[*Expositions* 9.2 (2015) 88–98] *Expositions* (online) ISSN: 1747–5376

The Challenge of Teaching Analytic Philosophy to Undergraduates[1]

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Introduction

Teaching at a four-year university with no graduate program in philosophy, I often struggle with enrollment in the upper-division courses that I teach on a regular basis: metaphysics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, philosophy of time, and senior seminars on related topics. My department has 100–150 majors, but my analytic courses sometimes face the threat of cancelation due to insufficient enrollment. Most of our majors flock to the many courses we offer in the continental tradition and to social/political philosophy courses such as Philosophy of Race and Gender or Philosophy of Sex and Love. Some of our majors could complete the program without ever taking any course in the analytic tradition. It seems that many philosophy undergraduates shy away from dipping into the "hard-core" analytic philosophy courses. Students perceive analytic philosophy to be "hard"; and more importantly, they find it too abstract, too nit-picking, too technical, and ultimately *having no relevance to their lives or their concerns*. I teach at a state university in southern California, where many students are working minimally 20–30 hours a week to support their studies. Some of them are first-generation college students, and they don't have the luxury of engaging in abstract philosophical discourse with their peers or among family members. Many of them are uncertain about their future, about their job prospects, and about themselves. What could analytic philosophy offer them? How could analytic philosophers speak to them?

The alienation between analytic philosophy and the current college student body is not a reflection of the demise of student intellect or the incompetence of instructors, but the current state of analytic philosophy. To begin with, finding the right readings for my students in these analytic courses has always been a challenge. I assign primary texts, as I believe that the best way to enhance students' philosophical literacy is to have them learn directly from philosophers. However, many articles written by contemporary analytic philosophers are obsessed with reformulation of principles, outrageous counterexamples, and some even with excessive symbolization. At the end of plodding through a long, tedious and technical paper, I often found myself going through a loop just to come back to where I started. If the long analysis could bring me closer to understanding the issue, the effort put into reading is well worth it. However, it is often the case that at the end of the

paper the author simply reaches a formulation that he or she found to be satisfactory—until the next person comes around to challenge it. I cannot expect my students to be enlightened by reading these articles other than learning to see how these analytic philosophers play their skill of philosophical analysis to the extreme.

Another challenge for teaching metaphysics, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of language in the analytic tradition is that some recent issues seem to be contrived and jargon-laden. There are too many counterexamples that are trite and ridiculous, and too many "-isms" or principles introduced just to be refuted. For example, in philosophy of mind, the notion *supervenience* was at the center of the mind-body problem for a while, and then various definitions of 'supervenience'—*strong*, *weak*, *local*, *global supervenience* and even "superdupervenience"—were introduced. The rampant discussion on the conceivability of zombies and its associated problems such as whether conceivability entails possibility does not seem to lead to anything substantive. How do we motivate students to engage in a serious discussion on whether zombies are *conceivable* and therefore *possible*? In philosophy of language, all is well before the introduction of possible world semantics. Then suddenly we are dealing with *primary intensions*, *secondary intensions*, *epistemic intensions*, *epistemic possible worlds*, *scenarios*, etc. How do I expect my students, who already have a hard time grasping the notion of *a priority*, to appreciate the significance of making these distinctions? In contemporary metaphysics, concepts such as *simples*, *gunk*, *junk*, *trope*, *perdurance, endurance*, *coincidence*, *fission*, *fusion*, etc., all require advanced training and knowledge, and it is not easy to prepare my students to get excited about these topics when the upper-division metaphysics course may have been the first (and possibly the last) course in analytic philosophy that they take before graduation. I do want my students to think about the "big and hard" questions in Mind, Language and Metaphysic, but I also want to have an honest assessment of what they could walk away with from these courses.

If philosophy majors in a four-year state university will have difficulty reading analytic philosophical papers and being engaged in the contemporary philosophical discourse, then those outside the discipline, including intellectuals in other disciplines in the humanities, are not going to have an easier time either. Many contemporary analytic philosophers seem to have forgotten their readers' receptivity and intellectual interests when they write. This is no surprise, since they are writing for their peers, for the scores of people who are engaged in the same language game. They are trapped in their own circle of analytic philosopher compatriots and forget how to reach out to others, to motivate others to think with them.

The Narrowing Circle of Experts with Analytic Philosophical Issues

As a philosophical trend, analytic philosophy in the Anglo-American tradition is primarily a "problem-solving activity."[2] From the beginning, analytic philosophy "aims to solve particular problems, puzzles and paradoxes, and to build theories in answer to them. It prefers to work upon details and particular analyses, rather than to produce general syntheses."[3] However, the collective "problem-solving activities" within analytic philosophy are primarily performed by the specialists, and for the specialists, on those particular philosophical problems. As Neil Levy points out, "The analytic philosopher addresses specialists she knows will share her technical vocabulary and her sense of what problems she ought to be concerned with."[4] As a result, many of the papers published in peer-reviewed journals and further selected in standard anthologies are intelligible only to a small number of experts. Even analytic philosophers with the same area of specialization would find themselves becoming novices with issues that others have developed into a theoretical labyrinth, not to mention analytic philosophers working in other areas. This "clubbishness" within analytic philosophy creates nepotism and exclusionism that professionals and students alike become outsiders. According to Alexander Nehamas, "This has led to what I believe is a dangerous fragmentation in the field, with people who teach together in the same department having neither any idea of what their colleagues are doing nor any interest in ever finding out."[5]

At the same time, partly due to the time and rigor required to keep up with an ongoing philosophical discourse, but partly also due to the closed-mindedness of some analytic philosophers, any philosophical tradition or issue that is not in the "main stream" analytic philosophical circle is regarded with disinterest, apathy, or even scorn. Many contemporary analytic philosophers know very little beyond their own expertise, and their philosophical engagement is restricted only with those in their clique. Analytic philosophy isolates itself from the history of Western philosophy as well as histories of other philosophical traditions. According to Hilary Putnam, a feature of Anglo-American analytic philosophy is "the exclusion of 'continental philosophy,'' and he remarks, "This indifference of analytic philosophy departments to what interests the other humanities departments is not surprising, however, when one realizes that the self-image of analytic philosophy is scientific rather than humanistic."[6] Nehamas also reports that by the late 1940s, analytic philosophers "ceased to think of themselves as part of the enterprise to which their colleagues in literature and history departments were devoted; they started thinking of themselves instead as participants in the enterprise of science."[7] In addition to segregating itself from the rest of the humanities, analytic philosophy also "retreated from the public domain. It no longer saw itself as bearing a direct relation to the world." Once analytic philosophy uproots itself

from the humanities and humanistic concerns, it also stops being *relevant*. Analytic philosophy stands opposed to "generalism," but as a result it also risks falling into *provincialism*.

Of course, all disciplines aim to develop expertise and their development depends on the interchange among specialists in the field. I am not suggesting that top analytic philosophical works have to be watered down to suit the general public. However, I do think that *some* contemporary analytic philosophers are self-indulgent when they write long formalistic papers that do not touch on real issues. They don't seem to care whether their examples could motivate readers to think, or whether their conclusions could really "solve" a problem. As Neil Levy presents the accusation that others have made of analytic philosophy: Analytic philosophy "is a new scholasticism, where the concern for technique overwhelms the very problems that the techniques had originally been designed to solve."[8] The intellectual rigor that defines analytic philosophy should not be translated into arid formulation after formulation of the same position. One rule that analytic philosophers should adhere to, but often do not, is the methodology of analytic philosophy—philosophical analysis that aims to clarify in a concise manner. According to James Baillie, "The idea of analytic philosophy clearly rests on some notion of *analysis*. Analysis consists of breaking down a complex system into its component parts, thereby making the underlying elements and the relations between them explicit […]. The aim of philosophical analysis was to become clear about what was being said or thought."[9] What analytic philosophers criticize about the continental philosophical style—obscure, convoluted rhetoric and vacuous verbiage—should be used as a mirror on their own writings.

In the current academic environment in the U.S., those universities with a graduate program in philosophy and those without seem to be of two cultures. According to *the Philosophical Gourmet Report 2011* by Brian Leiter, "In the U.S., all the Ivy League universities, all the leading state research universities, all the University of California campuses, most of the top liberal arts colleges, most of the flagship campuses of the second-tier state research universities boast philosophy departments that overwhelmingly self-identify as "analytic": it is hard to imagine a "movement" that is more academically and professionally entrenched than analytic philosophy."[10] This may be true for the research universities and top liberal arts colleges; however, many, if not most, undergraduate programs elsewhere strive to be diversified and pluralistic, and analytic philosophy has a difficult time attracting students when it is not the only tradition offered. Graduate programs train future philosophy instructors to be immersed in the analytic philosophical discourse and writing style, but these graduate students would need to readjust their expectation when they begin teaching undergraduate students who are encountering analytic philosophy for the first time.

In four-year universities, philosophy courses are often offered as general education courses to non-majors, and many undergraduate students are drawn to philosophy courses because they found them interesting, thought-provoking, eye-opening and even life-changing. Analytic philosophy is not a natural enemy to these students. They can learn to appreciate abstract speculation and meticulous philosophical analysis, but they also need to *see the point*. To stimulate these young minds and to inspire them to think outside the box, analytic philosophy needs to go back to the basics and restore the charm of analytic philosophy when substance takes precedence over form, and problem-solving activities aim at genuine philosophical problems rather than fabricated linguistic trivialities. There are numerous exciting topics that undergraduates could be fully engaged in because these topics “concern” them—not in the daily pragmatic sense, but on the deeper level of their own existence.

Back to the Basics: Investigation of the Nature of Language and Reality

In its heyday,[11] analytic philosophy provided perspectives that challenged us to reflect on the nature of language and its relation to reality. Early analytic philosophers seemed to be more immersed in the history of Western philosophy, and their philosophical concerns reached far beyond the trifles of linguistic analysis. They *made a point*. Even if their writings are by no means easier to read, it is a rewarding experience in the end. The key to the future development of analytic philosophy, then, is to reestablish the link to general philosophical problems, to return to the questions that would make people reexamine their common assumptions about the nature of reality, and to find ways to draw in undergraduate students.

In my Philosophy of Mind class, for example, students are eager to learn about the various contemporary theories on the mind-brain relationship, and although many of them came into this course with a Cartesian dualist mindset, most would end up defending a form of functionalism, reductive physicalism, or non-reductive physicalism. The issues of *qualia* and *consciousness* are especially engrossing for my students, and they would read things outside of reading assignments to be better acquainted with the ongoing discussion. The Turing Test and whether robots could have intelligence, thought, and emotions are of course the most fascinating topic for my students. From reflecting on the possibility of artificial intelligence, they also begin to examine the nature of mind or mental state.

In Philosophy of Language, I select primarily earlier articles by Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein, Austin, Searle, Quine, Davidson, Donnellan, Putnam, and Kripke. Frege’s “Sense and Reference” and the ensuing debate between description theories and direct reference theories constitute the core of my syllabus. The aim is to make students think

about the following questions: What is the nature and function of language? What do we *mean* when we speak—is meaning determined primarily by our intentions or by what our words express? How do our words *refer* to objects in the world? How is the use of proper names established in our language? What is the connection between language and the world? How does language depict reality? What is the connection between thought and speech? Is private language possible? How is communication accomplished? How do we ascribe beliefs to others when we are using *our* words to capture what *they* have in mind? Among these topics, Wittgenstein's ideas about *language game* and *private language*, Quine's idea of *radical translation*, and Davidson's theory of *intersubjective interpretation* generally draw appreciative nods from my students.

In Philosophy of Time, I probe such questions as: Is time real or unreal? Does time exist on its own or is it merely a reflection of relations among things? Does time "flow" and is there a "passage of time"? What constitutes "the *present*"? Are the past and the future *real*? Is there a single timeline progressing as an *arrow* or are there multiple timelines in space? Is time travel possible conceptually, metaphysically or physically? Could there be a "causal loop" such that one goes back in time to cause things to happen for the present? However, I have to admit that other than McTaggart's challenging but rewarding article on time and David Lewis' fun article on time travel, I have had a hard time choosing the right articles for this course. Most anthologies of philosophy of time include highly sophisticated and technical articles that are not intended for newcomers. Some articles with intriguing titles end up doing more sophistry than touching on the enigma of time itself.

Finally, in Metaphysics, I begin with the debate between realism and anti-realism, and ask students to ponder these questions: What is "reality"? Do we really know the reality? Is reality simply what we perceive, or is it what we as humans have created together? Is human science *advancing toward* reality, or are we simply shifting from one scientific paradigm to another? Is what we call 'reality' constructed out of humans' conceptual schemes? What is *truth*? How can 'truth' be defined? Putnam's version of realism and his challenge of the fact/value dichotomy generally make students examine their own conception of reality, and Goodman's *Ways of Worldmaking* is both shocking and enlightening to my students. Once students loosen their grip on reality, they begin to entertain a variety of metaphysical positions.

Good philosophy makes people think hard because it *poses good questions*. For analytic philosophers to produce good analytic philosophy, they must remember the primary goal of philosophy: to challenge people to think. Philosophical analysis is a tool, and we should not simply stare at the finger and forget the moon to which the finger points.

Engaging Analytic Philosophy with Chinese Philosophy

On a personal level, I have been reconstructing Chinese philosophy with the analytic methodology for years. Analytic philosophy and Chinese philosophy are not as incongruent as is commonly believed by philosophers on both sides. There are mutual benefits to gain if we engage Chinese philosophy with analytic philosophy: on the side of Chinese philosophy, we could employ a language of clarity and lucidity gleaned from analytic philosophy; on the side of analytic philosophy, we could broaden our perspectives of key philosophical issues prominent in the tradition of analytic philosophy.

To engage Chinese philosophy with analytic philosophy is not to presume that the two traditions are naturally compatible. For one thing, the Daoist and the Buddhist traditions have always emphasized that one should go beyond linguistic expressions, to seek transcendent truth, to grasp the meaning behind words and to comprehend the teacher's sayings with one's intuitive understanding. This is why some people strongly oppose using the analytic methodology on Chinese philosophy.[12] Eske Møllgaard argues that the analytic philosophical treatment of Chinese philosophy "hampers productive research in this area."[13] Bernard Faure argues that analytic philosophy "falls under the fascination of a particular kind of purely linguistic approach" and "restricting philosophy to grammar."[14] However, the development of Chinese philosophy has a lot to gain from importing analytic philosophical methodology and issues into traditional Chinese philosophy. As mentioned before, the methodology of analytic philosophy is philosophical analysis—focusing on the clarification of philosophical concepts, the articulation of reasoning and argumentation, and the precise formulation of principles or definitions. This methodology of philosophical analysis is very useful in the study of Chinese philosophy, especially for the benefit of contemporary readers. Contemporary interpreters of ancient Chinese philosophical texts should aim to assist readers in their understanding, and the precise choice of words along with the clear formulation of views is an effective means. Granted, the analytic presentation of Chinese philosophy cannot exhaust the whole content of Chinese philosophy, but it is a start in the right direction. What analytic philosophy as a methodology can offer to Chinese philosophy, is the scholars' conscious efforts aiming at conceptual clarity and precision of language. The analytic reconstruction of Chinese philosophy can help connect contemporary readers with these traditional philosophical issues. For example, the debate on realism and anti-realism is reflected in the Daoist conception of language and reality; the conviction of moral realism is implicit in the Confucian moral philosophy. There are many others who have engaged analytic philosophical issues or positions with classical Chinese philosophy—virtue ethics, moral psychology, political philosophy, and metaphysics are at present the most prominent areas of comparative study.

At the same time, analytic philosophical tradition challenges every participant to be a problem solver, a thesis presenter, and most importantly, to establish his or her own view. Expository work and textual analysis take backstage to the introduction of a novel solution. Any budding analytic philosopher is entitled to challenge the received view, as long as he or she has done the groundwork of research and has truly come up with something that can add to the discussion. It is this kind of equality that facilitates an open exchange of ideas in the circle of analytic philosophy. The historical tradition of Chinese philosophy, on the other hand, takes the pattern of adhering to one's own philosophical school, which is marked by the hierarchy of one master and multiple students. Ancient texts are often students' records of the master's teachings of the classics. This long-held "awe" toward the masters and the classics dominated the intellectual culture of interpretation and reinterpretation, to the extent that even one's novel ideas were disguised as textual commentary (as seen in the works of Neo-Confucians). To engage Chinese philosophy with analytic philosophy, therefore, one needs to begin with an attitude shift: from "textual interpretation" to "problem-solving," from speculating on the original author's intent to developing one's own voice. The convergence between analytic philosophy and Chinese philosophy can take place at various junctures with some aim at lucidity of conceptual analysis and rigor in philosophical argumentation, while some others go for innovative problem-solving as a joint endeavor.

Both philosophical analysis as a methodology and analytic philosophy as a philosophical interlocutor can contribute to the development of Chinese philosophy. The conceptual clarity gleaned from analytic philosophy can enable Chinese philosophers to better express their viewpoints. Analytic philosophy can also suggest many new topics and problems for the development of Chinese philosophy. Chinese philosophy, as well as other Asian philosophies, needs to be "reinvented" in order to become part of the global philosophical exchange. The analytic approach provides one way to *philosophize* Chinese thought, so that the question whether there is *philosophy* in Chinese history will no longer be pertinent.

Conclusion: Putting Analytic Philosophy Back in the Humanities

In my opinion, if analytic philosophy is to be a philosophical tradition that can make a cultural contribution to the world in the twenty-first century, then it needs to come out of the ivory tower—the graduate programs that teach exclusively analytic philosophy. Analytic philosophers should not think that their profession is only for the analytic elites, that their writings are only meant for trained experts, and that their serious philosophical pursuits are naturally urgent and important to others. They need to rethink the value of their

projects and find believable examples to motivate them. If analytic philosophy cannot even reach out to undergraduate students who receive proper instruction from their professors, then it will hardly have any appeal to other intellectuals in our society. As Putnam puts it, "Good prose, whatever its subject, must communicate something worth communicating to a sensitive reader […]. The demand that we only say what can be said in the sort of prose that Bertrand Russell wrote, marvelous as that prose was, will, in fact, necessarily limit what one can talk about."[15] Nehamas also points out that "[analytic] philosophy needs to take seriously the need to communicate its concerns more broadly and to a larger audience."[16] *Accessibility* and *relevance* must be constant reminders when analytic philosophers write their prose.

Furthermore, analytic philosophers need to have a broader philosophical training, so that their discourse makes more connections with other philosophical issues. Back in 1959, C. P. Snow criticized "the cultural divide" of the times: those in the culture of sciences and the culture of humanities "can't talk to each other,"[17] and he writes: "this polarization is a sheer loss to us all."[18] Now even within the philosophy circle, there is still the persistent polarization between analytic philosophy and any other philosophy that is supposedly non-analytic—continental philosophy, Asian philosophy, to list just the obvious. Analytic philosophy needs to open its closed door, and analytic philosophers ought to become more informed of philosophical issues and traditions that are not born and bred in the analytic tradition per se. Current graduate students in analytic programs need to be more broadly educated in the history of Western philosophy as well as in more pluralistic philosophical traditions to make connections with other philosophical concerns. Analytic philosophy needs to be brought out of its exclusionist clique and present its philosophical findings in a way accessible to a broader readership. It should return to genuine human concerns and resituate itself in the humanistic departments. I share Putnam's sentiment when he writes, "I am concerned about certain tendencies in analytic philosophy—by the tendency to scientism, the tendency to patronize the history of philosophy, the refusal to *hear* other sorts of philosophy—but fighting these tendencies is not the same thing as fighting analytic philosophy."[19] I believe that analytic philosophy has a lot to offer to our undergraduates, to the future *intelligentsia* of our society, but it needs to change its self-image first.

Notes

1. I wish to thank my colleague Andrew Howat for his input.

2. Levy 2003, 293.

3. Engel 1999, 222.
4. Levy 2003, 296.
5. Nehamas 1997, 221.
6. Putnam 1997, 201.
7. Nehamas 1997, 212.
8. Levy 2003, 286.
9. Baillie 2003, ix.
10. Leiter 2011.
11. By this I refer to what Alexander Nehamas calls the "canon" of analytic philosophy: works by Frege, Russell, Carnap, Ayer, Ryle, Wittgenstein, Austin, Strawson, Quine, Davidson, Putnam, and Kripke. The list is of course not exhaustive.
12. For example, Eske Møllgaard argues that the analytic approach "reduces unique thought to arguments and subsumes the specific under abstract categories." Hence, "in the study of Chinese thought this philosophy must be rejected" (2005, 321). Bernard Faure calls professional analytic philosophy "a language game in and of itself," which imposes a "straightjacket" on our understanding of reality (2004, 33). A Chinese scholar Fang Chaohui also criticizes the approach of analytic Chinese philosophy: "Employing Western disciplinary categories to interpret Confucian classics would turn Confucianism onto the path of being epistemized and philosophized." (Fang 2007, 12, my translation)
13. Møllgaard 2005, 321.
14. Faure 2004, 31.
15. Putnam 1997, 201–2.
16. Nehamas 1997, 222.
17. Snow 1961, 17.
18. Snow 1961, 12.
19. Putnam 1997, 202.

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