
The Humbling of the Pride

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The Enlightenment Project in the Analytic Conversation, by Nicholas Capaldi. *Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998. xiv + 532 pp. \$176.*

Since some humanistic readers might be somewhat puzzled as to exactly what analytic philosophy is, it seems appropriate to begin this review with an illustrative image. If one imagines that the truth is like a big Water Buffalo, then analytic philosophers are sort of like a pride of lions hunting it down. And indeed the best hunters, the most clever among analytic philosophers, brought down a Water Buffalo at the beginning of the twentieth century. Unfortunately, what remains to us today are the scrawnier lions quarreling over the privilege of gnawing on a bit of bone, long since picked clean of anything digestible.

One might well call into question the hunt itself, as Capaldi does throughout the book, remarking that truth never was a Water Buffalo, but one might as well tell a lion to be an owl. Analytic philosophers are what they are, and the wise hu-

manist leaves them to their hunting. Their search is barbarous, but it is at least an honest barbarism, expressing the genuine nature of the beast.

Capaldi was trained by lions and hunted with them for a long time, bringing down a gazel or two along the way, but one suspects he was never a lion. For what sort of lion eats the kill and then thinks privately: "there is nothing of wisdom in this"? No true lion can have such a thought. To be a lion is to live in forgetfulness that truth is valued for its rumored ability to make one wise. Wisdom is not a word in the vocabulary of analytic philosophy. As Capaldi consistently points out, analytic philosophers have substituted scientific knowledge of a certain sort for wisdom, and allowed themselves to think that knowledge of the truth either automatically makes one wise or, if it does not,

wisdom is of no value. Lions will be lions, and when one gets them in a group, “pride” does indeed seem the aptest collective noun.

Following this image, Capaldi has written a huge book on how and why lions hunt. And this points up its main (perhaps its sole) weakness. Only people who are concerned about the habits of lions would have any reason to pursue the question. On the other hand, if one is not a lion and yet finds oneself surrounded by lions every day, one’s interest in reading such a work would be significantly heightened. Analytic philosophers being far more ubiquitous in everyday academia than lions in the wild, perhaps the book will find an audience. But the analytic philosophers themselves are no more likely to read it than actual lions would be.

Capaldi traces the hunting and feeding habits of analytic philosophy to the Enlightenment. “We propose to identify the origins, the original core of ideas, the development of those ideas, and assess analytic philosophy, and we shall do so by putting that movement in historical perspective” (1). Capaldi has thus resolved to remove the lions from the wild for closer study, for in their natural habitat analytic philosophers are almost as unhistorical in their form of consciousness as wildlife, rarely reading anything more than ten years old, feeling no obligation to incorporate the effort and learning of prior generations, reinventing the wheel rather shabbily every few years (a

point to which we shall return shortly). Capaldi characterizes this general outlook with the term “elimination,” which is “an explicit substitution of new ideas for old ideas . . . radical replacement through innovation” (2). It is part of a larger problem with “the Enlightenment Project,” the central topic of the book. Capaldi approaches this task with four major theses, each of which I will discuss in its turn.

The first major thesis is that the analytic tradition is a continuation of “the Enlightenment Project,” which is the “attempt to define, explain, deal with the human predicament through science” (2), akin to what Babbitt called “Baconianism.” This project is characterized by a certain conception of reason—the tendency to treat Reason, conceived scientifically (in the narrowest sense), as the autonomous arbiter of all truth and knowledge, “freed of any higher authority,” self-evident and self-justifying. Reason understood in this way is ahistorical, answering neither to context nor circumstance, and is understandably therefore antihumanist. Such a conception of reason has always had its critics, of course. Hume, with his merciless attack on “false philosophy” in his *Treatise*, upon which Capaldi has written previously, is a notable example. But the defenders of the conception of reason in question have no ears with which to hear this criticism, pointing up Capaldi’s second major thesis.

According to Capaldi, while “the Enlightenment Project has been the

dominant intellectual force in Western Civilization for the past two centuries," it has of late suffered "implosion" (2). The programs of analytic philosophers now are collapsing under their own weight. This is due at least in part to the way in which the sterile, ahistorical concept of reason adopted by the inheritors of the Enlightenment Project set for itself a goal that was unachievable: a purity of clear and distinct ideas untainted by the mess that is human history—scientific knowledge with no need of wisdom. Such an approach always presupposes the reality of an absolute criterion of truth, but then never can discover the criterion. In giving an account of this implosion, Capaldi follows the development of the Enlightenment Project through the analytic conversation in a number of areas—philosophy of science, metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of language, philosophical psychology, philosophy of social science, ethics, political philosophy, and the history of philosophy—all of which receive chapter-length treatments in the book.

Capaldi's third thesis is an argument as to "why the Enlightenment Project failed and must always fail" (2), based on the two historical stages through which it always passes: a positivistic stage characterized by reduction and "elimination" of old ideas by new ones, followed by a rejection of the new ideas in favor of "exploration," in which the lions go out hunting again. In exploration, the believers

in the Enlightenment Project examine other sciences that seem to be succeeding, and attempt to remodel philosophy on an analogy to that science (from clockmaking all the way to computer programming). Positivistic elimination is antiphilosophical, while anti-positivistic exploration is somewhat philosophical, but its practitioners quickly degenerate into factions who disagree upon which exploratory hypotheses are the best ones.

The generalized failure of the Enlightenment Project leads to widespread nihilism and relativism in post-analytic philosophy. Indeed, Capaldi sees much of what is called "postmodern" philosophy as the pessimistic reaction to the failure of the Enlightenment Project in the analytic conversation: had we been less vehemently modern, we might not need to be so vociferously post-modern now.

Finally Capaldi offers hope through his fourth thesis. He favors an alternative strategy he calls "explication" that treats all philosophical knowledge as connected with and arising from common life. To an explicator, all knowledge is normative and situated, is "always expressed in specific historical contexts" (6), and seeks to retrieve tradition for practical purposes in the present. This approach certainly has the earmarks of a value-centered historicism of the sort Claes Ryn advocates, and it is thoroughly humanistic.

Each of these four theses is defended and applied to the ten chap-

ters that constitute the main body of the book. Capaldi identifies the Enlightenment Project within each of the major subdisciplines of analytic philosophy, shows the development from elimination to exploration, and then shows where and how the failure occurred. He then offers constructive suggestions based on explication of the philosophical problems each discipline confronts. In each case the constructive approach involves reconnecting the problems to their histories as well as to their present context in common life. It is not possible within the scope of this review to trace Capaldi's application of these general theses in all of the areas of philosophy treated in the book. Yet, since the same basic framework is applied to each area, it is possible to get a fairly clear sense of what the author has done by examining a single chapter. For this purpose I have chosen the eleventh chapter on the analytic approach to the history of philosophy. One of the great strengths of this book is that any one of the ten chapters treating an area of analytic philosophy can be lifted from the book (along with the introduction) and used as an independent essay. Some critics might argue that each chapter proceeds on anecdotal evidence, and that an entire book would really be required to demonstrate Capaldi's thesis in any one of these areas of philosophy. But a more sober view of Capaldi's method would see it not as anecdotal, but as thoroughly researched for "representative" view-

points from the analytic tradition. Capaldi does not simply take overstatements and soft spots in the analytic tradition and use them to discredit the work of a century. He is careful to take the best representatives in each area, and to let them speak in their own words. It is true that Capaldi has a talent for catching analytic philosophers in moments of unwarranted generalization and overstatement, but these overstatements reveal their genuine assumptions.

For example, in his chapter on analytic philosophy and the history of philosophy, Capaldi argues that, to its great detriment, "analytic philosophers influenced by the Enlightenment Project deny the 'philosophical' importance of the history of philosophy" (393). This denial entails: (1) "the epistemological thesis that good explanations are not historical (i.e., temporal) accounts"; (2) "the denial of the metaphysical significance of time"; and (3) "the claim that, except in a limited pedagogical sense, the history of philosophy is irrelevant to the self-understanding" or "the practice of philosophy" (393). Analytic philosophers appeal to "a covering law model of explanation for all human action" (393), in which the presumed timeless regularity of the universe, properly articulated in logical or mathematical laws, gives them the permanent truth about things. In this light, Capaldi cites William Frankena saying "I can, if I have the right conceptual equipment, understand what the view is

without seeing it as the result of a historical development; and, so far as I can see, I can also assess its status as true or false, rational to believe without seeing it as such an outcome" (393). Frankena only says here explicitly what the lion's share of analytic philosophers believe so implicitly as to leave it unsaid. That this belief is patently absurd seems not to bother them consciously, but it haunts them in retrospect.

As Capaldi demonstrates, analytic philosophy cannot detach itself fully either from its own history or from historical consciousness in general, since it relies upon a model of the progressive growth of knowledge to justify its elimination procedure. Recalling that elimination is the continual replacement of old ideas with new ones, one might well ask "why would we do that?" The analytic answerer must either confess that there is no more reason to replace the old ideas with new ones than to do the reverse, or appeal to some notion of the progressive growth of knowledge through the adoption of scientific method. Naturally, it is the second option that analytic philosophers choose, which is why Thomas Kuhn's work was able to create such a stir. As Capaldi puts it, Kuhn's scholarship showed that

The analytic movement had formed its conception of the growth of scientific knowledge in ignorance of the actual history of science. When the study of the the history of science failed to conform to the analytic model, many analytic philosophers stub-

bornly held on to their preconceptions. One even heard it said that the scientific community had failed to embody fully the scientific method! Holding on to the analytic preconception in the face of such anomalies ironically seems to exemplify Kuhn's views on how paradigms operate, only this time in philosophical thinking (61).

In spite of this ironic bit of confirmation of Kuhn's cyclical account of the structure of history as it relates to the growth of knowledge, from the point of view of a humanist, someone like Kuhn, although he may be a respectable sort of hedgehog as a historian of science, seems an exceedingly naive philosopher of history. Kuhn was apparently unaware of the alternatives to a cyclical account of pattern in history, or how to defend a cyclical view well against its common competitors. But to analytic philosophers, utterly ignorant of the actual history of science and of philosophy, and unaware of even the existence of the philosophy of history, Kuhn's naive offerings had a power that imploded their dogma—or should have.

This tension between the analytic elimination of the philosophical significance of the history of philosophy and its need for a historical account of the growth of knowledge gradually had the effect of ending the elimination stage and issuing in the exploration stage in the attitude of analytic philosophers to the status of the history of philosophy. In this next stage, "analytic philosophy

can take seriously the work of any historical figure as long as it construes that work as an exploration" (397). This gave rise to a class of analytic historians of philosophy who "understand themselves to be offering explorations about the explorations of other historical thinkers" (397). Here we find a peculiarly ahistorical attention to the history of philosophy, according to which the main reason to read these texts is to form judgments about "who is and who is not a great philosopher" (399), depending upon how well each addressed the problems and issues that are important to analytic philosophers of the current day. As Capaldi notes, "to be included in such a history is to become a member of The Grateful Dead" (399), whose efforts have received the approbation of the all-seeing present because they exemplified in some way a good try according to the scientific standards of analytic philosophers.

Analytic explorers go into the historical texts in search of confirmations of the general approach of analytic philosophy itself, often in spite of the intentions of the historical philosopher being so handled. Here analytic philosophers, treating the towering figures of the history of Western thought as junior colleagues who need to be saved from their own obvious confusion, purport to find in the text inklings and hints of their own later discoveries. Capaldi's example from Jonathan Bennett is worth quoting at length. Capaldi writes:

It is not even necessary that the 'great' philosopher have had any clear conception that what he said was such a contribution, much less an exploration. Rather, all that is necessary is that some current analytic historian of philosophy be able to reconstruct the work of the 'great' philosopher as if it had contained or suggested such a hypothesis. As Jonathan Bennett argued:

In writing *Kant's Analytic* I came across something that I call 'the ordering argument.' It is a fine, powerful argument, and so far as I know it had never before explicitly appeared anywhere in the literature of philosophy. Its basis in Kant's text was slim, but there were a few small bits that I could understand only as fragmentary expressions of the ordering argument; it was indeed my attempt to understand these that led me to the argument in the first place. It occurred to me that if I was right in attributing the argument to Kant, I had scored an important exegetical coup; and that if I was wrong about that, then I deserved credit for thinking up a first-rate bit of original philosophy. Well, Peter Strawson in his review of the book described the ordering argument as being better than that part of Kant's text seemed on the surface to contain, and praised the quality of my evidence that the argument was Kant's I would rather have been told that I invented the argument myself (400).

Setting Bennett's legendary nar-

cissism aside, we still see clearly the values that inform the analytic history of philosophy in its exploratory stage. "The very nature of exploration allows for the distinction between the conventional understanding of something and the hidden structure behind the conventional understanding" (401). Bennett seeks not to grasp what Kant took himself to be doing or why, but to see if he can get any "real" philosophy out of Kant—a "powerful argument" of some sort, presumably to be used by contemporary philosophers in addressing the problems they take seriously. According to Capaldi, exploration "begins with the ordinary understanding of something and then goes on to offer an hypothesis about the hidden structure behind the thing as ordinarily understood" (401).

But there is a problem with first treating historical texts as exploratory hypotheses and then offering exploratory hypotheses about them: there is no need for this activity. It is a pointless and unphilosophical academic exercise by the standards of analytic philosophy, and certainly of no conceivable value to any non-analytic philosopher. If one is an analytic philosopher and one has a powerful argument, what difference does it make whether one came upon it from reading Kant or from reading a comic book? If one would not bother to cite the comic book as the source of the ordering argument, why would one bother to cite Kant? This leads, as one might guess, to some very, very bad his-

tories of philosophy. There is no standard of scholarship or responsibility to a tradition of interpretation. As Capaldi notes, "there is no recognized need for analytic historians of philosophy to map their interpretation onto the work of other commentators, analytic or non-analytic" (405).

The exploratory phase gives rise to its own demise by creating too many exploratory hypotheses, "among which there is no rational basis for choosing" (408). The result of this proliferation is that "the analytic exploration of the history of philosophy, like its positivist forerunners, leads to nihilism. The consequence of this nihilism is the deconstruction of the history of Western philosophy. All historical views are viewed as political acts" (408). Here is Capaldi's characteristic move as he makes the transition from his critical analysis of an aspect of analytic philosophy to his constructive suggestion.

Capaldi's alternative, explication, always attempts to reach into modes of human practice, to understand those practices in their origins and development, and to bring critical reason to bear on those practices. Here the aim is to understand the meaning of those practices, to seek universal norms within them, and to evaluate these in light of their present and future prospects for the enhancement of common life. Here Capaldi argues that "philosophy [as a practice] is the explication of common life . . .," while as a discipline, "philosophy is itself

a meta-practice that explicates the explication of other practices" (412). This sort of view will always be a kind of historicism. As Capaldi puts it: "If universal norms are embedded in practices, then the articulation of those norms is always time-bound. There is no way of accessing or articulating the universal truth without reference to historical context" (414). Yet, this approach does not give up the reality of universal, trans-historical norms. It simply implies that any given account of them will be historical. Capaldi's approach brings the entire history of philosophy into the present conversation, but without presupposing any particular account of the structure and meaning of pattern in history. One's philosophy of history will certainly affect what one sees in the texts of historical thinkers, but in any case one will be engaged in an activity informed by normative practices with historical origins and present meanings.

Capaldi completes the chapter by explicating the history of analytic philosophy itself—looking at the practices to see what these people are doing. His explication shows that analytic philosophers believe (1) "that there are no official histories of analytic philosophy" (423); (2) "there are no analytically canonical accounts of major analytic philosophers" (424); (3) "there are no historically 'great' analytic philosophers" (426); (4) "analytic philoso-

phy has no canonical texts" (426); and (5) "analytic philosophy has adopted the habit of presenting itself in the form of a perpetual new beginning" (427). These are about the practices one would expect to discover. The image of Coleridge's ancient mariner lying parched upon the deck of his becalmed ship, unable to die and unable to move, strangely suggests itself. If the history of philosophy is the albatross he shot, then perhaps Capaldi is a water snake he needs to bless unaware.

Capaldi's treatment of the other general aspects of analytic philosophy varies as the subject matter requires, but the basic pattern of his critique is analogous. What may be said generally about the book is that it is incredibly clear, easy to follow, well organized and enlightening. The consistency of tone and viewpoint is exemplary. One might suppose that the length of the book argues for seeing it as prolix, but nothing could be further from the case. The economy of expression in this book leaves the reviewer wondering how Capaldi could have accomplished so much in a mere five-hundred pages. This book is, in my estimation, the definitive history of analytic philosophy, and the fact that Capaldi could see analytic philosophy as a whole with such clarity implies that analytic philosophy really is at an end—a world well lost.