

Philosophical Rift: A Tale of Two Approaches

By RICHARD BERNSTEIN

Special to The New York Times

Charles Sherover, who teaches philosophy at Hunter College, speaks in a sort of paradox about certain other philosophers. All too often, he says, those who were accepted into the ranks of the philosophers in America were not what he calls "philosophically inclined."

"You're much more likely to find philosophically inclined people outside of philosophy," Professor Sherover said, "because if you are philosophically inclined, you've probably been excluded."

Dr. Sherover's paradox, vehemently rejected by his targets, well reflects an argument taking place among American philosophers, sowing discord within the ranks of the 6,000 or so members of the American Philosophical Association, a group that rarely makes headlines but is, presumably, engaged in the task of examining the very foundations of Western thought.

Some philosophers like Professor Sherover, already organized into a group whose members call themselves pluralists, met in Cambridge, Mass., last month and formed a new organization, The Society of Philosophers in America, to combat what they believe is the control over the field exercised by what they see as a highly technical subspeciality, the Anglo-American analytical school.

Bogged Down in Logic

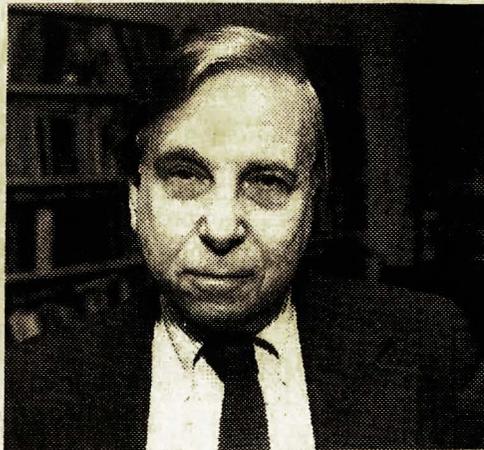
Underlying the pluralists' activities is the belief that philosophy, bogged down in a stress on logic, language, and empirical data, has lost its vocation of addressing the big questions asked by perplexed mankind: what is being? Is reality what our senses perceive? Does the universe have purpose?

Instead, the pluralists maintain, philosophy has come to mimic the sciences, striving to attain new clarity over what the big questions mean, with the result that philosophy has departed from the informed speculation that gave it its appeal over the centuries.

The analysts themselves not only disagree with this conclusion, but some dismiss the way the pluralists pose the problem. They deny, for example, that there is even such a thing these days as

Charles Sherover
Hunter College

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Ruth Barcan Marcus
Yale University

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an analytic school, and they claim that their own work, even if sometimes highly technical, marks a continuation of more than 2,000 years of rigorous philosophical reflection.

The dispute among philosophers is not the sort of thing that heats up public emotions, although it echoes disputes in other fields. Economics is one example where higher and higher degrees of specialization have alienated members of the public and some specialists as well.

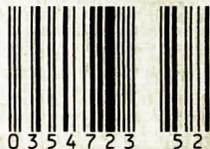
Philosophy, moreover, even if no longer followed as avidly by non-philosophers as it was in centuries past, does provide the foundation of many other disciplines, establishing grounds for judging ethical principles and claims to know the truth.

In this sense, underlying the position of Dr. Sherover and his allies is their concern, rejected by their opponents, that philosophy has drifted from the center of intellectual life to a technical periphery, with the result that Western civilization has been impoverished.

"The problem arises when it comes down to saying that a certain way of doing philosophy is the only way, and if you don't do it that way you don't do it

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at all," John E. Smith, a professor at Yale and a Sherover ally, said of what he views as the analysts' domination of the field.

"Tillich," Professor Smith went on, referring to Paul Tillich, the theologian, "said that you can put up no trespassing signs, but that doesn't stop people from trying to answer the great questions in any way they can." In short, Professor Smith is saying, if the philosophers fail to do philosophy, others, perhaps untrained in the major traditions, will. "People are going to look for answers whether the analysts like it or not."

Attempt to Restore Legitimacy

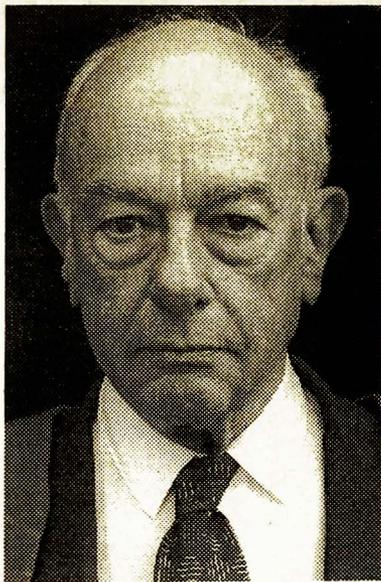
The pluralists' meeting in Cambridge last month marked a new step in a quarrel that has been marinating for nearly a decade, ever since they founded their first organization, known as the Committee for Pluralism in Philosophy in the late 1970's. Their purpose, as they explain it, was not to create a new orthodoxy, but merely to restore legitimacy to the several schools of thought obscured by what they regarded as the analysts' domination of the major academic departments.

But, the argument pitting the pluralists against the analysts goes back much further, at least until early this century when philosophy took a major turning, originally in Vienna. That is where the school of logical positivism, the ancestor of the Anglo-American analytical school took form. The new line of thought, originated and developed by the likes of Rudolph Carnap, Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and centered eventually in England, put a stress on logic and the methods of science, dismissing earlier philosophy as portentous verbiage.

Metaphysics Is Attacked

This group held that the age-old metaphysical questions were meaningless, since an analysis of the language used to frame them showed them to be nonsensical. Earlier philosophers' statements about ethics and morality, for example, were only expressions of the philosophers' emotions or opinions; they had no grounding in logic or empirical fact. In other words, metaphysics, which had been the philosophical motor for two millennia, was meaningless.

"What the analysts said really was that the classical questions of philosophy were really questions about language," Arthur Danto, a professor of philosophy at Columbia University, said. "The idea was that there was a frontier that you could drive back by an



Camera Press

Willard Van Orman Quine, considered by many to be the titan of American philosophy. His answer to the metaphysical question of the definition of being: "To be is to be the value of a bound variable."

ever more refined linguistic analysis."

A recent issue of Harvard Magazine gave an example of this sort of thing drawn from Willard Van Orman Quine, considered by many to be the current titan of American philosophy. The question was one of the big ones in metaphysics — the definition of being. Professor Quine's Anglo-American analytical answer: "To be is to be the value of a bound variable" — a difficult concept to explain briefly.

Disdained as Airy and Fuzzy

Professor Smith, Professor Sherover, and others dismiss this sort of thing as a bright but empty game played by the dreaded SMAG, the Singleminded Analytical Group, and they promote a return to the more freewheeling, literary traditions of Europe, where Nietzsche, Heidegger and Sartre provided a more soulful alternative to the analysts' brainy but dry logic. Many of the anti-analysts refer to themselves as Continentals. They in turn are disdained by some of the analysts as fuzzy, airy, ignorant of the empirical data, and more attached to feeling than to thought.

But here it becomes complicated, in particular because some philosophers dismiss the idea that there is a genuine intellectual quarrel taking place, or even that pluralists' definition of the

issue is accurate. At Yale, for example, Ruth Barcan Marcus, cited by many of the pluralists as a major champion of the analytic school, denies that hardcore analysts exist these days, or that the philosophical establishment has ceased asking the big questions.

"It's not just fake history, it isn't even history," she said, speaking of the pluralists' version of philosophy's changes. "The tradition up to Kant was analytical. It was one of addressing questions in a careful way and giving reasons for one's point of view."

"There was also a close connection between philosophy and science," she said, dismissing a common pluralists' charge that the analysts, whether they exist as a category or not, pretentiously mimic the sciences. "Plato's Academy bore the inscription: 'Those who have not studied mathematics shall not enter here.' Leibnitz invented the calculus. Spinoza wrote up his Ethics like geometry. Nobody is more analytical than Descartes. They had tremendously high standards of clarity and a healthy regard for good reasons."

Who Are the Nitpickers?

What's more, Professor Marcus went on, the pluralists are beating a straw horse, because, while logical positivism, with its stress on the meaning of words, may have had its day and still exerts its clarifying influence, the analytical approach itself has become far more multifaceted than before. The pluralists complain of dry, empty nitpicking, she said, but they cannot identify any of the nitpickers by name because they do not exist.

"I'll tell you what the issue is," she said. "There are some people whose notion about philosophy is that it is something that you do. There's some issue — knowledge, truth, the meaning of good — and they try to answer philosophical questions about it. Then there

Has philosophy become bogged down in language and logic?

are a whole lot of other people who write about other philosophers, who interpret their work. A lot of the people who call themselves pluralists are interested in studying other people's work."

Professor Marcus's point is that the prestige departments — such as those at Berkeley, Harvard and Princeton — hired from the group that "does philosophy" leaving the resentful others on the sidelines, from where they have mounted a political counter attack.

Indeed, one result of the dispute is that philosophers group themselves behind their favored candidates for office in the American Philosophical Association, which is holding its annual meeting in New York this week. When caucusing and voting is not taking place, there is still time to discuss such weighty matters as epistemology in the age of neurosurgery and conceptions of causality.

The pluralists, by good organizing have, since 1980, gotten some of their candidates elected to the presidency of the association and this has led to some complaints about sheer numerical majorities dominating the profession rather than standards of scholarly excellence. The pluralists, however, are unrepentant.

"The feeling was," Professor Sherover said, "that analytical philosophy had taken control of philosophy and the only way to counter that was by a political counter-offensive."