

What's Wrong with Analytic Philosophy?

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1. Two sorts of complaints: *quitting* or *staying*. Mine are *latter*: analytic philosophy is the *only* way to get a discursive understanding of the nature of the world & our place in it.
2. Won't try to *define*, except to say I take it broadly, to include Plato, Leibniz, Hume, Kant, Frege, Russell – and almost everyone in the MSC and the Cambridge Faculty. Best way to get idea is to look at examples, just as with kinds of music, art, poetry, etc.
3. Important *negative* features: neither relies on or supports any external *authority*, religious or secular: no sacred texts to be accepted without question.
4. Not secular *religion*: doesn't give 'meaning of life': objective isn't consolation but *truth*. Hence must either accept unwelcome *consequences* of view or modify those views.
5. E.g. if *justice* is treating people as they deserve, and *mercy* is treating them better than that, then we can't be *both* just *and* merciful. To reject that unwelcome conclusion, we must change our view of what justice and mercy are or of what makes them virtues.
6. Hence concern with *logic*, i.e. with what follows from what, and with *clarity*, so we can work out what our theories about the world and our place in it *do* commit us to.
7. It's also why we need to keep our theories *consistent* with whatever theories of other subjects – scientific, historical, political, moral, religious – we accept. This doesn't mean analytic philosophy should be *subservient* to these other subjects: all inconsistency shows is that something's wrong somewhere; it doesn't tell us *where*.
8. And the *first* thing that's wrong with some *secular* analytic philosophy today is that a historical subservience to *religion* has been replaced by subservience to *physics*, as if physics were the only independent source of truth about the factual nature of the world, which it isn't.

9. To do their work, physicists, like everyone else, need *some* basic assumptions, not all of which can be questioned at once: e.g. about *which* mathematical and other concepts to use to make sense of their observations.
10. Examining these assumptions is an important part of the philosophy of physics. More generally, an important part of the subject matter of philosophy is, as Wittgenstein put it to the MSC before WW1, those propositions *presupposed* by the ‘special sciences’.
11. And if we take the ‘special sciences’ to include all the *moral* sciences – psychology, economics, political science – that description of the basic job of analytic philosophy will do for present purposes.
12. What then *is* wrong with analytic philosophy – or rather with how it’s been done by some practitioners? Here are a few of the bad habits that have irritated me over the years – not here, of course ...
13. The *first* bad habit is that of relying too much on *analysis*, i.e. on clarifying our *concepts*, without questioning the assumptions built into them.
14. To take an example given by Jane’s father: it’s built into our concept of *kittens* that they’re both *offspring* of cats and grow *into* cats. That’s *mostly* true, of course, but what makes it true that most cats are descended from other cats is *biology*, not our concepts.
15. And if species evolve, as of course they do, then this assumption can’t *always* be true, of either cats or people. We can’t disprove evolution by claiming that our concept of humanity entails that only humans can have human offspring.
16. Similarly, when Russell asks how we know the earth and everything on it – including all our memories – didn’t come into existence five minutes ago, it’s no answer to say that our *concept* of the earth is of something that’s thousands or millions of years old.
17. It’s because factual assumptions built into our concepts sometimes turn out to be wrong that conceptual analysis is never enough to establish important claims about the nature of world; and it’s a great mistake to suppose *either* that it is *or* that philosophy can only tell us about our concepts – which isn’t true and, if it *was* true, I think would make analytic philosophy too narcissistically trivial to be worth doing.

18. The *second* bad habit is that of assuming that philosophical disputes must be won by a *knockout*, i.e. by showing that no rival theory *could* be true, e.g. because it contradicts itself.
19. While that may *sometimes* happen in logic and mathematics, it almost *never* happens in philosophy, any more than it does in the natural sciences, or in history. Cartesian scepticism, for example, can no more be absolutely *disproved* than Creationism can.
20. But that's no excuse for being either a Cartesian sceptic or a Creationist, since in both cases there are rival theories, that there *is* an external world and that species *do* evolve, which clearly win, if not by a knockout, then – very heavily – on *points*.
21. Now of course it often happens in philosophy, as in science and history, that even the *best* theory of a subject faces some serious objections; but that's no excuse for giving equal credence to theories that face far *more* serious objections.
22. In short, we should heed the advice given in an old *Punch* cartoon by one WWI soldier to another sheltering in a flooded shell-hole; 'If you knows of a better hole, go to it'. In other words, go for the least bad theory of a subject that you can find, and don't treat all its unrefuted rivals as if they were on a par.
23. This win-only-by-a-knockout attitude is encouraged by a *third* bad habit some analytic philosophers have, of discussing theories *no* one believes. How often, in discussions of epistemology, have you heard someone object 'But mightn't the Cartesian sceptic say ...', even though there *are* no such sceptics.
24. I don't mean it's *never* worth discussing what's wrong with sceptical *arguments*, merely that, since *no* one accepts their *conclusions*, the mere fact that those conclusions are *consistent* isn't a good enough reason to waste valuable time discussing them.
25. When I, for example, as a philosopher of time, argue against *presentism* – the thesis that only what's present exists, – I'm arguing against real opponents, who really *believe* the thesis I'm attacking, just as I really believe its *negation*. These are serious debates about which theory of our subject to believe, which debates about scepticism are not.

26. This accusation, that sceptics and others assert things they don't believe, has been met by distinguishing what people believe in everyday life – e.g. while playing backgammon – with what they believe as *philosophers*.
27. This lets self-professed philosophical sceptics claim that, *as laymen*, of course they believe the sun will rise tomorrow; it's only *as philosophers* that they doubt it. So when they argue for scepticism, they aren't saying anything that, *as philosophers*, they don't believe.
28. I think that's nonsense. It's true that in statements of the form 'X believes that P', the P context may be opaque, as when eighteenth century readers who believed that David Hume was a Scot didn't believe the author of *A Treatise of Human Nature* was a Scot, because they didn't know that he *was* the author of that anonymously published work.
29. But it doesn't follow, and isn't true, that the X context in 'X believes that P' is opaque. If David Hume the *backgammon* player believes the sun will rise tomorrow, so does David Hume the *philosopher*, and no one should deny that he does – especially as he himself didn't deny it.
30. The general point is that, as philosophy isn't a branch of *fiction*, philosophers shouldn't, *as philosophers*, assert things they don't believe – though they may of course *utter* them in the course of saying what it *is* they don't believe, and why they don't believe it.
31. The *fourth* – and last – bad habit I'd like to discourage is writing *about* philosophy instead of doing it. As a young lecturer, I was invited to join a bunch of philosophers who discussed little else, an activity I found – and still find – neither interesting in itself nor any help in doing substantive philosophy.
32. The fact is that the philosophy of *any* subject is rarely of much use to its practitioners. Doing aesthetics wouldn't have made Picasso a better painter; and the philosophy of science is of no help to most scientists, except very occasionally to a few leaders of scientific revolutions.
33. (And even then, what it takes to rescue or replace degenerating scientific research programmes are usually substantive new *scientific* ideas rather than new *philosophical* ones about how that science is or should be done.)

34. I suspect the reason philosophers are more prone than others – scientists, artists, linguists, poets, historians, etc – to overrate the philosophy of their subject is that it's a branch of its own subject matter, which the philosophy of other subjects isn't.
35. But that doesn't make it an *important* branch, and I don't think it is. I've never found doing the philosophy of philosophy *any* help in doing the philosophy of mind, or of causation, time, probability or any other of the philosophical topics I've worked on.
36. On the contrary, it's a *distraction* – and can be a *debilitating* one, as I learned by listening to the philosophers I mentioned earlier. The only effect of disappearing up their own intellectual exhaust pipes, if you'll forgive the euphemism, seemed to be to induce serious philosophical *constipation* – possibly by convincing them that they couldn't start doing substantive philosophy until they'd worked out what it *is*.
37. That's nonsense, because it's the wrong way round: practitioners of a subject don't need to understand its philosophy to start doing it; whereas philosophers *do* need to understand a subject in order to start doing its philosophy.
38. And as philosophy, like maths, isn't a *spectator sport* – i.e. its products, unlike those of chefs and poets, can't be understood by those who can't *do* it – philosophers of philosophy *must* be able to do the first-order philosophy they philosophise about.
39. And I don't think philosophers who can do *that* – i.e. can make major contributions to metaphysics, the philosophy of maths, ethics, aesthetics, jurisprudence, political philosophy etc. – should devote much of their time and talent to the far less important philosophy of philosophy.
40. This, I realise, may prompt the accusation that that's just what I've been doing this evening; to which I can only reply *first* that, if what I've said about how not to do philosophy counts as philosophy of philosophy, then the subject's even more trivial than I've said it is; and *second* that at least I've only spent twenty minutes on it: I'm not writing a book or a paper – or running a workshop – on it.