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Philosophical History and the Problem of Consciousness

The problem of explaining consciousness today remains a problem about the meaning of language: the ordinary language of consciousness in which we define and express our sensations, thoughts, dreams, and memories. This book argues that the contemporary problem arises from a quest that has taken shape over the twentieth century, and that the analysis of history provides new resources for understanding and resolving it.

Paul Livingston traces the development of the characteristic practices of analytic philosophy to problems about the relationship between experience and linguistic meaning, focusing on the theories of such philosophers as Carnap, Schlick, Neurath, Husserl, Ryle, Putnam, Fodor, and Wittgenstein.

Clearly written and avoiding technicalities, this book will be eagerly sought out by professionals and graduate students in philosophy and cognitive science.

Paul M. Livingston is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Villanova University.

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
1 Introduction: Philosophical History and the Problem of Consciousness	1
2 Structuralism and Content in the Protocol Sentence Debate	29
3 Husserl and Schlick on the Logical Form of Experience	77
4 Ryle on Sensation and the Origin of the Identity Theory	111
5 Functionalism and Logical Analysis	151
6 Consciousness, Language, and the Opening of Philosophical Critique	195
<i>Notes</i>	237
<i>Works Cited</i>	263
<i>Index</i>	273

Preface

The following is an interpretive investigation in the history of analytic philosophy. With it, I hope to begin to show what sort of significance the twentieth-century analytic inquiry into the nature of mind, experience, and consciousness has had for the continuing philosophical consideration of the human self-image. I argue that the contemporary debate about the explanation of consciousness, in particular, embodies an important and unresolved set of concerns about this self-image, and that historical investigation allows us to understand the hitherto obscure ways in which the analytic tradition has been defined by its responses to the distinctive philosophical problems of our understanding of ourselves.

Throughout this inquiry, I have adhered to the methodological assumption that the power of philosophy to yield means and methods of understanding that elucidate and edify – its way of making meaning out of the unthought foundations of our ordinary lives – depends, at each specific historical moment, on its way of imaging or imagining the human, of articulating the specific kind of being that human existence involves. In the broader history of philosophy, however, the greatest enduring significance of this articulation has probably not been its theoretical specification, once and for all, of some fixed truth of human nature, but rather its furtherance of the dialectic of our self-understanding, the interminable historical movement in which each successive image of the human defines the means and practices of thought that will ensure its own partial overcoming.

Descartes' consideration of the thinking subject as *res cogitans* articulates one such image, inaugurating the modern inquiry into conscious experience and making room for the conception of experimental science that continues to structure our understanding of nature to the present. Kant's philosophy of transcendental subjectivity, another image of the human, inaugurated the forms and methods of self-critique and social criticism that would be extended and radicalized, with precipitous consequences, by Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche. In the twentieth century, Freud's discovery of the unconscious made possible a whole new set of interpretive methods and techniques for bringing us, through the speaking of our memory, to the truth of ourselves. The outcomes of these practices of self-conception are so many ways of envisioning the specific character of our complicated way of life, so many ways of understanding what it is to think, to act, to relate to one another in human community.

The analytic tradition of philosophy founded by Frege, Russell, Moore, and Wittgenstein and still definitive of much of the practice of philosophy in the Anglo-American world has sometimes seemed to disclaim any specific consideration of subjectivity in its determinative focus on language. And it is true that the decisive turn of twentieth-century philosophy toward intersubjective language – a turn as deeply definitive of what is called the twentieth-century “continental” tradition as it is of the analytic one – separates its heirs categorically and irreversibly from any philosophy that founds itself on the egoistic selfhood of a wordless and mute subject of experience. But as I argue in this work, historical interpretation can actually reveal the turn toward language, capturing in each of its methods of philosophical illumination the unique insight that our ways of understanding and defining ourselves are ineliminably and decisively linguistic, as defining the most sophisticated and sustained inquiry into our own nature that is today available to us.

The historical analysis conducted here has direct consequences for the discussion of the problem of explaining consciousness that has emerged and developed over the last two decades. Interpreted against the backdrop of the history of linguistic methods of philosophical understanding, this debate, in itself one of the most interesting areas of contemporary analytic philosophy, bears witness to the endurance and relevance of our ongoing inquiry into the human self-image. Historical

reflection on the deep roots of the current debate in the specifically linguistic practices of analysis and investigation characteristic of the analytic tradition points the way for the questions and issues of self-understanding that have in fact organized the contemporary discussion to be recovered for it explicitly. This recovery of the forgotten origins of the contemporary discussion reveals the real philosophical issues that have determined it, pointing the way to a more self-conscious form of the discussion that does not, indeed, offer any final or definitive “explanation” of consciousness but nevertheless, by showing what is really at issue, can bring the debate to substantial resolution.

Analytic philosophy characteristically and definitively develops and practices methods of philosophical insight that operate by furthering our understanding of the meaning of language – of (among other things) what *we* mean when we make the claims and issue the expressions that define us to ourselves and others, and of the significance for our human form of life of the fact that language definitively mediates this self-understanding. The history of its methods, from the earliest conceptions of “logical analysis” to today’s more flexible and multiple explanatory practices, reveals the decisive significance of specifically linguistic inquiry for the kinds of understanding of ourselves that we seek from philosophy. Accordingly, the four studies that comprise the body of this work focus on important moments of theoretical development and change in the history of analytic philosophy, moments at which issues about experience and consciousness have caused trouble for existing analytic programs and methods and led to the invention of new ones.

Though the case studies collectively aim to give a revealing and characteristic portrait of the struggles and tensions underlying some of the most significant projects of analytic philosophy, they make no attempt to provide a comprehensive or exhaustive history of the tradition. Instead, they look for insight into the contours of analytic philosophy generally by focusing on the moments most decisive in creating its characteristic methods and practices. For this reason, I have given a great deal of attention to some figures whose views are today rarely explicitly examined, but I have sometimes devoted little space even to the philosophers whose work has most visibly contributed to the contemporary debate.

The great and decisive contribution of Wittgenstein, moreover, I have mostly discussed only at one remove, by discussing the generally more systematic positions of two of the philosophers who were most deeply influenced by him, Schlick and Ryle. The decision to treat Wittgenstein's work here primarily in this insulated way reflects the continuing complexity of the question of his reception within the tradition of analytic philosophy – a question that, I believe, calls on the deepest insights of historical and methodological reflection to define, over the next several decades, successor methods of linguistic insight and interpretation that integrate his conception of philosophy with the further critical inheritance of the analytic tradition. But the determinative role of Wittgenstein's ideas in bringing about the history related here should nonetheless be apparent to anyone who understands his work. I have also devoted substantial attention, in Chapter 2, to a philosophical program that is not generally considered part of the analytic tradition, Edmund Husserl's phenomenology. My aim in that chapter is to shed light on the development of analytic philosophy by considering its historically decisive divergence from one of its closest and most important programmatic competitors in the investigation of the self. The investigation undertaken there exemplifies a kind of reflection on the historical and conceptual boundaries of analytic philosophy as a specific tradition that can, I think, illuminate its deepest conceptual determinants.

The investigations to follow do not confine themselves to what is today defined as “philosophy of mind” (and still less to one side of the currently fashionable distinction, within philosophy of mind, of the “philosophy of consciousness” from the analysis of intentionality), but they necessarily involve, just as centrally, issues in the philosophy of science, epistemology, logic, and metaphysics. Indeed, one of the chief results of the investigation as a whole is that the characteristic means and methods of analytic philosophy in its consideration of consciousness and experience remain, to this day, determinatively grounded in philosophy of *language* – that is, in determinate conceptions of the nature of language and the practice of the illumination of linguistic meaning – even when they superficially seem to have departed from it.

Beyond its revelation of the deep and often obscured unity of the practice of analytic inquiry into experience in its underlying

dependence on, and determination by, specifically linguistic means of investigation, the yield of the historical investigation is the methodological self-awareness that could allow the analytic tradition to understand and articulate its own most significant contribution to philosophical history. In particular, the methods and practices of analytic philosophy, typically and definitively linguistic in their orientation and practice, have, I argue in what follows, repeatedly encountered significant and revealing difficulties in their attempts to understand the *language of experience*, the ordinary language with which we articulate and define our own memory, our consciousness of ourselves, and our particular understanding of the world. The historical investigation shows that, over the course of the twentieth century, the philosophical struggle for the intelligibility of this language has taken the form of a struggle of the means and methods of linguistic analysis and interpretation against theories of language and meaning that threaten to make this intelligibility impossible, to reduce or deny the kind of truth that the language of consciousness brings to expression.

In the history I examine here, analytic philosophers have repeatedly supposed that their method demands what I call a *structuralist* picture of language, a picture according to which the essence of language is its total, comprehensive logical or conceptual structure and according to which the analysis of language is the location of terms and propositions within this structure. Though philosophers throughout the history of the tradition have voiced dissatisfaction with the structuralist picture, it remains deeply characteristic of the projects and methods of analytic philosophers even today. But the assumption of the structuralist picture has also repeatedly and determinatively, I argue here, threatened to render the language of consciousness unintelligible, obscuring the kind of contribution that the methods of linguistic analysis and interpretation otherwise definitive of the analytic tradition can in fact make to our understanding of ourselves.

This struggle between theory and method has determined, I argue, a consistent theoretical oscillation between totalizing structuralist theories of language and the world and the repeated complaint that consciousness escapes or resists them, a dialectic struggle that has not only frustrated analytic philosophy's hopes for a comprehensive theory of consciousness but also driven some of its most significant methodological innovations. The dialectic continues, and perhaps culminates, in

the contemporary debate about the explainability of consciousness, where the comprehensiveness of physicalist and functionalist forms of explanation, themselves direct descendents of the conceptions of language and meaning that oriented some of the first projects of the analytic tradition, encounters significant but inarticulate resistance from the thought that consciousness cannot be explained in these terms. Historical interpretation provides the basis on which this debate and its predecessors alike can be understood in their real underlying methodological character, paving the way for the means and methods of specifically linguistic analysis and inquiry to produce the kind of understanding of ourselves that the contemporary debate unself-consciously and obscurely seeks.

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