the “virtuoso debating maneuvers” of Oxford dons, “John Austin had taught her that all the epistemology she had cherished was wrong.” (A Philosopher’s Story, 1999, p. 148)

My Ph. D. dissertation addressed the problem of our knowledge of other minds, critically examining John Stuart Mill’s 19th century extended argument from analogy with one’s own case. [His discussion occurs in An Examination of

Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy and of the Principal Philosophical Questions

Discussed in His Writings, Chap. XII.] Mill's reasoning was perfunctorily repeated by A. J. Ayer and others in the 20th century. What particularly interested me, and others, was the intersection of this traditional issue with Ludwig Wittgenstein's remarks in Philosophical Investigations concerning the possibility of a "private sensation language." Published in 1953 the book was just coming to notice in America, but the senior Harvard faculty either lacked interest or were hostile to it. In discussing Wittgenstein's dark sayings with Ziff I became convinced that traditional philosophical skepticism about knowledge of other minds was the result of important and revealing confusions. This conviction was reinforced by Rogers Albritton, who came to Harvard to teach Greek philosophy, but who was also exposed to Wittgenstein at Cornell by Norman Malcolm. Albritton became my advisor.

In 1958 a Harvard Sheldon travelling fellowship provided a year at an academic institution of my choice, and I chose Oxford, then in its heyday as the world's greatest concentration of analytic philosophers. Joining Corpus Christi College gave access to both Professor Austin and to Wittgenstein scholar, David Pears, who served as my tutor for the academic year. Thomas Nagel, who in 1971 delivered his famous paper "What is it like to be a bat?" at this Colloquium, was

also a student at Corpus. In class, we attempted to engage Austin in discussion of passages in the Investigations, such as the beetle in the box; but Austin wisely refused to bite, preferring to explore his own insights into material of his own choosing. I heard the final presentation of his “Sense and Sensibilia” lectures just before he died in 1960. In a large hall packed with PPE students, he marshaled a loose collection of notes on sheets and scraps of paper, while poking fun at Ayer’s claim that “we never directly perceive or sense material objects (or material things), but only sense-data (or our own ideas, impressions, *sensa*, sense-perceptions, percepts, &c.) (Sense and Sensibilia, p. 2) Austin’s mission was to dissolve Ayer’s philosophical worries by looking at the actual use of English words like ‘real,’ ‘seems,’ ‘looks,’ ‘appears,’ etc., which Austin thought both philosophically slippery and in their own right interesting. (S and S, p. 5)

Ayer’s adopted son, Julian, an undergraduate at Corpus, who tragically died in the Banda Aceh tsunami in 2004, confided to me his concern about how his father would be treated on returning to Oxford in 1959 after twenty years teaching in London. He needn’t have worried. Anthony Quinton of Oxford has written that, “After Austin’s death in 1960, the return of A. J. Ayer to Oxford after a twenty-year absence, and a focusing of interest on the work of W. V. Quine and other American analytic philosophers, the ordinary-language school disintegrated

and nothing specifically Oxonian has replaced it.” (The Oxford Guide to Philosophy, 1995, p. 675)

Nonetheless, in the 1960s, the impact of Austin and Wittgenstein, as well as of Wilfrid Sellars’ critique of the myth of the given, caused the appeal of sense data as the foundation of perceptual knowledge rapidly to fade. Epistemologists plowed new ground. Fred Dretske’s 1969 excellent book Seeing and Knowing, made a fresh start investigating how and what we see. Others turned to the analysis of the concept of empirical knowledge itself, centering on true justified belief. Edmund Gettier’s 1963 counter-examples to that tripartite analysis in Analysis set off a prolonged flurry of attempts to defend, augment, or replace the traditional account. Epistemologists also debated whether empirical knowledge has a bedrock foundation or, alternatively, the justification of knowledge claims appeals simply to the coherence of an interlocking web of beliefs.

At Oxford in the late 1950s and 60s there was enormous interest in philosophy of mind. Gilbert Ryle moderated lively discussions of The Concept of Mind in his crowded Magdalen living quarters, where we literally sat at his feet. Elizabeth Anscombe, one of Wittgenstein’s translators and *nachlass* executors, lectured on intention (published as Intention, 1957) and presided over intimate, invitation-only discussions at her home, all the while flicking cigarette ashes into a

large bowl set on the floor. Her substantial presence reminded me of Picasso's portrait of a seated Gertrude Stein. Peter Geach, her husband and author of Mental Acts, who taught at Birmingham at that time, also attended. A young American philosopher, told me that as secretary of an Oxford organization, he had naively addressed an invitation to Mrs. Elizabeth Geach. When he later visited her home, she took the envelope from her mantel, handed it to him, and said politely but firmly "there is no Mrs. Geach and she cannot be invented." Until I met Miss Anscombe and Philippa Foot at Oxford, I had encountered no women faculty in philosophy.

Even metaphysics at Oxford reflected philosophy of mind, as exemplified by Peter Strawson's influential lectures which appeared in 1959 as Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics. Strawson's chapter on persons focused upon problems connected with the concept of the insubstantial Cartesian ego, and featured his conception of persons as unitary subjects of both personal and material predicates. My own essay, "The Philosophical Concept of a Human Body" (The Philosophical Review, 1964) represents another application of Austin's warning about dichotomies, by questioning the uncritical acceptance of the concept of a "living, behaving human body that might or might not have conscious states"--a philosophical zombie--as a meaningful basis for skepticism

about other minds. The concept of a mind may be puzzling, but our various concepts of “body” need clarification as well, especially philosophical ones.

By 1960 I was teaching at UCLA and my colleagues included epistemologist Robert Yost, classicist Montgomery Firth, Keith Gunderson, and Charles Chastain, along with the legendary Rudolph Carnap; mathematical logician Alonzo Church; logicians Richard Montague, Donald Kalish, and David Kaplan; and new Harvard Ph. D David Lewis of counterpart theory and real possible worlds. Formalism ruled, but philosophy of mind, which had been nascent in the U.S., rapidly developed after Australian identity theorists U. T. Place, Jack Smart and David Armstrong, as well as Donald Davidson, challenged dualistic conceptions of phenomenal consciousness. Functional models of cognitive processes replaced behaviorism. The advent of computer technology stimulated the development of computational models of cognition. And later, what David Chalmers labeled the “Hard Problem” of reconciling our phenomenal conscious experiences with physicalism occupied much of the discussion.

In the 1960s events outside academia seriously intruded. President John Kennedy, his brother Robert Kennedy, and the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. were assassinated and no one went to class. Many students and faculty at UCLA, as elsewhere, vigorously protested the war in Vietnam. My wife and I remember

hearing Mohammad Ali speak eloquently to a large crowd at an open air park in Los Angeles before he was arrested for draft evasion and stripped of his heavyweight boxing titles. The U S Supreme Court eventually overturned his conviction. At UNC the turmoil on campus led to the canceling of final exams at the end of one memorable spring term.

Nonetheless, philosophy survived and flourished. Increasingly since the 1960s it has been comingling with other disciplines, such as psychology, cognitive and brain science; art, music, and cinema; public affairs, law and economics, and women's studies. In 1978 I taught the first bioethics class in the UNC philosophy curriculum. Now there is even experimental philosophy. I am pleased that the philosophical terrain looks far less self-enclosed and insular, more fruitfully interdisciplinary, than it did when I began my philosophical education.