

Twentieth-Century American Philosophy— “What Is, ‘Is’?”

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Upon completing this chapter, students should be able to meet the following Learning Outcomes:

- 8.1** Explain the idea of analytic philosophy in contrast with other schools of philosophy.
- 8.2** Compare and contrast the logical positivist to the natural language theorist.
- 8.3** Explain the role of the “Vienna Circle” in the history of analytic philosophy.

Analytic philosophy was created as a distinct school of philosophical thought by many of the great minds in the first half of the twentieth century. There were various founders: Bertrand Russell is one of the founders of analytic philosophy along with his predecessor Gottlob Frege, as well as his colleague G. E. Moore, and their student Ludwig Wittgenstein. It is worth noting that many of the first analytic philosophers, including Frege and Russell, first made their mark in formal logic and science. Philosophy, like science then, would henceforth value conceptual clarity and concise language, with a resulting aversion for the convoluted and often dense language of European philosophers from Hegel to Husserl. That clarity need not be the enemy of complexity did not occur to many of these analytic philosophers, and the very subject matter of Continental philosophy became suspect.

“Modern analytical empiricism . . . differs from that of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume by its incorporation of mathematics and its development of a

powerful logical technique. It is thus able, in regard to certain problems, to achieve definite answers, which have the quality of science rather than of philosophy. It has the advantage, in comparison with the philosophies of the system-builders, of being able to tackle its problems one at a time, instead of having to invent at one stroke a block theory of the whole universe. Its methods, in this respect, resemble those of science. I have no doubt that, in so far as philosophical knowledge is possible, it is by such methods that it must be sought; I have also no doubt that, by these methods, many ancient problems are completely soluble."

—Bertrand Russell, 1945, *A History of Western Philosophy*

What differentiates analytic philosophy from other school of philosophical thought is unclear. In his book, *The Dialogue of Reason* (1986), L. Jonathan Cohen (1923–2006) argues that there are three ways by which analytic philosophy may be separated from other philosophical schools of thought. The first possibility is that analytic philosophy holds different foundational doctrines or tenets than other areas of philosophy. This was the view adopted by the **logical positivist (or empirical positivist)** at the beginning of the last century. In the view of the logical positivist, only statements verifiable either logically or empirically are cognitively meaningful—anything else (primarily metaphysics) is meaningless or nonsense.

The second possibility as to what differentiates analytic philosophy as a distinct school of philosophy is that it employs doctrines distinct from other branches of philosophy. This notion was employed by the **natural language theorists** in the middle of the last century. Finally, the third possibility is that analytic philosophy is concerned with different problems than other branches of philosophy. Jonathan Cohen argues for the third possibility in his book and claims that what separate analytic philosophy from other schools of philosophy is that it is primarily focused on "normative problems about reasons and reasoning."

Powerful Thinkers: L. Jonathan Cohen

L. Jonathan Cohen was a fellow of the Queen's College, Oxford (1957–1990) and of the British Academy. He contributed to the various areas of philosophy including epistemology, logic, the philosophy of law, language, psychology, and philosophy of science. He was awarded a scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford, where he read literature and began his interest in philosophy. His studies, however, were interrupted by the World War II. Cohen trained as a code-breaker, and after learning Japanese, he served in British naval intelligence in the Far East from 1942 to 1945.

Upon completing his studies, he began his career at Queen's College, Oxford. In his second book, *The Diversity of Meaning* (1962), he examined the nature of meaning from the different perspectives of linguistics, sociology, the history of ideas, as well as analytic philosophy. The book was one expression of his dissent from the prevailing philosophical fashions in Britain.

In his work, *The Probable and the Provable* (1977), he developed a "Baconian" analysis of probability, which is opposed to the more standard a "Pascalian" analysis of probability. The analysis provided unique solutions to a number of open problems and paradoxes, including a proof of when the testimony of two witnesses corroborates one another. He applied his inductive logic to questions of metaphor, explanation and skepticism.

"I found myself filled with semi-mystical feelings about beauty . . . and with a desire almost as profound as that of the Buddha to find some philosophy which should make human life endurable"

—Bertrand Russell, 1872–1970, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, 1956.

Powerful Thinkers: Michael Dummett

Michael Dummett (1925–2011) supports many of Cohen's claims regarding the nature and foundation of analytic philosophy in his book, *Truth and Other Enigmas* (1978). He says that, "The goal of [analytic] philosophy is the analysis of the structure of thought; secondly, that the study of thought is to be sharply distinguished from the psychological process of thinking; and finally, the only proper method for analyzing thought consist in the analysis of language . . . the acceptance of these three tenets is common to the entire analytical school."

POWERFUL ANALYSIS: ONLY THE ANALYSTS?

Is the analytic school the only one in the history of philosophy to deal with "normative problems about reasons and reasoning"? Or is that what every philosopher since Socrates has done?

Logical Positivism

Logical positivism is a twentieth-century school of philosophy, which argues that all meaningful propositions (or statements/utterances) are either: analytic, verifiable, or confirmable by means of observation and experiment. The proponents of this view argue that metaphysical theories are therefore strictly meaningless (as such the mind or soul do not exist, or at least cannot be confirmed, since they cannot be observed). This view is also sometimes known as logical empiricism.

One of its chief proponents and founders was Rudolph Carnap. The notion of analytic can be stated as "true by virtue of the meaning of the words or concepts used to express it," so that its denial would be a self-contradiction. An alternative definition, one that is proposed by natural language theorist, is that "analytic statements tend to not alter the form of its words and to use word order rather than inflection or agglutination to express grammatical structure."

Powerful Thinkers: Vienna Circle and A. J. Ayer

The "Vienna Circle" has been described as a group of philosophical thugs or as the patron saints of twentieth-century philosophy—the truth, no doubt, is somewhere in the middle. The members of the "Vienna Circle" founded a school of thought known as empirical or logical positivism, which is, in fact, a recognized school of philosophy. As such, the group has as much right to be a "school" of philosophy as any other "school" developed in the twentieth century.

As noted above, some have called this group, which is traditionally known as the "the Vienna Circle," a gang of philosophers" (which is certainly the most boring "gang" ever assembled). The group included various philosophers including Rudolph Carnap and Kurt Godel, they were the founders of the group, which started meeting in Vienna in the twentieth century—hence the name.

The so-called "Vienna Circle" dedicated themselves to the reconciling philosophy with the new sciences and so determined to take it upon themselves to evaluate the truth solely in terms of the empirical verifiability or logic of language—which lead philosophy down an interesting path, from which it is still recovering. This was termed either of "Logical Positivism" or "Empirical Positivism."

A. J. Ayers's *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) represent a modified version of logical Positivism, which he called "logical empiricism." The book questioned all aspects of philosophy that did not deal with what he consecrated empirical or verifiable issues. He called into question the entire enterprise of metaphysics by saying it was

"nonsense" and that questions of value were nonexistent . . . which leads to various other issues (like why get out of bed since nothing has axiological significance), which they missed.

It is interesting to note that Ayer himself realized the shortcomings *Language, Truth and Logic*, and he recanted and/or clarified many his views in the introduction to the 1946 edition of the book.

"True philosophic contemplation, finds its satisfaction in every enlargement of the not-Self, in everything that magnifies the objects contemplated, and thereby the subject contemplating. Everything, in contemplation, that is personal or private, everything that depends upon habit, self-interest, or desire, distorts the object, and hence impairs the union which the intellect seeks"

—Bertrand Russell, 1912, *The Value of Philosophy*

Natural Language Philosophy

Natural Language Philosophy (also known as Linguistic Philosophy or Ordinary Language Philosophy) approaches traditional philosophical problems as rooted in misunderstandings in a language. The proponents of the view claim many of the philosophical problems undertaken as a result of a misunderstanding of language.

Some philosophers argue that it is a separate school of philosophy and is a tradition against the analytic philosophy, while others argue it as just an extension of analytic tradition Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein (1889–1951), Gilbert Ryle (1976), J. L. Austin (1911–1960), Peter Strawson (1919–2006), and John W. (1904–1993) were all proponents of this school of thought. Of the group, Wittgenstein was ultimately the most accomplished (as well as misunderstood of the group).

Wittgenstein's early and late works (if they do not contradict one another) certainly provide very different philosophical views regarding the nature of language and of philosophy itself. His philosophy is often divided into an early period exemplified by the *Tractatus*, and a later period, articulated in the *Philosophical Investigations*. The early Wittgenstein was concerned with the logical relationship between propositions and the world and believed that by providing an account of the underlying this relationship, he had solved all philosophical problems. The Wittgenstein rejected many of the assumptions of the *Tractatus*, arguing that meaning of words is best understood as their use within a given language game.

Some members of this school of thought were willing to accept metaphysical statements (or at least entertain them) such as Wittgenstein. As he said, "What we bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday usage."

"Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language"