

Contemporary Philosophy in the United States

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Philosophy as an academic discipline in America has considerably fewer practitioners than do several other subjects in the humanities and the social sciences, such as sociology, history, English, or economics; but it still shows enormous diversity. This variety is made manifest in the original research published by professional philosophers, whose differing points of view are expressed in the large number of books published each year, as well as in the many professional philosophy journals. There are over two thousand colleges and universities in the United States, of which nearly all have philosophy departments, and the number of professional philosophers is correspondingly large.

Because of this diversity, any generalizations about the discipline as a whole, which I am about to make, are bound to be misleading. The subject is too vast and complex to be describable in a single essay. Furthermore, anyone who is an active participant in the current controversies, as I am, necessarily has a perspective conditioned by his or her own interests, commitments and convictions. It would be impossible for me to give an 'objective' account. I am not therefore in what follows trying to give a neutral or disinterested account of the contemporary philosophical scene; rather I am trying to say what in the current developments seems to me important.

In spite of its enormous variety, there are certain central themes in contemporary American philosophy. The dominant mode of philosophizing in the United States is called 'analytic philosophy'. Without exception, the best philosophy departments in the United States are dominated by analytic philosophy, and among the leading philosophers in the United States, all but a tiny handful would be classified as analytic philosophers. Practitioners of types of philosophizing that are not in the analytic tradition – such as phenomenology, classical pragmatism, existentialism, or Marxism – feel it necessary to define their position in relation to analytic philosophy. Indeed, analytic philosophy is the dominant mode of philosophizing not only in the United States, but throughout the entire English-speaking world, including Great Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. It is also the dominant mode of philosophizing in Scandinavia, and it is also becoming more widespread in Germany, France, Italy and throughout Latin America. I personally have found that I can go to all of these parts of the world and lecture on subjects in contemporary analytic philosophy before audiences who are both knowledgeable and well trained in the techniques of the discipline.



1 Analytic Philosophy

What, then, is analytic philosophy? The simplest way to describe it is to say that it is primarily concerned with the analysis of meaning. In order to explain this enterprise and its significance, we need first to say a little bit about its history. Though the United States now leads the world in analytic philosophy, the origins of this mode of philosophizing lie in Europe. Specifically, analytic philosophy is based on the work of Gottlob Frege, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore, as well as the work done by the logical positivists of the Vienna Circle in the 1920s and 1930s. Going further back in history, one can also see analytic philosophy as a natural descendant of the empiricism of the great British philosophers Locke, Berkeley and Hume, and of the transcendental philosophy of Kant. In the works of philosophers as far back as Plato and Aristotle, one can see many of the themes and presuppositions of the methods of analytic philosophy. We can best summarize the origins of modern analytic philosophy by saying that it arose when the empiricist tradition in epistemology, together with the foundationalist enterprise of Kant, were tied to the methods of logical analysis and the philosophical theories invented by Gottlob Frege in the late nineteenth century. In the course of his work on the foundations of mathematics, Frege invented symbolic logic in its modern form and developed a comprehensive and profound philosophy of language. Though many of the details of his views on language and mathematics have been superseded, Frege's work is crucial for at least two reasons. Firstly, by inventing modern logic, specifically the predicate calculus, he gave us a primary tool of philosophical analysis; and, secondly, he made the philosophy of language central to the entire philosophical enterprise. From the point of view of analytic philosophy, Frege's work is the greatest single philosophical achievement of the nineteenth century. Fregean techniques of logical analysis were later augmented by the ordinary language analysis inspired by the work of Moore and Wittgenstein and are best exemplified by the school of linguistic philosophy that flourished in Oxford in the 1950s. In short, analytic philosophy attempts to combine certain traditional philosophical themes with modern techniques.

Analytic philosophy has never been fixed or stable, because it is intrinsically self-critical and its practitioners are always challenging their own presuppositions and conclusions. However, it is possible to locate a central period in analytic philosophy – the period comprising, roughly speaking, the logical positivist phase immediately prior to the 1939–45 war and the postwar phase of linguistic analysis. Both the prehistory and the subsequent history of analytic philosophy can be defined by the main doctrines of that central period.

In the central period, analytic philosophy was defined by a belief in two linguistic distinctions, combined with a research programme. The two distinctions are, firstly, that between analytic and synthetic propositions, and, secondly, that between descriptive and evaluative utterances. The research programme is the traditional philosophical research programme of attempting to find foundations for such philosophically problematic phenomena as language, knowledge, meaning, truth, mathematics and so on.

