

Introduction to Analytic Philosophy
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Course Overview

Although the expression “analytic philosophy” was first used, apparently, in a 1933 essay by R.G. Collingwood, the phenomenon itself is usually understood to refer to the result of a sea-change in academic philosophy brought about, mainly, by G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell at Cambridge University in the 1890s, and also strongly influenced by the German mathematician and philosopher Gottlob Frege, and Ludwig Wittgenstein.. We will start by reading Russell’s and Moore’s accounts of this period, and some of what they wrote that was especially influential. Moore and Russell saw themselves as rebelling against Absolute Idealism, as found in the work of such English philosophers as F.H. Bradley, T.H. Green, B. Bosanquet, and, from the younger generation, J.M.E. McTaggart, H.H. Joachim, J.H. Muirhead, R.G. Collingwood, and G.R.G. Mure. British Idealism grew from the writings of Kant, the post-Kantians Fichte, Schelling, Schleiermacher and others, and most importantly, Hegel. It is interesting that both Russell and Moore were, at first, staunch proponents of the Idealist philosophy of their teachers; indeed, the first publications of both were solidly within that tradition, so their rebellion was all the more dramatic. In the years that followed, indeed for more than a century, the primary contrast with analytic philosophy has been with what is called continental philosophy, more or less a continuation of the Kantian and Hegelian tradition. Analytic philosophy is dominant in most graduate philosophy programs in the U.K., the U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Scandinavia. While some departments in continental Europe provide training in analytic philosophy, most (including courses at Bard College Berlin) are oriented toward continental philosophy.

There are important counter-narratives here, and we will look at them. Husserl, the father of phenomenology, had close connections with Frege, and it has been persuasively argued (see D.W. Smith, “The Role of Phenomenology in Analytic Philosophy” in the *Oxford Handbook of Analytic Philosophy*, pp. 1117 ff) that there are important and continuing connections between phenomenology, which has remained part of the core of continental philosophy, and later developments in analytic philosophy. (See, for example, a detailed 1928 review by Gilbert Ryle, who was editor of the Oxford journal *Mind* for 24 years, of Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit*.) There is also something to be said for the view that the analytic/continental divide is more imagined than real. One is reminded of the rejection of the dichotomy between popular music and classical music by Duke Ellington, who said famously, “There are simply two kinds of music, good music and the other kind.” We should be on the lookout, as the course proceeds, for themes and insights that are also present in “continental” philosophers, and if we are very fortunate we will be able to bring these two kinds of philosophy occasionally into dialogue.

But we also shouldn't minimize the differences. The Yale University department of philosophy was put into receivership by the administration for six years because of an irreconcilable struggle between the 'analytic' and the 'continental' members of the faculty. ("Receivership" is when the administration turns over tenure and hiring decisions to an outside person or committee.) For an account of the Yale philosophy department situation, see the report in the 1998 issue of *Lingua Franca*.

As a first attempt, let's list some of the key elements of the Moore-Russell revolution, and then sketch out, very schematically, the developments that followed. This will necessarily be a very superficial overview, but I think it will be helpful at least to locate in a larger frame the work that we will be studying in detail.

Moore was most upset by the Idealist view that nothing exists independent of consciousness, and more generally the view that common sense is not to be trusted. Russell was particularly troubled by the Idealist's *monism*, the view that there are in reality no separate objects. Besides offering arguments against the Idealists, Moore was persuasive because of the way he did philosophy – his near obsession with clarity was probably as important as the arguments themselves. And for Russell, besides his arguments against monism, his ground-breaking work in logic was enormously influential, both in setting a standard of rigor and also in providing a tool for philosophical analysis. Russell had already published his *Principles of Mathematics*, built on his new system of logic, in 1903, but in 1905 he wrote a paper, the one that we will study, called "On Denoting", that has become one of his most famous. That paper made particularly clear the relevance of symbolic logic to epistemological and ontological issues.

Here must be mentioned the extraordinary coincidence that at roughly the same time (actually a few years earlier), Frege, working alone in Jena, came up with a system of logic the same as Russell's in all essentials except its graphic notation. Largely through Russell's efforts, Frege's work became widely known and extremely influential. Tyler Burge writes "Frege is the undisputed father of 'analytic philosophy', or what I prefer to call the mainstream tradition in twentieth-century philosophy....The influence in philosophy of Frege's development and application of logic...was unitary, pervasive, and steady, from Russell's initial recognition of Frege as a great philosopher onward. It is not too much to say that this influence was the largest factor in initiating a new era of philosophy. The new era was marked by a shared understanding of techniques and problems, a distaste for vague, grandiose claims, and a consequent openness of discussion to communal development. (*Oxford Handbook of Analytic Philosophy*, pp. 356, 358).

One strand in the next phase in the development of analytic philosophy was indeed on the continent, in the 1920s and 30s, in the work of what became known as the Vienna Circle. This was "a group of scientifically trained philosophers and philosophically interested scientists who met under the (nominal) leadership of Moritz Schlick for often weekly discussions of problems in the philosophy of science during academic terms in the years from 1924 to 1936." (Stanford Encyclopedia entry on Vienna Circle, by T. Uebel). Besides regular members, the Circle welcomed visitors from all over the world, including from the U.S., the U.K., and even China.

The members organized conferences, founded a journal (*Erkenntnis*), published a book series, and planned (but didn't complete) monumental *International Encyclopedia of Unified Sciences*. In its own way, the work of the Vienna Circle was even more fervent and revolutionary than that of the Cambridge "revolution" of the 1890s. Their work was "socially, indeed politically, explosive," writes Uebel. It was so partly, he continues, because of "its claim to refute opponents not by proving their statements to be false but by showing them to be (cognitively) meaningless. Whatever the niceties of their philosophical argument here, the socio-political impact of the Vienna Circle's philosophies of science was obvious and profound. All of them opposed the increasing groundswell of radically mistaken, indeed irrational, ways of thinking about thought and its place in the world. In their time and place, the mere demand that public discourse be perspicuous, in particular, that reasoning be valid and premises true—a demand implicit in their general ideal of reason—placed them in the middle of crucial socio-political struggles. Some members and sympathisers of the Circle also actively opposed the then increasingly popular *völkisch* supra-individual holism in social science as a dangerous intellectual aberration. Not only did such ideas support racism and fascism in politics, but such ideas themselves were supported only by radically mistaken arguments concerning the nature and explanation of organic and inorganic matter. So the first thing that made all of the Vienna Circle philosophies politically relevant was the contingent fact that in their day much political discourse exhibited striking epistemic deficits." (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, entry on Vienna Circle)

Wittgenstein's views were extremely influential within the Vienna Circle, though he never actually participated. He agreed to meet only once, and that meeting (in 1929) had to be in private with only Waismann, Schlick, and Carnap in attendance. Another visitor, in 1934, was the recent Oxford graduate, A. J. Ayer, who spent the year studying in Vienna and participated in meetings of the Circle for about six months. Ayer returned home and in 1935, at the age of 25, wrote *Language, Truth and Logic*. He writes in the Preface, "The philosophers with whom I am in the closest agreement are those who compose the 'Viennese circle', under the leadership of Moritz Schlick, and are commonly known as logical positivists." Ayer's book became the most popular and influential exposition and defense of the logical positivists' views, at least as he understood those views; its success at home is indicated by the fact that it shortly became known as "the Oxford bible." It is now considered in some ways to distort some of the views of the Vienna Circle and to fail to represent fully the breadth and depth of those views. (See Thomas Uebel, "Early Logical Empiricism and its Reception" in the *Oxford Handbook of Analytic Philosophy*, pp. 526 ff.) I have chosen it for our study because of the energy and boldness of the writing and because of its widespread influence. It should be treated as a preamble, not the final word, on the work of the Vienna Circle.

As an amusing footnote (from the Wikipedia entry on A.J. Ayer): After his retirement, Ayer taught or lectured several times in the United States, including serving as a visiting professor at [Bard College](#) in the fall of 1987. At a party that same year held by fashion designer [Fernando Sanchez](#), Ayer, then 77, confronted [Mike Tyson](#) who was forcing himself upon the (then) little-known model [Naomi Campbell](#). When Ayer demanded that Tyson stop, the boxer reportedly asked, "Do you know who the fuck I am? I'm the heavyweight champion of the world," to which

Ayer replied, "And I am the former [Wykeham Professor of Logic](#). We are both pre-eminent in our field. I suggest that we talk about this like rational men". Ayer and Tyson then began to talk, allowing Campbell to slip out.

Another strand in analytic philosophy was increased attention to ordinary language, as opposed to the formal languages of logical systems. Here too the ideas of Wittgenstein were extremely influential, though this is Wittgenstein at a later stage, when he renounced his own earlier work in logic and advocated attention to language as we actually use it. Ordinary language philosophy, as it came to be known, flourished especially in Oxford, and reached a pinnacle in the work of J.L. Austin. His lectures at Harvard University in 1950, called "How to Do Things with Word" are a remarkable example of philosophy as process (as opposed to product). Over the course of the twelve lectures, Austin first explores and then rejects his own distinction between performative utterances (such as "I pronounce you husband and wife" said by the minister) and constative utterances (such as "You two are married"), and then begins detailed work on a new theoretical framework for understanding speech acts. Austin's lectures sparked a whole field, known as Speech Act Theory, that is now important not only in philosophy but also in linguistics, literary analysis, and sociology, among other fields.

It was only 15 years later, in 1970, that another set of lectures opened a new era within analytic philosophy. Saul Kripke's three lectures at Princeton University, published subsequently as *Naming and Necessity*, moved from what was apparently a somewhat narrow issue in the philosophy of language, specifically about the reference of proper names, to broad questions in metaphysics and the philosophy of mind. Kripke's ideas in these lectures have without doubt changed the landscape of analytic philosophy. At the time, Kripke was best known as a logician who, at the age of 17 had already made significant contributions in the field of modal logic

Though I have focused here on the works we will study – from Moore, Russell, Ayer, Austin, and Kripke – this overview must also note some other landmark works and developments in analytic philosophy.

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, published in 1922., was related, at least in its themes, to Russell's logic and its ontological foundations. His *Philosophical Investigations*, published in 1953 (after his death - 1951) repudiated his earlier work. His new views were, and have continued to be, extremely influential.

Another important philosopher whom we will not study is W.V.O. Quine, perhaps most famous for his attack on the analytic-synthetic distinction. Related to Quine's work, and also influential, is Donald Davidson, who made important contributions in the philosophy of language and the philosophy of action. From Russell's earliest work, the foundations of mathematics have been a major problem area within analytic philosophy, starting with the discovery of the logical and semantic paradoxes around 1900. The core branches of philosophy – metaphysics, epistemology, ethical theory, political theory, and aesthetics – have all flourished as parts of analytic philosophy, with a characteristic emphasis on clarity of exposition and demand for supporting argumentation.