

Synthetic Philosophy By David Johnson

Most academic philosophy programs today consider themselves part of the ‘analytic tradition’ which has roots going back to Bertrand Russell, G.E. Moore, Gottlob Frege, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and logical positivism. This is a paradigm, much like the ones that occur in science, and these are the paradigm’s exemplars. Their work, along with a few other prominent figures within the movement, such as W.V. Quine and John Rawls, provide the model for how those in the paradigm believe that philosophy should be done.

Thomas Kuhn, who was the first to recognize paradigms in science, had this to say about paradigm change:

When, in the development of a natural science, an individual or group first produces a synthesis able to attract most of the next generation’s practitioners, the older schools gradually disappear. In part their disappearance is caused by their members’ conversion to the new paradigm. But there are always some men who cling to one or another of the older views, and they are simply read out of the profession, which thereafter ignores their work. The new paradigm implies a new and more rigid definition of the field. Those unwilling or unable to accommodate their work to it must proceed in isolation or attach themselves to some other group.

This quote could easily be applied to what happened in philosophy when logical positivism spread across the United States and Europe in the early 20th century. The positivists took it upon themselves to redefine what philosophy was, and they narrowed the definition considerably. They regarded some traditional areas of philosophical inquiry, such as theology and metaphysics, to be meaningless, and said that philosophers like Hegel (who had his own philosophical paradigm at the time) were not even really doing philosophy because many of his claims were not verifiable. Those unwilling to conform to the new paradigm, such as perhaps a few stubborn souls who had previously dedicated their careers to studying idealism, would have simply been ignored.

One characteristic of the analytic paradigm, as identified by the practitioners themselves, is that they do not try to develop entire philosophical systems, as earlier philosophers did. Instead, they approach philosophical problems by working collaboratively on one small puzzle at a time, the way that modern scientists work. However, this characterization of science is only partially true; that is how ‘normal science’ proceeds, once a paradigm has been established, but it does not describe the work that causes a paradigm shift, such as that of Isaac Newton or Albert Einstein; their work is more like that of the system-builders in philosophy. I do not see working collaboratively as necessarily being better, or really even being much different than if one philosopher develops an entire system himself when the collaboration all takes place under the same paradigm. It may be true in some cases that ‘two heads are better than one’, but it really depends upon which heads you are referring to.

Analytic philosophers have been very successful in this crusade to model philosophy after science, to its detriment. The purpose of scientific research journals is to provide a forum for

scientists to report the observational results of their experiments to peers. It is not exactly riveting literature, nor is it necessarily intended to be. It is often very technical and jargon heavy, and that makes it almost entirely inaccessible to anyone outside of that particular scientific specialty. Most of what is published in academic philosophy journals is equivalent to this puzzle-solving of 'normal science'. I characterize it that way because the goal is typically quite modest, with little novelty even attempted. The purpose is not usually to invent new theories, it is to articulate, refine, or analyze the ones already available. In philosophy, objections and counterexamples are like anomalies in science. These papers do the equivalent of arguing over anomalies: they either point out an anomaly, or on the reverse side, they attempt to show how a theory could account for one. Sometimes a minor adjustment is proposed to further refine the theory and enable it to more easily cope with the most prominent objections against it. However, the proposed changes would almost always make the theory vulnerable to a new set of objections so that it is difficult to tell whether it would really be an improvement. Another popular topic is to show how a theory would relate to a particular problem or example, or what the implications would be if it is correct.

Before the essays are even published they are put through an extensive peer-review process where they are thoroughly vetted and edited. The assumption is that this allows the experts in the field to act as 'gatekeepers' in filtering out inferior work. The whole process is so ultra competitive that the quality of the submission must be very high to have any real chance at publication, so to some extent, it works. But peer-review is also peer-censorship. Those in a paradigm are often quite resistant (and sometimes even hostile if it threatens the paradigm) towards what is equivalent to revolutionary science. That makes it very difficult to get anything that is not the 'normal science' of the paradigm published at all.

The essays that are selected do not come from laymen, or even experts in other fields. Invariably they are from the experts of the paradigm, and are written almost exclusively for professional colleagues. Indeed, they are so technical and filled with jargon that only the writer's peers have enough background knowledge of the paradigm and the topic of research to even understand them. Kuhn actually identified inaccessibility to a general audience as a key indicator of the presence of a paradigm. I believe that it allows the paradigm to differentiate itself by creating its own semi-independent language, and along with it, a unique set of customs and beliefs that more firmly and permanently establishes the subculture.

Now one might think that the reason 'normal science' is done in the journals is merely because of the format, with its restrictions on length and the accompanying narrow focus. Perhaps the revolutionary science could be found in books. But to even get a book published one must first be considered an 'expert', meaning that they have already published a number of essays in academic journals, and the books usually just end up being an expansion and further development of those arguments in some form. Thus, even most books still end up being within the paradigm. If they were not, they probably would not be published. The same phenomenon occurs in science as well.

There are really two types of experts, *artists* and *scholars*. Artists are distinguished by the fact that their work brings something new into being. This is true even in arts such as drama or music, as even though an actor follows a script, and a performer follows music already composed, the performance is their creation, and it is uniquely their own. In this sense even a mathematician who develops a new unique proof would be doing a type of art. The primary aim of *scholars* is understanding. A good example of this is the literary criticism of English Professors. In fact, any type of criticism or analysis would, broadly speaking, fall into this category (including writing textbooks and other teaching endeavors). The vast majority of philosophy professors are scholars who do research and critical analysis of philosophers rather than doing original philosophy themselves. In pointing this out, I do not necessarily mean to disparage what they do. If I wanted to take a class on the work of Immanuel Kant and I had the choice to take it from a Kant scholar or from someone trying to develop his or her own view, I would rather take it from the Kant scholar. Sometimes researchers and scholars are needed to understand the creative works. But it is just a different project. Now obviously there is some overlap: creative work often requires a lot of research, and some scholars can be very creative in teaching or interpretation. The distinction is based upon where the focus is. ‘Normal science’ is mostly *scholarly*, while ‘revolutionary science’ is *creative*.

As you may have already guessed, I consider myself primarily an *artist*. Perhaps that is why I find analytic philosophy to be so dull. The format of this ‘scientific philosophy’ is so rigid and stuffy that it stifles my creativity. Such a high degree of specialization is required, with entire journals dedicated to only a small sub-discipline of philosophy, that a person can realistically only follow and contribute to one or two areas, which is really quite boring. It used to be that philosophers would write about a number of different subjects and issues. My interests are broad, and that is what I like to do as well. So, partly out of necessity, and partly by choice, I have decided to go my own way. I doubt that I could get anything published in an analytic philosophy journal, but I do not feel bad about that, because Plato would not be able to either.

I considered becoming a Continental philosopher for a time. I thought it may be a better fit for me because philosophers like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Sartre are more literary and creative than those in the analytic tradition. However, the term ‘Continental philosophy’ does not even refer to an actual paradigm. It was originally a pejorative label that analytic philosophers used to describe the Western philosophy that they did not like, and therefore excluded from the analytic tradition. Well, that is not necessarily such a bad thing; after all, ‘Impressionism’ was a pejorative label at first too. But ultimately I decided against it because my philosophical views do not match up very well with Continental philosophy. It tends to be more rationalist than empirical, and I agree with the analytic critique that many of the claims that Continental philosophers make are vague and difficult to even understand, let alone evaluate. Furthermore, working in the Continental tradition does not necessarily allow one to be an artist either; they are mostly just doing scholarship as well. The main difference with the analytic tradition is simply in the philosophers they choose to research, and the approach. In many ways, it is almost like a form of literary criticism. I want to write the literature, not literary criticism.

There are some significant costs that come with staying independent. I get little to no professional benefit from self-publishing. In fact, there is a significant risk that I will never receive any tangible benefit from the enormous amount of work that I put in. If recognition ever comes at all, it will probably be after I am dead. That is the tragic irony of being an artist. It is a long, difficult path, but creating good art requires sacrifice, and this is just one that I have to make in order to maintain full control over my own work. The most important thing is doing good work.

I have decided to call my approach synthetic philosophy, in reference to the analytic/synthetic distinction. The title is appropriate because I am an empiricist. I am not sure whether the founders of the analytic tradition had this distinction in mind when they named their movement, but 'analytic' is a fitting title for them, as it describes very well what they do. Since the logical positivists believed that the purpose of philosophy was merely the logical clarification of thoughts - to organize knowledge rather than to develop new knowledge, as it was the role of the natural sciences to do that through empirical methods - it would not surprise me if they did consider themselves to be using analytic reasoning, through symbolic logic and the analysis of language.

Analytic philosophers believe that most, if not all philosophical debates can be resolved by simply clarifying the language, then symbolizing the argument and using formal logic to show whether it is valid or invalid. As a result, they often begin by first attempting to more rigorously and clearly define the concepts involved. However, introducing a new more rigorous definition of the term that others will not accept does not help to clarify the concept any. What usually happens is that the discussion gets bogged down over whether borderline cases should be included in the author's new proposed definition, and what the correct definition should be. A better approach is to consider particular cases first. Suppose that the question is whether lying is immoral. I would start by analyzing well-known obvious examples. If and when the question is settled there, then borderline cases of lying and possible counterexamples involving unique and extreme circumstances can be compared and contrasted with the obvious cases to determine their moral standing. This would not end all debate over the more difficult cases, but it would be more fruitful than trying to define lying in some obscure abstract sense and then arguing over whether it is universally right or wrong.

Formal logic can be useful for some arguments, but it does not have near the importance that analytic philosophers place upon it. First of all, deductive reasoning is self-evident, so pointing out the obvious is of limited value. Logic cannot be used to obtain new knowledge; the conclusion simply restates in another way what was already given in the premises. An argument's validity is really only a small part of deciding whether it is any good. It is easy to make an argument valid, but in so doing one must often introduce premises that the opposing side would not accept, and thus they do not accept the conclusion either. The tendency is to argue past one another, each side using valid arguments, but with premises of questionable soundness (at least to the other side). These arguments resemble the ones over definitions, and once again, very little is accomplished.

Analytic philosophers love to formalize arguments, even those that come from outside the tradition. But focusing so much on logic is kind of like judging a beauty contest by taking an x-ray of all the contestants and then deciding who wins based upon who has the best skeletal structure. I am sure that quality bone structure is necessary for a beauty contestant, but there is a little more to it than just that. Only looking at the logical form oversimplifies an argument to a mere shell of the original. Philosophy is rhetoric as well as logic. The analytic tradition tries to remove the rhetorical element, but a better strategy is simply to challenge points that are thought to be wrong rather than leaving them out entirely. At least then you are doing justice to the original argument by presenting it in its full robust form.

Speaking of rhetoric, there also needs to be a place in philosophy for such things as humor, satire, and irony. This is rarely (if ever) done in analytic philosophy. It is considered unprofessional. Apparently you must be as dull and unimaginative as possible to be a true professional. Sometimes these techniques are interpreted as informal fallacies. However, it is not a fallacy if the exaggeration is intentional and obvious to the audience. If I said that the IRS is going to send their leg-breakers after me if I don't buy health insurance, then everybody ought to know that it is not meant to be taken literally. Yet it is effective in getting the point across because even though it is obviously an outrageous comparison, there is a little kernel of truth to it. Such a claim is in the same vein as political cartoons, which nearly always exaggerate the truth for greater effect.

We do not have to be relegated only to lifeless truth-functional propositions. Philosophy is both an art and a science. I understand the need for precision and clarity, but it should be possible to have that while still allowing for some variation and creativity. Philosophy is more than just reporting experimental results to colleagues.