

COMMENTARY

Bertrand Russell's brainchild

Analytical philosophy: its conception and birth

Ray Monk

'Just arrived from Germany, a Fine Consignment of Assorted *Weltanschauungen*.'

So ran an announcement on the back of a spoof edition of *Mind* edited by F.C.S. Schiller in 1901. Below it was a message from a satisfied customer: 'Your latest "Immoralist" *Weltanschauung* was a great success. It was showy and wears well. It quite paralysed the Examiners, who proved utterly incapable of coping with and even of understanding it.'

Even at the height of British neo-Hegelianism, it seems, the impenetrability and po-faced earnestness of German philosophy was seen as intrinsically comic. But, if German-baiting has a long tradition among British philosophers, it reached new heights after the Second World War, particularly with Gilbert Ryle's outrageous address to the Royaumont conference in 1962, 'Phenomenology versus "The Concept of Mind"'. Before the war, Ryle had been famously sympathetic to Continental streams of thought, delivering a measured account of Husserl's work in a paper called 'Phenomenology' to the Aristotelian Society in 1932, and reviewing Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* with respect (even if with robust dissent) for *Mind* in 1928. He even gave what he later called 'an unwanted course of lectures' at Oxford on the work of Bolzano, Brentano, Husserl and Meinong ('Ryle's three Austrian railway-stations and one Chinese game of chance', as they were facetiously described at the time). But in his Royaumont paper, Ryle's tone changed drastically. His dissent had become outright hostility, and in place of respect he offered derision.

New, too, was the bellicose sense of superiority of us (the British) over *them* (the Continentals, particularly the Germans). Husserl's thought is caricatured as an attempt to 'puff philosophy up into the Science of the sciences'. We British thinkers, Ryle implies, are not tempted to such delusions of grandeur because the rituals of Oxbridge High Table open us at all times to the ridicule of scientific colleagues:

I guess that our thinkers have been immunised against the idea of philosophy as the Mistress Science by the fact that their daily lives in Cambridge and Oxford Colleges have kept them in personal contact with real scientists. Claims to Führership vanish when postprandial joking begins. Husserl wrote as if he had never met a scientist – or a joke.

That's the trouble with these Germans, the implication goes: no sense of humour. They take themselves, and philosophy, altogether too seriously. 'Philosophy as a Rigorous Science' indeed! Try telling that to Arthur Eddington the next time you find yourself next to him at High Table!

More outrageous still, Ryle accuses the Germans of compounding the sin of their disastrous earnestness with a pernicious need for *Führers* (he was writing at a time when memories of the Third Reich were still vivid). We in Britain, on the other hand, ‘have not worried our heads over the question Which philosopher ought to be Führer?’ Unlike the Germans, we trust in logic rather than leadership: ‘At least the main lines of our philosophical thinking during this century can be fully understood only by someone who has studied the massive developments of our logical theory. This fact is partly responsible for the wide gulf that has existed for three-quarters of a century between Anglo-Saxon and Continental philosophy.’

Our logical theory? But didn’t Russell learn his logic from an Italian (Peano), and a whole lot of Germans (Cantor, Weierstrass, Dedekind and Frege)? In the following section of Ryle’s paper, it transpires that what he means by ‘the massive developments of our logical theory’ is the progression from Russell’s theory of descriptions to Wittgenstein’s theories of meaning in, first, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and then *Philosophical Investigations*. These developments he characterizes as ‘The *Cambridge* Transformation of the Theory of Concepts’ (my italics), thus bypassing the slightly awkward fact that Wittgenstein was more Germanic than Anglo-Saxon. Wittgenstein, for all that he wrote in German and felt like an alien in England, was, it seems, a Cambridge man through and through, and not really a ‘Continental’ at all.

What is presented in its starkest form in this extraordinary paper is a conception of analytical philosophy – as contrasted with, and superior to, ‘Continental’ thought – that has remained dominant in this country until fairly recently, and is, perhaps, the most unfortunate aspect of Ryle’s enormous (and, in many other respects, beneficial) legacy to British philosophy. Now, however, this conception is coming under its strongest threat yet, not from the schools of self-styled ‘Continental’ philosophy that have sprung up in Britain under the leadership of *Radical Philosophy* and the Department of Philosophy at Warwick University, but from the most prominent members of the analytical tradition itself.

The Fregean myth

One way of understanding the excursions into the history of philosophy that Michael Dummett has lately undertaken – in *Frege: Philosophy of Mathematics*, *Origins of Analytical Philosophy*, and many of his more recent papers – is as a sustained attack on Ryle’s conception of analytical philosophy as characteristically ‘Anglo-Saxon’. Something of Dummett’s attitude to Ryle emerges in his description of him in the Preface to *Frege and Other Philosophers* as ‘the generalissimo of Oxford ordinary-language philosophy’, and, still more so, in his disparaging remark in the course of his interview with Joachim Schulte: ‘I did not think Ryle’s positive influence was so great; his negative influence, in teaching us to disregard so many things – Carnap, for instance – was much greater.’ But what really undermines Ryle’s legacy at its very root is Dummett’s attack on the notion that the opposite of ‘analytical’ is ‘Continental’. *Our* logical theory, even when this is understood to mean the transformation of the theory of concepts that lies at the heart of the analytical school, has its origins, Dummett insists, not in Cambridge but in Germany, Ryle’s land of *Führer*-followers, who, bereft of logic and of High Table conversation, would not recognize a scientist or a joke if they came face to face with one at dinner.

‘The sources of the analytical tradition’, Dummett writes in *Origins of Analytical Philosophy*, ‘were the writings of philosophers who wrote, principally or exclusively, in the German language; and this would have remained obvious to everyone had it not been for the plague of Nazism which drove so many German-

speaking philosophers across the Atlantic'. This would be a welcome reminder of an evident truth that a whole generation of British Ryleans has tended to ignore, except that, in place of Ryle's myth of the 'Anglo-Saxon' analytical tradition, Dummett's historical revisionism presents us with another: the myth of analytical philosophy as 'post-Fregean philosophy'. A key element in this myth is provided by the twin ideas: (1) that analytical philosophy is characterized by its 'linguistic turn', and (2) that the linguistic turn was taken by Frege. 'We may characterize analytical philosophy', Dummett writes in his 1975 essay, 'Can Philosophy be Systematic, and Ought it to Be?', 'as that which follows Frege in accepting that the philosophy of language is the foundation of the rest of the subject':

For Frege, as for all subsequent analytical philosophers, the philosophy of language is the foundation of all other philosophy, because it is only by the analysis of language that we can analyse thought.

In his adherence to the claim that Frege is the father of the analytical school, Dummett presents a view of history that is, in its way, every bit as myopic as Ryle's. Where Ryle offers a story in which the heroes are Russell, Moore and Wittgenstein, and in which Frege has only a walk-on part, Dummett puts Frege centre-stage to such an extent that Russell and Moore are hardly mentioned. On Dummett's account, the action takes place *entirely* on the Continent. 'The roots of analytical philosophy', he claims, 'are the *same* roots as those of the phenomenological school'. The two traditions, he writes, 'may be compared with the Rhine and the Danube, which rise quite close to one another and for a time pursue roughly parallel courses, only to diverge in utterly different directions and flow into different seas'.

Central to Dummett's philosophical cartography here is the importance he gives to the linguistic turn taken by the Fregean stream. Both Frege and Husserl, Dummett claims, conceived philosophy to be fundamentally concerned with the analysis of thought, but Frege took the decisive step of insisting upon what Dummett calls 'the extrusion of thoughts from the mind'. 'Analytical philosophy was born when the linguistic turn was taken', he says, and, in *Frege: Philosophy of Mathematics*, he points to the precise moment of this decisive step. It was in paragraph 62 of *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik*, where Frege begins by asking about the nature of number and ends by asking instead about the meanings of sentences containing number words.

Dummett has been vigorously challenged on this conception of Frege's importance by Baker and Hacker, who argue that Dummett's seminal book, *Frege: Philosophy of Language*, went wrong on its title page: Frege never was a philosopher of language, they claim, and the idea that it is to him that we owe the concern with meaning that characterizes contemporary analytical philosophy is a mistake. Be that as it may, it seems to me that, in any case, Dummett's conception of the analytical tradition is unduly narrow and distorted by his preoccupation with the linguistic turn. On Dummett's understanding of what analytical philosophy is, Russell would fail to count as an analytical philosopher at all, and that is surely a misreading of history.

Page One.	Permit Book
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Christian Name	<i>Bartrand</i>
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Signature of Holder	<i>Bartrand Russell</i>
PERSONAL DESCRIPTION.	
Height	<i>5' 9" in.</i>
Sex	<i>male</i>
Build	<i>thin</i>
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Analysis: from logic to psychology

Russell *never* thought that the philosophy of language was the foundation of all other philosophy. What, in his early career, he thought was foundational was *logic*, and, until he was persuaded otherwise by Wittgenstein, Russell considered logic to be the study of Platonic forms rather than linguistic structures. ‘Meaning, in the sense in which words have meaning’, as he put it in *The Principles of Mathematics*, ‘is irrelevant to logic’.

When, after 1919, he came to accept a linguistic view of logic, he was sent in *exactly* the opposite direction to that which Dummett regards as definitional of analytical philosophy. Logic, that is, ceased to be of any great interest to him, and his thoughts turned instead to psychology. Questions of meaning took centre-stage, but they were approached by Russell with precisely the opposite view to Dummett’s about the ‘relative priority of language and thought’. He sought, that is, to understand language through an understanding of *psychology*. ‘I think that the notion of meaning’, he says in *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, ‘is always more or less psychological ... the theory of symbolism is not a thing that can be explained in pure logic without taking account of the various cognitive relations that you may have to things.’

And yet, even after this ‘psychologistic turn’, Russell considered himself, above all, to be an analytical philosopher. ‘The chief thesis I have to maintain’, he announces, ‘is the legitimacy of analysis’, and in the last chapter of his *History of Western Philosophy* he proselytizes in favour of what he calls ‘the philosophy of logical analysis’. On Russell’s characterization, this kind of philosophy is not primarily concerned with the theory of meaning. It is concerned with questions like: What is number? What are space and time? What is mind? and What is matter? And its origins do not lie in the linguistic turn of Frege’s *Grundlagen*, but in the work of Weierstrass, Dedekind and Cantor in transforming ‘Calculus’ into ‘Analysis’. ‘The origin of this philosophy’, he writes, ‘is in the achievements of mathematicians who set to work to purge their subject of fallacies and slipshod reasoning’.

A crucially important influence on Russell’s notion of analysis was G.E. Moore’s 1899 essay ‘The Nature of Judgment’, which insisted – *contra* the neo-Hegelians – that propositions could be analysed into their constituent concepts, and that concepts themselves could be divided into those (like *red*) that were simple, and therefore unanalysable, and those that were complex and thus analysable (like *horse*). If one wants to find a decisive moment when analytical philosophy was born, one would do better to find it in the publication of this essay than in the purported first step of the linguistic turn, for it is there that the ‘legitimacy of analysis’ is first announced. Russell realized this, and so did Ryle, who, in ‘G.E. Moore’s “The Nature of Judgment”’ (1970), paid tribute to the essay’s historical significance. It could, Ryle wrote, ‘be described as the *De Interpretatione* of early twentieth-century Cambridge logic’. Even generalissimos sometimes get things right.

For a true picture of the analytical tradition, a path must be steered between Ryle’s Anglocentric concentration on *Cambridge* logic, and Dummett’s absurd claim that, ‘Important as Russell and Moore both were, neither was the, or even *a*, source of analytical philosophy’. Analytical philosophy was born when Moore’s notion of analysis was fertilized by the work of the great German mathematicians. And the matrix in which this took place was the mind of Bertrand Russell.