

***Twentieth-Century Analytic Philosophy* by Avrum Stroll  
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The history of analytic philosophy is a troubled genre. Analytic philosophers have only recently shown an interest in their historical roots, and to date no one has succeeded in providing a historical account of the period (roughly) 1879-1960 which is both relatively complete and free from excessive bias. We have fine, historically sensitive studies of practically every major early figure (e.g. Kenny on Frege<sup>1</sup>, Baldwin on Moore<sup>2</sup>, Hylton on Russell<sup>3</sup>, Coffa<sup>4</sup> and more recently Friedmann<sup>5</sup> on the positivists, and too many to mention on Wittgenstein, both early and late); but these do not provide, and don't purport to provide, systematic accounts of the historical interconnections and influences in question. We also have a couple of ostensible histories proper; but these are either too idiosyncratic (Dummett<sup>6</sup>, Hacker<sup>7</sup>) or too incomplete (Gross<sup>8</sup>, Passmore<sup>9</sup>) to fit the bill.

Avrum Stroll has written a history of analytic philosophy which suffers from neither defect. He discusses, usually in some detail, the work of Frege, Moore, Russell, Schlick, Carnap, Austin, Ryle, Quine, Kripke, Marcus and both Wittgensteins. He also attempts to unearth influences and interrelations amongst these thinkers. It cannot be said, moreover, that his book suffers from any particular bias or radical perspective. In nearly every case he attempts (admirably) to meet the philosopher in question on the latter's own terms. Despite this, however, the book cannot be judged a success. In the course of this review I will indicate why this is so, beginning with more general reasons and proceeding to discussion of Stroll's section on Quine, to my mind the worst of the book's nine chapters.

The main problem with the book is that it fails to illuminate. Certainly some of the discussions (e.g. of Austin and the later Wittgenstein) are competent and interesting; but for the most part the reader receives little more than some biographical data and stock summary of the position.<sup>10</sup> Stroll is not without talent as an

expositor, and much of the biographical information is very enjoyable to read. However, in those cases in which he does attempt to go beyond this quite basic exercise, he fails. I'll give two examples (but see further below on Quine). First, in a chapter entitled "Logical Positivism and the *Tractatus*" Stroll wonders why given the mystical nature of the remarks near the end of the early Wittgenstein's *opus* and the apparent incompatibility between these and the metaphysics of logical atomism, Wittgenstein didn't just start over and write a new book (63)<sup>11</sup>. This is an odd question. It might make some sense if Stroll were to demonstrate, and not assume, that there is a conflict between Wittgenstein's metaphysics and his mysticism. Second, Stroll notes the sad fact that Austin died at the height of his powers, in his late forties. He goes on to speculate about how philosophy might have been different had Austin lived for another twenty or thirty years. "My own guess is that its consequences would have been momentous and that the course of mainstream philosophy would have been radically different"(166). This conjecture belies a failure to understand the limited scope of Austin's influence.

Stroll recognizes Quine's status as the most influential living philosopher, and accordingly devotes an entire chapter to his work. The discussion centers on Quine's rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction, his behaviorism, and his epistemological naturalism. So far so good. But already in the opening biographical remarks we've got problems. Stroll notes, correctly, that Quine's 500-page autobiography amounts in general to little more than a travel diary. He says truly that Quine's work seems to him the most important thing in his life. He then draws conclusions which are nothing short of absurd. "Because his inward life is everything, his outward life is as solitary as a monk's"; "... in a way Quine is a solipsist . . . a practical solipsist who isolates himself from [the world]"; "*Der Mann ist seiner Arbeit*"(186). On the following page Stroll notes an even "greater mystery. Why would a solipsist write not one but two autobiographies?" This entire discussion is silly and a complete waste of time.

Stroll distinguishes in Quine's work what he calls 'three successive phases', but then notes that the stages don't follow temporally upon one another (the first, 'logic' phase, is said to begin

in 1934 and end in 1970; the third, 'epistemological' stage "commences in 1951"!)) One wonders what 'successive' and 'phase' mean in Stroll's idiolect.

We come finally to the substantive criticism of Quine. I will focus on four of Stroll's charges. First, he claims that Quine thinks there are no numbers (181, 188). This is easy to refute; it is just false. For at least the last forty years, and in publications Stroll himself mentions and quotes from, Quine has been an unrepentant platonist about mathematical entities. Second, he notes that Quine adheres to scientism. "So the question for him is whether scientific theory requires the existence of various kinds of abstract *entities*. His naturalism tells him that it does not"(201, his emphasis). As should be obvious to any reader of Quine, his concern is not with abstractness as such; it is with criteria of identity. Sets are abstract, and their identity criterion is as clear as could be. 'Two' sets are identical iff they have the same members. Propositions, attributes, and other intensional rodents are abstract as well, but lack clear criteria of identity. Quine keeps sets and dispenses with the rest. Third, Stroll thinks he has a devastating objection to Quine's indeterminacy semantics. "Quine thinks that we can identify what an utterance means with an auditor's reaction to it. But this thesis is susceptible to a serious objection. For an auditor to respond to an utterance, he must already understand what it means"(205). Quine does not think, nor has he ever said, that we can identify utterance meaning with audience reaction. Stroll is confusing, among other things, the intuitive notion of meaning, which Quine thinks is more-or-less useless, with the proposed notion of stimulus-meaning, which is not meant to replace the intuitive notion in every context. The final charge from Stroll I'll consider here is that he thinks he sees an inconsistency within Quine's treatment of the analytic-synthetic distinction (206-207). The criticism is familiar from Boghossian (so at least here Stroll is in good company). At times it seems as if Quine is saying that there are no analytic sentences; at other times he appears to claim merely that the a/s distinction is not clear. Stroll and Boghossian think the two claims are in conflict, and it isn't difficult to see why – if the predicate 'is analytic' is unclear, then how could we know what, if anything, is in its extension?

The fallacy is in thinking that Quine's two claims, and I admit that he does say or imply both, are made on the same methodological level. A more perspicuous way of making his point would be to note first that the analytic/synthetic distinction is fatally unclear (it is crucial to note that clarity, at least for Quine, is a matter of degree); we can make no sense of it save by assuming the notions of meaning, synonymy or necessity, and the members of this ill-begotten triad are not one jot clearer than is analyticity. And second, it is to be pointed out that, in any case, there are no analytic sentences. Quine's commitments to extensionalism and to pragmatism sometimes come into conflict; e.g., propositional attitude contexts are woefully unclear, but we cannot practically get on without them. If the notion of analyticity (or necessity or synonymy) were likewise to be shown indispensable, Quine would tolerate its relative unclarity. However, we can do quite well without analyticity; indeed as Duhem showed recalcitrant data can be accommodated in sundry ways, and Quine takes this to demonstrate that sentences don't possess significance individually and that any can be revised.

Now this argument assumes that any adequate notion of analyticity will entail incorrigibility; if you want a notion of analyticity according to which we might revise an analytic statement (such as Boghossian's epistemic conception), you're well advised to drop the word 'analytic' and take up instead 'a priori'. The latter can do the work needed without misleading the reader.

In summary, while Stroll makes an honest effort at a hard and demanding task, his book in the end just isn't competent. The history of analytic philosophy has yet to be written.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Frege* (Penguin, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> *G.E. Moore* (Routledge, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> *Russell, Idealism and the Emergence of Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> *The Semantic Tradition from Kant to Carnap* (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> *Reconsidering Logical Positivism* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> *Origins of Analytical Philosophy* (Harvard University Press, 1994). Dummett's book is idiosyncratic in that he devotes far more attention to Husserl than to Russell and Moore combined. This is of course a consequence of Dummett's notion of what analytic philosophy consists in.

<sup>7</sup> *Wittgenstein's Place in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Philosophy* (Blackwells, 1996). Hacker's book, despite its rather narrow title, does purport to be, *inter alia*, some sort of general history. But it fails because of his radical Wittgensteinian outlook.

<sup>8</sup> *Analytic Philosophy* (Western Publishing Co., 1970). Gross gives almost no attention to Frege, and stops short of considering Quine's full impact. Both of these faults are understandable given the time at which it was written.

<sup>9</sup> *One Hundred Years of Philosophy* (Duckworth, 1957); *Recent Philosophers* (Open Court, 1985). The combination of Passmore's two books (the latter beginning as an appendage to the former) comes closest to success here. The problem is that the first book doesn't restrict itself to analytic philosophy as such, and the second is too brief. I don't of course suggest that Passmore set out to write the sort of history whose absence I am lamenting.

<sup>10</sup> There are within the book a couple of original contributions to the issues, but these are naïve and poorly thought-out. Here is one characteristic argument: in the course of discussing the direct reference theories of Kripke and Putnam Stroll claims (235-6) that water is not identical to H<sub>2</sub>O because ice is water and ice is not so identical.

<sup>11</sup> All intratextual page references are to the book under review.