



The Term „Analytic Philosophy“ in  
1930s Britain: John Laird’s  
Perspective from *Recent Philosophy*

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# Agenda

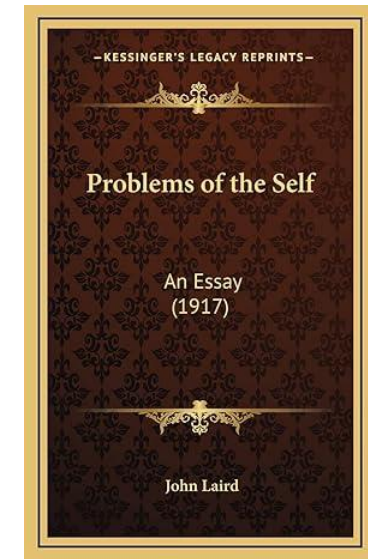
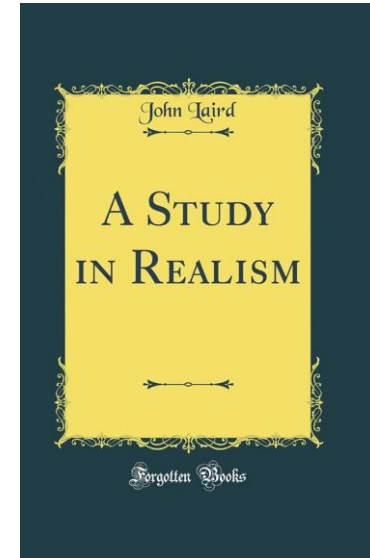
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- The life and works of John Laird.
- „Analysis“ in the book *Recent Philosophy*.
  - The term „new analytic philosophy.“
  - The term „contemporary analytical philosophy.“
- The term „analytic philosophy“ in 1930s Britain.



# The life and works of John Laird

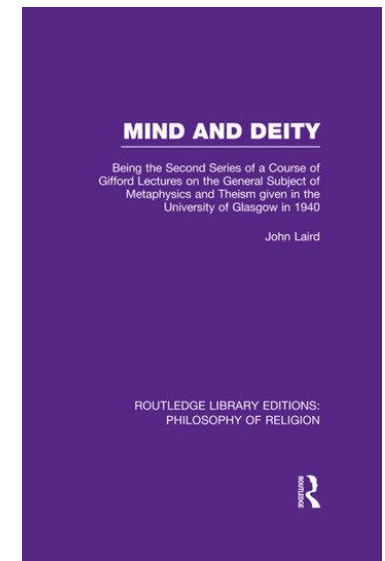
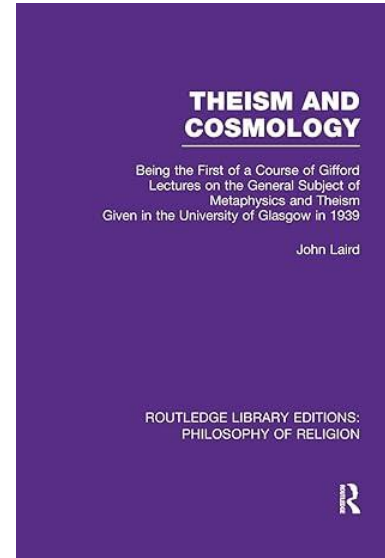
- Laird was born on 7 May 1887 in Durris, Kincardineshire.
- His father resigned from his job in Durris, and the family relocated to Edinburgh. There, he spent a year at George Watson's College before enrolling at the University of Edinburgh.
- During his time at Cambridge, Laird was taught by J. M. E. McTaggart. However, it was G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell whom he regarded as truly outstanding.
- Another important fact in his biography is that in 1912, he accepted a position as a professor of philosophy at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.
- Then, after returning to Britain in 1913, he was appointed professor of logic and metaphysics at Queen's University in Belfast.
- His most important publications from the „Belfast“ period are: *The Problem of the Self* in 1917 and *A Study in Realism* in 1920.



# The life and works of John Laird

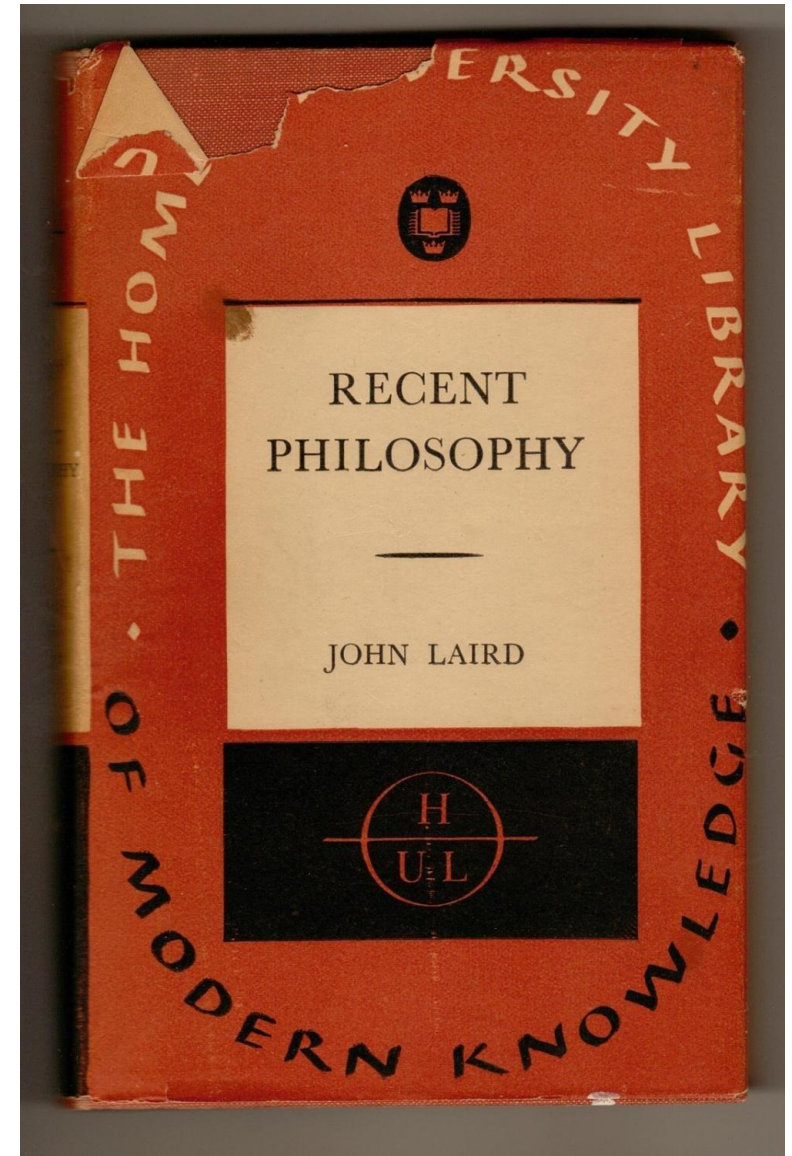
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- Laird had always hoped to become a „Scots professor,“ and in 1924, his dream came true when he became the Regius Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Aberdeen.
- His most important works during the „Aberdeen“ period were his Gifford Lectures of 1939, *Theism and Cosmology* in 1939, and *Mind and Deity* in 1941.



# „Analysis“ in the book *Recent Philosophy*

- In the book's introduction, Laird mentions how the language of philosophers has become „technical,“ and he sees this as contributing to the differentiation of various philosophical movements in contemporary philosophy (Laird 1936, 13).
- He believes that this rise in the technicality of philosophy occurred earlier in history, and he underlines that it is associated with the decline of Latin as the universal language of philosophy, when philosophers started writing in their national languages (Laird 1936, 14).



# „Analysis“ in the book *Recent Philosophy*

- In addition to contemporary philosophical positions, Laird also characterises „the modern school of analysis“ (Laird 1936, 19):

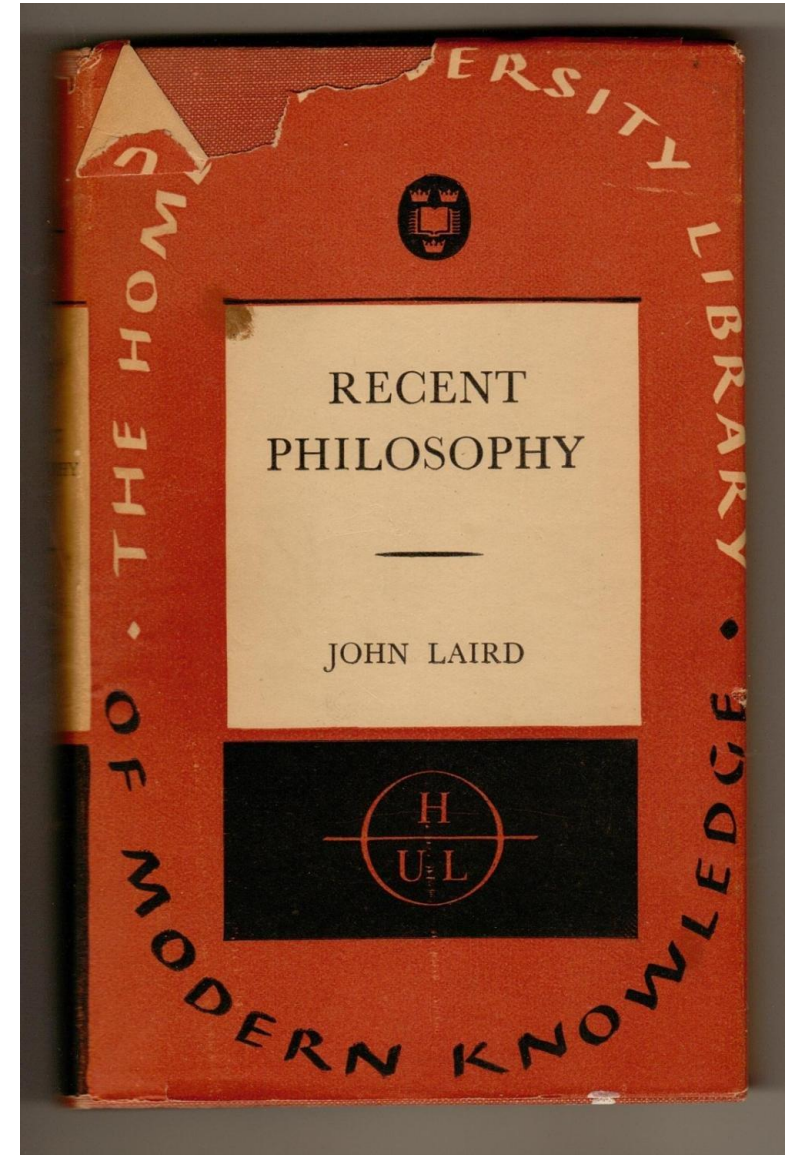
Speaking generally, all the great philosophers in the past have busied themselves with problems of philosophical analysis. They have been the microscopists of the critical conjunctures of theory as well as the telescopic spectators of all time and of all existence, and there is nothing peculiarly novel in the idea that philosophy, for a time at least, should restrict itself to analytical questions and make haste slowly in that domain, although there may be an unusual degree of heroism in the resolution with which this arid-seeming programme is pursued. In the form of “analysis” called “logical” or “logistical positivism,” however, the emphasis is laid upon language. A science develops by elaborating an adequate technique of expression. Philosophy deals with the most general problems. Let it therefore track pure generality to its lair. When it does so it necessarily deals with the pure form of expression, with generalized logical syntax. That is what philosophy, the science of the general, necessarily comes to; and that is its logical positivism. (Laird 1936, 19-20)



# The term „new analytic philosophy“

- Laird sees logical positivism as a certain novelty compared to old empiricism, old materialism, old positivism, and new pragmatism. (Laird 1936, 176).
- It's worth mentioning that he delves into the origins of logical positivism and finds it in Russell's 1914 work, *Our Knowledge of the External World*, which was intended to be a manifesto for the „logical-analytical method in philosophy“ (Laird 1936, 176).
- Laird wrote:

Anyone, be he plain man, scientist or philosopher, conveys his thought in some language, and every language has a structure or syntax as well as a mere vocabulary. The syntax of a language, therefore, should correspond to the logical-analytical construing that epitomized Russell's method. Russell and Wittgenstein accordingly suggested that logical syntax itself might supply the key to the new analytic philosophy. (Laird 1936, 179-180)



# The term „new analytic philosophy“

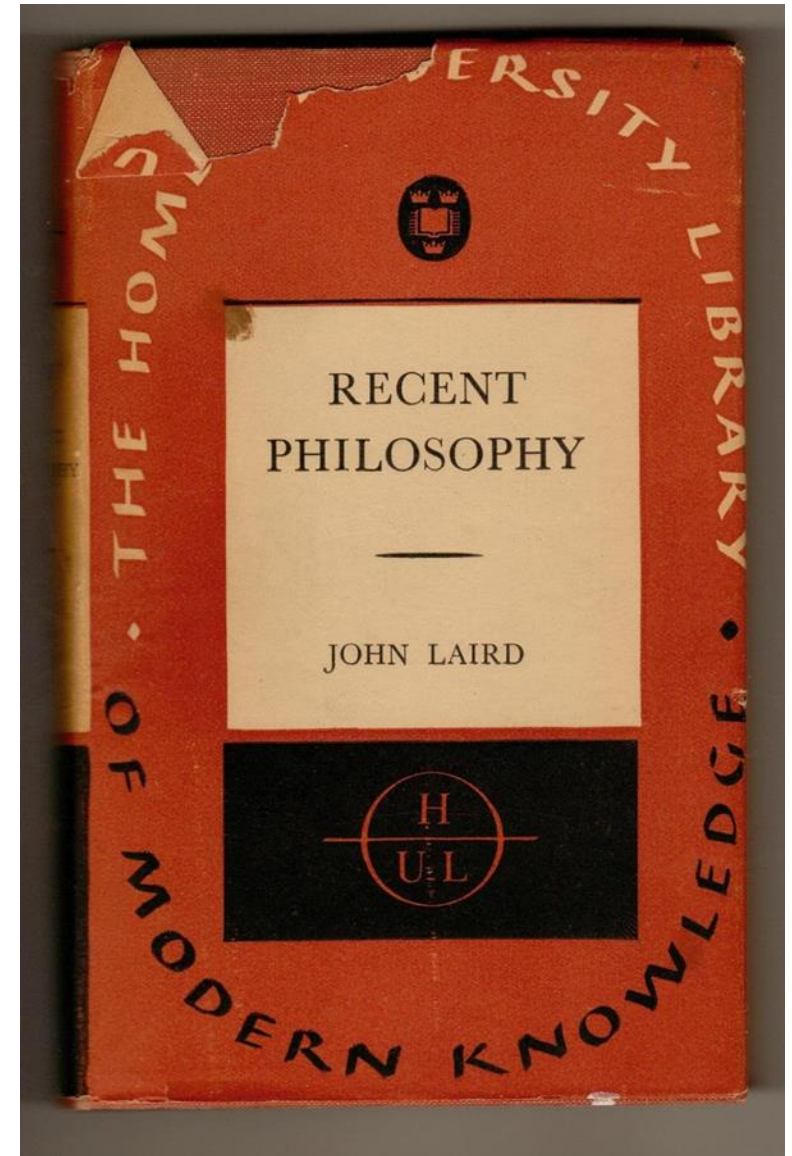
- His portrayal of logical empiricism is as follows:

Accordingly, the rapid growth of “logical positivism” in recent years took place in ground suitably prepared. The “Vienna circle” is most active in this propagandism. M. Schick of Vienna, whose murder in the summer of 1936 shocked the whole of Europe, was one of its leaders. Others are Neurath of Vienna, and Carnap and Frank of Prague. But Carnap, like a former British Prime Minister, is prepared to issue coupons to other authors, such as Reichenbach of Berlin, Sheffer of Harvard, Tarski and other members of the “Warsaw circle,” the formalists, finitists and logisticians in mathematics, and, chief of them all, Russell and Wittgenstein. The “union rationaliste” in France, supported by such writers as Langevin and Boll is also commended and the coupon is extended to writers in *Erkenntnis*, the journal of the Vienna circle, the International Philosophy of Science, and the British periodical *Analysis*. (Laird 1936, 184)



# The term „contemporary analytical philosophy“

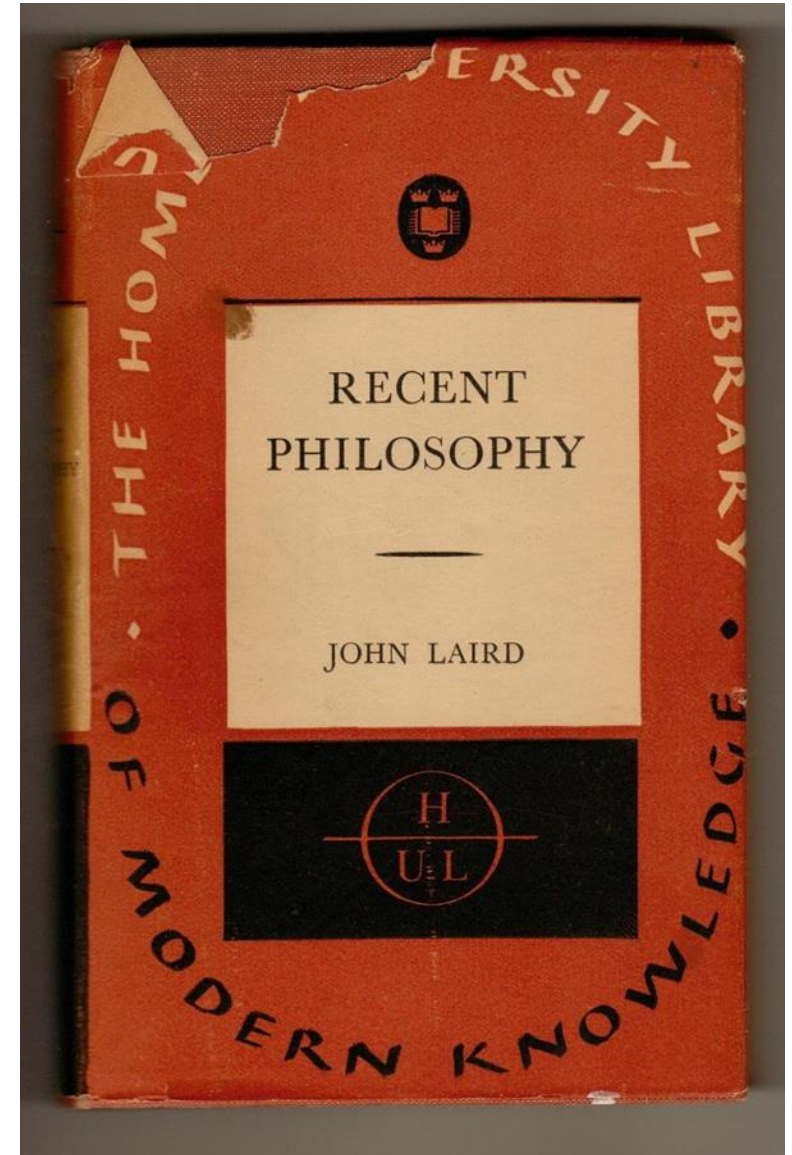
- According to him, there are four analytical methods characteristic of „contemporary analytical philosophy“ (Laird 1936, 240):
  - (a) crucial analysis (e.g., Brentano, Meinong, Russell, Stout, G.E. Moore, C.D. Broad, Lovejoy, Stron, Mead);
  - (b) typical ostensive analysis (e.g., Alexander, James, Avenarius, Bergson);
  - (c) instrumentalism (e.g., Dewey);
  - (d) formal analysis (e.g., logical positivism).



# The term „contemporary analytical philosophy“

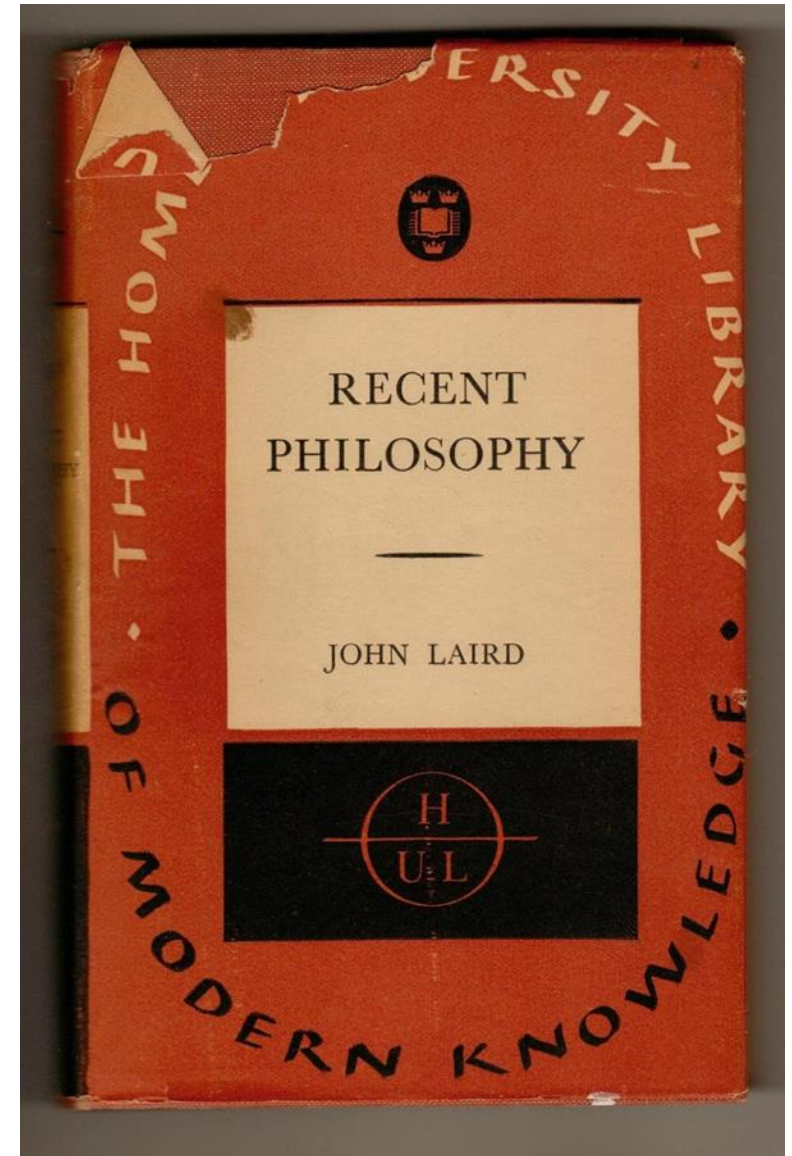
- Laird describes crucial analysis as follows:

This method has certain presuppositions. It must have some preliminary inkling of the whereabouts of the important crossroads. It must also presuppose, at any rate tentatively, that each such crux may be isolated and investigated, as we say, on its merits. At a later stage results may be pooled and perhaps revised; but not in the first instance. (Laird 1936, 240-241)



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# The term „analytic philosophy“ in 1930s Britain

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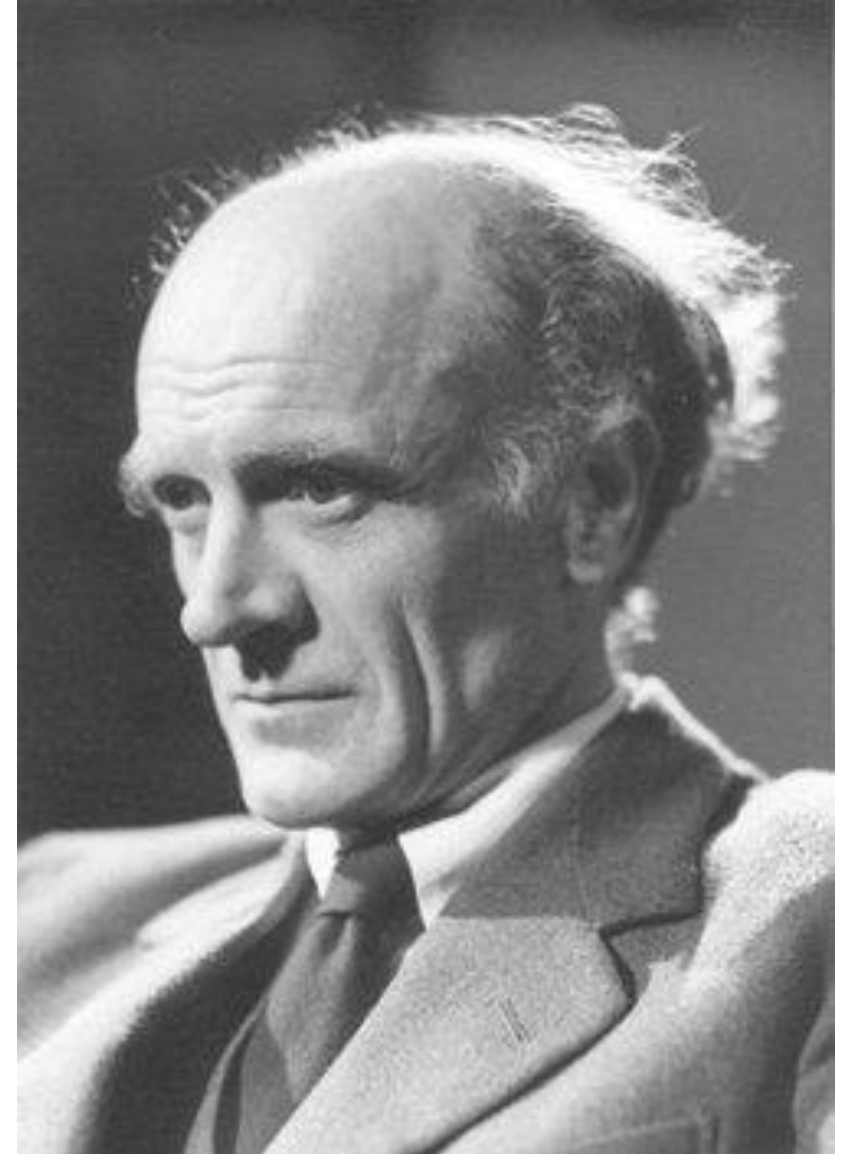
- It merits attention that Laird's book was released in 1936, the same year Ernest Nagel's two-part article entitled „Impressions and Appraisals of Analytic Philosophy in Europe“ (1936a; 1936b) made its appearance in print.
- Thus, the book *Recent philosophy* may also be categorized as one of the first publications in which the term „analytic philosophy“ was used.
- Nevertheless, Nagel's articles more precisely reflect the metaphilosophical principles of the analytic tradition during that period and employ the term „analytic philosophy“ with a narrower scope than Laird's usage.
- Nagel visited Cambridge in 1935, where he had the opportunity to attend lectures and meet, among others, Wisdom, Stebbing, and Ayer (see Verhaegh 2022, 56).





# The term „analytic philosophy“ in 1930s Britain

- Thus, Wisdom's 1931 book *Interpretation and Analysis in Relation to Bentham's Theory of Definition* is the first work to use the terms "analytic philosophers" and "logico-analytic philosophers" in a sense similar to that understood by some philosophers today (see Beaney 2013, 42; Wisdom 1931, 13-15).
- It's important to note that Wisdom does not describe the philosophical movement itself in his work; instead, he uses the term „paraphrase“ in the context of Jeremy Bentham's method.
- It is worth noting that Russell's theory of descriptions consists of two models of analysis: decompositional and transformative.
- However, Russell did not make a clear distinction between these two analyses of models (see Beaney 2007a, 4).
- Nevertheless, Laird did not mention the theory of descriptions in his book in the context of issues concerning analytical philosophy and the methods of analysis themselves: (a)-(d).

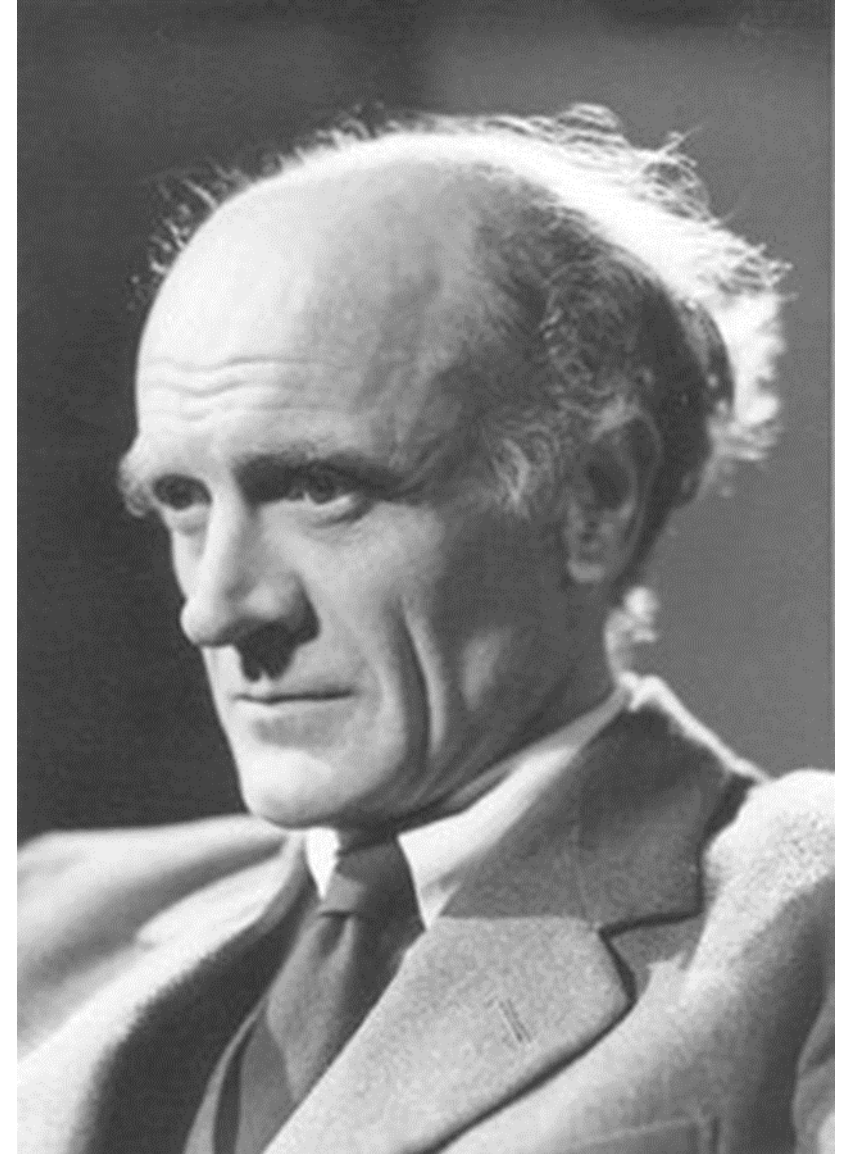




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- Another significant work by Wisdom on analytic philosophy is *Problems of Mind and Matter* (1934), which was intended to serve as an introduction to analytic philosophy.
- In his book, he drew a distinct line between the speculative approach in philosophy and the analytical approach. He wrote in the article about analysis in such a way that it does not have a special subject; thus, one can philosophise about lozenges and philosophy itself (Wisdom 1934, 2).
- Laird does not define analysis itself in his book; he only enumerates its types.



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- In the context of analytic philosophy's development, it is noteworthy to mention that Stebbing's book *A Modern Introduction to Logic* (1930) was also recognised as an introduction to analytic philosophy (Beaney 2013, 44).
- Nevertheless, Laird shares with Stebbing the effort to name and describe the methods of analysis used in contemporary philosophy.
- In her article „Logical Positivism and Analysis“ (1933), Stebbing distinguished four types of analysis:
  - (A1) analytic definition of a symbolic expression;
  - (A2) analytic clarification of a concept;
  - (A3) postulational analysis;
  - (A4) directional analysis.



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- In the classification proposed by Laird, the method described by Stebbing as (A4) can be categorised as „crucial analysis.“
- In Laird’s classification, the methods described by Stebbing in (A1)-(A3) could be classified under „formal analysis“ (d).
- This suggests that Laird, in line with Stebbing, differentiated between models of decompositional analysis and transformative analysis in the contemporary philosophical sense.
- However, one could criticise Laird for not making such critical remarks as Stebbing did regarding the way proponents of logical positivism only engage in formal analysis.
- On the other hand, it is also worth noting that Stebbing herself did not use the term „analytical philosophy“ during that period.



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- Ayer discussed this in the article “The Analytic Movement in Contemporary British Philosophy” (1936), which was based on his lecture at the Sorbonne in 1935:

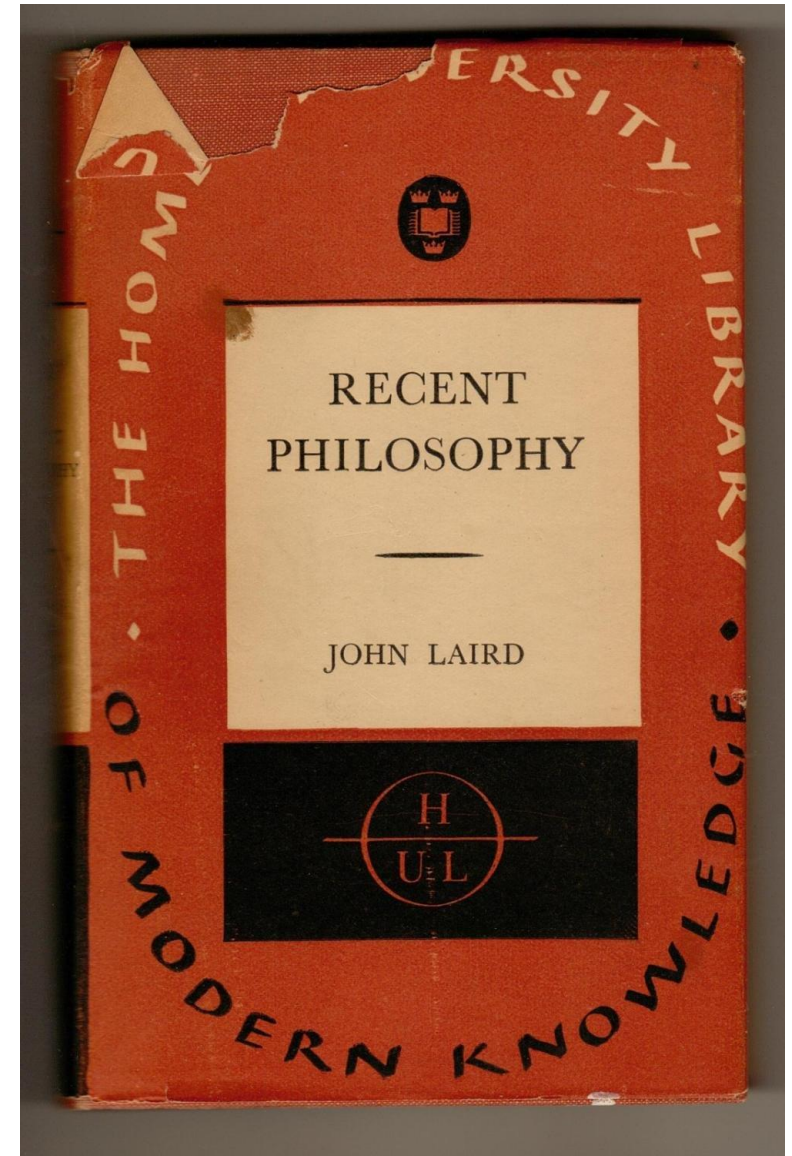
As both Russell and Moore have taught philosophy at Cambridge, where Moore remains to the present day, it is with Cambridge University that the analytic movement in contemporary British philosophy is chiefly associated. So much so indeed that it has become customary to speak of the philosophy of analysis in England as the philosophy of “The Cambridge School.” Of those who have actually studied under Moore in recent years, and follow him most closely, the most prominent are Professor Susan Stebbing, John Wisdom, C. E. Mace, and A. Duncan-Jones. These philosophers condemn metaphysics, but find themselves unable to accept either the doctrine of physicalism, as developed by Neurath and Carnap, or the methodological solipsism which is adopted by those who profess to follow Wittgenstein. (Ayer 1936a, 57)





# The term „analytic philosophy“ in 1930s Britain

- This bibliography includes significant works such as Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1936b/2001), Carnap's *The Unity of Science* (1934), Stebbing's entry on „Logic“ in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1929/1950), and Wisdom's *Problems of Mind and Matter* (1934). It is noteworthy that this term appeared in the work mentioned by Wisdom. It is from this textbook that Laird might have derived the term „analytic philosophy“ for use in his book.
- As mentioned, Wisdom distinguished analytic philosophy from speculative philosophy in his book. This distinction by Wisdom might align with the interpretation that Laird included diverse methodologies within contemporary analytic philosophy – such as phenomenology and Dewey's instrumentalism – particularly because „analytic Philosophy“ was, at that time, often set in opposition to idealism and speculative philosophy.
- Laird's understanding of logical positivism as the „new analytic Philosophy“ was likely influenced by his study of the works of Carnap and Ayer.





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