



Quantitative studies of philosophy

Eugenio Petrovich: A quantitative portrait of analytic philosophy: looking through the margins. Cham: Springer Nature, 2024, xii + 214 pp, \$119.99 HB

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It is notable that a review of a book on the application of digital methods in philosophy no longer has to begin with an extended defense of the ability of those methods to contribute to our understanding of philosophical texts. It is, at this point, widely recognized that—far from the fearful caricatures of digital humanities as glib and superficial or as destructive to traditional practices of close reading and exegesis—digital methods can be applied in a complimentary fashion along with our other philosophical tools, allowing us profound insight into philosophical texts and the history of our field.

Eugenio Petrovich's *Quantitative Portrait of Analytic Philosophy* is a delightful and well-crafted addition to the arsenal of examples of just this kind of complementary work. Two features make the project particularly valuable. First, such digital studies are almost always published as journal articles, which means that a sustained analysis, using a variety of different methods to study the same target domain, is relatively rare. Petrovich carefully delimits an area of study, which he calls Late Analytic Philosophy (LAP), comprising a collection of all the journal articles from five top analytic philosophy journals (*Journal of Philosophy*, *Nous*, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, *Mind*, and *Philosophical Review*) published between 1980 and 2000. Occasionally, for technical reasons, the target is instead Recent Analytic Philosophy (RAP), comprising a collection of all the journal articles from the same journals but from 2005 to 2019. These articles are well situated to give us a comprehensive picture of the evolution of the field over this rapidly moving twenty-year period.

For LAP and RAP, then, the book walks us through: the construction of the domain of study; the analysis of the conceptual shape of this domain and its changes over

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time; an exploration of citation behavior and the epistemic role that citations play in the field; an analysis of sociological relationships and connections to funding; a discussion of the community structure in philosophy; and, finally, a meta-analysis of the quantitative study of philosophy itself, using LAP and RAP as a lens. This makes the book interesting for two readerships in particular: historians of analytic philosophy who hope to understand its recent structure and development, as well as anyone interested in the prospects for quantitative studies of philosophy more generally. I should note here that I am a member of the second camp; I lack the expertise in LAP to be able to evaluate many of Petrovich's historical claims and thus will not do so here.

This multi-faceted analysis is salutary for a number of reasons, not least of which is that it brings the reader along for an experience that is common for practitioners of digital studies but rarely articulated in the limited scope of a journal article: as multiple methods from multiple perspectives are applied to the same domain, we have the feeling of “triangulating” the subject, reinforcing our belief that our analyses are showing us the truth because different lines of attack converge and push in the same direction. The idea that this kind of consilience tells us that we are on the right track is a familiar perception for those of us who have performed these studies, as we often are worried about ensuring the robustness of our results. It also provides one of the ways in which we can demonstrate that quantitative studies are not engaged in cherry picking or latching onto spurious correlations.

The second broad feature that makes the book unique is its methodological slant. Petrovich is known for his previous work not on the traditional content of philosophical texts, i.e., the main text of these journal articles, but on what we can call the para-text—other parts of publications such as their citations (Petrovich 2018) and their acknowledgments (Petrovich 2021). This focus on the para-text lets us see features of philosophical publication that might otherwise pass under the radar. As I already noted, there is a significant emphasis here on sociological and community structure—something that is usefully illuminated by looking at acknowledgments and citations, but which might be much more difficult to see if we concentrated instead on article content. The relationship between the history of philosophy and the sociology of philosophy is, as is well known, somewhat strained; Petrovich's illustration of ways in which we can redress this gap using digital analysis are extremely welcome.

A final feature of the work that makes it impressive is its forward-looking perspective. Petrovich is conscious of the developing character of the field of, as he nicely dubs it, quantitative studies of philosophy (QSP), and the book includes a number of avenues for future work. Let me consider three of them briefly here. First, to be sure, the limitation of the study to journal articles poses a challenge that will need to be met head-on in the years to come: book publishing is too important in philosophy to be set aside. The inclusion of books into corpora like Petrovich's, however, will raise a variety of interesting technical challenges, as the nature of, for instance, citation practices in a book is simply not the same as the role that those citations play for an article.

Despite the para-textual focus of the book, at various points in the argument Petrovich still leverages these analyses to give us insight into the content of analytic philosophy—citation networks, for instance, can pick out communities at moments in time that seem, based on the authors involved and the works cited, to correspond to the various sub-disciplines that we know to compose contemporary analytic phi-

losophy. But as Petrovich notes, this is a “mediated” relationship: a network built from citation and co-citation cannot provide us directly with “any precise intellectual commitment about the content of metaphysics, philosophy of mind, epistemology, etc.” (83). The path forward for future digital programmes that can integrate structural analyses, like those Petrovich performs here, with analyses of the content of the papers in the corpus (as, for instance, has been explored with topic modeling; Malaterre et al. 2019), is thus bright.

Lastly, as anyone who has performed quantitative work of this sort can tell you, there is a temptation latent within it that is as natural as it is dangerous. These methods could mistakenly be interpreted as giving us an “objective” judgment of the state of the data, freed from the biases of close reading. This is not the case. Petrovich himself is exemplary in this regard: his book carefully considers the impact of the numerous subjective decisions that he makes in the construction of his corpus, the choice of methods of analysis, and so on. These choices will clearly have an impact on the results that we generate. But Petrovich’s care here stands both as a good example and as a warning. For once our attention is attracted to the importance of these subjective choices, the difficulty of tracing out their resulting implications looms large. To take just one example, every corpus, Petrovich’s included, goes through a number of processing and cleaning steps to make it “intelligible” to quantitative study. Thresholds are applied; “noise” is thrown out. What exactly might the impact of these kinds of quotidian choices be on the conclusions that we draw? An answer to such questions is as important as it is elusive.

To conclude, I believe this is an important book—not just for its first-order content, which offers a wide array of historical insights, and which should lead to fruitful debates in the history of contemporary philosophy, but also for its second-order content, which presents a careful example of quantitative methodology that is extremely self-reflective about its own weaknesses and the ways in which QSP should develop in order to ensure that it continues to fruitfully contribute to our understanding of the philosophical enterprise.

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