



Chapitre de livre

1987

Published version

Open Access

This is the published version of the publication, made available in accordance with the publisher's policy.

Continental insularity: contemporary french analytical philosophy

Engel, Pascal

How to cite

ENGEL, Pascal. Continental insularity: contemporary french analytical philosophy. In: Contemporary French Philosophy. [s.l.] : [s.n.], 1987. p. 1–19. (Royal Institute of Philosophy)

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:5019>

Continental Insularity: Contemporary French Analytical Philosophy

PASCAL ENGEL

1. Sociological-Cultural Remarks

People outside France have always wondered why analytical philosophy has had so little influence in this country, while it has gained currency in many other European countries, such as Germany and Italy, not to speak of Northern Europe, where the analytical tradition is strongly established. This can be explained only by a particular conjunction of historical, cultural, sociological and maybe economical factors, which it would be too long to detail here. If there are natural characters of nations, there is no reason to believe that there are no philosophical characters of nations. As Hume said, the characters of nations can have physical as well as moral causes.¹ As for the physical causes, everybody in Britain knows how insular the Continent can be. So if there is such a thing as French analytical philosophy, nobody will be surprised to learn that it is very insular. Before presenting some of the work done by French philosophers related to the analytical tradition, let me try to give what I take to be some of the moral causes of their insularity.

Among the more familiar reasons of the separation between the Anglo-American analytical tradition and the French tradition in philosophy, are some historical features of these traditions. One of them is the fact that logic has always been in France a minor and neglected discipline. Descartes is largely responsible for that, in spite of the influence of Port Royal. At the time when Boole in England was writing his *Laws of Thought*, the *Idéologues* and their spiritualist followers were explaining that logic is sterile and scholastic. Poincaré's attacks against Russell and Couturat, at the turn of the century, have been largely responsible for the lack of interest of mathematicians and philosophers in logic. Even the most rationalistically inclined philosophers, such as Brunschvicg, were always tempted to identify the use of reason with mathematics, and to divorce the use of reason from the use of logic. This feeling is largely shared today by the mathemati-

¹ Hume, 'The National Characters of Nations', in *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary* (London, 1875).

cians of the Bourbaki school and their followers. And the few mathematicians and philosophers who worked in logic during the first half of the twentieth century, such as Couturat, Nicod, Cavailles and Herbrand, died so young that they could not change the fate of the discipline. The result has been that there was no echo in France of the so-called 'revolution in philosophy' which has changed the landscape of philosophy in England.

Another deep intellectual factor has been the general contempt for empiricism. Analytical philosophy has been associated (and rightly so) with empiricism and with the logical positivist movement. One of the very first things that a young student learns in France during his philosophy classes is that empiricism is the anti-philosophical doctrine *par excellence*, because it dissolves our concepts into experience, and amounts to the apology of common sense (experience is tolerated only if it is of a higher and more praiseworthy kind: 'inner' experience, which is richer than the poor empiricist 'impressions'). About positivism, French philosophers have always thought that their own kind of positivism, namely the positivism of Auguste Comte, was better than any other brand of positivism, even if it had to be criticized. So if you combine empiricism, logic and positivism, you can only get one of the most absurd doctrines that one can ever find.

Last but not least, analytical philosophy has been associated with a particular method, the method of linguistic analysis, be it formal or informal. Here matters are more complex, because the dominant trend of French philosophy in the twentieth century, phenomenology and existentialism, has been in some sense associated with a criticism of language. But this aspect of the Husserlian tradition, the Husserl of the *Logische Untersuchungen*, has never been dominant, and French philosophers have always paid less attention to it than to the phenomenological descriptions of 'pure, inner, transcendental experience'. Later, the structuralist movement could satisfy what might be called a Mallarmean feeling of the linguistic nature of reality. But there has never been in France anything like a 'linguistic turn' in philosophy.

But beside these well-known historical reasons, it seems to me that the divorce between the two philosophical traditions can be explained only in part by the rejection of certain doctrines and methods, and by the adherence to other doctrines and methods. There are also institutional reasons.

Analytical philosophy, as it is seen by many of its practitioners, is neither a doctrine nor a method. It is a tradition and an attitude. A tradition consists in a certain set of beliefs, and beliefs are dispositions to act. Analytical philosophy can be (in part, but in an important part) characterized by the following beliefs:

Contemporary French Analytical Philosophy

- (1) Philosophy, like science, is a common enterprise. What philosophers say has to be discussed, criticized, argued about, and no philosopher can expect to produce good arguments or good theories without the help and sanction of other researchers.
- (2) There can be progress in philosophy (although not in the sense of scientific progress), provided everyone tries to be clear and argumentative. 'Truth emerges more readily out of error than from confusion'. 'Do not write so that you can be understood, but so that you cannot be misunderstood' (Quintillian).
- (3) Not everybody is a genius, but as Peirce said, 'in order to be deep it is sometimes necessary to be dull'. Philosophers can be co-workers without being engaged in the construction of large philosophical systems, and without encompassing the whole range of philosophical problems and of the history of their discipline. There can be good professional, specialized, and therefore technical, philosophy.

The success of analytical philosophy and its vitality are mostly due to the fact that many people can share these beliefs without agreeing on any philosophical opinion or theory. They can even be co-workers while sustaining philosophically antagonist doctrines, provided that they share this general attitude. This attitude is just the scientific attitude, even though philosophy is not one of the sciences, or, better, it is the rationalistic attitude. This is not to say that every philosopher in the analytic community adopts this attitude, but, by and large, it serves as a regulative ideal. It is also, by and large, an institutional attitude, the academic attitude, and it is better carried out through the channels of the academic institutions than through any other institution.

Now if one considers the present situation of French philosophy, the attitude which many French philosophers have towards their discipline is most likely the very reverse of the analytical attitude as I have just defined it. Some widely held beliefs are the following:

- (1') Philosophy is, by definition, a solitary enterprise; criticism of one's philosophical views is due to malevolence or to oblique (maybe unconscious) intentions or motives; there is no other form of approval than celebration.
- (2') There can be no progress in philosophy, because there is no truth or agreement to be reached; truth and objectivity are suspect values; philosophy is more like literature than like science, and the use of argument is more a matter of rhetoric and eloquence than a matter of logic and truth.
- (3') There can only be geniuses in philosophy, giants of thought; contrary to what Descartes thought, it is better to have a great number of confused ideas than to have a small number of clear

ideas; the philosopher is neither a professional nor a specialist; he is more like an artist.

It might be thought that I have myself indulged in some sort of malevolent caricature. Of course the expression of those beliefs is far more subtle and sophisticated than that. As a matter of fact, many prominent French philosophers have held such beliefs quite literally, and far from being ashamed of them, they are quite proud of these opinions, which are for them the expression of their passionate fight against what they take to be the tyranny of reason itself. In any case the question is: how far are they ready to renounce those beliefs? I shall not try to examine whether they are sincere or just naive. As Peirce said: let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we cannot doubt in our hearts.

Needless to say, this intellectual climate has not been very favourable to the development of analytical philosophy in France, and is largely responsible for the present crisis of the academic institution in philosophy. It has been most ably described and diagnosed by Jacques Bouveresse in two recent books, *La philosophie chez les autophages* and *Rationalité et cynisme*.² In these books Bouveresse explains the tragedy of the perpetual divorce and remarriage of French philosophers with philosophy, and the self-defeating and self-deceptive attitudes to which it leads. They contain also some profound reflections on the present status of rationality, to which I shall come later.

2. Contemporary French Analytical Philosophy: a Preliminary Map

I have given some of the reasons for despair. Now for some of the reasons for hope. For some years there has been in France an increasing interest in analytical philosophy, due in part to a reaction against the excesses of post-structuralist philosophy. The French reader has now at his disposal the main writings of Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein, Quine, Strawson, Ryle, Kripke, Goodman, Putnam, Searle and Popper, although there are still large lacunae in the politics of translation. There are good historical expositions and discussions.³ We have come a long way since the time when, in 1962, some French and Anglo-

² Minit, 1984 and 1985.

³ For instance, Jacques Bouveresse's books and papers (see below); Pierre Jacob, *L'empirisme logique* (Minit, 1980). Joëlle Proust has recently published an important book about the history of the notion of analyticity from Hume to Carnap, which is also a study of the origins of analytical philosophy (*Questions de forme* (Fayard, 1986)).

Contemporary French Analytical Philosophy

American philosophers met in Royaumont, and showed their inability to understand each other.⁴ These changes, however, came in a disorderly way. The French philosophical community being but a collection of tribes, there are no institutions, journals, or associations devoted to analytical philosophy, and not even a particular tribe of analytical philosophers (in spite of the allegations of those who are always ready to discern the signs of a so-called invasion).

In many cases, the analytical tradition has been met by those philosophers of a more classical bend, who could not persuade themselves that such traditional ideas as the certainty of the *cogito*, the importance of the notions of truth, of argument, or of the rationality of science, had to be readily replaced by the Freudian unconscious, relativism and rhetoric, and the irrational succession of *epistèmai*, or at least who believed that these notions had to be criticized on better grounds. Some people have met certain problems in analytical philosophy from the inside of other traditions, and have found that these problems had similarities with those from which they started. Some important agents in this respect have been the linguists, who in many cases have attracted the attention of the philosophers to the ideas of analytical philosophy of language.⁵

Are there positive, substantial, French contributions to analytical philosophy? It depends on what is meant by a 'positive' contribution. If it means work which has been discussed outside French by Anglo-American philosophers, the answer is: very few (in this respect the post-structuralists have been much more successful). If by 'positive contributions' one means work which *could* (I do not say should) be discussed by analytical philosophers (given their usual criteria), the answer is: not many. But my purpose here is not to give a judgment but to give the elements to judge.

In many ways the work of analytically orientated French philosophers reflects the present tensions existing within the analytical tradition itself, which might be briefly described in the following way. First, there is the thesis, which Michael Dummett has called 'the basic tenet of analytical philosophy', according to which the philosophy of language is the primary part of philosophy, upon which other parts are dependent, and which occupies the place which was traditionally reserved to ontology or to the theory of knowledge. Second, there is the

⁴ *La philosophie analytique* (Minuit, 1962).

⁵ Benveniste was the first. See 'La philosophie analytique et le langage', in *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Gallimard, 1966). See also O. Ducrot, *Dire et ne pas dire* (Herman, 1972), where the notion of presupposition is discussed. Chomskyan linguistic too-attracted the interest of philosophers to the debates in analytical philosophy of language.

growing propensity of many (mostly American) philosophers to think that philosophy is a sort of subpart of science, either because they conceive philosophy as 'naturalized epistemology' in Quine's sense, or because they see it as a part of cognitive science. There is a tension between the 'basic tenet' and this second trend because according to the latter the philosophy of language becomes dependent upon the philosophy of mind, and maybe the science of mind. Third, there is the thesis, quite opposed to the second tendency, but not incompatible with the basic tenet, according to which the central question of philosophy is the Kantian critical question of the possibility of our knowledge and of our experience, and about the place of the 'transcendental'. It seems to me that many of the current debates about, for example, the status of rationality or the truth of scientific or metaphysical realism, rest upon one or the other of these three assumptions, or a combination of them.

In general, the Continental tradition has been favourable to the third, post-Kantian, thesis. It has shown recently (in particular in Germany) some interest in the first thesis, the basic tenet of analytical philosophy, but with a proviso: the philosophy of language is the primary part of philosophy, *provided that* language can be considered as 'transcendental' in one way or another. The main idea is that analytical philosophy of language could be adapted to the post-Kantian tradition, and relieved of its ungracious empiricist and scientific tendencies. (Of course I am not claiming that this line of thought is exclusively Continental; everything rests on the way this programme is achieved.)

All the French philosophers whom I am going to talk about have accepted the basic tenet of analytical philosophy, but they do not agree on its proper interpretation.

A last reservation. I shall not count among the 'analytics' those philosophers who, although they have done much to introduce it to the French readers, are very critical of it, and when they discuss it, do so from a different standpoint. Jules Vuillemin and Gilles Granger are among them. Vuillemin's impressive work is about the philosophy of knowledge and the history of philosophy. He has commented upon Russell, Carnap, Goodman.⁶ In his most recent book, *Nécessité ou contingence*, an analysis of Diodorus' Master Argument, he uses widely the tools of modal and temporal logic, as well as in his previous books.⁷ In a sense Vuillemin's methods have affinities with the analytical school

⁶ J. Vuillemin, *Leçons sur la première philosophie de Russell* (A. Colin, 1968); *La logique et le monde sensible* (Flammarion, 1970).

⁷ *Nécessité ou contingence; l'aporie de Diodore et les systèmes philosophiques* (Minuit, 1984). *What is a Philosophical System?* (Cambridge University Press, 1986) is an English adaptation of part II of this book.

Contemporary French Analytical Philosophy

in the history of philosophy, which considers, in Hidé Ishiguro's happy phrase, that the history of philosophy is the 'jurisprudence' and not the court of appeal for philosophizing.⁸ But Vuillemin's work is unique, and cannot fall squarely within one category or another. The same can be said about Granger, a philosopher of science, who has shown much interest in Wittgenstein (whom he was the first in France to write about) and in the philosophy of language.⁹ Vuillemin and Granger are, if they let me use this phrase, the godfathers of French analytical philosophy. But a godfather need not approve of his godson's opinions and deeds.

For similar reasons, I shall leave out of this survey the work of Paul Ricoeur, which has been for some years an attempt to bring about a fruitful dialogue between hermeneutics and analytical philosophy.

3. Francis Jacques' Philosophy of Dialogue

Francis Jacques is one of the few French philosophers who became acquainted quite early with the analytical tradition, especially the Oxfordian philosophy of the fifties. For more than fifteen years he has been developing a comprehensive philosophy of dialogue.¹⁰ Two stages can be discerned in his work.

The first stage is a study, within the field of the philosophy of language, of the pragmatic conditions of dialogue and communication. His main thesis is that the semantic, but also the pragmatic aspects of meaning have been analysed inadequately by the contemporary philosophy of language and linguistics. Not only the traditional semantical theory of meaning of the logicians, according to which meaning is determined by truth conditions, but also the pragmatic theory, according to which meaning is dependent upon the contextual features of utterances, are radically defective, because they ignore what Jacques calls the 'dialogical' conditions of communication. His reason for this claim seems to be that, on most pragmatic models of communication and discourse analysis, the meaning of an utterance is taken to be

⁸ Hidé Ishiguro, 'La philosophie analytique et l'histoire de la philosophie', in *Critique* 399-400 (1980), 743-750.

⁹ G. Granger, *Pensée formelle et sciences de l'homme* (Aubier, 1962) (English trans., *Formal Thought and the Sciences of Man* Reidel, 1981); *Essai d'une philosophie du style?* (2nd ed. O. Jacob, 1987); *La théorie aristotélicienne de la science* (Aubier, 1976); *Languages et épistémologie* (Klincksieck, 1980); *Wittgenstein* (Seghers, 1968).

¹⁰ *Dialogiques* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1979); *Différence et subjectivité* (Aubier, 1983); *L'espace logique de l'interlocution* (PUF, 1985).

relative to the subjectivity of the speaker who utters a certain sentence, and to the subjectivity of the hearer who interprets this utterance. But in locating this subjective element of meaning either in the speaker or in the hearer's communicative intentions and expectations, these models ignore the fact that it is mostly in the exchange between the two that the communication resides. The primary situation in which meaning has to be deciphered is dialogue. Jacques has applied this principle to an analysis of reference. Singular terms such as definite descriptions and proper names refer to certain individuals only within a context in which they 'co-refer' to other possible individuals involved in the dialogic communication, or 'retro-refer' to objects in previous uses.¹¹ Reference is fixed only in the ongoing dialogue which involves the further beliefs of the interlocutors. The same analysis is extended to other speech acts, such as questions.¹²

The second stage of Jacques' inquiry is an attempt to relocate this dialogic account of communication within a general philosophy of dialogue. He takes up the Kantian question: how is our experience and our knowledge of an objective world possible? This question, according to him, cannot be posed, as it was in Kant's and in Husserl's philosophy, as the question of the nature of a fixed 'transcendental subject' whose acts are immutable and within a fixed concept of what our experience is. On the contrary transcendental subjectivity is constrained by transcendental intersubjectivity, and the realm of our experience is not fixed, but evolves as a dialogue within a community.¹³ Instead of being true of an objective world, our theories (including) our scientific theories are ways by which we refer to a world, in a perpetual dialogue with it. Jacques intends thus to escape what he takes to be the false debate between objectivism and relativism.¹⁴

This transcendental philosophy of dialogue has some affinities with the transcendental philosophy of communication of German philosophers like Apel and Habermas. One might expect also that Jacques' pragmatic analysis of communication could issue in the 'logic of dialogue' which has been set forth by German logicians such as Paul Lorenzen and Kuno Lorenz. He disclaims, however, any commitment to an ideal community of communication which would fix the norms of objectivity, and he rejects as inadequate the analyses which would capture the essence of dialogue within a logical formalism. Jacques' views are ultimately ethical. Being a participant in a dialogue implies being a person, and the very concept of a person depends upon the

¹¹ See *Dialogiques*.

¹² *L'espace logique de l'interlocution*, 267–322.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 497–539.

¹⁴ See especially *ibid.*, 461–496.

interpersonal conditions of communication. *Ego* is *alter ego*, and *ego communicans*.¹⁵

I shall not comment upon the 'transcendental turn' which Jacques imposes, among others, on the basic tenet of analytical philosophy, although I shall say something about it towards the end of this paper. I shall only raise a few questions about his analysis of reference.

According to Jacques, the semantical analysis of a sentence like:

- (i) Certain musical qualities are required for the principal actor of this comedy

is defective if one only considers the truth conditions of (i), because the referential expressions contained in it are ambiguous.¹⁶ A semantic theory which, like for instance Davidson's adaptation of Tarski's theory of truth for natural languages, would be unable to give us the truth and reference conditions of (i), as uttered in a particular context. Only a process of 'inter-reference' (by which I suppose, Jacques means a series of questions and answers exchanged between two people in order to identify the proper referents of the expressions in (i)), can 'fix the referents'. An agreement on these referents is necessary, according to Jacques, to give the proper truth conditions of (i), before a truth value is given to this sentence. This situation, says Jacques, is not exceptional, but canonical in the process of communication.¹⁷ But I cannot see how it is an objection to Davidson's procedure. According to Davidson, an allocation of a truth-value to (i) is an hypothesis which we set in the process of interpreting the talk of someone else. By a maxim of charity, we decide not to count more beliefs that others hold true than are true by our lights. If this interpretative process fails, we then try another hypothesis, until we reach the best fit.¹⁸ Jacques objects that the process of maximizing agreement is not described. But being a postulate of interpretation, it need not be described. He objects further that Davidson rejects in the 'meta-theory' of a theory of meaning the pragmatic conditions which should appear in the theory itself. I cannot see why this is an objection. The strategy used by Davidson in his theory of meaning is to try *not* to incorporate too much explanatory hypotheses about meaning, in order to minimize the rules which we have to invoke when interpreting the speech of others. As Davidson puts it, his theory explains more 'in the obvious sense of bringing more data under fewer rules'.¹⁹ Incorporating more and more principles of

¹⁵ Par ex. *ibid.*, 562.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 248.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ See D. Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, essays 9–11 (Oxford, 1984).

¹⁹ Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford, 1980), 141.

communication within the theory does not necessarily increase its explanatory power.

Jacques is not satisfied either with Grice's analysis of meaning, although it is more pragmatic than the purely semantic theory. According to Grice (roughly), meaning is a matter of speakers' intentions over sentences uttered, and of various 'conversational maxims' which conventionally regulate these intentions. As well known, Grice's theory implies that in uttering p with the intention of meaning that p , I also intend that my hearer recognizes my intention to mean that p , and that I recognize his own intention. Whatever the way to escape the regress, this process is clearly communicational and dialogic. But this does not satisfy Jacques, who says that the very process of recognition of the other's intentions is presupposed by Grice's analysis, and therefore begs the question against an analysis which, like his, implies that the intentions are identified in the dialogical situation.²⁰ If he means that one of the difficulties of Grice's analysis is that linguistic meaning is explained in terms of intentions of communication, and intentions of communication in terms of linguistic meaning, and is therefore circular, I think it is a serious objection (although it maybe disposed of). But if he means that there is no such thing as a literal meaning of a sentence p in an utterance of it, because the meaning of p is fixed by a dialogue about the meaning of p , I think he is wrong, because one of the conditions of the 'interaction' between speaker and hearer about communicative intentions is that there be such a literal meaning of p .

4. Pragmatics and Cognition

As I remarked above, one of the interesting features of recent work on analytical philosophy of language in France is the co-operation between linguists and philosophers, a co-operation which existed a few years ago in England or in America but which has not proved as fruitful as it was expected to be. In France, where the communities of researchers are smaller, this has been possible to some extent. Chomskyan linguistics and pragmatics have been important points of contact.

One of the main centres of interest has been speech acts theory, in the style of Austin and Searle. François Récanati has written a comprehensive presentation of these theories. In his book, *Les énoncés performatifs*, he studies explicit performatives (such as 'I promise to come'). Although Récanati introduces some new points, he follows mainly the lines of the theory of communication based on Grice's theory of meaning and conversational implicatures, according to which interpreting a

²⁰ *L'espace logique de l'interlocution*, 72, 135, 249.

certain performative utterance is a matter of making a certain inference calculated from the literal meaning of the statement concerned. He therefore rejects the kind of conventionalism which has been associated with speech-act theory, for Strawson's analysis.²¹

Among Grice's maxims of conversation is what he calls the maxim of pertinence: in conversation, always try to say something relevant to your audience. Dan Sperber, a French anthropologist, and Deirdre Wilson, a British linguist, have explored the implications of a pragmatic theory which reduces the Gricean maxims of conversation to only this one, which they call the 'principle of relevance'.²² An interesting feature of this theory is that it is not incompatible with truth-conditional semantics, since, as in Grice's theory, the various inferences drawn by the hearer of a speech act are calculated from the truth conditions of the sentence uttered.

It might be asked: what is the philosophical upshot of these studies? They are, for sure, less far-fetched than those which are drawn by transcendental pragmatics. The upshot is mainly psychological: the principles of conversation are principles of reasoning, and reasoning is, under reasonable assumptions, a matter of cognitive processes. An important question, therefore, is whether the principles of pragmatic reasoning which are explored by linguists have a psychological counterpart and can be backed up by precise cognitive processes. Another linguist, Gilles Fauconnier, has proposed a pragmatic theory orientated along these lines, where the linguist constructions are taken as the counterpart of mental constructions, which he calls 'mental spaces'.²³ But he does not study precisely the psychological underpinnings of these constructions, and pretends to leave out the philosophical interpretations of his theory. In my opinion, however, these studies have some philosophical significance. They raise important questions about the nature of logic and reasoning, and about the general form of a theory of meaning for natural language. But I think that we should not be too hasty and over-ambitious in drawing philosophical conclusions in this field.²⁴

²¹ F. Récanati, *Les énoncés performatifs* (Minuit, 1981). *Meaning and Force*, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

²² D. Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance, Communication and Cognition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

²³ C. Fauconnier, *Les espaces mentaux* (Minuit, 1983); English trans., *Mental Spaces* (MIT, 1985).

²⁴ Although speech act theory and pragmatics have attracted the interest of many linguists, some work has been done on semantics from a logical standpoint. See especially Frédéric Nef, *Sémantique de la référence temporelle* (Lang, 1986), a study of temporal reference within the framework of intensional logic.

5. Denis Zaslavsky on Being

Another interesting way in which linguistic and logical analyses can be combined with philosophical claims has been explored by Denis Zaslavsky. In a book called *Analyse de l'être* and subtitled 'an essay in analytical philosophy', he attempts to give an account of the structure of 'atomic propositions' and explores the consequences which this account might have for a theory of the meaning of the verb 'to be'.²⁵

Zaslavsky starts from the traditional question: what is the ground of the difference between propositions which assert the existence of a certain individual and propositions which predicate something of a given individual? He takes up the problem, both in its traditional formulation in Plato and Aristotle and in its modern and contemporary formulation in Kant, Frege, Russell and Strawson. One first difference between predication and existence is that existence is not a property in the usual sense, as it can be seen from an analysis of the famous paradoxes, such as Plato's paradox of the being of not being. Another difference is that predication is relative to certain categories within which properties are ranked. Being, unlike predication, is a cross-categorical notion, too general to be applied to an object in the manner of the attribution of a property to an object. It is, in the medieval sense, a 'transcendental'. Kant, Frege and Russell have drawn similar conclusions, although with different arguments: existence is not a predicate. So far, Zaslavsky's does not pretend to give a new analysis, but only to aim at a generalization of these views. The more original part of his account comes with his analysis of atomic propositions, of the basic subject/predicate form. Here he takes up Aristotle's, Russell's, and Strawson's views, and points out that they all recognize what Strawson has called the 'asymmetry' of subject and predicate. But Zaslavsky has a new, different interpretation of this asymmetry. According to him the basic structure of atomic propositions is not really the subject/predicate form, nor the function/argument form of modern post-Fregean logic, but the thematic structure in the linguist's sense. For instance in a sentence such as 'John is not polite', 'John' (which is the grammatical subject) is the *theme*, and 'polite' is the *focus* (the grammatical predicate). But theme and focus can be reversed, as in 'It is not John who is polite', where 'John' is not the theme, but the focus. According to Zaslavsky, the asymmetry of theme and focus is more basic than the asymmetry of subject and predicate, and Russell's and Strawson's analyses can be reinterpreted as special cases of this structure. Existential propositions reveal the same thematic structure as predicative propositions, and therefore both depend on this fundamental thematic

²⁵ D. Zaslavsky, *Analyse de l'être* (Minuit, 1983).

structure. Both show an asymmetry with respect to negation. For instance, the negative existential propositions which Russell was interested in, such as:

(ii) The best French analytical philosopher does not exist

do not have the description 'the best French analytical philosopher' as their subject (as Russell recognized in his theory of descriptions), but there is a hidden theme in the proposition which can be paraphrased as:

(iii) France does not have a best analytical philosopher.

The same thing is true of negative predicative statements:

(iv) The best French analytical philosopher is not modest

can be paraphrased as:

(v) France does not have a modest best analytical philosopher.

It turns out, therefore, that existential and predicative propositions share the same asymmetrical thematic structure, although this asymmetry is distributed differently in each case. Existence is not a predicate, but there is something common to both, namely thematization.²⁶

I would not quarrel with Zaslavsky's conclusion, which I find interesting, but with his method. As he himself points out, this conclusion is not incompatible with Russell's account. But he believes that his account is more general, and that the opposition theme/focus is a true linguistic universal (although a pragmatic one). I do not share his 'intuitions' regarding (ii)–(v), which seem to me strained. Zaslavsky has not shown conclusively that similar results could not be obtained within a more traditional, Fregean, treatment of predication and existence, and therefore that his informal 'comparative' method succeeds against this traditional account.²⁷

6. Jacques Bouveresse on Wittgenstein and Rationality

Jacques Bouveresse has long been the most active defender of analytical philosophy in France, but it begins to emerge that analytical philosophy can be defended and practised from different points of view, in France as elsewhere. Bouveresse's standpoint can be readily characterized as Wittgensteinian. Most of his work up to now has consisted in commentaries on Wittgenstein's philosophy, which he was one of the

²⁶ Ibid., 177.

²⁷ I have reviewed this book in *Revue Philosophique*, 108, 3 (1983), pp. 317–22.

first to expose and discuss. But Bouveresse's books and papers are not mere Wittgenstein scholarship: each of them is an attempt to put Wittgensteinian problems in contemporary perspective, and to put contemporary philosophical problems in a Wittgensteinian perspective. His first book, *La parole malheureuse*, is a series of exercises in conceptual analyses, on current topics in the philosophy of language, philosophy of mind and ontology. Although this book shows some influence of the 'therapeutic' style of analysis of Oxfordian philosophy, Bouveresse sees no real incompatibility between ordinary language philosophy and the formal methods of Carnap, for instance.²⁸ In both cases, philosophy is a form of conceptual analysis, aiming at a clarification of philosophical problems. But Carnap was concerned by foundational problems.²⁹ Wittgenstein, on the contrary, dismissed all foundational questions in philosophy (especially in the theory of knowledge and in the philosophy of mathematics).³⁰ Philosophy was for him a kind of anti-mythology, a 'Form der Betrachtung' of contemporary culture and of philosophy in particular. In his book *Wittgenstein, la rime et la raison*,³¹ Bouveresse shows the dual attitude which Wittgenstein had about the myths: on the one hand, he was a typical *Aufklärer*, willing to denounce the illusions of mankind and every form of mythology and of religion, and on the other hand he was deeply convinced that mythologies are inevitable. He was, says Bouveresse, a militant rationalist with an acute consciousness of the limits of rationality.³² This formula can be applied to Bouveresse himself, who, when he defends analytical philosophy, does not defend certain theses and doctrines, but a certain style of thought, which he finds generally absent in contemporary French philosophy. For instance, Bouveresse's master work, *Le mythe de l'intériorité*, which is a commentary and exegesis of Wittgenstein's thoughts on subjectivity and private experience, can also be read as the demonstration of what can be done in philosophy when one leaves the realm of 'pure subjectivity' and of 'the phenomenological ego' which has been the centre of the phenomenological tradition. As Bouveresse points out, many current themes in present day thinking (for instance many *leitmotifs* of the post-structuralist philosophers) were anticipated by Wittgenstein. But Bouveresse suggests that these ideas lose most of their strength when they are not the product of a certain style of thought, with a sense of

²⁸ *La parole malheureuse* (Minuit, 1971), 12.

²⁹ See Joëlle Proust, *Questions de forme*, op. cit. sec. IV.

³⁰ Cf. Jacques Bouveresse, 'La philosophie et les fondements', *Archives de philosophie* 43, No. 1 (1980), 1-32.

³¹ Minuit, 1973.

³² *Ibid.*, 228 seq.

Contemporary French Analytical Philosophy

what Wittgenstein called 'real philosophical problems'. But what are 'real philosophical problems'? This is the kind of phrase which has been considered with much irony and sarcasm by the dominant trend of contemporary philosophy. Bouveresse's last two books (see above §1) are precisely devoted to an elucidation of the reasons and the causes of this particular situation.

I shall not detail here the particular arguments of these books, which do not deal with analytical philosophy as such, although they certainly deal, interestingly enough, with certain antitheses of analytical philosophy, as I have indicated above. Bouveresse's main purpose, in these books, is to discuss some contemporary philosophical varieties of irrationalism, relativism and scepticism, and to defend against them the rights of a rationalistic attitude. An interesting feature of Bouveresse's discussion is that he does not deal only with French versions of these doctrines, but also, so to say, with their Anglo-American counterparts. For instance, Bouveresse compares certain themes in Lyotard's thought with certain themes of Feyerabend; he points out similarities between Derrida and Rorty, etc. Relativism and irrationalism are not the apanage of the French.

Richard Rorty has recently claimed that analytical philosophy, which he sees—rightly, in my opinion—as an heir of classical philosophy, has itself come to its end, and has to be replaced by a 'post-analytical philosophy'. The prefix 'post', which Rorty uses with many writers today (for instance Lyotard speaks about a 'post-modern' thought) means that Philosophy (with a capital P), conceived as an inquiry about the nature of Truth, Reality, Knowledge, or Goodness, is a declining, and maybe dead enterprise. It has been already replaced, and at least should be replaced, by a more modest kind of inquiry, which leaves out these traditional platonic questions. For Rorty, there is no such thing as Truth or Rationality. 'True' and 'rational' are just the names which we give to the doctrines which we happen to approve, and express the norms of our inquiry at a certain moment. This 'pragmatist' attitude, according to Rorty, is already present in the work of some leading analytical philosophers, such as Quine, Davidson, and Sellars. And Rorty is not afraid of coupling those names with those of Foucault, Derrida, to enrol them all under his banner.³³

The question whether Rorty is right in bringing together those names can be left to the reader as an exercise. But it is certainly true that Rorty's reasoning about the coming of a new age, in which Philosophical questions will be withdrawn and replaced by philosophical (with a

³³ See in particular R. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Brighton: Harvester, 1982), and Bouveresse's discussion in *La philosophie chez les auto-phages*, conclusion.

small p) questions, where notions such as truth and rationality will have a different meaning, looks very much like the reasoning of philosophers like Derrida, who always speak about the coming of a new era, when classical philosophical questions will be left over, an era which has in some sense already begun. As Bouveresse rightly points out, it is one of the favourite arguments of the irrationalists, that the meaning of 'rationality' is not fixed, and that there is no real criterion of what rationality is, apart from the criterion which we accept at a certain moment or age. But from the fact that there are various criteria of rationality, it does not follow that there is no rationality or that this word is devoid of any meaning. As Bouveresse remarks, quoting Wittgenstein, the fact that certain conceptions of rationality are untenable does not show that rationality itself is untenable. It leaves everything just as it is.³⁴

According to Rorty, truth amounts just to 'rational acceptability' for a given community, and there is no independent point of view from which we could assess the truth of our theories of the world, or their correspondence to an independent reality. Rorty rejects not only the traditional realist conception of truth, but also the conception which has been put forward by Peirce and taken up by Popper, according to which truth is rational acceptability at the ideal limit of scientific inquiry. Rorty claims that he has no idea what the 'end of scientific inquiry' would be like, and that nobody has any idea of it either.³⁵ But, as Bouveresse remarks, why should we have any precise idea of a situation which is a regulative ideal, or a necessary presupposition of our inquiry? This seems to involve a confusion between rationality as a fact and rationality as a norm.³⁶

Does Bouveresse himself hold the realist conception of truth? It is sometimes difficult, in his writings, to discern exactly what kind of conception he defends, on this topic and on others. This is due to the fact that he very often defends a certain style of thinking, more than particular theses. As a Wittgensteinian, he has a natural suspicion of philosophical theories. But we may get some hints from a paper which he wrote on Dummett and Frege.³⁷ According to the realist, there is an independent reality, which 'makes true' our statements about the world. But it would be a mistake to think that this reality could be

³⁴ *Raionalité et cynisme*, 120–124.

³⁵ See for instance his 'Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth', in E. Le Pore (ed.), *Truth and Interpretation, Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson* (Blackwell, 1986).

³⁶ *Rationalité et cynisme*, 140.

³⁷ 'Frege, Dummett et la "nouvelle querelle du réalisme"', *Critique* (Oct. 1980), 881–896.

determined independently of our language and thought, for this reality is the projection of our 'grammar'. But to conclude that it is *nothing but* a mere reflection of our grammar would be a mistake. We still need the notion of an independent reality. But this reality is nothing which we could assess. It is a transcendental presupposition of our linguistic practice and of our knowledge. Wittgenstein, in this sense, is a 'transcendental anti-realist'.³⁸

7. Does Analytical Philosophy Need a Transcendental Turn?

It seems, then, that, for Bouveresse, we can avail ourselves of some sort of transcendental philosophy. There are, of course, various interpretations of what a transcendental philosophy is or can be. We have seen for instance how Francis Jacques interpreted the critical question within his philosophy of dialogue. Wittgenstein's transcendental anti-realism (if Bouveresse is right in his interpretation) is certainly very different.³⁹ The fact that many writers about analytical philosophy in France find it necessary to interpret their own position in the light of transcendental arguments is not at all surprising, given the strong influence of German idealism in that country. It is, of course, even truer of contemporary German philosophy.

We are reaching here a fundamental question: is analytical philosophy at bottom a variety of transcendental philosophy? However, I cannot examine this question here.⁴⁰ But I want to emphasize two points. First, there has been no discussion among French analytical

³⁸ Op. cit., 896. Bouveresse follows here J. McDowell, 'Antirealism and the Epistemology of Understanding', in H. Parret and J. Bouveresse (eds), *Meaning and Understanding* (Berlin; De Gruyter, 1981).

³⁹ The question whether Wittgenstein's philosophy can be interpreted as a transcendental philosophy has been much debated. For a recent account, see J. Lear, 'Leaving the World Alone', *Journal of Philosophy*, LXXIX, No. 7, (July 1982), 382-403.

⁴⁰ Vincent Descombes has given an interpretation of Wittgenstein notion of 'grammar' according to which the transcendental question in philosophy amounts to the study of the transcendental (in the medieval sense) or trans-categorical notions, such as being, truth, or goodness. His analysis has many affinities with Zaslavsky's. See his book, *Grammaire d'objets en tous genres* (Minuit, 1983), translated as *Objects of all Sorts* (Blackwell, 1986). I have not commented on Descombes' book because it is more a critique of contemporary French philosophy from the point of view of certain (reinterpreted) insights borrowed from analytical philosophy than a contribution to analytical philosophy. See my review of this book, 'Des nuages de philosophie dans des gouttes de grammaire', *Critique*, 451 (Dec. 1984), 954-983.

philosophers about the precise nature and validity of transcendental arguments, that is, about arguments which proceed from the fact that a given proposition p is known to be true, to the fact that there is a universal, necessary, condition for our knowing p to be true. On the other hand, transcendental arguments have been much questioned among Anglo-American analytical philosophers. Second, there is a dominant trend in analytical philosophy, of which Quine is the most famous representative, according to which there is no 'first philosophy', no point of view from which we could formulate, outside our experience, any *a priori* or necessary condition for this experience. On this view there are no transcendental questions, and philosophy has no specific subject matter which could be distinguished from the subject matter of scientific inquiries. A striking fact about most of the philosophers I have talked about is that they are all very reluctant to accept this position. I do not mean to imply that they are wrong, but that there is a different way to defend realism and rationalism than from a critical and transcendental perspective. It is to accept a version of scientific realism, a position which, despite its shortcomings, seems to me to make perfectly good sense. This position has been defended recently by Pierre Jacob, a French philosopher who has made interesting contributions to analytical philosophy.⁴¹ Pierre Jacob wants to defend the traditional distinction between the truth of a statement and our reasons for holding this statement true: a statement can be false even when we have the best reasons to hold it true. Like Bouveresse, Jacob criticizes Rorty's identification of truth and rational acceptability. He points out that Rorty's mistake is to infer, from the fact that there can be many correspondence relations between a language and the world, that there is no correspondence at all, and therefore nothing for a language to be true of. Jacob remarks also that the version of realism according to which our theories of the world can be true (or false) at the ideal limit of human scientific inquiry, encounters the same difficulty as the crude version of realism, according to which our scientific theories are just true or false: in both cases we encounter the idea of an unconceptualized reality independent of the human mind. If one, therefore, wants to deny the existence of such an independent reality then he will have to admit that truth collapses into rational acceptability. But, as Jacob remarks, the idea of

⁴¹ See his book mentioned in note 3 above. See also P. Jacob (ed.), *De Vienne à Cambridge, l'héritage du positivisme logique* (Gallimard, 1981) (a translation and edition on positivist and post-positivist philosophy of science). See also his papers 'Réalisme et vérité', *Fundamenta Scientiae*, 3/4, (1983); 'Le rationalisme peut-il être déductif?', *Le temps de la réflexion*, 5 (1984), and especially 'Is there a path halfway between realism and verificationism?', to be published in *Synthese*. Pierre Jacob has also written on the philosophy of mind and psychology.

Contemporary French Analytical Philosophy

an independent reality makes sense. For instance according to the essentialist doctrine as it has been revived by some analytical philosophers, there can be essential properties of things, independent of our knowledge of them, and which science can investigate.⁴²

These arguments, of course, should be examined with much more scrutiny than I can attempt here. But if they are correct, the 'transcendental turn' which many Continental philosophers are willing to take is by no means imposed on us.

8. A Modest Proposal

I have tried to show that, despite the fact that there is much interesting work done by analytically minded French philosophers, there is at present nothing which can really be called 'French analytical philosophy'. Writing about analytical philosophy is one thing, practising it is another thing. The French context lacks the cohesion, the sense of a community of problems and of techniques which analytical philosophy has in other countries. It would be preposterous, however to expect that analytical philosophy could have in France the same diversity and the same institutional strength as in England or in America. I do not know whether it even possible or desirable, if it amounts to the suggestion that a certain tradition can be 'imported' from the outside into another tradition. It may well be that the best way to promote analytical philosophy in France is not to try to practise according to the canons and methods of the analytical tradition in other countries, but to try to revive those parts of the French tradition in philosophy which can best harmonize with it. For instance I have often heard analytical philosophers express the opinion that Descartes, Malebranche, or Arnauld were just analytical philosophers, by their own standards. We might then express the hope that, if French philosophy happened to renew, not the doctrines, but the style of its rationalist tradition, we could say, as Hilary Putnam, that there is no analytical philosophy, but just good philosophy.

⁴² e.g. Kripke.