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## OTHER VIEWS OF PHILOSOPHY

**Mortimer Adler**

Part 2 of 2

( 2 )

I have reserved for a somewhat more extended treatment the view of philosophy that is expressed, often quite explicitly, in the writings of the analytical and linguistic philosophers, especially since the end of the second world war. I refer specifically to the last fifteen or twenty years, because it is in this very recent past that the analytical and linguistic approach to philosophy has corrected the errors and excesses of Viennese positivism, logical atomism, and logical empiricism, with which it was associated in the period between the first and the second world wars.

In addition, it must be said of the analytical and linguistic writers in recent years that they continually ask themselves whether they have put philosophy onto the right track; whether they are at last doing what philosophers always should have been doing. They even ask themselves whether doing the things to which they have severely restricted them-

selves is enough—enough to deserve the high status that philosophy once claimed for itself in the family of disciplines.<sup>16</sup>

15 For example, they are given to personal system building rather than to cooperative work in philosophy and to the piecemeal approach to philosophical problems. This is truer of Whitehead and Santayana than it is of Dewey.

16 In this connection, I recommend two painstakingly honest reviews of the whole movement—one by J. O. Urmson, entitled *Philosophical Analysis*, Oxford, 1956; the other by G. J. Warnock, entitled *English Philosophy Since 1900*, Oxford, 1958. See also the title essay by H. H. Price in the collection, edited by H. D. Lewis, entitled *Clarity Is Not Enough*, *op. cit.*; and a collection of talks over the B.B.C., edited by D. F. Pears, entitled *The Nature of Metaphysics*, London, 1960.

Since the analytical and linguistic philosophers have the unusual merit of directly and publicly facing up to questions about the work they are doing—in a way that reveals their own doubts and misgivings—I think it important to comment, in a somewhat more detailed way, on their conception of philosophy in relation to the five conditions set forth in the preceding chapter.

It seems to me that the analytical and linguistic philosophers have taken a number of steps in the direction of making philosophical work intellectually respectable in precisely the same way that historical and scientific work is intellectually respectable.

They have excluded from the domain of proper philosophical work all efforts to construct vast speculative systems of thought which must be accepted or rejected as wholes. They have limited their efforts by strict observance of the heuristic principle that untestable statements are as out of place in philosophy as they are in science and history. They do not claim for their theories or conclusions any greater hold on truth than is claimed for scientific theories or conclusions; they eschew the certitude and finality of *episteme*. They carry on philosophical work in a way that manifests all the characteristics of a public enterprise: they address themselves to common problems; they make a piecemeal approach to these problems, question by question; they are able to agree and disagree, and when they disagree, their differences are adjudicable by reference to some common standard, such as the meaning of ordinary language; they have worked cooperatively on problems, as is shown by the many symposia in which they have engaged; and through cooperative work and sustained interchanges, they have made noticeable progress in a relatively short time, as is evidenced by errors corrected, insights sharpened, and points clarified.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to all this, they have demanded a certain proper autonomy for philosophy. They are not content, as were the early positivists, to

have philosophy serve exclusively as the handmaiden of the empirical sciences—as their semantic clarifier or logical unifier. They have insisted that philosophy has a domain of its own, marked off from all others by a set of questions or problems that are purely philosophical.

*So far, so good.* What we have here is a program for philosophy, and philosophical work actually done, which satisfies the first four of the five conditions that I have proposed. *So far, so good, but still not good enough.* Analytical and linguistic philosophy fails to satisfy the fifth condition—the stipulation that the primary questions of philosophy, whether pure or mixed, must be first-order questions, seeking answers about that which is and happens in the world, answers that have the status of knowledge in the sense of *doxa*. The analysts and linguists restrict themselves to the plane of second-order questions—to the tasks of analyzing and clarifying the ways in which we think and speak and claim to know about that which is and happens in the world or what men should do and seek. Their rejection of the fifth condition is so crucial that it deserves further consideration.

17 There are other examples in this century of cooperation in philosophy: the cooperative work of the members of the Vienna Circle (M. Schlick, R. Carnap, H. Reichenbach, and P. Frank); the joint undertaking of E. B. Holt, W. T. Marvin, W. P. Montague, R. B. Perry, W. B. Pitkin, and E. G. Spaulding in the production of *The New Realism* (New York, 1912); and a similar undertaking by D. Drake, A. O. Lovejoy, J. B. Pratt, A. K. Rogers, G. Santayana, R. W. Sellars, and C. A. Strong in the publication of *Essays in Critical Realism* (New York, 1920).

It would appear that the analysts and linguists join hands at this point with the positivists, who also restrict philosophy to the plane of second-order questions. But they differ from the positivists in one very important respect. Their concern with everyday speech has led them to attempt to understand and clarify the concepts that are expressed in ordinary language, as well as the concepts of science. And this in turn has led at least some of them to deal with what they call “philosophical puzzles.”

All or most of these puzzles seem to arise from the fact that certain lines of philosophical thought have reached conclusions which are incompatible with common-sense beliefs about such things as, for example, the existence of material objects, of other minds, or of the past. The analysts have been so concerned with these philosophical puzzles, bafflements, or embarrassments that they have at times appeared to regard the business of getting rid of them as the chief, if not the sole, function of philosophy, conceived then as a therapeutic effort to cure philosophy of its own self-induced headaches or blind spots.<sup>18</sup>

18 Professor Price tells us how “the analytic conception of philosophy developed very naturally into a ‘therapeutic’ conception of it. The philosopher’s job, it was said, is to cure us of muddles or headaches, generated by language; either by everyday language, or by the technical language of science. But it would appear that nobody could suffer from headaches of that particular sort unless he were already a philosopher. . . . And so we witness the curious spectacle of the professional philosopher deliberately and methodically causing the headaches which he is subsequently going to cure. The student spends the first year of his philosophy course catching the disease, and then he spends the second year being cured of it. A strange sort of therapy! But unless things were done that way, the therapist would have no patients” (*loc. cit.*, p. 18). Cf. J. O. Urmson, *op. cit.*, pp. 173 ff.

19 Some signs are now present of attempts to relax these restrictions or of efforts to transcend them. The analysts and linguists may be troubled by the question that Professor Price asks: “If philosophy is only clarification, does it deserve the place it traditionally had in liberal education? It acquired that place,” he goes on to say, “on the strength of a claim to be something much more than this” (*loc. cit.*, p. 19). Cf. G. J. Warnock, *op. cit.*, pp. 157-159.

Let us grant them complete success in the discharge of the therapeutic task (forgetting for the moment that all their troubles might disappear at once if they restated their problems about knowing material objects, other minds, and the past by expunging the properties of *episteme* from the meaning of the word “know”). Let us suppose that philosophy is at last rid of all the mistakes or unclarity in thought or speech that propagated the puzzles in the first place.

*What then?* With the philosophical theories or conclusions that conflicted with certain common-sense beliefs either eliminated or reinterpreted, we should be left with those beliefs—and many others—about the world in which we live, about ourselves and other men, and about how human life should be lived and human society organized and conducted. *What is philosophy’s duty with respect to these beliefs?* Just to clarify them? To borrow a phrase from Professor Price, “clarity is not enough.” Philosophy’s duty is to examine them, to understand them, and above all to judge them—to say whether they are correct or incorrect and to offer adequate theories in support of such judgments.

I cannot guess whether the analytical and linguistic philosophers will ever break out of their present self-imposed restrictions and undertake this task.<sup>19</sup> Whether or not they do, it seems to me that philosophers must attempt to answer first-order questions and must support their answers with reasonable theories, which can be submitted to appropriate tests, leading to a judgment of their relative truth. This is quite different from saying, as the analysts and linguists are wont to say, that the philosopher’s only task is to understand what other men can possibly mean when they give this or that answer to such

questions, without ever judging the relative soundness or truth of the answers given.<sup>20</sup>

20 These philosophers, as Iris Murdoch points out, “took it that the central question of ethics was the question ‘What does “good” *mean?*’—but they refrained from answering the question ‘What things are good?’ and made it clear that this was a matter for the moralist, and not for the philosopher” (*The Nature of Metaphysics*, edited by D. F. Pears, p. 101). The analytic and linguistic philosophers, as G. J. Warnock remarks, “wish to say that philosophy has nothing to do with questions of *that* kind. Political philosophy involves the study of political concepts, but says nothing about the rights and wrongs of political issues. The moral philosopher examines ‘the language of morals,’ but does not as such express moral judgments” (*English Philosophy Since 1900*, p. 167).

( 3 )

The failure of the analytical and linguistic philosophers to satisfy the fifth condition, while satisfying the other four, underlines the importance of that last requirement. For philosophy to withdraw entirely from the field of first-order questions diminishes its educational and cultural importance to a point where it ceases to be anything more than a professional occupation, of interest only to highly skilled specialists.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, one aspect of the work done by the analysts and linguists suggests a sixth condition that philosophy should be able to satisfy. These philosophers, as we have seen, not only appeal to the ordinary usage of words; they also require philosophical theories or conclusions to illuminate and clarify commonsense beliefs. Some of them go further: they make compatibility with common-sense beliefs one of the tests of the soundness of a philosophical theory or position.

21 “No doubt one would not wish to deny,” Warnock writes, “that there are very vital and interesting questions of this sort. But does it follow that philosophers ought to discuss them? Have they not perhaps, like physicists or philologists, their own special and specialized concerns in which in fact, for what the point is worth, they are evidently more interested. . . . Even if, as in fact is not perfectly clear, their present concerns are somewhat more confined than the concerns of philosophers historically have been, it is not clearly improper nor in the least degree unusual for such progressive specialization to occur” (*ibid.*, pp. 168-160. A page or two later, Warnock adds: “There are after all a great many academic subjects in which, as they are at present pursued, the general public neither finds nor could well be expected to find any sort of interest. Yet no one is moved to complain of this state of affairs, or to urge the professors of those subjects to turn their hands to matters that would engage the concern of a wider audience. Why are philosophers not thus allowed to go their own way? No doubt there are many reasons. But one, I think, is this. There is a sense in which philosophy has only recently achieved professional status. . . . Second, it is only quite recently that the subject-matter, or rather the tasks, of philosophy have come to be clearly distinguished from those of other disciplines. . . . For these reasons I believe that philosophy has not yet been

accepted as a subject which its practitioners should be left to practise” (*ibid.*, pp. 171-172).

22 See Chapter 8.

More than that needs to be said about the relation of philosophy to common-sense.<sup>22</sup> For the moment, I wish only to repeat what was said earlier—that, if technical or professional philosophy is to play the role it should play in liberal education and is to guide and improve the philosophizing done by the layman, it must avoid being esoteric. This, I think, should be added, as a sixth condition, to the other five. It can be considered as an addendum or corollary attached to the fifth condition: not only must philosophy be able to answer first-order questions, but it must also answer them in a way that makes contact with the world of common-sense; in a way that is continuous with commonsense rather than out of communication with it; in a way that makes sense, not nonsense, of common-sense.

In judging common-sense beliefs, philosophy may discriminate between those which are sound and those which are unsound and may correct the latter; but it is also the case that any philosophical theory which rejects all commonsense beliefs as unsound, or reduces the whole world of common-sense to the status of an illusion, has two strikes against it, or maybe three. It is with regard to this last point that some of the analytic philosophers seem to me to be moving in the right direction, even though they do not yet go the whole way. In order to do so, they would have to satisfy the fifth condition and do more than make a gesture in the direction of the sixth.

( 4 )

This brings me finally to a brief mention of the views of philosophy held by the phenomenologists and existentialists.

There can be no question that philosophy, according to the view of it held by those phenomenologists who are not also existentialists, is an autonomous branch of knowledge and that it has a method of answering first-order questions. They also think that the method of phenomenological analysis enables them to establish their principles and conclusions as necessary truths; in other words, they conceive their own philosophical doctrine as having, or more nearly having, the character of *episteme* rather than of *doxa*. In addition, the pursuit of their special methods tends to make their doctrine extremely esoteric. It soars transcendently above the world of common-sense and makes little, if any, contact with it.

The variety of the existentialists is such that it is almost impossible to say anything about them as a group, but two things seem to be clear. One is

that they do deal with the most pressing problems of the ordinary man as well as with some of the traditional problems of philosophy—all of them important first-order questions: speculative questions about being and non-being; about the conditions of existence and its modes; about life and death; about being and becoming, about time and duration; about self and other; about matter and mind or consciousness; about freedom and indeterminacy; and practical questions about good and evil; about the conduct of life; about man's aspirations and life's goals; about man's relation to society and to his fellow men; and about the course of human history.

The other thing which is clear, unfortunately, is that in dealing with such questions—the kind of questions with which philosophers should be concerned—the existentialists proceed in a manner that reduces philosophy to a purely personal affair. The notion of conducting philosophy as a public enterprise would be an abomination to them. It would violate the privacy of the inner sanctum of the self, requiring them to relinquish the isolation of individual

existence. The existentialists do not form an intellectual community, and they try even less to achieve communication with other thinkers. It is, therefore, difficult to say whether they agree or disagree with one another, and even more difficult to imagine them joining issue and arguing with philosophical outsiders.<sup>23</sup>

( 5 )


Three observations will bring to a close this examination of other views of philosophy.

(i) The analysts and the existentialists represent the two main currents in contemporary thought. There is a striking contrast between them, which should not be missed. On the one hand, the analysts are exemplary in the proper procedure of philosophy: they try to conduct philosophy as a public enterprise (and, in my judgment, succeed to a high degree) ; in contrast, the existentialists make no effort at all in that direction. On the other hand, the existentialists have a firm hold on the proper substance of philosophy; they address themselves to first-order questions that should be philosophy's primary concern. In contrast, the analysts have turned their backs on problems of this sort.

23 For a relevant portrayal of existentialism, see Abraham Kaplan, *The New World of Philosophy*, New York, 1963, pp. 97-128; cf. his account of analytic philosophy, *ibid.*, pp. 53-98. For one expression of the existentialists' position, see Karl Jaspers, *The Perennial Scope of Philosophy*, New York, 1949. For a brief statement of phenomenology, see the account of it by one of its founders and its most eminent exponent, Edmund Husserl, in the 14th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 17, pp. 699-702 (1929-1955). Hus-

serl's essay is reproduced in a collection edited by Roderick Chisholm, entitled *Realism and the Background of Phenomenology*, Glencoe, 1960, pp. 118-128. For a comprehensive account, see Herbert Spiegelberg's two volumes, *The Phenomenological Movement*, The Hague, 1960.

(ii) I have so far done no more than compare other views of philosophy with the one being advanced in this book, by examining them in the light of the five or six conditions that I have proposed as requirements that philosophy should satisfy. I have shown in what respects these other views concur or diverge. While I have not concealed my judgment that these other views put philosophy in an unfavorable light, so far as its deserving the respect accorded science and history is concerned, I have not yet made an effort to persuade the reader that my view of philosophy is sounder or more tenable.

(iii) Underlying all these views of philosophy—the one being advanced in this book and the alternative views that have been examined in this chapter—there are a number of presuppositions, *themselves philosophical*. Any argument between conflicting views of philosophy, where they really disagree, would ultimately involve these basic presuppositions. Thus, for example, if the conflict we feel to exist between the analysts and the existentialists could be turned into real disagreements (logically tight issues), the dispute of the issues would involve arguments about the presuppositions underlying each of the opposing views. These presuppositions (in the case of analytic philosophy and existentialism) are more implicit than acknowledged; and so the conflict remains blind and is unlikely to become a reasonable and enlightened dispute. I will, therefore, try to state, as explicitly as possible, the presuppositions underlying the view of philosophy being advanced in this book, so that anyone who would take issue with it, or with the conditions that determine its character, can do so in a rational and enlightening manner. 

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