On the Idea and Ideology of Analytic Philosophy

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1. Compiling an anthology of analytic philosophy inevitable involves an understanding of what analytic philosophy is. This is a question that James Conant and Jay Elliott address explicitly in the General Introduction to their new anthology.¹ They don’t try to answer it by specifying a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. In fact, they reject any such definition on the ground that it would fall into «either total vacuity or inaccurate partiality»². More specifically, they rule out as a non-starter the attempt to develop a doctrinal definition of that sort: «The nature of analytic philosophy simply cannot be captured in terms of a shared assent to any philosophical “-ism”», such as «realism, empiricism, scientific naturalism, and the like»³. They also rule out a methodological variant of that sort of definition: «Clearly, no definition – or even a minimally internally consistent summary statement – can do justice to the full breadth and depth of the analytic tradition…It has exhibited far too much internal diversity (and sometimes outright disagreement) on the question of what philosophy is and how it should be

³ Ibidem, p. 19.
done».

And finally, they reject also a variant of that sort of definition that focuses on the alleged style of analytic philosophy: here too, and perhaps more vividly that ever, one falls either into the Scylla of total vacuity (as in all too common appeals to the «clarity and rigor» of analytic philosophy) or into the Charybdis of inaccurate partiality (as in more informative characterizations of what is demanded by the standards of clarity and rigor).

From these observations, Conant and Elliott (henceforth «the editors») do not draw the conclusion that the concept of analytic philosophy is in bad standing, as others have done. Nor do they draw the conclusion that we cannot say anything helpful about what analytic philosophy is. Instead, they give an explanation of the following sort. They provide three lists of statements, concerning matters of method and style, made by a wide variety of analytic philosophers at different historical moments. The statements on each list are not only different, but often mutually inconsistent. But in spite of this diversity – and in fact, in virtue of this diversity – they succeed, according to the editors, in conveying a sense of what analytic philosophy is.

The three lists are of two different kinds. The first list consists of statements made by a number of central figures of the history of analytic philosophy expressing their views about the proper aims and methods of philosophy. It is crucial here that each figure

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is speaking in the first person about what they think philosophy should try to achieve. So we have, for instance, Russell on logical analysis and the scientific method of philosophy, the *Tractatus* on philosophy as clarification and the radical separation between philosophy and science, Austin on the observation of the ordinary use of words as a way of understanding the nature of phenomena, Strawson on descriptive metaphysics, and Quine on the continuity between science and philosophy.

The other two lists are of a very different kind. They consist of statements by analytic philosopher *about* the nature of analytic philosophy. The second list focuses on questions of methods, and the third list on questions of style. The editors characterize the statements that make up these two lists as “ideological.” In these statements, analytic philosophers do not simply talk for themselves about what they think philosophy is and how it should be done. They do express a view about these issues that they themselves espouse. But at the same time, they put forth such a view as *a definition of what analytic philosophy is*. Taken together, these statements express the different and sometime opposite *self-understandings* of analytic philosophy. Attending to the variety of these forms of self-understanding, the editors suggest, is also important for getting a sense of what analytic philosophy is.

Now, in which sense are the statements appearing on the second and third list “ideological,” exactly? Conant and Elliott capture part of the issue when they write that «such programmatic statements of what analytic philosophy is tend to take the form of persuasive definitions, promoting the very way of doing philosophy that they purport to define».

\[\text{7 Conant and Elliott, *The Analytic Tradition*, p. 27.}\]
which the term «analytic philosophy» carries positive associations, and manage to transfer those positive associations to the conception of philosophy that they present as a mere definition of what analytic philosophy is – for example, theory-building in substantial continuity with the natural sciences.\footnote{This exemplifies roughly C. L. Stevenson’s original notion of «persuasive definition». See Id., \textit{Persuasive Definitions}, in «Mind», 47 (1938), no. 183, pp. 331-350.} A related idea would be that those programmatic statements take as given the extension of the concept of analytic philosophy and try to get the reader to approve the items that fall within that extension by including laudatory terms into what is presented as a mere definition of the term that has that extension. So, for example, one may operate in a context in which it is uncontroversial that, say, Davis Lewis is an analytic philosopher, and then define «analytic philosophy» as that way of doing philosophy that pursues «clarity and rigor». This may have the result of promoting the way of doing philosophy exemplified by David Lewis. For who doesn’t like clarity and rigor? What should a philosopher pursue, obscurity and sloppiness?\footnote{This second idea exemplifies roughly Stevenson’s notion of «persuasive quasi-definition». See Id., \textit{Ethics and Language}, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1944, p. 278.}

Even if all of this is correct, I am interested in bringing out a different respect in which statements by analytic philosophers about the nature of analytic philosophy are «ideological». Such definitions issue in what we might call \textit{gestures of exclusion}. A line is drawn between who \textit{is} and is \textit{not} an analytic philosopher. And since the person drawing the line thinks of herself as an analytic philosopher, this is a line between who is, and who is not, \textit{one of us}. The concept of analytic philosophy, I want to suggest, is an \textit{identity concept}, in the political sense of the term. Belonging to the community of
analytic philosophers – or not belonging to it, or not belonging to it anymore – is something that tends to shape one’s identity qua philosopher. Thus the question of the nature of this community is at the same a question about one’s own intellectual identity. This question is intrinsically ideological, not because it involves disregard for the facts, but because it involves a substantial and always contestable vision about what analytic philosophy is.\(^{10}\)

I am going to substantiate and further articulate these claims by looking at two examples. Each example features a self-described analytic philosopher excluding from the ranks of analytic philosophy someone who thinks of herself as an analytic philosopher or is regarded as such by a significant number of self-described analytic philosophers. The examples are particularly relevant for our present purposes because the philosophers who are excluded figure prominently in Conant and Elliott’s anthology.

2. The first example is also mentioned by the editors in their Afterward. It concerns Crispin Wright, doing the exclusion, and John McDowell, receiving and reacting to the exclusion. Here is Wright, commenting on McDowell’s book *Mind and World*:

> If analytical philosophy demands self-consciousness about unexplained or only partially explained terms of art, formality, and explicitness in the setting out of argument, and the clearest possible sign-posting and formulation of assumptions, targets, and goals, etc., then this is not a work of analytical philosophy. [...] At its

\(^{10}\) I do not wish to deny that there may be purely classificatory concepts of «analytic philosophy». But I hope to make a case that a concept with the features just anticipated is dominant among self-described analytic philosophers.
worst [...] McDowell’s prose puts barriers of jargon, convolution, and metaphor before the reader hardly less formidable than those characteristically erected by his German luminaries. Why is this? It cannot be that he thinks that the care and rigor which we try to instill into our students is merely a fetish, unjustified by anything in their projects or the philosophical subject matter. Is it that he views the kind of deconstruction of existing research programs in analytical philosophy to which his work is directed as something which cannot be accomplished save by writing of quite a different—rhetorical or “therapeutic”—genre?\(^{11}\)

Here is McDowell’s response:

Finally, I must comment on Wright’s splendid conclusion, where he drums me out of the regiment of analytic philosophers. If analytic philosophy prohibits imagery except for rare special effect, and precludes letting the full import of a term […] emerge gradually in the course of using it, as opposed to setting down a definition at the start, I do not care if I am not an analytic philosopher. Likewise if analytic philosophy requires the kind of argument that aims to compel an audience into accepting theses. In fact I see no reason why these should be taken to be marks of the genre. Of course explicitness and clarity are another matter. But I wrote as explicitly and clearly as I knew how. […] Wright is clearly galled by my work, perhaps particularly by my stance of not aiming to compel my readers into theses, and I think this has prevented him from seeing how straightforward my book

really is.¹²

Let’s try to sort out what is going on in this exchange. What kind of speech acts are Wright and McDowell performing?

At a very superficial glance, it might seem that the exchange concerns merely the use of a label designating a purely classificatory concept, namely a concept whose correct application depends only on comparatively uncontroversial facts. According to this construal of the exchange, Wright is saying that the expression «analytic philosophy» can be used to denote a purely classificatory concept having a certain set of marks, including putting forth constructive philosophical theses and offering explicit definitions of philosophical terms at the beginning of one’s enquiry; and he is further saying that, in this sense of the expression, McDowell’s book does not belong to analytic philosophy; to which McDowell responds: «I agree». Of course this does not capture what is going on: It renders completely mysterious the evident pathos of the exchange, and doesn’t even account for the fact that Wright and McDowell are disagreeing about something.

At a slightly closer look, it might seem that Wright is saying something more: In addition to noticing that McDowell’s book does not exemplify the sort of philosophy that falls under a certain purely classificatory concept, he is also saying that such a philosophy lacks some important intellectual virtues, namely explicitness and clarity; to which McDowell responds by questioning Wright’s understanding of what those intellectual virtues require. But even this misses the core of the exchange. For it fails to capture that the main disagreement between Wright and McDowell is one about what it is to be an

analytic philosopher, not simply a disagreement about what is demanded by clarity and explicitness.

The core of the exchange, I suggest, is that Wright is excluding McDowell from the community of analytic philosophers, and McDowell is resisting that exclusion, reclaiming membership into that community as part of his intellectual identity. This is quite clear when McDowell says that he does not think that putting forth constructive theses is a mark of the genre of analytic philosophy; but it can be seen to pervade McDowell’s response.

Exclusion, resistance, identity, community, community membership: these are all political notions. I think it is helpful in this context to bring in explicitly the contrast between two other political notions, i.e. renouncing one’s membership in a community and being deprived of it. There is a difference between, say, deciding to leave our country, out of the feeling that we cannot, perhaps not anymore, think of ourselves as belonging to it, and on other hand, being exiled—just as there is difference, in another sort of community, between apostasy and excommunication. Similarly, there is a difference between, on the one hand, renouncing our membership in the community of analytic philosophy, because we come to the conclusion that it makes it impossible the pursue our aspirations, so that we cannot bear the thought of representing it and being represented by it – and on the other hand, being expelled from that community by some of its members, because they judge that our aspirations make us unsuited to be its representatives. For some, the former course of action can be a live possibility. Richard Rorty, perhaps, is someone who went down that road. Advocates of “post-analytic
philosophy” are, arguably, another example. But that is clearly not the road taken by McDowell in the passage I quoted: his apparent concession to Wright—«[then] I do no care if I am an analytic philosopher»—is conditional on the acceptance of a conception of analytic philosophy that McDowell contests.

Wright’s and McDowell’s respective acts of exclusion and resistance are based on different visions of what analytic philosophy is. Their disagreement cannot be settled by pointing out facts that can be ascertained from an independent, neutral perspective. They are not disagreeing, say, about the question of whether Mind and World contains modern logical formalizations – a question that could be ascertained in a pretty straightforward manner. They disagree about the relevance of any such independent fact. The concept of analytic philosophy that figures in their exchange is one that has internal to it the possibility of being contested: What are its marks (say, whether it includes the setting forth of constructive philosophical theses), and what counts as satisfying those marks (say, what counts as philosophical explicitness and clarity) can always become an object of discussion among competent masters of the concept. Their disagreement is, in this sense, ideological.

3. Here I disagree with a central claim of Hans-Johann Glock’s book, What Is Analytic Philosophy?, which is the most extensive treatment of the topic I know of, and in many ways a very rewarding work. Glock emphasizes that his aim is to give a definition of

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14 H.-J. Glock, What is Analytic Philosophy?, especially chaps. 1 and 8.
what analytic philosophy *is*, not of what it *should* be. For Glock, the most entrenched concept of analytic philosophy is a «descriptive» (as opposed to «laudatory») concept having a fairly clear and uncontroversial extension. Everybody agrees, say, that Plato or Decartes or Hume, or Heidegger and Derrida or Foucault, are not analytic philosophers, while Russell and Ryle and Quine and Davidson are. His aim is to come up with a definition that captures this extension.

Glock holds, like Conant and Elliott, that no definition in terms of necessary and sufficient condition is possible. His proposal combines two criteria. First, a *family-resemblance criterion*: a work of analytic philosophy is one that shares a number of features concerning aims, methods, and style, where none of these features is by itself either necessary or sufficient for membership in the set. And secondly, a *genetic-historical criterion*: a work of analytic philosophy is one that stands in certain causal-historical relations of positive and negative influence with certain other works.

Glock does not deny that the concept of analytic philosophy has blurred edges. But according to his account, this can simply be the expression of the fact that the concept is partly defined in terms of a family resemblance. The existence of a grey area does not reveal for him that the concept has an ideological dimension. And this means, in effect, that according to Glock’s account, any disagreements about cases in the grey area, when it is not due to ignorance or misinformation, can only be merely terminological, and thus capable of being peacefully settled with a move of this sort: «Call it what you want, as long as we agree about the facts». That his account cannot be right is shown by the fact that no such move could resolve the disagreement between Wright and McDowell.
In order to strengthen my point, I come now to the second gesture of exclusion that I promised to discuss. It involves Glock, doing the exclusion, and Stanley Cavell, being excluded. The context is a discussion of attempts to «synthetize» analytic and continental philosophy. Glock notices:

One possibility is post-analytic philosophy, i.e. continental philosophy presented by Anglophone commentators who refer to analytic thinkers like Wittgenstein, Quine and Davidson (e.g. Taylor, Cavell and Mulhall)\(^\text{15}\).

Cavell is here presented without hesitation as a representative of «post-analytic» philosophy, which is in turn characterized as an alternative to analytic philosophy – one which tries to go beyond it by taking down the barriers that have separated it from «continental» philosophy. But it is not clear that, according to Glock’s own definition of analytic philosophy, Cavell should not count as a *bona fide* analytic philosopher. Arguably, Cavell satisfies to a significant extent Glock’s family resemblance criterion for being an analytic philosopher, as well as his genetic-historical criterion.\(^\text{16}\) This was recently emphasized by Diego Marconi in a book that is largely dedicated to the question of the nature of analytic philosophy. Commenting on Glock’s twofold definition, Marconi writes:

There are perhaps some borderline cases: for example, Stanley Cavell has a genetic connection with the analytic tradition, he is definitely not keen on

\(^{15}\) *Ibidem*, p. 256.

\(^{16}\) Compare the summary table in *ibidem*, p. 218.
speculative philosophy, he believes in the search for clarity and in the distinction between science and philosophy, and in spite of all this, some would hesitate to classify him as an analytic philosopher.¹⁷

The non-genetic qualities that Marconi ascribes here to Cavell are part of Glock’s family resemblance criterion for being an analytic philosopher. Cavell, for Marconi, is a case that puts pressure on the adequacy of Glock’s definition. Unlike Marconi, Glock does not register that whether Cavell is or isn’t an analytic philosopher is a controversial issue: as Marconi puts it, «many» – not all! – «would hesitate to classify him as an analytic philosopher». Conant and Elliott are certainly among those who do not hesitate to count Cavell as an analytic philosopher, since they include him in the anthology and regard him as a representative of one of the very different strands that characterize the comparatively late development of analytic philosophy.¹⁸

This shows, I suggest, that contrary to his explicit intensions, Glock is expressing a particular vision, or ideology, of the identity of analytic philosophy. My criticism of Glock, here, is not that there is a tension between his definition of analytic philosophy and his exclusion of Cavell (even though I agree with Marconi that the tension is in itself a problem); nor that he is careless in failing to register that some people would not deny Cavell the title of analytic philosopher (even though, given what he purports to be doing, that is indeed a problem); but that he misconceives what he is doing. The ideological character of the concept of analytic philosophy comes back with a vengeance, producing

¹⁸ It is worth noticing that Glock excludes also Conant, qua «New Wittgensteinian», from the ranks of analytic philosophers. See Id., *What Is Analytic Philosophy?*, pp. 83 and 162.
a split between Glock’s conception of his undertaking (formulating a definition that captures the extension of an uncontroverted concept) and the actual character of that undertaking (articulating an inevitably ideological vision of what that concept is).

4. Let’s go back to the lists of ideological statements about analytic philosophy collected by the editors in their General Introduction. The fact that each of those statements is said to give an ideological characterization of analytic philosophy, together with the fact that the editors distance themselves from those statements, might give the impression that, in their view, there is some other way of telling what analytic philosophy is – the way they follow – which is not ideological. This impression is strengthened by another feature of their presentation. As we saw, they reject any attempt to define analytic philosophy by specifying its doctrines or methods or style on the ground that any such definition would fall into «either total vacuity or inaccurate partiality». This suggests that what renders the statements that they consider ideological is simply a matter of inaccuracy, measurable on some comparatively neutral ground: blinded by ideology, one fails to see to facts, or hides the facts, or refuses to look for the facts. This would be a form of ideology that should and can in principle be avoided. However, Conant and Elliott also write that their volume «reflects a large and comprehensive vision of the analytic tradition»\(^{19}\). This can be taken as an acknowledgement that the volume does indeed express a substantial and contestable – and in this sense ideological – vision of the nature of analytic philosophy. Be it as it may, I am going to conclude by pointing out four distinctive features of this substantial and contestable vision.

\(^{19}\) Conant and Elliott, *The Analytic Tradition*, p. 34.
5. The most consequential feature of Conant and Elliott’s vision of analytic philosophy is that they think of it as a *tradition*. This is already conveyed by the title of the anthology, and is explicitly emphasized in the Afterward. The analytic tradition, according to the editors, is not kept together by a shared doctrinal, methodological, or stylistic agenda – not even an agenda to be defined in terms of a family resemblance. It is kept together, instead, by the fact that it consists of a sequence of moves and countermoves, actions and reactions, that to a significant extent make *philosophical sense* in relation to one another:

> The unity of a tradition cannot be found in a collection of features instantiated in each moment of its history. It is explicable only through a form of understanding that seeks to grasp how those moments are linked in philosophically significant ways.\(^{20}\)

This view of the unity of the analytic tradition bears some resemblance to Glock’s «genetic-historical» criterion. But while Glock focuses on mere relations of positive and negative influence, the passage just quoted points to relations of influence whose appreciation leads to a deeper philosophical (and not merely causal-historical) understanding of the views in question. The underlying idea, I believe, is a conception of analytic philosophy, and of philosophy more generally, as essentially *dialectical*.

In the second place, the editors view analytic philosophy as a *heterogenous* tradition: it features different and often opposite strands, where the opposition may

concern the very aims and nature of philosophy. One of these oppositions, perhaps *the* overarching opposition since the Second World War, is between a Humean, naturalistic strand, and a Kantian, anti-naturalistic one. As they put it,

much of postwar twentieth-century analytic philosophy can be seen as involving a contest between [a] standard analytic conception of what it is to be a Humean (replacing our ordinary view of the world with a properly naturalized understanding of what it *can* contain) and the opposed standard analytic conception of what it is to be a Kantian (seeking to respect *both* the natural-scientific understanding and our everyday understanding of the world)\(^\text{21}\).

In the third place, the editors view analytic philosophy as a tradition whose internal contrasts may involve a camp that is perceived by itself or the relevant others as the *mainstream*, and a camp that conceives of itself as a movement of *internal resistance*: a movement that does not see in the mainstream a way of achieving its aspirations, and yet wants to reclaim for itself the title of analytic philosophy, without having at the same time to deny such a title to the mainstream it opposes. This sort of internal resistance is well exemplified, I think, by John McDowell’s response to Wright. For another example, consider this passage by Cora Diamond, which opens the introduction to a German collection of her ethical essays:

While the essays collected here are about a number of different particular topics, they all reflect a concern about moral philosophy, as it is practised within the analytic tradition. I write from within that tradition, but with a sense of its problematic relation to what moral thought and moral life are like, and in that respect my essays reflect Iris Murdoch’s influence.\(^\text{22}\)

Diamond is here speaking specifically about her moral philosophy, but the same sense of internal contestation of analytic philosophy pervades also her theoretical work. For sensible reasons, her work is not included in Conant and Elliott’s anthology. But the inclusion of works by Murdoch, Anscombe, Cavell, and McDowell, which are in different ways deeply attuned to Diamond’s, leaves room for the kind of analytic philosopher that Diamond exemplifies: namely, someone who says, «I am an analytic philosopher, and yet I am deeply critical of analytic philosophy».

In the fourth place, Conant and Elliott present analytic philosophy as part of the Western philosophical tradition more broadly, where being part of that broader tradition is not merely a matter of being causally and temporally linked to it, but a matter of being connected to it, as the editors say about the internal moments of the analytic tradition, in «philosophically significant ways». This feature of their vision is conveyed, above all, by the first part of the anthology, which features an ample selection of 19\(^{\text{th}}\)-century precursors of analytic philosophy, but also by various discussions in their vast editorial apparatus, such as the claim about the Humean and Kantian roots of analytic philosophy that I mentioned above.

The editors’ vision of analytic philosophy is, as they themselves emphasize, «large and comprehensive» – much more so that most alternatives. Because of this, it exhibits a significant pedagogical advantage: Even though it remains a substantial and, in the sense I have explained, ideological vision of what analytic philosophy is, it makes it possible for the reader to question it and come to different conclusions. This is less the case for anthologies informed by less inclusive visions23. There is therefore a sense in which this anthology manages to be, for pedagogical purposes, comparatively ideological neutral. And it is on these grounds, I think, that the editors can say in earnest: «It is for each reader to consider and assess – through reading closely and thinking about the primary texts collected here – what the true legacy of that tradition is»24.

23 A good contrast case, here, is the only other anthology of analytic philosophy available in English: A. P. Martinich and D. Sosa, Analytic Philosophy. An Anthology, Oxford, Blackwell, 20112.

24 Conant and Elliott, The Analytic Tradition, p. 36.