

Analytic Positivism

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Preface

Until Frege's philosophical works were more widely appreciated, *analytic* philosophy was taken to have begun at Cambridge with Russell and Moore, a new departure in a philosophical tradition which goes back as far as ancient Greek philosophy.

Though Russell and Moore shared an interest in philosophy as a kind of analysis their philosophical interests and their conceptions of analysis differed. Moore is known for his interest in common sense and ordinary language, while Russell's early reputation was built is the contribution of his Theory of Types and Principia Mathematica to the formal foundations and philosophy of mathematics.

The differences between these two philosophical standpoints is reflected in the development of analytic philosophy through much of the twentieth century. Russell's formal approach lead through his logical atomism and Wittgenstein's Tractatus into Logical Positivism. Moore's interest in ordinary language and common sense is closer to Wittgenstein's later work, that post-war Oxford philosophy which might be called "ordinary language philosophy", and similar work throughout the world.

That there were two very different attitudes toward philosophy pivoting around attitude to language is conspicuous in some of the polemic of Bertrand Russell, who while continuing to recognise the genius of Wittgenstein could not be reconciled to the direction which his later philosophy had taken and virulently condemned the broad sweep of like minded philosophers. Writing in 1956 of "the cult of common usage" he said:

The most influential school of philosophy in Britain at the present day maintains a certain linguistic doctrine to which I am unable to subscribe. ... The doctrine, as I understand it, consists in maintaining that the language of daily life, with words used in their ordinary meanings, suffices for philosophy, which has

*no need of technical terms or of changes in the significance of common terms. I find myself totally unable to accept this view.*¹

How these two tendencies fared as the second half of the twentieth century progressed is not so plain to see. On the one hand, "the cult of common usage" became enshrined in the widely accepted semantic doctrine that "meaning is use". On the other hand some of the most influential philosophers of the period such as Quine, Kripke and Dummett, were accomplished in formal logic. One might argue that all the dogmas of the first half of the century were softened, yielding to a kind of philosophy in which the best of each of these tendencies may be found.

To a positivist however, no such assimilation can be comprehended. No gentle reconciliation of rigour and muddle is possible, in the attempt rigour is lost.

¹First published in *Portraits from Memory*, Allen & Unwin 1956, also in *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*, Routledge, 1961 as *The cult of "common usage"*.

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1 Introduction

This essay is concerned with a positivist philosophical framework, and with certain philosophical problems considered in the context of that framework.

Positivism is the name of a tendency or historical thread in philosophy (and in some other disciplines). The particular variant of positivism presented in this essay will be called here *analytic positivism*.

In this introductory section some key general features of positivism will be presented, some features of particular positivist philosophies will be mentioned, and a brief preliminary sketch will be given of analytic positivism.

In the rest of the essay fuller details of the framework are presented, together with some discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of adopting the framework. In context of the framework, various areas of philosophical investigation are then presented.

1.1 General Characteristics of Positivist Philosophy

Probably the single feature most characteristic of positivism is its advocacy of scientific rigour in all branches of knowledge (including philosophy). A positivistic philosophy will often therefore be built around a conception of scientific method, and provide philosophical doctrines necessary to underpin that method. Positivistic philosophies are likely to be systematic rather than fragmentary.

Positivist philosophy may therefore be of a skeptical tenor, falling short of the ultimate extremes found in Pyrrhonian skepticism, but nevertheless sometimes severe. It is recognised that some knowledge is attainable, and those methods which may lead to knowledge are distinguished from those which are unlikely to do so.

Positivistic philosophical systems are likely to

admix skepticisms about

- whether certain kinds of statement have meaning
- truth and certain ways at arriving at it
- existence of various kinds of entities

Metaphysical speculation is often a primary target for criticism by positivists. Metaphysical propositions may be considered meaningless. Metaphysical reasoning may be criticised as deriving supposed facts about the world by purely rational means, or as inferring to the existence of entities of which we can have (according to the positivist) no possible knowledge.

A positivist philosophical position is likely to contain some or all of the following elements:

- methods for establishing the meaning of sentences or languages, or for testing whether sentences are meaningful or nonsensical
- doctrines which limit the scope of reason, which indicate the sources of true knowledge and limitations on what we can know
- nominalistic ontologies which deny the existence of entities of which we can have no knowledge, notably phenomenalism
- reductionist schemes permitting the world to be understood in terms of such nominalistic ontologies

Positivism is not however confined to these rather theoretical matters. In Comte, from whose use of the term “positive philosophy” the name “positivism” derives, the emphasis on scientific rigour is in the pursuit of a new social order. Truth is not merely an end in itself. The spirit of positivism is also to be found in subsequent utilitarian and pragmatic philosophies.

1.2 Some Particular Features of Positivist Philosophies

1.3 Analytic Positivism

Positivism is generally skeptical, but sometimes dogmatic and uncompromising.

Analytic positivism aims to be a more thoroughgoing but a constructive and graduated skepticism. Its purpose is to propose, analyse and evaluate certain proposals of a linguistic and methodological nature, and in the context of these proposals to identify for further investigations philosophical problems which may be of interest to those of positivist inclination, or possibly of some utility outside philosophy.

Analytic positivism is, rather than a body of doctrine presented and argued for, more in the character of a conceptual framework for analytic philosophy, to be considered on its pragmatic merits and adopted or rejected, or to be subjected itself to philosophical analysis. The enterprise we are engaged in is similar to that which Carnap envisaged for the adoption of a language, though the conceptual framework falls short of constituting a language, and is presented informally.

1.3.1 Graduated Skepticism

Positivist philosophies typically provide constructive skepticism. Doubts are expressed about prior standards for the establishment of knowledge, scientific and philosophical, and new standards are enunciated. Often entire disciplines are swept aside as meaningless, unsound, or without application. Inevitably, the higher the standards proposed, the larger the part of existing philosophy and science which fails to meet them.

1.3.2 Choice

An important element of *analytic positivism* is its emphasis on our freedom to choose. It

is characteristic of positivistic philosophy to identify classes of questions which have no definite answer, typically metaphysical questions, considered meaningless. Questions may lack a sufficiently definite sense to be answerable without being metaphysical. In many such cases an answer is contingent on clarification, or on the setting of appropriate context. To arrive at a question which has a definite answer *choices* must be made. It is a tenet of analytic positivism that the general character and detailed content of philosophy is, or should be, determined by such choices. Evidently, philosophical (and other) disagreements are often apparent rather than real, the parties not speaking the same language.

In political, economic, and ethical matters, the emphasis is upon our freedom, within limits, to choose how society shall be. In order to exercise that choice it is desirable to know what those limits are, to understand how things are, how they might be.

Knowledge is a means towards such ends. Rigour in determining truth serves those ends. Philosophy may help to determine and underpin rigorous methods, it may help to identify and eliminate unsound method or false doctrine.

Choice is exercised not only in determining these higher ends, but in the pursuit of science and technology to facilitate their realisation. Choice percolates down to the most fundamental philosophical foundations through the medium of language. We do not choose what is true, but our choice of language determines what truths we can come to know.

1.3.3 Language

To exercise choice in other things we must first exercise choice of language. It is proposed that the languages of science be made precise by their being given a formal abstract semantics. An abstract semantics is a semantics couched in terms of abstract entities, and suffices to settle the relationship of seman-

tic entailment and hence supports deductive reasoning. Where a language is intended to speak of the real world, an abstract semantics is couched in terms of abstract models of possible worlds, and a full semantics for the language depends upon supplementing the abstract semantics with some account of the correspondence between the abstract model and the real world.

1.3.4 Ontology

All things which exist are either abstract or concrete. A concrete entity is one whose existence is contingent, a constituent of the world, whose existence can only be known by observation. An abstract entity is one whose existence is not contingent, and can be known only by supposition. What we know of such entities is just what is derivable from their defining characteristics. Empirical observation is immaterial to knowledge of abstract entities.

This choice of terminology does not however constitute a final word on ontology. Analytic positivism eschew ontological parsimony and rejects Occam's razor. Occam's razor is a pragmatic principle in default of any systematic method for determining the consistency of any proposed ontological scheme, since elaborate ontology in such a context risks incoherence.

However, set theory now provides a framework for settling the consistency of any proposed ontology, and we may fall back on purely pragmatic evaluation of any ontological proposal which can be shown to be logically consistent.

Beyond pragmatics, beyond questions about which ontologies provide the best models of the world, analytic positivism does not venture. The question of what *really* exists in the world, as opposed to what it is convenient for us to suppose exists, is beyond our reach, so much so that we may doubt that it can be given any definite meaning. A concrete ontology is what we use in expressing our models of the regularity of the world. Any state of

knowledge about those regularities will be expressible using various distinct ontologies, and we have not only no way of telling which is correct (if they make the same predictions) but its not clear what the question means.

1.3.5 Fundamental Logical Partitions

It is a desideratum to distinguish various kinds of proposition which are logically independent.

For example, empirical propositions are not entailed by analytic or logical propositions, and those of ethics are not derivable from either. The truth of such principles depends upon the semantics of the languages in question, and these theses may not be sustainable in relation to ordinary language. These conditions are therefore considered as desiderata, suggestions on how language should be used. The arguments in favour of this position are pragmatic rather than theoretical.

These are not the only logical divisions which may be useful. Philosophers have long debated whether mind and matter are distinct or whether one of these is reducible or should be understood in terms of the other. To many positivists both of these substances are illegitimate inferences from the phenomena, but to an analytic positivist the question of whether there is one or two kinds of substance has no meaning. The question posed instead is whether the use of two categories enables the construction of better models of reality.

2 Analyticity and Semantic Foundations

In this section we attempt a definition of analyticity. Analyticity is to be defined as a relationship between sentences and languages, where the concept of a language includes both syntax and semantics. To give a precise definition of this relationship, it is therefore nec-

essary to have a clear notion of what kind of thing a syntax and semantics are.

The definition will be developed in stages, the initial stages serving to motivate the later.