Preston on the Illusory Character of Analytic Philosophy

Christopher Pincock (pincock@purdue.edu)

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I.

In his carefully argued and extensively researched article "The Implications of Recent Work in the History of Analytic Philosophy" (Preston 2005a) Aaron Preston has raised what should surely be the central methodological issue for Russell studies and the history of analytic philosophy more generally.[1] That is, what are the goals of the history of analytic philosophy and by what means can we best try to meet these goals? Preston's main conclusion is that historical investigation into the origins of analytic philosophy has made the most common answers to these questions untenable. In particular, we are encouraged to conclude that analytic philosophy is not even a genuine philosophical movement, and is in this sense "illusory". For Preston, then, the history of analytic philosophy should reconcile itself to this fact and adjust its methods dramatically. Once we see that analytic philosophy, as traditionally conceived, never existed, then we are free to apply tools not usually deployed in the history of philosophy, e.g. memetics (Preston 2005b).

In this short discussion piece I aim to challenge this conclusion by arguing that Preston's claims about analytic philosophy depend on ascribing two goals to the history of analytic philosophy. While I will grant that he is largely successful in arguing that no account is likely to be able to meet both goals simultaneously, I will suggest that there is no reason to expect or require a unified means of achieving both goals.

II.

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, all references are to Preston 2005a.

A concise version of Preston's argument comes towards the end of his article when he presents three statements which he claims are jointly inconsistent:

> (1) Analytic philosophy is a philosophical school.
> (2) Analytic philosophy originated in the early twentieth century.
> (3) There is no set of views accepted by all and only those figures ordinarily taken to be analytic philosophers (i.e., on the received view [of analytic philosophy]) (p. 26).

(3) is supported by citing what Preston calls the "new wave" of history of analytic philosophy "exemplified by such figures as Nicholas Griffin, Peter Hacker, Ray Monk, Peter Hylton, and Michael Beaney, among others" (p. 15). They have successfully challenged what Preston views as a prior consensus or "received view" of analytic philosophy that claimed that analytic philosophers agreed that philosophy was primarily focused on the analysis of language. The received view was put in place prior to 1970 by writers like Arthur Pap, J. O. Urmson and P. F. Strawson (pp. 12-13), but failed when it was later critically examined.

Granting Preston's (3), it is not initially clear how (1)-(3) are inconsistent or why (2) is something we should accept. It turns out, though, that Preston has a special understanding of what a philosophical school is. This understanding requires that a philosophical school be unified by a collection of philosophical views or what Preston calls "a defining doctrine":

> a group counts as *philosophical* in the most proper, primary, or focal sense if and only if its criterion for membership is acceptance of some set of views on the basis of rational understanding. I will say of any group which meets this requirement that it is *philosophically unified*, or that it possesses *philosophical unity*. And, when a view actually functions in this way to ground the unity of a group, I shall call it a *defining doctrine* of that group (p. 21).

This implies that a necessary condition on the existence of philosophical school X is that all of X's members have some set S of views in common. This condition is not yet

sufficient, as Preston also requires that the members of X each accept S for rational reasons, e.g. explicit philosophical arguments, and that it is this very rational acceptance which unifies X.

Understood in this way, (1) is by itself inconsistent with (3). How does Preston motivate such a demanding definition of a philosophical school? He appeals to the metaphilosophical conception of philosophy as a theoretical discipline, i.e. as a discipline that aims at "the production and critical assessment of theories by means of reasoning" (p. 21). I agree with Preston that nearly all philosophers would agree with this aim, and most would probably also feel confident in saying what these theories are theories of, e.g. the nature of reality, knowledge, language and ethics. But it is one thing to take part in an activity that has certain aims and quite another to make the achievement of that aim constitutive of the existence of a school of a certain sort. It seems that the only way to move from the aim of philosophy to Preston's definition of a philosophical school is to think of philosophical schools as those groups that realize the ideals of philosophy. A history of philosophy that takes on this definition of philosophical schools seems to have as one of its goals what I will call (G1):

> (G1) Determine what sets of philosophical views can be justified by rational argument. That is, what philosophical schools are there?

Looking back over the history of philosophy can provide us with raw materials that will help us meet (G1). Along the way we may find that there are some philosophical schools that consist of actual people. But our focus is mainly on the views themselves and whether or not they can be rationally motivated.

Much of the work in the history of philosophy takes on this form, and we often see (G1) expressed with some degree of clarity. Two examples are Russell's preface to

his *Philosophy of Leibniz* and Soames' recent remarks on the value of history for philosophy. Russell writes that in addition to the causal question of influence of one philosopher on another,

> there remains always a purely philosophical attitude towards previous philosophers – an attitude in which, without regard to dates or influences, we seek simply to discover what are the great types of possible philosophies, and guide ourselves in the search by investigating the systems advocated by the great philosophers of the past (Russell 1900, xvi).

And, in more strident terms, Scott Soames has said of his *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century*,

> if progress [in philosophy] is to be made, there must at some point emerge a clear demarcation between genuine accomplishments that need to be assimilated by later practitioners, and other work that can be forgotten, disregarded, or left to those whose interest is not in the subject itself, but in history for its own sake. The aim of my volumes was to contribute to making that demarcation (Soames 2006, 655).

If our history of analytic philosophy is aiming at (G1), then we must be willing to admit that analytic philosophy is not a philosophical school in the relevant sense. That is, analytic philosophers are not unified by a set of views that can be rationally justified. This would be a disturbing conclusion for someone who defined herself as an analytic philosopher and also subscribed to the ideal of philosophy as a theoretical discipline discussed above. But all would not be lost for such a philosopher, for she could readjust her self-conception by thinking of herself as helping to create an ideal philosophical school through a continuing refinement of her philosophical views through rational reflection. So conceived, "analytic philosophy" would be a label for an as yet non-existent philosophical school that develops rationally from one's current views. We see this conception of philosophy, and the relatively fleeting importance of history according to it, at work in the Soames quotation above. History should bring us up to date and show

to what extent we have so far realized the ideal behind (G1), but at some point "progress" in philosophy requires that we go beyond what history can teach us.

It is precisely here that Preston would appeal to a second goal for the history of philosophy and it is this goal that is inconsistent with Soames' approach, or more generally with any "revisionist" conception of analytic philosophy. A second goal for history is:

> (G2) To explain how this or that philosophical group achieved and maintained its dominance within academic philosophy.

Here I use "philosophical group", as Preston appears to, for a collection of philosophers who may or may not amount to a philosophical school. Preston appeals to (G2) in arguing against revisionist conceptions of analytic philosophy. A revisionist isolates a defining doctrine for analytic philosophy, but is willing to accept that the analytic philosophers that result might be different than what the received view would lead us to expect:

> by shifting the traditional boundaries of analytic philosophy both extensionally (in terms of who gets included or excluded) and temporally (in terms of when the school originated), it draws our attention away from the locus of the phenomenon that explain analytic philosophy's meteoric rise to power and prominence during the twentieth century – and this, I think, is *what most needs to be explained* by work in the history of analytic philosophy (p. 25, my emphasis).

A revisionist definition of analytic philosophy undermines (G2) because we start with a specified group of philosophers that dominated philosophy for a particular period of time. It is not helpful in answering our historical question to add philosophers to this group from other times or to take out some of the philosophers we started with. It is as if we wanted to understand why a particular explosion took place in the desert on Wednesday and someone proposed an explanation of what happened at the bottom of the ocean on Monday.

(G2), then, motivates (2) by blocking any revisionist accounts of who the analytic philosophers actually are. If we accept (3) and want to also achieve (G1), then we must reject (1). The result is what Preston calls an illusionist account of analytic philosophy. Contrary to the influential picture of analytic philosophy as a philosophical school, we come to accept that "analytic philosophy" merely picks out a group of philosophers who came to dominate philosophy during a certain period of time. But we are a step closer to achieving (G2) because we are now free to consider non-theoretical reasons for the dominance of this particular group. Crucially, Preston argues that the illusion that analytic philosophy was a philosophical school in his sense was in part causally responsible for its social success (p. 27). So, unmasking analytic philosophy is a necessary first step to achieving (G2).

III.

My main objection to Preston's argument is that (G1) and (G2) are goals that we should not try to achieve simultaneously or with similar methodologies. If we restrict these goals to analytic philosophy, then the differences become obvious:

> (G1-A) To determine if analytic philosophy is a philosophical school. That is, is there a set of views that can be rationally defended that fits with analytic philosophers' views?
> (G2-A) To explain how analytic philosophy achieved its dominance in academic philosophy at the time it did.

It is only if we assume at the outset that it is likely that (G2-A) can be met solely through an appeal to philosophical argumentation that we are warranted in trying to meet both goals simultaneously. But this is not likely and work in the history of analytic philosophy is not necessary to appreciate this. For it does not take too much historical reflection to reveal that if twenty of the most important early analytic philosophers had not survived

past the age of eighteen, then nothing like analytic philosophy would have come to dominate philosophy at the time that it did (Simons 2001). So part of a reasonable answer to (G2-A) would include the fact that these philosophers were born and that they survived into adulthood. But, quite clearly, we are not interested in these sorts of facts when we try to answer (G1-A).

More generally, we can insist that some historical and causal factors must be introduced in answering (G2-A), but that these sorts of factors are irrelevant to answering (G1-A). The dominance of a group of philosophers is largely a result of contingent factors and this dominance should not lead us to expect that this group forms a philosophical school in Preston's sense. It may be possible to justify many of their philosophical beliefs, but there is little hope that these very justifications played a crucial part in the popularity of that view at that particular time. To see why in slightly more detail, suppose we have a strong philosophical argument A for a metaphysical theory T. If A is a good philosophical argument, then it will not appeal to the authority of particular individuals or the contingent historical events of some particular historical period. But if A lacks these historical details, then an appeal to A cannot be the whole explanation of why T was adopted at the time that it was. A philosophical school with a defining doctrine fulfills the ideal of philosophy as a theoretical discipline. For this reason, understanding the defining doctrine of the school and its justification will not appeal to the historical factors that are necessary to explaining its popularity or lack of popularity at any given time.

Preston tries to connect what I have called (G1-A) and (G2-A) by insisting that the only content that we can assign to a label like "analytic philosophy" must be based on

the prior consensus of the received view. Invoking the error of excessive charity committed by an interpreter who claimed that "phlogiston" had referred to oxygen all along, Preston encourages us to accept that "the original definiendum, analytic philosophy on the received view, doesn't exist any more than phlogiston does" (p. 25). I agree that if we are trying to meet (G2-A) and we initially also assume that analytic philosophy is a philosophical school of the sort specified by the received view, then we must conclude that analytic philosophy does not exist. But the appropriate thing to do if this happens is to drop our assumption that analytic philosophy is that kind or any kind of philosophical school, and go on to try to resolve (G2-A) by other means. At this point, I do not see why we must remain wedded to the conception of analytic philosophy initially offered by the received view. To extend Preston's analogy, suppose we started with a theory of combustion that included phlogiston. When we later come to believe that phlogiston does not exist, we don't also come to believe that combustion was an illusion. Instead, we adjust our view as to what combustion is and what brings it about. A similar openness is needed when approaching analytic philosophy as a historical movement. It is only after we start to understand why this philosophical movement took over at the time that it did that we will be able to offer an account of its essential features. Our historical explanation will then use these features to explain the fleeting dominance of analytic philosophy so conceived. Here new methods are needed, perhaps even Preston's sociological approach. Other tools worth exploring are comparisons with other philosophical (Köhnke 1991) and intellectual (Kusch 1995) movements that coincided with analytic philosophy.

In answering (G2-A), then, we need to be willing to adjust our conception of analytic philosophy. Similarly, as we engage in the quite different activity of trying to satisfy (G1-A), we must be equally flexible. For there are likely to be several different ways in which the views typically associated with analytic philosophy can be extended, clarified and justified. At the end of the day, we may remain unsatisfied with all of these extensions, but that is not something we can know in advance. On the picture of the history of analytic philosophy that I am suggesting, then, the term "analytic philosophy" is fairly open-ended, and it may very well happen that our understanding of analytic philosophy as a historical movement may conflict with our favored interpretation of analytic philosophy as a defensible philosophical school. To be sure, these two tasks are difficult to complete. But I believe it is too early to conclude that they cannot be completed.

References

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