

Aaron Preston (Ed.)
Analytic Philosophy: An Interpretive History
Routledge, London 2017, pp. 168.

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This volume comprises eighteen specially-composed essays on aspects of the self-understanding and self-narration of analytic philosophy, written by acknowledged scholars on the topics under examination. Most of the contributions are relatively brief, coming in at a little more than fifteen pages per pelt, including endnotes and bibliographies (which, given the overlappings, could well have been gathered in a single uniform listing at the end of the volume). Given the track record of many of the authors, it is no surprise that there is something of value in every one of the essays. But, given the controversial nature of the overall topic, nor is it a surprise that they cannot all be taken as read. For, some of the divergences among the views expressed point to questions that it is not the role of a review to try to adjudicate but, at best, to adumbrate.

A very first approach to the book might make a brief pause at the cover of the paperback edition, which presents on the front a version of a line drawing that appears in the *Philosophical Investigations* (II, xi, p. 194) and on the back the explanation that this is “the duck-rabbit made famous by Ludwig Wittgenstein”. The version reproduced on the Preston’s cover matches pretty closely what Joseph Jastrow (whom Wittgenstein cites by name) reproduced in *Popular Science Monthly* (1899) on the basis of an unattributed picture featured in a humorous German magazine of 1892. To keep our liminal pause as brief as possible, we may make just a few remarks. For all the reader can tell, the choice of image was not the editor’s, but the duck-rabbit has strong brand-recognisability: if there is one visual trope in common to analytic philosophers, it will be this. Second, like many of the terms and labels that crop up in the discussions that make up the body of the book, the precise origin of the bistable picture is slightly murky. Third, as a matter of empirical fact, around two thirds of those who meet the picture for the first time see just a duck, while only around 15% see a duck and a rabbit¹, which might indicate that there is some sense in

¹ McManus, I.C., et al., 2010, “Science in the Making: Right Hand, Left Hand II. The duck-rabbit figure”, *Laterality*, 15, 1/2: 166-185; tables at p. 177.

which we must learn to recognize images (Necker cubes, Rubin vases, etc.) that have the characteristic feature of this figure. Fourth, the duck-rabbit seems to reflect the pluralism implicit in Preston's subtitle "An Interpretive History". But, fifth, if we attend to some of the things that Wittgenstein says about such phenomena, for instance in the *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, seeing it as a duck or as a rabbit is *not* a matter of interpreting, but of seeing because interpreting is an action (*Handlung*), while seeing is a state (*Zustand*)².

This last remark, for all its brevity, nudges us to return to the fourth and to reinterrogate Preston's subtitle. After the editor's lucid and thought-provoking introduction, the contributions are organised in an order in which the movement of the centre of gravity is basically chronological, with five chapters on the nexus Frege-Moore-Russell, two on Wittgenstein early and late, three on the various relations among pragmatism, scientific philosophy and naturalism, and then a transatlantic back-and-forth of Ryle-and-Ayer, Quine, Strawson, Austin, Davidson and Dummett with a chapter each, and the volume is rounded off by further consideration of the extent to which analytic philosophy can be regarded as forming a tradition. In this movement, the volume does indeed present a history of analytic philosophy.

But there are at least two caveats to be entered.

One is that the level of sophistication of many of the contributions is such that this is not a manual or an introduction that could be usefully, or even safely, given to an undergraduate. Not least because many points of reference and their reverberations are taken to be self-explanatory and thus presuppose previous acquaintance with the literature under discussion. Moreover, though a host of thinkers and commentators are mentioned to help contextualise and render dialectical the positions of the leading actors, the index contemplates only seventeen names (all, bar Susan Stebbing, of male philosophers) and seventeen labels for philosophical disciplines or "schools", when interesting recurrences, such as the word "piecemeal" (which I kept on stumbling on), could easily have been logged with the technology available today³.

The other is that we need to understand a little better what is meant by describing a history as "interpretive". For, this part of the subtitle raises the expectation that what are in store are *re*-interpretations of some key moments in analytic philosophy's history. This expectation is fully justified and at least in the main satisfied by the papers presented: most of them offer novel readings

² On this point, Bozzi, Paolo, 1998, *Vedere come. Commenti ai §§1-29 delle Osservazioni sulla filosofia della psicologia di Wittgenstein*, Guerini e Associati, Milano: ch. 1.

³ Even the fullest index short of a full-scale concordance will not pick up interesting near-omissions, such as the word "quantification" (which seems to appear only once, on p. 132).

of important figures and texts that are at least corrective of some exaggerations and caricatures that have had a certain currency in what we might call analytic philosophers' "folklore" or "foundation myths" about their disciplinary predecessors. Were these mythemes not already current, they would not have to be addressed in the ways that our authors suggest.

Though it is not fully embraced by all the contributors to the volume, the editor's underlying hunch for the project of an interpretive history is that the academic formation known today as "analytic philosophy" can be viewed as the outcome of what he calls, starting on p. 1 (we are making progress), "tradition-shaping interpretations". By this phrase he means readings of a text or a thinker's thought that in one way or another create what he elsewhere calls the "illusion" that analytic philosophy forms or has at some time formed a unity of some sort⁴. It is of course salutary to be reminded of the extent to which the formation of a canon of reference-points is a process of selection that comes after the fact, and, hence, to which the formation of a tradition is, despite its etymological relation with "passing on" (*trado*), a matter of recuperation or preservation. But, as Sandra Lapointe also reminds us in her contribution on "The Traditionalist Conjecture" (pp. 269-87), the peculiarities of analytic philosophy (unlike, say, medieval philosophy, mentioned by way of contrast, pp. 273-4) are such that it may be more fruitful to allow for much underdetermination, vagueness and adjustability in our historical enquiries to account for the very various phenomena that can be grouped under this label: perhaps the notion of a tradition imposes a misleading model.

Conversely, prefacing his account of Strawson on ordinary language and descriptive metaphysics (pp. 214-28), Hans-Johann Glock takes it that an "orthodox" narrative of analytic philosophy as having some intimate concern with language and logic has at least a "*fundamentum in rebus*" (p. 215): it may not be the whole story, but it cannot be left out as one of the motors that propelled some characteristically analytic enterprises. In similar vein, Scott Soames' account of the changing role of language in this field (pp. 34-51) roundly asserts that it all "began with interest in new topics – logic language and mathematics" (p. 34) and proceeds to list a number of "currently intractable problems" in the theory of meaning as "foundational issue[s]" (p. 44) that stand in need of "urgent attention" (p. 45).

To some extent, Soames' approach takes over viewpoints that are explored in the chapters on the move from talk of "scientific" philosophy to the adoption of the label "analytic" by Alan Richardson (pp. 146-159), on Ernest Nagel's naturalism by Christopher Pincock (pp. 160-174), and on Quine by Sean Mor-

⁴ Preston, Aaron, 2010, *Analytic Philosophy: The History of an Illusion*, Bloomsbury, London.

ris (pp. 193-213). In describing primarily the American scene from the 1930s to the 1950s, these essays bring out some of the ways in which the perceived continuity between philosophical activity and the procedures of the natural sciences discouraged just the sort of historiographical reflection that the book under review promotes. In particular, in his excellent account of Quine's interactions with what he learnt from Russell, C.I. Lewis and Carnap, Morris illustrates how his subject sees that the overcoming of metaphysics is the realisation that metaphysics cannot be "overcome" but amounts to "a general limning of the general traits of reality [Quine's well-known phrase] from within the confines of our current best scientific theories" (p. 208). And as Lee Braver concludes from his review (pp. 240-253) of the ways that Davidson "tries to out-Quine Quine" (p. 243), the ultimate upshot of truly charitable interpretation is that "there is no such thing as philosophy" (p. 250).

While several authors note more or less in passing the impatience that, until recently, most thinkers of an analytic bent have expressed for the history of their own undertaking, the volume contains some noteworthy revisionist readings of easily misconstrued passages. Perhaps it is invidious to mention just a few of these. But Cheryl Misak's account (pp. 131-45) of the role of Frank Ramsey in reorienting Wittgenstein's thought after the *Tractatus* is a tremendous contribution to understanding one of the standing puzzles about that puzzling man, as well as a just tribute to the brilliance of the often-neglected figure of Ramsey. Another microhistory of fruitful interactions between two philosophers who exercised enormous influence in their day (but less today) is Michael Kremer's narrative (pp. 174-92) of, first, the back-and-forth between Ryle and Ayer in the years immediately preceding the publication of *The Concept of Mind* on how to formulate a sustainable version of what might, after all, be called "behaviourism", and, later, of Ryle's own dissatisfaction with how he had expressed himself and how the book was read when it appeared. Likewise, Kelly Dean Jolley's re-reading of Austin's *Sense and Sensibilia* (pp. 229-239) is an all-too-brief illustration of how, for Austin, the sense-datum theory was not false but a muddle, so that "refuting" it would be like "adding a tilde to a string of symbols that is not well formed" (p. 232); for this reason, the attack on that theory is not to be read as a defence of its negation, which would be the direct realism that is often attributed to Austin.

Though there is not space to give credit to all the contributions to Preston's volume, it is worth reiterating that they are of uniformly high standard both in argumentation and in documentation. But it may also have transpired from the synopses already furnished that there is a marked trend – not to use Lapointe's favoured word "bias" (pp. 278-279) – towards privileging questions of the philosophy of mind-and-language to pinpoint the decisive moments in

the development of analytic philosophy. As Anat Matar notes in her chapter on “Dummett’s Dialectics” (pp. 254-268), these are indeed topics that, following Frege, mark out a “first philosophy” that has taken the place of the epistemological concerns that dominated philosophical discussion for two and a half centuries after Descartes: the theory of meaning, especially in light of Frege’s context principle, provides the materials for making philosophy “systematic” (p. 259). But it does leave interesting analytic work on ethics (starting with Moore’s epoch-making *Principia Ethica*) rather out of the picture.

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