Should Philosophers Do the Continental?

Stephen Maitzen

The local philosophical community owes King's student Nic Thorne a debt of gratitude for devoting an entire skillfully written op-ed to the topic of analytic philosophy ("Analyse This!" *The Watch*, February 1997, p. 20). Analytic philosophers should appreciate any such public attention, something they rarely receive outside the pages of the *TLS*. I thank the editors of *The Watch* for the chance to reply to Thorne's remarks.

"It has been less than a year," says Thorne, "since I had to choose between continental and analytic philosophy" on finishing his year in the Foundation Year Program. Nevertheless, he thinks he has analytic philosophy figured out. As we might expect, perhaps, from a second-year student, some of Thorne's criticisms of analytic philosophy are, well, sophomoric. But much of what he says is correct and important, and even when the criticism is misguided, analytic philosophers should adopt Oscar Wilde's attitude toward it: the only thing worse than being talked about is *not* being talked about.

Thorne praises continental philosophy for its "emphasis...on understanding the world-views of particular philosophers, rather than looking at particular arguments," an emphasis, he says, analytic philosophy unfortunately lacks. Surely, though, to understand a philosopher's world-view it helps to understand the reasons he or she finds it a plausible world-view, the arguments that recommend that world-view in the first place. Besides, why should it matter to a philosopher that a given position is part of So-and-So's world-view unless there are good reasons for thinking that So-and-So has it right, the sort of reasons analytic philosophy is tailor-made to uncover?

"In analytic philosophy," he writes, "the emphasis is on logic and understanding how arguments work." What sort of contrast could he have in mind? A style of philosophy that emphasizes illogic and ignoring or misunderstanding arguments? His complaint seems to be that analytic philosophy pays too little attention to "the context of a tradition of thought" and "the context of history."

Thorne's complaint may arise from misunderstanding the goals of analytic philosophy. Indeed, he nowhere mentions what, to my mind, makes the analytic approach to philosophy distinctive: analytic philosophy takes philosophical problems seriously and tries to solve them. It also tries to present its proposed solutions as clearly, precisely, and rigorously as possible, so that we stand a chance of seeing whether those proposed solutions in fact work. Most of the time they don't work, at least not as advertised, but that fact should hardly surprise us, since the problems of philosophy are among the hardest intellectual problems there are. On rare and wonderful occasions, though, they do work, and even when they fail we often learn important things from their failure. What other approach to solving philosophical problems could we want?

The great philosophers—including philosophers respected by the analytic and continental camps alike—adopt the same approach. Take, for instance, Plato, whom Thorne cites

approvingly and whom both camps clearly respect, presumably for having *discovered* so many important philosophical problems rather than for having *solved* them. As far as I know, Plato doesn't spend time exploring the historical and social contexts of his philosophical predecessors or his contemporary rivals. When he mentions other philosophers at all, it's in order to endorse or rebut their assertions and arguments. The same goes for Aristotle, Aquinas, and on down the line. Why shouldn't we, then, pay them the respect they're due by emulating their philosophical method?

Some examples suggest that, in terms of method, analytic philosophy's closest kinship may be to mathematics, rather than to the other humanities and the social sciences. Consider this example from arithmetic. The eighteenth-century Swiss mathematician Christian Goldbach left to posterity a beautifully simple conjecture—that every even number greater than 2 is the sum of two prime numbers—which, for all its simplicity, has turned out to be maddeningly hard to prove or disprove.

Mathematicians needn't know anything about Goldbach's life, his politics, his world-view, or eighteenth-century Switzerland in order to find the problem raised by his conjecture fascinating and worth trying to solve. As a philosopher, I'm ill-equipped to prove or disprove Goldbach's conjecture, but I can, again without knowing about Goldbach's *milieu*, use his conjecture (and I have) as a helpful illustration of points I make in my courses in epistemology, metaphysics, and philosophy of religion.

Analytic philosophers likewise concentrate on solving problems rather than on the historical, political, social, or psychological origins of those problems. They leave the investigation of origins largely to intellectual historians and other people better equipped for that task.

Consider an example from some of my own current work. David Hume left us, among many other things, the "Is"-"Ought" problem: can we derive "ought" from "is," can we logically derive an ethical conclusion from entirely non-ethical premises? According to Hume, it can't be done: ethics is logically isolated from everything else. Over the last several decades, analytic philosophers have busied themselves seeing whether Hume's assertion is true on any reasonable interpretation of its meaning.

I and some others think Hume is provably wrong on any reasonable interpretation, but plenty of intelligent people disagree. Even if the problem's solution is still in doubt, the attempt to solve it has spun off important discoveries about the nature of ethics and the nature of moral language. To the analytic philosopher tackling the "Is"-"Ought" problem, it doesn't matter what, if any, historical factors prompted Hume to assert what he asserted, or whether he actually did assert it, or whether, if so, he really meant it. The analytic philosopher trying to solve the philosophical problem would find it scarcely less interesting had it been found written on a piece of uncooked lasagna instead of in the works of an eighteenth-century Scotsman.

Thorne finds ineffective "the standard analytic reply" to the strange slogan "There is no truth." Oddly, he complains that a logical argument is insufficient to refute the slogan but then proceeds to *give* a logical argument purporting to refute it, even signaling the conclusion of his argument with the logical transition "Thus." Thorne's argument against the slogan may

be no better than the argument he dismisses, yet it's generically just the thing an analytic philosopher would attempt. But that kind (or any kind) of inconsistency may not bother Thorne, who thinks that the claim "Reality is self-contradictory" is, far from being self-refuting, worthy of serious consideration. I suppose that I could reply by saying, "No, it isn't," and we'd both be right.

Contrary to Thorne, we don't have to embrace inconsistency to explain the motivation behind the slogan "There is no truth." The slogan probably arises from confusing three different things: (1) truth, a characteristic of propositions; (2) certainty, a characteristic of beliefs; and (3) unanimity, a characteristic of groups of people. How, we might wonder, can there be any such thing as truth when we face so many issues about which certainty and unanimity seem impossible to achieve?

Analytic philosophers tend to answer that question by stressing the logical independence of truth, certainty, and unanimity: achieving one of the three doesn't guarantee achieving either of the others. On many issues, certainty and unanimity may always elude us, but given any well-defined, contradictory pair of claims we know that exactly one of them is true. Far from being mysterious or nonexistent, truth is all over the place; the real trick is discovering it.

About the analytic philosopher's emphasis on clarity, Thorne writes: "Clarity may be comforting in difficult situations, it may make the matter easier to deal with, but nothing worthwhile is easy." The analytic philosopher needn't disagree. A subject can be made *easier* without being made easy. The analytic philosopher A. P. Martinich describes the analytic method as striving "to make philosophy less difficult than it would otherwise be." "Anyone can make any subject difficult," he reminds us; "it takes an accomplished thinker to make a subject simple." But even simple problems—like the "Is"-"Ought" problem—need not be easy to solve. In spite of the analytic method's ability to make philosophical problems easier, I doubt that my students would describe what I teach them as "easy."

Finally, Thorne complains that the analytic philosophers he met in Vancouver, although they "had received rigorous training in analysis," couldn't analyze aesthetic or moral value and so had concluded "that it was nothing more than a figment of the imagination." It sounds to me as if their training wasn't rigorous *enough*. My colleagues and I at Dalhousie spend much of our time analyzing value of one kind or another—profitably, we think. If it couldn't be done, many of us would rightly be out of a job.

Analytic philosophy isn't, perhaps, the kind of philosophy that will make you seem erudite at cocktail parties. You'll be more likely to give and demand arguments than to drop names and one-liners about world-views. But if you like trying to solve hard and weighty problems, give analytic philosophy a try.

Dr. Stephen Maitzen teaches analytic philosophy at Dalhousie.