

Thomas L. Akehurst

The Cultural Politics of Analytic Philosophy

Britishness and the Spectre of Europe

Continuum Studies in British Philosophy



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Continuum International Publishing Group

The Tower Building
11 York Road
London SE1 7NX

80 Maiden Lane
Suite 704
New York, NY 10038

www.continuumbooks.com

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-8470-6450-9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Akehurst, Thomas L.

The cultural politics of analytic philosophy: britishness and the spectre of Europe/Thomas L. Akehurst.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references

ISBN-13: 978-1-84706-450-9 (HB)

ISBN-10: 1-84706-450-7 (HB)

1. Analysis (Philosophy) 2. Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, 1770–1831–Influence. 3. Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, 1844–1900–Influence. 4. Germany–Politics and government–20th century. I. Title.

B808.5.A34 2010

146'.40941–dc22

2009019738

Typeset by Newgen Imaging Systems Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed and bound in Great Britain by the MPG Books Group

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Acknowledgements

The research for this book was made possible by a University of Sussex Seedcorn Scholarship, and subsequent work has been made easier by a Scouloudi Foundation Historical Award. I am grateful to both of these institutions, and to the East Sussex Fire and Rescue service for preventing the whole project going up in smoke at an early stage.

Given that the cultural history of philosophy is a relatively unpeopled field in this country, I've been very fortunate to find so many readers and commentators. Many of them have had to stray from their preferred fields and display considerable tolerance in engaging with this project. They have, in so doing, immeasurably improved the resulting book. I am grateful to the historians at the University of Sussex who have supported me in my idiosyncratic research choices. I am especially indebted to Knud Haakonssen, Alun Howkins, and Paul Betts. The encouragement of the latter, in particular, has proved fortifying at all points of this process. I have also benefited greatly from the comments of Stefan Collini, James Hampshire, Michael Morris, Andrew Rebera, Jonathan Rée, Darrow Schecter and Brian Young. Ben Jones, Shamira Meghani, Katherine Nielsen, Karen Schaller and Reto Speck read parts or all of the manuscript for me – catching many errors I would have missed entirely. While this book is not unequivocal in its praise of analytic philosophy, I would like to offer unequivocal gratitude (and praise) for the teaching of my own philosophy tutors, among them Hallvard Lillehammer, Neil Manson, and the late Peter Lipton.

I am tremendously grateful to my friends: Chris, Emma, Jon, Karen, Kat, Katerina, Matt, Petra, Reto and Tim for their company and conversation. In keeping with the theme of Britishness, I will say least about those whose support has mattered most: Shamira, my parents, and my sister. I'll send them all postcards.

Sections of the argument of Chapters 1 and 2 of this book have previously appeared in 'The Nazi Tradition: the analytic critique of continental philosophy in mid-century Britain', *History of European Ideas* 34 (2008), 548–557.

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Introduction

*Hitler's ideals come mainly from Nietzsche.*¹

(Bertrand Russell 1935)

*Nor is it news to philosophers that Nazi, Fascist and Communist doctrines are descendants of the Hegelian gospel. They may therefore wonder whether Dr. Popper is not flogging a dead horse in exposing once again the motives and fallacies of Hegel. But Dr Popper is clearly right in saying that even if philosophers are at long last immunized, historians, sociologists, political propagandists and voters are still unconscious victims of this virus . . .*²

(Gilbert Ryle 1947)

*If Empiricist philosophy is strong to-day, perhaps we may hope to see a revival of Liberalism the day after to-morrow.*³

(H. H. Price 1940)

*By God, Ryle, I believe you are right. No one ever had Common Sense before John Locke – and no-one but Englishmen have ever had it since.*⁴

(Bertrand Russell 1965)

*The history of Germany is not a good advert for romantic philosophy; I do think that if they had had philosophers of the calibre of Bentham and the Mills during this period, and if they had listened to them, history might have been very different.*⁵

(R. M. Hare 1989)

British analytic philosophy has something of a reputation. Particularly in its early years, the discipline was seen as aloof from the concerns of politics and human life. In his infamous *Words and Things*, Ernest Gellner condemned Oxford analysis for its 'conspicuous triviality'.⁶ More recently, some

have suggested that this ‘existential gap’, separating analytic philosophy from the concerns of human life, does not merely characterize one short period in history, but is a feature of analytic philosophy as such.⁷

When, in 1958, the Oxford philosopher G. J. Warnock wrote that he believed British analytic philosophy was politically neutral – potentially compatible with a range of ideological positions – he was doing no more than stating positively what critics of analytic philosophy had been saying and would continue to say. But Warnock went a little further; while finding such an eventuality extremely unlikely, he conceded that: ‘there may be some deep seated similarity of attitude and outlook, in which it may be that future historians will find without difficulty the *Weltanschauung* of contemporary philosophy’.⁸ What the quotations at the top of the introduction illustrate is that Warnock was right. There was a ‘deep seated similarity of attitude and outlook’ among the British analysts; contrary to the stated beliefs of critics and analysts alike, we can detect a clear pattern of cultural, political and philosophical beliefs shared by major British analytic philosophers. This is a worldview the analysts elaborated themselves in the pages of their published work.

The three decades with which we are centrally concerned, 1930 to 1960, were a crucially important period in the history of British analytic philosophy. In these years it moved from being a marginal grouping in Cambridge, in the late 1920s, to being central to the largest philosophy department in the country, Oxford, by 1960. While these decades frame much of our discussion, our focus is on generations, specifically on the three generations of analysts who co-founded the discipline in Britain. Where it proves useful in understanding our period, we will look at the reflections of these philosophers beyond the boundaries of 1930 and 1960.

The first generation under examination here, that of Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore, both in their twenties by 1900, are credited with the decisive break away from idealism at the turn of the century. The second is the generation of A. J. Ayer, J. L. Austin and Isaiah Berlin, all born around 1910, to which Gilbert Ryle in these terms properly belongs, despite being ten years older than Ayer; Ryle’s conversion to analysis happened at the beginning of the 1930s, and he did not gain his Chair until 1945. Third, we have the children of the 1920s, the Warnocks (Mary and Geoffrey), Stuart Hampshire, Richard Wollheim, and, by the skin of his teeth, Bernard Williams. Beginning in the mid-1930s the second generation emerges, and by 1945 the third is also involved.

In this period, three foundational generations of analytic philosophers, with growing institutional prestige and responsibility (a process which

began with Moore gaining his Chair at Cambridge in 1925), could address and fight over what it meant to be a British analytic philosopher. For this tradition, this is the equivalent of Jesus being able to sit down with Paul, Constantine and the Early Church fathers to thrash out the canon, and the definitive history. It is a crucial, and somewhat overlooked, moment in the history of the discipline.

Given the chronology outlined above, the discovery of a seam of cultural-political assumptions should not be a cause of surprise. Analytic philosophy emerged and came to dominance in Britain against the backdrop of some of the most traumatic events of the twentieth century. In the time between analytic philosophy's emergence in Cambridge in the first decade of the century and its achievement of institutional dominance in Britain in the 1950s, two new ideologies, Marxist-Leninism and fascism, made dramatic appearances on the world stage, and Europe saw its two bloodiest wars in history. Between 1940 and 1945, many of the most significant British analysts of the twentieth century were also soldiers, intelligence officers or code breakers. What we find in the work of these thinkers are attempts to relate their philosophical enterprise to the chaotic times in which they lived.

Yet these reflections and beliefs have been largely ignored by historians. This project reveals two previously unacknowledged themes in analytic discussion. First, as the quotations from Lord Russell, and Professors Ryle and Hare at the top of this introduction illustrate, there was a consistently held belief among these early generations of analytic philosophers that a post-Kantian tradition of continental philosophy was the direct source of fascist ideology. I will examine these quotations in far more detail later, but what we can see here is the condemnation of Nietzsche, Hegel, and, in the quotation from Hare romantic philosophy, as being in some way the 'ancestors of fascism', to use Russell's phrase.⁹ This belief was generalized as the analytic philosophers witnessed what they believed to be Germany's corruption of the European (though not the British) mind, helping to form the notion of a dangerous 'continental philosophy', characterized as philosophically inadequate, politically aggressive, and irrational.

The divide between analytic and continental philosophy is still with us and although components of it have a far longer history (as I will briefly discuss later), its modern origins lie in the first half of the twentieth century. Peter Simons has provided us with a chronology of the developing divide. On his reading, the 'first signs' are present in the period 1918 to 1933; 1933 to 1945 is characterized by 'catastrophe'; and in the period 1945 to 1968 'the rift is cemented'.¹⁰ While the first period is clearly important in examining the origins of British analytic philosophy, during the period the

discipline was barely recognizable; it was practised by only a handful of predominantly Cambridge-based philosophers. Only later did the movement become distinguishable and set about forming an intellectual identity. The chronological frame of this study encompasses, then, the most crucial of Simons' periods, the second and third (I will have something to say about the earlier period in Chapters 1 and 2).

We are presented with a convergence of circumstances. On the one hand, as analytic philosophy gains control of British universities, the divide between British and continental philosophy opens up. On the other hand, the period during which the fissure widens to a gulf is cut through with six years of total war – a war for which, the analysts believed, continental philosophy was partly responsible. The analysts' purging of continental philosophy, once they were in a position to do so, seems to have been at least partly motivated by these considerations. Randall Collins has pointed out that the 'unprecedented vehemence' of the dispute between analytic philosophers and continental philosophers has 'outlasted virtually every other substantive feature of their programme'.¹¹ On the analysts' side, I suggest, the vehemence is in part the legacy of the cultural-political assumptions revealed in this study. If one thinks one's philosophical opponents are implicated in an ideology one has had to fight in a world war, this will likely add vehemence to one's polemic.

Secondly, this project reveals that, contrary to the received view of the analysts as un-engaged politically, there is a strong pattern of thought in this period that ties analytic philosophy to liberalism. As the Price quotation at the top of this introduction makes clear, the analysts believed in a link between the characteristic epistemological position of their movement, empiricism, and 'a revival of liberalism'. So, while in the years after the war political philosophy was declared dead and the analysts were condemned as those responsible,¹² we will see here that in actual fact the analysts considered themselves to be guarantors of political liberalism.

Underpinning and uniting these two sets of attitudes was a project of self-definition. An image of the 'continental philosopher' and a 'continental tradition' helped define the young British analytic tradition. The continentals were the 'other' against which the virtues of the British could first be constructed and then juxtaposed. The character of the analysts was also clearly derived from stereotypical notions of Britishness, more specifically of Englishness. In this book, I will use these terms interchangeably, though it is clear from the character traits that the analysts celebrate and seek to model that their perception of their own character is specifically English. However, there is no consistency in their usage of the terms English/

British; and as I will argue, the significant contrast for the analysts was against continental philosophy, not among English, Scottish, Welsh or Irish thought. Though the identity was recognizably an English one, the analysts appear happy to extend it to all Britons, whom, they no doubt felt, had more in common with each other than they did with the French or the Germans.

In keeping with their British identity, the analytic philosophers saw themselves and their discipline as down to earth and reasonable – as Russell says at the top of this introduction, the British invented common sense, and have been the sole guardians of the virtue ever since. The analysts juxtaposed their own native tradition, with its history of intellectual rigour and political liberalism, against the perceived philosophical and political vices of ‘continental philosophy’. Hare makes this explicit in his comment at the top of the introduction – if German philosophers had been of the same quality as British philosophy, then ‘history might have been very different’. We can already see in these quotations, the creation of two identities – one for ‘us’, and one for ‘them’. These identities blended the political with considerations of character and of nationality. This was not simply a difference between philosophical schools; it was a constructed contrast between liberalism and fascism, virtue and vice, Britain and Europe.

These nationalist beliefs, together with the condemnation of post-Kantian continental thought, and the celebration of the liberalism of analysis, are not found by seeking out and then grilling minnows. They are present in the very biggest fish in the analytic pond. To take just the names at the top of this introduction: Russell hardly requires comment, so colossal has he been in the history of twentieth-century analysis; Ryle was arguably the most powerful philosopher of his day, the Waynflete Professor of Metaphysics at Oxford from 1944 to 1968, and editor of the leading journal *Mind* from 1947 to 1971; R. M. Hare took the White Professorship of Moral Philosophy at Oxford in 1960, and wielded massive international influence over that subject. In the course of this study almost all the great names from this period will be canvassed, A. J. Ayer, J. L. Austin, Isaiah Berlin, Stuart Hampshire, Peter Strawson, Anthony Quinton, and the Warnocks, Mary and Geoffrey. Far from being marginal or obscure figures within analysis, these were the biggest names, working from the biggest philosophy department in the United Kingdom. This project, then, examines powerful beliefs held by very significant figures at a very important time for analytic philosophy.

At the centre of this book is a body of evidence pointing to the importance of these attitudes for the analysts. Its first purpose is to establish

beyond reasonable doubt that these beliefs were widespread among centrally important analytic thinkers. Its second purpose is to illustrate how these beliefs were, on the analysts' own testimony, active in informing their thinking, and therefore in moulding the discipline of analytic philosophy as it emerged in this country.

However, this does not seek to be, and cannot be, the definitive statement on the analysts' attitudes in this period. Until recent years, there has been very little genuine historical enquiry into analytic philosophy. The majority of the historical work now going on focuses, quite legitimately, on scrutinizing the origins of analytic philosophy, whether this is seen as lying with Russell and Moore, Frege, or elsewhere. Little attention has so far been paid to the period under examination in this book – the period in which the claims about Russell and Moore as the originators of a tradition are first extensively aired. Far more work will be needed to build a picture of British analytic philosophy in the period 1930–1960. Only in the light of this wider work will we be able to gain a more authoritative sense of the significance of the attitudes canvassed here. Author and reader alike are faced with an historical period about which little is known, and much remains to be discovered. In such unexplored terrain, our maps are necessarily provisional.

A Cultural History of Philosophy

The fact that few historians have set about the exploration of this uncharted territory is very largely the result of dominant attitudes within the analytic philosophy itself. The discipline is, and has been, inhospitable to historical work, and yet it has been analytic philosophers themselves who have enjoyed a near monopoly on the writing of their own history.¹³ As a consequence, the history of analytic philosophy has been relatively neglected.

Where histories have been written, they have tended to be founded on some fundamentally ahistorical assumptions:

[t]he year 1900 is a comparatively meaningless date in philosophy; the First World War did not provoke in philosophy profound changes which echo on in subsequent years . . . The tenuous relationship between our subject matter and common-or-garden historical narrative may be regarded as an index of the rarefied atmosphere in which we shall be moving . . .¹⁴

Here, analytic philosophy is painted as occupying a sphere of its own, rarefied, and unpolluted by the vicissitudes of the rest of history. Such

confident assertions, however, are not, as they may appear to be, the result of detailed historical investigation into the interaction between analytic philosophy and the cultural circumstances of its production – almost no such work exists. Rather, they are the result of the disinclination of those within the discipline to engage in any such enquiry.

Many analysts go further than Bell and take a universalist view of the subject. They hold, not that analytic philosophy's historical development is 'hermetically sealed' off¹⁵ from wider historical events, but that analytic philosophy is engaged with timeless questions, and in timeless conversations. History of any kind, it is assumed, is irrelevant to such universal, timeless pursuits.

Guided by these ahistorical assumptions, for much of the latter half of the twentieth century the histories of philosophy in Britain manifest a context-free linearity. First there was Russell, and then there were Price, Ayer and Ryle, then Ryle and Austin, Hampshire and Strawson, and so on. These texts, purely through their form, could leave the reader with the impression of a steady progressive march of the mind, culminating in a, if not perfect, then less benighted, present.

Recent important revisionary work, for example by Peter Hylton, Robert Hanna, and Tom Rockmore among others, has sought to disrupt the smooth historical narrative of the tradition by highlighting the wrinkles and the foundational misreadings; but they have not attempted to disrupt the context-free approach the analysts have brought to the writing of the history of philosophy.¹⁶ These are still histories of analytic philosophy within its hermetic seal.

A history of analytic philosophy that looks beyond the boundary of the 'strictly' philosophical, then, might be expected to set alarm bells ringing. Yet, as John McCumber points out:

Even those who are wholly resolute in their ahistorical view of their discipline – those many who, in the words of Peter Hylton, see analytical philosophy 'as taking place within a single timeless moment' – cannot escape this [the impact of culture]. For in the eyes of such people, political and cultural circumstances are failings and defects that at the very least need to be weeded out. You can't weed them if you don't see them, and you can't see them if you won't look for them.¹⁷

The notion of a cultural history of philosophy, then, should be admissible even within the standard analytic norms concerning history writing, even if it only has the relatively limited use of pointing out where the seal has been broken and cultural-political pollutants have sunk in.

However, I would suggest that the cultural history of philosophy can have more of a role than this. Both the attempt to conceive of philosophy as having a hermetically sealed history and attempts to view it as universal, are, I think, poor starting points for reflecting on a discipline necessarily undertaken by people living within, and inevitably influenced by, their time and culture. Poor, that is, if what one is interested in is establishing how philosophy came to be the way it is today – a process of development that manifestly did involve influences beyond the strictly philosophical.

That the history of philosophy is influenced by more than the strictly philosophical is even more clearly true in the case of analytic philosophy, because the discipline itself dramatically narrowed the bounds of what counts as a philosophical question. This has resulted in traditional analytic histories ruling out on principle not just the examination of wider culture, where we might think of the non-philosophical beliefs of ordinary folk, political events, the arts and so on, but even the examination of areas of theoretical reflection considered to be beyond the bounds of philosophy. This narrowed focus is not the best, and certainly not the only, basis for understanding developments in the history of philosophy.

The resistance to anything resembling a cultural history of philosophy has more to it than the foregoing characterization of a sealed discipline, or alternatively, of one dealing with a narrow range of universal questions. There is also an entirely legitimate fear that philosophy will be ‘reduced’ to culture – so that questions that appeared to be philosophical can be explained away as products of a particular time or circumstance. This kind of history apparently manifests a real threat to philosophy as a discipline – explaining away philosophical claims, rather than respecting them enough to examine their argumentative merits.

While such historical-cultural deconstructions of philosophy are possible, they are not the inevitable result of the practice of the cultural history of philosophy. They are certainly not what is attempted in this book. I am not claiming that the cultural/political attitudes revealed in this study provide the final definitive explanation for any ‘strictly’ philosophical development. What I am suggesting is that the history of philosophy is not governed only by the making and refuting of ‘strictly’ philosophical arguments in the very narrow sense that this phrase has taken on within analytic philosophy. To be sure, good (and bad) philosophical arguments are active in history. People do, sometimes, change their minds in response to a sound argument. ‘Strictly’ philosophical ideas do therefore have a role in historical explanation. But so, as recent studies have shown, do other things; both

John McCumber and George Reisch have recently shown that there are significant factors outside the 'strictly philosophical' which have moulded the development of philosophy – specifically they show the impact of McCarthyism on American analytic philosophy and philosophy of science, respectively.¹⁸ Whether modern analytic philosophy was moulded by strictly philosophical argument or other factors or, as I suggest here, a combination, is a question that has to be answered through historical investigation, and through studies of particular ideas and circumstances. It is no more legitimate to claim that, 'it's all culture', than it is to maintain what has been the analytic status quo and insist, 'it's all philosophy'.

The fear that philosophy will be 'explained away' into a wider culture, then, is not a good enough reason to maintain the hermetic seal around the discipline. We should investigate the causes of historical developments, whatever they are. In this book, the evidence strongly points to the inter-relationship of cultural and political beliefs and philosophical ones. It was this web of belief, not simply the 'strictly' philosophical aspects, that strongly influenced the formation of British analytic philosophy – in determining who could be studied, and what kinds of question could be asked.

Because of the careful policing of what can and cannot be considered philosophy, I have had to use the term 'cultural political' to pick out beliefs of the analysts on subjects such as political philosophy, character, and the relationship between nations and philosophical ideas. If a more catholic reading of the term 'philosophy' were available, an alternative label would not prove necessary. Indeed, if a more catholic reading of the term 'philosophy' was available, it seems unlikely that the assumptions of the analysts canvassed in this book would have remained unexplored for so long.

Finally on the subject of the cultural history of philosophy, it is worth noting that this approach, which has enjoyed a very limited revival since the turn of the century, has some other advantageous features.¹⁹ It allows the historian to begin to fit the history of analytic philosophy into the wider history of a period. For the first time in the history of analytic philosophy, histories are now being written which can offer something to the historian and to the philosopher. With this thought in mind, this book begins the task of situating the analysts within the cultural milieu of mid-century Britain; and discusses the continuities between the attitudes of analytic philosophers and those present in a wider culture. It also aims to contribute to the growing body of historical work on the cultural and intellectual dimensions of Anglo-German relations.²⁰

Methodological Considerations

Because cultural histories of analytic philosophy are still relatively rare beasts, in this section I will briefly canvass some important respects in which this book differs from what might be expected of a traditional history of the subject. For the sake of clarity – and to allow the reader to skip questions about which they are unconcerned, this discussion is arranged under sub-headings: Traditional distinctions; Personnel; and Use of sources.

Traditional distinctions

Perhaps inevitably, the focus on broader cultural questions has resulted in an approach which ignores some traditionally important distinctions. The conventional approach is for historians to concern themselves with the distinctions, debates and questions which directly engaged their historical subjects, or with those specific features of the debates considered to be potentially illuminating to contemporary philosophical concerns. The historian would chart the different configurations of ideas: in the period under examination here the differences between Russell, the logical positivists and the Oxford ordinary language philosophers would be discussed.

These philosophical similarities and differences within the analytic fold are distinctions that I choose to ignore. My interest here is in a series of assumptions that do not respect these demarcations – partly because they relate to a series of broader philosophical commitments that the analysts, of whatever sub-group, had in common: hostility to metaphysics, a subscription to some form of empiricism, a commitment to small scale, precisely defined philosophical investigations, and so on. It is to these shared signature beliefs of the analytic philosophers that the cultural-political attitudes uncovered by this project relate.

This commonality is, to use a highly loaded word, an empirical discovery and it has meant that the following project pays less attention to traditional boundaries within analysis than one might have come to expect from other histories of the subject. The philosophical differences within analysis have been well documented and in not engaging with these arguments and not using them as structuring features, I wish to make no general comment on the value of these boundaries, except to say that, viewed through a certain lens, they become substantially less important.

It is important to note, however, that on one significant point I do adhere to the traditional approach to the history of analytic philosophy in this period: in placing Oxbridge, and in particular Oxford, at the centre of the

story. Most historians see the 1930s as a decade in which Cambridge analysis came to Oxford, and this is borne out by contemporary sources. H. J. Paton spent ten years away from Oxford: ‘by the time of my return . . . in 1937 the philosophical climate was already greatly altered . . . the Cam was flowing into the Isis and it seemed to me that a fresh era had begun’.²¹ Once this transformation is underway, what we might term the ‘era of Oxford philosophy’ begins. In her biography of H. L. A. Hart, Nicola Lacey (2004) points to the significance Oxford had achieved as a philosophical centre by the end of World War II: ‘[i]n 1946, Oxford philosophy dominated philosophical scholarship in England, while British philosophy continued to dominate all over the English speaking world . . . These men . . . felt and behaved as if they ran the philosophical world’.²²

Lacey also highlights the numerical dominance of the department: in 1952 the 50 philosophers based at Oxford ‘constituted more than a quarter of all professional philosophers in England’.²³ One of the few philosophers to have devoted serious historical attention to this period, Jonathan Réé, also emphasizes the dominance of Oxford philosophy after World War II: ‘[i]n fact . . . nearly all the energy of English academic philosophy in the fifties came from Oxford’.²⁴ While Cambridge and also, to some extent, London, do appear in this project, it is this new era in Oxford that attracts historians’ attention, and because I have no wish to be revisionist in this sense, it is Oxford which has provided my main focus. I will have more to say on the significance of Oxford’s centrality in Chapter 2.

Personnel

I have already indicated the centrality of some of the main players in this book. So rather than offer a comprehensive cataloguing of inclusions and exclusions, I will briefly discuss three notable exclusions and a notable inclusion. Moore, Popper, and Wittgenstein will be absent. I am concerned with a national(ist) conversation among the insiders of British analysis and neither of the latter were ‘insiders’ in this world, though for somewhat different reasons. Karl Popper did not arrive in the UK until January 1946. He was, and chose to remain, an Austrian citizen, and he found himself thwarted by Ryle in his attempts to get a Chair at Oxford.²⁵ Popper was, then, twice an outsider – his access to the nerve-centre of analytic philosophy was blocked, and he was a foreign newcomer who, therefore, could hardly join in with the post-war British self-congratulation.

Ludwig Wittgenstein is a more interesting figure, who was initially read as being an analytic insider, and whose reputation diminished as he came to