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# Faith and Philosophical Analysis: The Impact of Analytical Philosophy of Religion

Edited by Harriet A. Harris and Christopher J. Insole

(Heythrop Studies in Contemporary Philosophy, Religion and Theology), Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005, viii + 201 pp., pb £ 16.99; ISBN: 0-7645-3144-3.

[1] In this highly stimulating collection, a range of authors take the pulse of analytical philosophy of religion. The contributors were asked to reflect on the history and social context of analytical philosophy of religion and, as the editors acknowledge, there is a particular emphasis on the roots of the discipline in British universities, particularly Oxford. This is hardly a surprise given that of eleven contributors, all but two teach at British universities (or did so until retirement), and more than half are linked to Oxford, either as teachers or students. The editors point out, correctly, that the contributors acknowledge the importance of American influences in analytical philosophy of religion, and there are two contributors who teach in the USA (although one of these is studying for a Ph.D. at Cambridge, which brings the number who are members of British universities up to ten out of eleven). However, there is no acknowledgement of the thriving tradition of analytical philosophy of religion in Europe—not even a word of regret at the impossibility of including it. Still, the limited scope of the collection provides for a unity of focus, and the editors make no claim to present a comprehensive over-view of analytical philosophy: rather it constitutes a series of reflections on a very specific movement that originated in Oxford in the 1950's.

[2] In the first paper, Basil Mitchell, a former Nolloth Professor of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion at Oxford, and one of the founding figures of the movement, describes its origin. At a time when a generation of philosophers was emerging who, under the influence of logical positivism, simply refused to take religious claims seriously, Mitchell joined forces with other philosophers and theologians to form a group known as 'the Metaphysicals'. Of course, in order to make their defence of religion convincing, Mitchell and his allies had to adopt methods of argument that would win the respect of their opponents, that is the respect of analytical philosophers, and thus was (British) analytical philosophy of religion born.

[3] Judging by the evidence of this book, the tables have turned since those days. All of the contributors take for granted that philosophers should address

religious questions, what is disputed is whether analytical philosophy provides the appropriate tools for doing so, with a strong suggestion that if the tools it provides are not up to the job, there is little point in learning how to use them.

[4] Of course, that is partly a reflection of the kind of philosophers who were invited to contribute; I am sure that there are still many analytical philosophers who are content to ignore religious questions, but such philosophers would hardly take the trouble to contribute to a collection such as this. However, I think it also reflects a turning of the tide. One can no longer take for granted the hegemonic status of analytical philosophy in British and American universities. For example, G.W. Kimura's paper, 'Analytical Thought and the Myth of Anglo-American Philosophy', brashly depicts analytical philosophy as a movement whose time has come and gone: 'Analytical philosophy did hold sway on both sides of the Atlantic, if only for a slice of the twentieth century, but that time is now past.' (p. 133) Giles Fraser's paper, 'Modernism and the Minimal God' examines the cultural context in which analytical philosophers of religion, (as he argues), learned to make the mistake of ignoring the messy history of religion in order to concentrate on a supposed common core of beliefs shared by all religions. Fraser draws an analogy between analytical philosophy and modern art, suggesting, (as I understand his paper), that these were both movements that played a positive role in his own life, that made sense in a certain context, and that have left behind their masterpieces, but also that the time has come for artists and philosophers to move on.

[5] The editors see a certain lack of respect for tradition as characteristic of analytical philosophy (p. 7), and one of them, Christopher Insole, expands on this in his paper, 'The Forgetting of History', where he recalls being upbraided for his excessively historical approach to the subject in his first graduate tutorial with Richard Swinburne, who told him '... we are interested in truth, not who said it.' (p. 161) Given what has been noted about the geographical focus of this collection, it is hardly surprising that Swinburne emerges as the dominant figure within the discipline. He is the best representative of analytical philosophy of religion at its most analytical, defending the truth of Christianity using the same standards of rationality that prevail in the natural sciences.

[6] It is interesting to note then that, in defending the analytical approach, both Insole and Swinburne use historical arguments. Swinburne sketches the history of apologetics from the Old Testament through to the present day, legitimising his approach by placing himself within a venerable tradition. Insole argues that the most charitable reading of analytical philosophers' deliberate forgetfulness of history (that is, the insistence on starting discussions from scratch, rather than from what must be said after Kant, or after Hegel), is loyalty to the political ideals of John Locke: by making writing accessible to any reader, whatever their historical background and commitments, we make a liberal society possible.

[7] It might seem paradoxical that Insole invokes history in order to defend an ahistorical approach, but such an objection would be frivolous. It is clear from his paper that what he finds objectionable is when a position is made to seem inevitable because it is the culmination of a historical process, particularly

when this is presented in terms that are opaque to anyone who has not studied the history in question. However, taken together, his paper and Swinburne's establish that there is a legitimate use for historical arguments in philosophical theology, if only because establishing one's relation to history is a way of establishing one's identity, and theology is a discipline that, by its nature, cannot ignore questions of identity.

[8] This perhaps explains why there has been a recent trend towards studying the history of analytical philosophy itself. Insole charitably ascribes the analytical neglect of history to a desire for a democratic philosophy. However, there is another explanation that is less charitable but perhaps more credible. Analytical philosophy began with a revolutionary fervour and, as in so many revolutions, what happened before the year zero was of no interest unless, perhaps, it could be seen as an anticipation of the revolution. Studying the history of philosophy became a matter of searching through ancient ruins trying to find stones that might be useful for the urgent building requirements of the present. However, the current generation of analytical philosophers was born long after the revolution. They are bound to its history because it was presented as a *fait accompli*, but they never took a conscious decision to participate in it, and have no particular reason to be committed to its ideals—particularly since one of those ideals was to be suspicious of commitment to maintaining traditions. So, they are studying their own history, looking to see what it was their revolutionary ancestors were committed to, so as to decide whether, and in what sense, they should maintain their fidelity. After a century of analytical philosophy, it takes some effort to sort through the past of analytical philosophy and find a shared sense of purpose; for example, Michael Dummett's *Origins of Analytical Philosophy*<sup>1</sup> can be read as an attempt to rally the troops around the slogan 'Language is the vehicle of thought!'

[9] In this book, by contrast, no such rallying cry emerges. The defenders of analytical philosophy stand for clarity, respect for science, intellectual humility and taking the trouble to anticipate objections, but none of them claim that analytical philosophers were the first to discover these virtues. The paper by the late Cyril Barrett (to whom the book is dedicated) might seem to be an exception. Its title, 'The Wittgensteinian Revolution' leaves one in no doubt who was the great leader to whom we should look for inspiration, providing the opportunity to escape from the Cartesian search for certainty that has plagued modern philosophy, and to learn to value faith without falling into a simplistic fideism. Barrett's writing has an elegiac tone however, as he recognises that few philosophers these days are willing to adopt the Wittgensteinian approach, and he is left to reflect on the reasons why the world chooses to remain in darkness even though the saviour has come to cure the blind.

[10] Two of the other writers are more positive about new directions that analytical philosophy of religion could take. Elizabeth Burns argues that Iris Murdoch's work can be read as a successful contribution to a project associated with analytical philosophers such as Braithwaite and Kee, that of re-interpreting

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1. Michael Dummett, *Origins of Analytical Philosophy* (Cambridge Massachusetts 1996).

religious language for a new era. Murdoch is best known as a writer of philosophical novels, and novels are hardly the preferred medium of analytical philosophy, which has always aligned itself with natural sciences rather than the arts. So, Burns is right to point out that Murdoch does not, at first, seem to be an analytical philosopher. However, she belongs to the same cultural milieu – Mitchell points out that she attended the first meeting of the Metaphysicals – and Burns argues that Murdoch only rejected the task of philosophical analysis because ‘the task of analysis has been too narrowly conceived.’ (p. 57) So reading Murdoch as an analytical philosopher is a matter of broadening our idea of what analytical philosophy can do.

[11] Harriet Harris asks ‘Does Analytical Philosophy Clip Our Wings?’ Students turn to philosophy of religion for spiritual succour, only to find that analytical philosophers typically have more modest goals. But need this be so? Harris discusses Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff as representatives of reformed epistemology, who argue that belief in God need not be based upon rational arguments, because God has equipped us with a *sensus divinitatis* that enables us to acknowledge the truth of his existence. As she notes, Wolterstorff has also written movingly about how the loss of his son shaped his understanding of God,<sup>2</sup> and has argued that a life of contemplation, or a life spent fighting injustice could also yield a deeper understanding of God. (p. 109) Harris calls upon religious epistemologists to consider such themes further, examining how a religious life (in many senses of that term) can enable us to be more perceptive of truth. Like Burns, Harris broadens our conception of what analytical philosophy of religion can be.

[12] But as we broaden the conception of analytical philosophy of religion, does anything remain that is distinctively analytical? The blurring of the boundaries is particularly evident in the papers of Charles Taliaferro and Pamela Sue Anderson. Taliaferro defends the proposition that the goal of philosophy is to obtain a God’s eye view, and Anderson disagrees on feminist grounds. Within the context of a collection such as this, one might be tempted to bill this debate as Analytical Philosophy versus Feminist Philosophy, but those hoping for a good knockabout will be disappointed: Taliaferro and Anderson are talking to each other rather than past each other, and seem to be on the way towards achieving mutual understanding. Certainly there is a disagreement, but from the way that disagreement is pursued, it is apparent that we do not have two totally different and incompatible conceptions of what philosophy is. In the famous conclusion of George Orwell’s allegory, *Animal Farm*, everyone looks from humans to pigs and pigs to humans, but nobody is able to tell the difference: man and beast share the same moral corruption. I would say the same about Taliaferro and Anderson, with the important difference that the traits they share are positive rather than negative. But if analytical philosophy of religion can no longer be sharply separated from other ways of doing philosophy, does it still exist as a distinct entity?

[13] The movement that is being studied here began as an attempt to battle

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2. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament For A Son* (London 1997).

a strongly anti-religious form of philosophy with its own tools. That battle is over now, and the tools can be turned to other uses, or discarded as no longer necessary. The veterans of the battle have important lessons to teach the next generation, and there are plenty who are willing to learn, but if they choose to fight battles, they will be different ones. A reader who is new to the subject would discover more about analytical philosophy of the 1950s, than about non-religious analytical philosophy of the present day. Insole, it is true, surveys the contemporary analytical scene, but he does so in order to indicate the diversity rather than to find a shared agenda. If this book is to be believed, A.J. Ayer's thought dominated Oxford in the 1950's not in that everyone accepted it, but that nobody could ignore it. If any single philosopher has dominated the agenda in Oxford in recent times, it is Donald Davidson, but although he merits inclusion in Insole's survey, there is no sense that he, or any other analytical philosopher, is someone religious thinkers have to reckon with rather than one of many thinkers they might choose to engage with. In this sense, analytical philosophy of religion no longer seems to be defined by its relationship to analytical philosophy as such, although that is not to suggest that all links has been severed.

<sup>[14]</sup> If the aim of the collection is to take the pulse of analytical philosophy, it seems to me that it emerges as a child that has come of age: alive, healthy and with a new set of friends.