

## JOHN HOSPERS AND THE ACTIVITY OF PHILOSOPHY

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In the preface of the recently published third edition of his *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis* John Hospers notes that he concurs with Moritz Schlick's observation that philosophy "is less a subject matter than an activity." In other words, philosophy is to be understood more in terms of its search for the truth than any particular set of questions for which it seeks to provide answers. To those familiar with John Hospers' own philosophical works, there can be no doubt that Hospers is as much, if not more, concerned with the search for truth than its possession. His works bear witness to this understanding of philosophy. They convey a sense of ongoing activity.

This is not to say that one does not find in John Hospers' philosophical articles and books serious discussions of such traditional philosophical topics as, for example, the nature of mind, human freedom, truth, goodness, beauty, and the material world. Rather, it is to say that Hospers would before ever addressing these questions warn his reader that one should be careful of the expression "nature of." He would warn his audience that even the simple "What is...?" expression is wrought with ambiguities and that one should be careful not to assume that the sort of answer that works in answering one instance of this question will work in others. The same warning would go for the "What is the meaning of...?" expression and would be accompanied with the importance of distinguishing between process and product, type and token. He would also, I should note, even ask what it means to say "an answer to a question works"! John Hospers is after all what some people have called an "analytic" philosopher.

What it means to be an "analytic" philosopher is a matter of philosophical controversy, for there are many ways of doing philosophy that are covered by this label: logical atomism's creation of an ideal language to handle philosophical problems; logical

positivism's attempt to eliminate metaphysics and enshrine science by use of the principle of verifiability, and ordinary language philosophy with its many variations and use of paradigm case arguments. Moreover, the influential figure of Ludwig Wittgenstein casts a long shadow over all these procedures; for both his early and later writings remain in certain ways an enigma. Labeling John Hospers an "analytic" philosopher is, then, as problematic as speaking of the "nature of" something.

Certainly, it can be said that the logical, linguistic, and empirical dimensions of a philosophical problem are of extreme importance to an "analytic" philosopher, but what saying this actually amounts to is difficult to determine. It seems that anyone who does philosophy—be they existentialist, Thomist, or even Platonist—must pay some attention to these dimensions. Yet, it seems with those philosophers who have been called "analytic" there is a conviction that close attention to logic, language, and sense perception will pay dividends when it comes to dealing with philosophy's traditional questions. It's not that any particular view of logic, language, and sense perception is necessarily involved or even that one is somehow committed to avoiding what is sometimes called "metaphysical speculation." No, it is the belief that *before* philosophers make any pronouncements regarding "what is" these dimensions must be fully considered. There is, then, no single common feature "analytic" philosophers share; rather, there is, at best, a family resemblance among those who share this label. The resemblance pertains to how they philosophize, not to what they claim to be true.

To the reader of all three editions (1953, 1967, and 1988) of John Hospers' *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis* one will find an approach to philosophizing that can only be characterized as "analytic." Though the subsequent editions of this work were in each instance substantially rewritten, there remains in each edition an approach to philosophy that seems to be a continuation of the methods and techniques of such twentieth century "analytic" philosophers as G. E. Moore, John Austin, and Gilbert Ryle. Conceptual analysis, the close attention to the meaning of words, is the hallmark of John Hospers' writings. One need only consult, for example, his discussion of freedom and determinism in the 1988 edition to see this technique. Here is an "analytic" philosopher at work.

According to a *New York Times* (December 21, 1987) article, "Philosophical Rift: A Tale of Two Approaches," "analytic" philosophy is under attack. It seems that there are not a small number of contemporary philosophers who believe that philosophy has become "bogged down in a stress on logic, language, and empirical data" and has lost site of its traditional function—namely, "addressing the big questions asked by perplexed mankind: what is being? Is reality what our senses perceive? Does the universe have purpose?" In other words, these philosophers, called "pluralists," have become impatient

with the highly technical and often painstaking philosophical techniques of "analytic" philosophy. They seek "a return to the more freewheeling, literary traditions of Europe, where Nietzsche, Heidegger and Sartre provided a more soulful alternative to the analysts' brainy dry logic."

Though this complaint did have merit when Anglo-American philosophy was under the sway of logical positivism, though there is at present a profound need for a reexamination of the assumptions that gave rise to Frege's and Russell's "realism" regarding logic's forms and relations and which, in turn, continue to provide the necessary foil for Quine's "nominalism" and ontological relativism, and though there is a sense in which the later Wittgenstein's philosophy is a "transcendental linguisticism" that can be used to "deconstruct" philosophy and thus should be rejected, this complaint seems nonetheless to be off the mark. It is off the mark if it assumes that one must "swim the English Channel" and consult the works of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre in order to address the central questions of philosophy. It is also off the mark precisely because there are "analytic" philosophers like John Hospers. Hospers has always dealt with the "big questions" that have perplexed mankind. He would be the last to say that he has found the answers, but he has continuously dealt with these questions. He has always dealt with the questions in a careful, thoughtful, and respectful way.

It should, of course, be readily admitted that to those who seek an integrated vision of reality, something which puts all the pieces together, Hospers' writings will be a disappointment. It does not seem, however, that Hospers lacks an integrated world view because he thinks that there can be no such thing. Rather, it seems that Hospers has just not found one and is intellectually honest enough to leave it at that. It also may just be that what an integrated world view is is much different than has so far been conceived. Finally, it should be remembered that such a world view—let's call it by its classic name, metaphysics—need not be construed in some rationalistic way. Aristotle did note, after all, that there are many senses in which something may be said to "be" and that we should not try to offer some definition of "being."

To those, however, who want to have some idea of what is being talked about when one asks a "big question," then Hospers' writings are a gold mine. They almost always help one to get a handle on the problem that is being addressed. Clarity may not be enough, but without it, there is no hope of wisdom. Further, it should not be assumed that Hospers' way of philosophizing is without its compensations. To the student who is willing to follow him through the process, Hospers states:

But if we persevere, we can gradually cut through the confusions and popular oversimplifications; and then the feeling of mastery we

experience will make it seem more than worth all the effort we put into it and all the frustrations we encountered along the way.

The master Hospers speaks of is not necessarily knowing the truth; rather, it is the realization that one has a clear idea of what is being discussed and that one knows how to examine the reasons that have been advanced for believing something. It must be remembered that philosophy is primarily an ongoing activity for Hospers.

Hospers is an "analytic" philosopher that has demonstrated throughout his philosophical career a capacity to consider points of view that have not always been favored by the philosophical establishment. The chief example of this is, of course, the thought of Ayn Rand. Though certainly attracted by her power as a writer, John Hospers was one of the first, if not *the* first, established philosopher to seriously consider what Ayn Rand had to say about philosophical issues. While a professor at Brooklyn College in New York, Hospers met Rand and had many conversations with her about philosophy. These conversations were long and fruitful to both. They helped to encourage Rand to write nonfiction. In all fairness it must, however, be said that openness and civility with which Hospers received Rand's ideas were not always reciprocated, and after Hospers publicly criticized some of Rand's views on aesthetics, their philosophical conversations ended.<sup>1</sup> This was tragic—tragic for Hospers because Rand was a thinker whose broad brush strokes could assist him in developing an integrated world view and tragic for Rand because Hospers' probing, wonderfully detailed strokes were just the sort of thing anyone who attempts grand syntheses should face.

Despite this rejection, Hospers remained interested in Rand's thought. As editor of *The Personalist*, he opened up its pages to discussions of Rand's philosophy. While always demanding only the best from its contributors and never letting these discussions dominate the journal, Hospers helped to bring into public view many aspects of Rand's philosophical thought—most prominently, the political philosophy of libertarianism. If one looks through the issues of *The Personalist* for the 1970s, one will find many philosophers who are today actively involved in an examination of libertarianism. Furthermore, it should not go unnoticed that John Hospers' systematic presentation of libertarianism, *Libertarianism: A Political Philosophy for Tomorrow*, was written in 1971. This was three years before Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. The intellectual and moral courage required to take these actions at that time should not be forgotten. Neither have they been without personal and professional cost to John Hospers.

Hospers' interest in libertarianism continues to this very day. The 1982 edition of his highly acclaimed ethics text, *Human Conduct*, devotes an entire chapter to the discussion of human rights, and while not offering a justification for the claim that people have rights,

Hospers helps to explain just what kind of moral claim a right is and offers many useful distinctions that will assist anyone who tries to defend the claim that human beings have rights. The 1988 edition of *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis* contains some interesting problems for libertarians to consider when it comes to understanding what "coercion" is and is not and what "property rights" involve and do not involve. Hospers is an expert at showing what the possible ramifications of holding a position are.

Any account of the philosophical activities of John Hospers must mention his work in aesthetics. His *Meaning and Truth in the Arts* was first published in 1946 and is considered a classic. He has authored numerous important works in aesthetics journals and in 1982 his *Understanding the Arts* was published. Hospers' many valuable contributions to aesthetics are considered in great detail elsewhere in this volume.

John Hospers was born June 9, 1918 in Pella, Iowa. He received his doctorate in philosophy from Columbia University in 1944. He was a Fulbright scholar in 1955 and has been a visiting professor at many distinguished universities. Before teaching at Brooklyn College, he spent eight years at the University of Minnesota. He has been a professor of philosophy at the University of Southern California since 1968 and was for many years director of the School of Philosophy and editor of *The Personalist*. He is currently the editor of *The Monist* and continues to teach his students with the same civility, grace, and expertise he has demonstrated throughout his career.

John Hospers is an "analytic" philosopher, and we are all the better for it. He has taught us, and still continues to teach us, the importance of that ongoing activity that is philosophy.

1. Barbara Branden, *The Passion of Ayn Rand* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1986) pp. 323-324.