

ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY

To 'analyse' a problem is one of the oldest and most basic techniques used by philosophers, and we can first look at what those techniques involve. The progress of these techniques eventually brings us to a modern philosophical movement known as Analytic Philosophy, and that too must be examined. Serious philosophy began when thinkers resolved to study the great problems of life in a slow, cool, careful and rational manner. This means getting very clear about what you are discussing, and breaking a problem down into its component parts. The earliest step towards being precise in philosophy was the desire to define the key terms of the discussion. The best strategy for arriving at a good definition seemed to be a continual division of the target idea, down to its basics. If asked to define 'motorway', for example, we would break it down into a set of features, which are then listed in the definition. Thus analysis seems to be a reduction down to things that are understood, and which may even be basic and beyond further analysis. Even in those early days there were, though, doubts about analysis. If you break something down, do you destroy the thing, instead of fully grasping it as a whole? And surely you must already understand the thing if you are going to successfully analyse it? Nevertheless, this careful revealing of the ingredients of the central topic of a discussion was perhaps the first major advance in the techniques of philosophical thinking.

An offshoot of this early desire for detailed definition was the invention of formal logic. If we use algebraic letters to replace the non-logical ingredients of an argument, we can analyse the argument, without worrying about its content. This gives a technique for selective analysis, by focusing on the parts that interest us, rather as scientific experiments control the conditions of their study. A more careful focus on ambiguities was also revealing, as when it dawned on English-speaking philosophers that their word 'is' has at least four distinct meanings.

A concept of analysis which gradually emerged was an aim of giving the 'necessary and sufficient conditions' for the item in question. Thus to analyse 'bravery' we can say that it is necessary that some danger be involved, but that it is sufficient for bravery if the danger is faced resolutely. Typically one might list a set of necessary conditions which add up to a sufficient condition, though one condition might be sufficient on its own. To travel to London it is necessary that you set out and then make progress, but it is sufficient that you arrive. In this way we not only list the requirements for the thing that interests us, but show how they relate together.

All good philosophers were familiar with these these techniques of analysis, and they were vital to the progress made in the subject. But for the arrival of what we now call Analytic Philosophy, some new ingredients were required. The two developments that produced this movement were the creation of a better logic, which mapped the way in which collections of objects, properties and truths were connected, and the suggestion that examining our language might reveal the deep truths about our understanding of the world. These two steps quickly combined into the proposal that the logic could be used to reveal the 'logical form' of the language, producing a dramatic clarification in how we talk about things. Certain puzzles, such as how you can express truths about non-existent things, and how the descriptions of things connect to what they refer to, became the focus of careful analysis. Logic became an essential tool for analytic philosophy, because it could weed out ambiguities and dubious shifts in meaning in an argument. When an account of truth was added to the new formal logic, the analytic approach surged in popularity.

An early result of such analysis was a return to the idea that metaphysics is only meaningful if it connects to experience. Now a careful analysis of a sentence might show that no such connections existed, and the sentence could be consigned to the philosophical dustbin. Another dream was that the original analysis of definitions down to basics could now be done in linguistic terms. We show how every complex and sophisticated sentence can be broken down into 'atomic' sentences, which just say that some object has some attribute. Thus we might pare our view of the world down to some minimal ingredients. Analysis offers us a new way to do metaphysics. If the analysis is combined with the findings of the sciences, a completely satisfactory world view might emerge.

One experiment in analysis used the assumption that ordinary language was the final arbiter of human metaphysics, and hence an application of analysis to daily usage of words might reveal what we are after. When this strategy was quickly abandoned, a rebellion went in the opposite direction, and now formal languages (even implemented on computers) are at the centre of much analytic study, because they can offer an idealised, precise and varied modes for successful thinking.

Of course, the old doubts remained. If you want to analyse something, then you either know what you are analysing, or you don't – but if you know, why bother? – and if you don't, how are you going to analyse it? Most analyses look wrong anyway, and successful analyses seem rather boring. There might not even be a consensus about what a good analysis looks like. Sceptics concluded that analysis has led philosophy into a dead end, where it seems obsessed with logical minutiae and problems that are merely technical, while forgetting the big picture.

Nevertheless, philosophy relies on certain key concepts such as inference, truth, proof, contradiction, paradox, intuition, definition, objects, values and knowledge. If philosophers failed to scrutinise these concepts with every useful tool available to them, they would be failing in their intellectual duty, and would be rightly scorned by more rigorous disciplines. The practitioners are becoming aware of the dangers of narrowness and triviality, and there are aspirations to find a synthesis of the findings, as well as an analysis of the ingredients. The areas on which analysis focus have also expanded (beyond language and logic), so that more precision can be brought to thinking about possibility and necessity, and to patterns of knowledge, obligation, and scientific theorising.

If logical and linguistic analysis are rejected as philosophical strategies, the rival approaches typically either focus on explanation, dependence relations, truthmakers and science, or (more drastically) on pure speculation, or on expounding issues of thought in a more historical or literary style. Maybe philosophy should be a more creative activity than the analytic approach will permit?