

Review of Hans-Johann Glock, *What is Analytic Philosophy?*, Cambridge University Press, 2008. Paperback, xii, 292pp. ISBN: 978 0 521 69426.

Reviewed by Michael O'Sullivan, PhD candidate in Philosophy, King's College London

Academic philosophy has seen something of a turn towards self-consciousness in recent years. Philosophers have been drawn to discuss the current status and future direction of the discipline (see, for example, the papers published in the collection *The Future for Philosophy*, 2004). Methodological discussion of, for example, the confident appeal to empirical data in “experimental philosophy” has thrived. The trend can be detected in the debates sparked by Timothy Williamson's metaphysical work *The Philosophy of Philosophy* (2007), and in the beginnings of a scholarly historiography of twentieth-century philosophy in such works as Scott Soames's *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century* (2003).

Various reasons might be suggested for this trend. The turn of the century perhaps occasioned reflection on recent history. Further, various developments, including the rise of experimental philosophy, and by contrast the articulation of various forms of anti-naturalism, have raised anew the old question of the relation between philosophy and science. There is also, less tangibly, a feeling that the heroic days of analytic philosophy are over, and a concomitant drive to understand just how contemporary philosophy relates to older philosophical traditions, and not least to those parts of philosophy which were sometimes marginalised in the heroic days, such as metaphysics, ethics and political philosophy.

It is in this context that Hans-Johann Glock's *What is Analytic Philosophy?* should be understood. It is not a history of analytic philosophy, nor a prescriptive work on philosophical methodology. Rather, Glock enquires into what distinguishes analytic philosophy; on, that is, the necessary and sufficient conditions of analytic philosophy. Though the book is not a history per se, it is an historical work, in the sense that it understands analytic philosophy as an historical movement, and tries to understand just what that movement amounted to, what the philosophers described as analytic had or have in common, and in what respects they differ from others. Ultimately, Glock finds that no such set of necessary and sufficient conditions can be discovered; he appeals, rather, to an understanding of “analytic philosophy” in terms of family resemblances.

Glock's methodology is as follows. He presupposes that the common usage of the term “analytic philosophy” expresses some pretheoretical or under-articulated conception of a type of philosophy. With reference to Grice and Strawson on analyticity, the fact that general (though perhaps not universal) agreement can be found on the proper application of the term is adduced in support of this claim. He accordingly avoids the temptation to make his task easier by denying the term “analytic” to philosophers who are usually so considered. After a brief historical survey of the various strands of thought generally classified as analytic, Glock then considers a range of candidate criteria for distinguishing analytic from other types of philosophy, and rejects each one.

To begin with, the suggestion is considered that it is to be distinguished in geographical or linguistic terms, as when analytic philosophy is contrasted with continental. A simplistic conception of this contrast runs aground straight away on the obviously Viennese character of much early analytic philosophy. Glock, perhaps too pedantically, also rejects the characterisation of analytic philosophy as “Anglo-Austrian”, citing the unsurprising pre-war links between philosophy in Austria and in other German-speaking parts of Europe. But the connections he points to between the undoubtedly analytic philosophy of the Vienna Circle and other German-language work, such as that of the neo-Kantians and logicians like Husserl, are of genuine interest.

It has been suggested that analytic and non-analytic philosophy are to be distinguished by their

differing attitudes towards the history of philosophy, and in particular by a supposed lack of historical knowledge and interest on the part of the former. As Glock argues, analytic philosophers have studied and learned from the tradition. Some, though not all, have rejected an extreme historicism with relativistic implications: for this, Glock applauds them. This chapter amounts to an interesting taxonomy of the different roles historical study can play in the practice of philosophy.

Unsurprisingly, Glock finds, analytic philosophy cannot be defined by a set of shared, substantive philosophical doctrines. The prospects for such a definition, never bright, have only dimmed further in recent years with the reappearance of widespread discussion of topics in metaphysics, ethics and political philosophy, topics which were once neglected or even disdained by analytic philosophers. Dummett's already much-criticised suggestion, in his *Origins of Analytical Philosophy* (1993) that analytic philosophy is essentially linguistic, since it characteristically approaches the study of thought through the study of language, is criticised again here.

It is not until the sixth of the book's nine chapters that Glock turns to the most obvious suggestion: that analytic philosophy is characterised by the use of analysis. Glock is surely right to see the suggestion as a non-starter: it is very unclear just what "analysis" is supposed to be, and many paradigmatically analytic philosophers practise analysis only in such a vague sense of the word that the definition would inevitably include obviously non-analytic thinkers in the category. Jacques Derrida's self-description as an analytic philosopher, in his notorious debate with John Searle, looms.

The book would have benefitted here from a more extended discussion of what those philosophers who, early in the twentieth century, put such store on the analysis of propositions meant by the term. Glock's focus here is on the approach of the early Wittgenstein, but that approach was surely idiosyncratic in its day. In order to understand the dawn of the analytic tradition, it might have been wiser to examine in depth G.E. Moore's conception of analysis. This is still an unfortunately neglected topic, but it is central to the proper understanding of Moore's own epistemology as well as the school of philosophy which he inspired.

After the discussion of family resemblances, Glock ends the book with some reflections on what might be called the sociology of the discipline. He includes an unusually judicious and level-headed discussion of the unfortunate "Sokal affair", and more broadly of the accusations of relativism that are so readily flung in the semi-popular media.

The main value of the book lies, I feel, in Glock's discussion of various philosophical and historical issues, including those mentioned above. The question of how best to define the term "analytic philosophy" is not of any great interest in itself. Glock defends the non-triviality of philosophical labels in general, but his reason for considering the meaning of this particular label is its historical importance, rather than its inherent intellectual value.

Further, given that analytic philosophy is understood as a historical episode or movement rather than as a school, it is only to be expected that no set of necessary and sufficient conditions can be discovered. The similarities running through the work of analytic philosophers are better explained by their tendency to read the same authors and discuss their work each other, than any shared approach, doctrine or method.

To take the opposite tack, and understand analytic philosophy as a substantive philosophical school, one would have to be prepared to deny the title to some philosophers who are usually so described. Glock is too quick to dismiss, for example, Peter Hacker's view that Quine's philosophy is importantly non- or post-analytic, since the analytic tradition conceived philosophy as an a priori discipline importantly distinct from science. Again, Dummett's conception of analytic philosophy as

essentially linguistic could be defended as an interesting reconceptualisation of the history of modern philosophy. On such a view, a tradition stemming from Frege dominated the mainstream of academic philosophy until, roughly speaking, the 1970s and 1980s, when the work of Evans, McDowell and others restored thought, considered to some degree independently of its linguistic expression, to the centre of philosophical discussion .

But to write in such a vein would be to write a substantially different book. Glock's treatment is successful in its own terms: given how he conceives the task, his conclusions are compelling.