

BEFORE AND BEYOND THE ANALYTIC-CONTINENTAL DIVIDE

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Introduction

Hegel famously tells us in the 'Preface' to *The Philosophy of Right* that the owl of Minerva flies only at dusk. In this spirit, we might wonder whether the fact that conferences like this are occurring isn't a sure sign that the analytic-continental divide in Anglophone philosophy is coming to its end. Did not the critiques of logical positivism by the later Wittgenstein and then by Quine destroy from within the ambitions of 'analytic philosophy' in its classical, pre-1939 phase? And so today, is there not a new eclecticism about anglo-american philosophy, crowned by a renewed interest in the very types of metaphysics which the younger Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle wanted to outlaw? Meanwhile, on the other, the continental side, is the influence of the French post-structuralists Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, Lyotard and Baudrillard—who in many critiques form the most reprehensible 'contys'—now declining, except in departments where their work is read not as philosophy, but as 'theory'? Couldn't the present interest in some circles in Agamben's and Badiou's work be seen as the last baroque moment of a lineage in decline: the former as an elegant, gnostic footnote to Heidegger, the latter as a militant reaction against continental philosophy which remains bound to its founding normative assumptions *malgre lui*?

There is, and will remain, a distinction between analytic and continental philosophy.

Even if, at a suitable level of conceptual abstraction, it is possible and desirable to imagine a *rapprochement* between what remains of analytic and continental philosophy, the distinction has structuring political or institutional efficiency. It governs appointments, shapes departmental plans and syllabuses, government rankings of journals, and the allocation of research and other moneys. It does so in this country, as in the US and the UK—although interestingly, not so strongly on the 'continent', certainly in Germany.

This material or political reality of the analytic-continental distinction reflects real methodological differences. And it promotes powerful, inter-generationally reproduced prejudices on both sides. These methodological differences in their turn reflect a lasting difference in the way both sides of the

division conceive of philosophy herself. We could ironically say that the analytic-continental divide resembles what some psychoanalytic theory tells us characterizes sexual difference: the two sides of the divide are not just different, but each conceives of this difference differently. There is no neutral, universal—‘Philosophy Capital P’—that the two sides take themselves to be contesting. Instead, partisans think that their way of doing philosophy is philosophy *per se*: each particular or species in this way projects its own genus or universal. The other side, continental or analytic, is a deceptive *fantasma* of the real philosophical thing: sophistry perhaps, or pedantry, or poetry. You could think here of the odd way that at least the continental side of the divide is named: as if the opposite of ‘analysis’ was not the activity of synthesis or transcendental reflection, but an exotic place you might visit across the channel, next time you return to Oxbridge and the *alma mater*.

There have been many attempts from both sides to understand the difference between analytic and continental philosophy, and to trace the genealogy of the divide. The methodology I will use here brings elements of classical philosophy together with Hegelian Marxism. From classical philosophy, it takes the notion that Philosophy Capital P, since Plato, has had two components: one, a mathematical side, which is concerned to divide and conceive the different parts of reality and their relations; and the other, an erotic side, which strives to ascend to comprehend the whole of natural and political reality. In the twentieth century, these parts of philosophy have largely sundered, in the analytic-continental divide. From classical philosophy and Hegelian Marxism, it takes the insight that philosophy is a *bios* or way of life, one which carries within it an interest in promoting human happiness, whether of the individual thinker (as for the ancients) or for a transformed, rational society (for the moderns).

This perspective will probably not satisfy practitioners on either side of the analytic-continental divide. Or it will appear as a folly. Yet it is salutary to recognize that, historically and today, there are more meta-philosophical positions available to think about what some of us are fortunate enough to be paid to do than just two. Although I cannot speak with any knowledge at all on them, it is worth for one thing noting that there are more ‘continents’ where philosophy is done than one: so there is ‘continental’ middle Eastern and Asian philosophies we can learn from and study.

I

In my classical-philosophical perspective, how does the analytic-continental division present itself?

Analytic philosophy presents itself as the continuation of what has been a permanent tendency of philosophers, for political and devotional reasons. The medievals preserved philosophy by making it, in various ways, the handmaiden to theology (in Christianity) or jurisprudence (in the Moslem and the Jewish orbits). Just so, analytic philosophy continues philosophy today by subordinating philosophy to the modern sciences. It adapts the rhetoric and ambitions of the modern enlightenment.

Analytic philosophy is thus characterized by a humble, non-foundationalist view of philosophy's place in the polis and the division of the disciplines. The duty to understand the whole of nature and political life is held to have been taken over by the sciences. While science does not yet, and perhaps in principle can never, achieve a complete 'TOE' (theory of everything), the progress it has made in understanding and harnessing nature since its seventeenth century inception fully justifies our faith in it as the legitimate and sufficient heir of *prima philosophia*.

How then will the analytic view his continental rival?

In the analytic's perspective, continental philosophy appears as mistaken for the following reasons:

- 1) Continental Philosophy (CP) continues to attempt to understand the whole. Yet:
- 2) CP is not scientific. Indeed:
- 3) it often even questions the epistemic sufficiency of the natural sciences.

So, given only (sic.) the synthetic *a posteriori* truth that:

- 4) the natural sciences have by now justified their claim to be the only means of understanding the whole and the relations between the parts of reality;

The necessary inference is that continental "philosophy" so-called either:

- 5) approximates to good poetry, at best; or:
- 6) is simply bunk, anti-realist nonsense at worst, that ought to be consigned to the flames.

The ancient *gnothi seauton* (know thyself) that stands over the philosophical tradition thus becomes in this analytic lineage something like: know the limits and capacities of the linguistic or conceptual equipment that shapes thy ability to know the world, so thou do not formulate unanswerable or meaningless questions, and can so contribute to the wider modern project of rendering reality transparent to scientific rationality.

How does the continental philosopher respond?

For her, analytic philosophy's renunciation of the attempt to understand the whole means that the, doubtless important enough, work it performs in dividing up the parts of our conceptual equipment for understanding the world, remains strictly sub-philosophical. At best, it does not speak to the most vital questions of human concern. Most deeply, analytic philosophy remains constitutively unable to understand its own radically founded or derivative character. It rests on a series of phenomenological (Husserl), hermeneutico-historical (Heidegger, Gadamer) and/or sociopolitical (critical theory) presuppositions that it cannot explain. For Heidegger, for instance, modern logicism exemplifies a deeply founded understanding of language. It takes language as a present-at-hand thing in a way which both presupposes and forgets language's prior, disclosive function. This function involves the synthesis not of subject and predicate, nor of function and variable(s), but of 'what is for thinking and for being', as Parmenides already stated it.

Analytic philosophy is hence both partial and blind to its own partiality, for the continentals. This is shown in amongst other places by how it cannot avoid invoking notions like 'intuition', the 'charity principle', and 'common sense', without accounting for how these presuppositions might be historically variable and politically problematic.

The ancient *gnōthi seauton* in this continental lineage hence becomes something like this: reflexively understand the historical, political or 'epochal' presuppositions which make possible thy way of understanding the world, so that thou do not commit yourself to practices based on unthought and potentially partial or reductive assumptions.

It is worth noting that, as charged, continental philosophy does reserve the right, from Husserl onwards, to call into question the presuppositionless basis of the natural sciences, and accordingly their sufficiency as the model for all rational knowledge. The transcendental mode of argumentation it inherits from Kant, with reference to which it claims to disclose the extra-scientific phenomenological, historical and categorical presuppositions which make the empirical sciences possible, is a further deep marker of the difference between continental and analytic philosophy.

II

So, in the perspective I am looking from, is a *rapprochement* between analytic and continental schools possible or desirable? I answer that it is desirable, but if it is not impossible, it is probably not a reasonable thing to hope for in the foreseeable future.

The *rapprochement* is unnecessary, if not undesirable, from the analytic side, since this side is and will remain institutionally hegemonic, at least for extra-philosophical reasons I will return to in Part III below.

The *rapprochement* is desirable from the continental side for political reasons. Continental philosophy is presently not, and will never realistically be dominant, in Britain, the United States, and Australia. If anything, it is and can expect to continue to decline. As Aristotle tells us in his *Politics*, it is the weak who always wish for equality.

Ascending from the politics, the *rapprochement* is difficult to imagine since both sides arguably correspond to one legitimate and irreducible component of philosophical activity. As such, they speak powerfully to people of different types or temperaments. But for that reason, the problem concerning the best way of life Plato raises in *Republic IX* and Aristotle in the *Ethics I* and *X* arises. This is the problem that each group of human beings tends to believe their conception of the best way of life is the simply best. It follows that all those with a truly less comprehensive view will view skeptically any or all claims to a more comprehensive vision, however unjust or just.

Nevertheless, I would argue a *rapprochement* between analytic and continental philosophers is a good we might at least pray for, as the ancients would have said. Why?

First, because both sides, as well as harboring virtues, also do harbor the type of vices and limits the others' prejudices typically pick out. Continental philosophy often does verge into anti-realistic, unfalsifiable, and nonsensical formulations. It is legitimate to long for Carnap, when one has been reading Deleuze and Guattari on the Karmic egg, or for Rawls, when one reads some of the ill-conceived libertarianism that some continental thought presupposes as self-evidently best.

Analytic philosophy, for its part, does not allow itself to raise many questions which are 'philosophical', certainly in the sense in which philosophy was understood until the seventeenth century, and is still understood by laypeople today: what is the meaning of being, or of our being? Can the sense of "truth" be reduced to something internal to propositions, rather than attitudes, systems of understanding, beliefs, ways of life, or certain experiences? What is the best way of life or regime? What is the relationship between ethics, politics, religion, art, and philosophy? Is our modern or postmodern age any better than previous societies? And if so, in what respects, and with what costs? It is legitimate to long for Heidegger or Hans Blumenberg, when asked to consider for too long, in a time of fast-tracked social change, what it is like to be a bat, or to have a lead role in the prisoners' dilemma.

Second: a *rapprochement* of analytic philosophy with some extra-scientific, but defensibly rational, way of understanding the whole, is desirable. It is desirable because the modern scientific *Weltanschauung* is predicated on a fact-value distinction, and before that on the later medieval attack on final causes. But this means that its objectivity excludes—indeed, it threatens to render ‘irrational’—any normative criteria for making the ethical and political decisions that are the unavoidable stuff of our shared life. We will return to the consequences of this. They turn around how the philosopher, once he leaves the study, is also a citizen. So if his philosophy—whether analytic or continental—cannot offer guidance on ethical and political questions, he must decide like everybody else on extra-rational grounds of fear, passion, or tradition—or at least he cannot *philosophically* critique any of these ethico-political motivations.

Third: a *rapprochement* between analytic and continental philosophers is desirable since both sides are arguably blind to their shared modern presuppositions, despite the well-attested ambivalence of many continentals about modernity in general and science in particular.

We moderns can only know what we make. There is a world of difference between ancient contemplative *episteme* and the Baconian intention to put nature on the rack using active experimentation, so we might pry loose her secrets. For the analytic philosophers, this is why our linguistic and conceptual equipment, however conceived, is the privileged object of the analysis, and the thought experiment is a principle *modus operandi*. For the continental philosophers, this is why human history, and the art and texts produced by numinous authorities, are the privileged object of analysis, and hermeneutics is the principle *modus operandi*. For both traditions, then, nature cannot be philosophically comprehended: either science takes this laurel or else nature appears, in forms of continental vitalism, as radically resistant to, or excessive of, any rational determination.

Divided in what they stand for, that is, the analytics and continentals are united in philosophical possibilities both exclude. Both reflect in different ways what historians of ideas have called modern world-alienation. This was the moderns’ loss of faith in the goodness or order of the world which activated the modern ambition to become master and possessor of nature. Since god is so powerful or so distant that the apparent law-like appearances of the world might be deceptive, or can in any case harbor no orienting meaning, then human beings must needs assert themselves in and against this nature. Its symptom is that modern philosophy from its Cartesian start—and even before that, in figures like Montaigne—was founded and remains haunted by species of skepticism, pragmatism, and relativism, up to Kripke among the analytics, de-

construction on the continental side, and Richard Rorty, somewhere in between.

Scientificity about fact is perfectly consistent with a complete relativization of norms. This is what renders the continentals' historical study of the way different peoples have asserted visions of the good life eminently rational. Even though we cannot rationally decide between different normative visions of life, that is—in default of prephilosophically bracketing all normative questions—we can at least “archaeologically” inventory different cultures' different ways of seeing the world. The correlative inability to decide between the differing caves we excavate leads continentals, very rationally, into the twinned termini with which that tradition has, since Heidegger, been bedeviled—namely, decisionism (not what, but how we decide, can still be valorised) and messianism (since perhaps some wholly Other cave might yet appear or be hoped for).

Fourthly, both lineages of twentieth century philosophy, as modern, miss the orienting fact that philosophy is a way of life. Trivially, it is one career amongst others, if one which has every bit as much trouble today justifying itself before the court of society as it did in Plato's youth. Yet to not consider philosophy as one way of life amongst others is to miss (i) asking the question of what *Eros* drives some people to do philosophy and (ii) asking thereby about the wider existential and political significance of their philosophical inquiry. The analytics accept the modern solution: truth, or at least scientific truth, will always be a good in itself, since—in the technologies which apply these sciences etc.—it will help to better the human estate. The continentals philosophize in different ways about 'life', but not about philosophy as a way of life. In ways that lead to notorious performative contradictions and repeated collapses into pragmatism (philosophy as 'tool kit', 'strategic', etc.), continentals will often truthfully deny that their philosophy is or should aim at any context-transcendent truth at all.

III

Plato in *Republic VI* tells us, with small variations, that the philosopher should at least exhibit “ease of learning, good memory, quick wits, smartness, youthful passion, [and] high-mindedness”. (503c) These are difficult for any one of us to achieve all at once. But why the high-mindedness and good cultural memory of continental philosophy should have been so wholly severed in the last 100 years from the quick wits and smartness of analytic philosophy is historically remarkable. Even the rationalists and the empiricists shared common ground on what philosophy should be about. The continental-analytic division begs a larger explanation.

My wager is that the continental-analytic divide is one, small but significant, manifestation of what C. P. Snow famously dubbed the ‘two cultures’ of the modern world. If philosophy has long ceased to be the queen of the sciences, its dividedness since the 1920s at least veridically reflects the wider division of the modern human and natural sciences. Analytic philosophy sides with the natural sciences, conceptually and institutionally. Continental philosophy in its Anglophone reception is closer to the humanities, many disciplines of which have taken it up, often thereby compromising its analytic rigor.

The most powerful diagnosis of the unusual cultural divisions within modernity comes from within the Marxist tradition: principally the work of Gyorgy Lukacs and Max Horkheimer. Lukacs’ argument concerns the divisions and impasses that bedeviled classical modern philosophy—by which he means first of all Kant and Fichte. Critical rationalism was always driven, Lukacs argues, by a lingering skeptical sense of the larger irrationality of the world. In Kant’s system, this larger irrationality is figured in the Thing in Itself. This Thing is at once critically necessary for Kant—certainly to save practical reason from natural determinism—yet also constitutively inaccessible, *and*—remarkably—a kind of repository wherein all the things Kant argues that our reason can not decide about are collected in a kind of philosophical limbo: a noumenal soul, free will, the presupposed pure materiality of objects, and the truth of the first and last things. Kantian philosophy leaves the world as we experience it divided into the great “antinomies of bourgeois thought”, to cite Lukacs’ famous expression: freedom and necessity, phenomena and noumena, form and content, duty and feeling. These antinomies are given textual body in the division between the first and second *Critiques*, so from the Preface of the third *Critique*, Kant feels troubled and compelled to try to mediate between them.

Kant may well turn to practical philosophy, in an ingenious but unlikely way, to give us good reasons to continue to postulate concerning the Things of our highest metaphysical hopes: freedom, immortality, and divinity. The price is that practical reason, in his thought, wholly loses touch with *phronesis* and the empirical complexity of political life, and thereby leaves the moral subject loaded down with a well-known supererogatory motivational burden, (I apologize to people unfamiliar with Kant for having to race like this through things.) Into the gap between the is and an ought that modern philosophers since Machiavelli or Hobbes have realistically suspected of being unattainable, theodical philosophies of history and/or the market have duly been inserted. The thought is that although individuals cannot realistically be expected to act out of duty or virtue, we can nevertheless hope—or even econometrically show—that the sum total of their vicious or pathological choices will end, if not in a kingdom of ends, in the most materially prosperous of all possible worlds.

Why is any of this relevant to the continental-analytic divide?

The Hegelian-Marxian wager is that the emergence of such antinomies must speak to and from certain powerful divisions in the way that moderns experience their social and political world. Modern liberalism from Hobbes on, like analytic philosophy, eschews the possibility of knowing the highest good for human beings. The political reflection of this theoretical perspective is the enshrined distinctions between public and private, the state and the church, and the citizen and bourgeois producer/consumer. The state neither can nor should direct individuals in the private realm, and society as a whole, towards a substantive vision of the good. Instead, the burden for reproducing the social whole is “outsourced” to the market, as we repeat today. The market is conceived in liberal economics as the realm of freedom wherein private individuals can pursue their competing ideas of the good, all mediated by a neutral, value-free mechanism, the market as ‘invisible hand’. In the private realm, then, forms of micro-rationality, instrumental to the pursuit of the competing ends and enterprises, is encouraged to flourish. The price for any enterprise of failing to maintain ‘best practice’ in managing people and producing and marketing goods is economic failure.

Yet this retail rationality is coupled with wholesale irrationality. Western subjects are more and more required to be an expert in one or other technical specialty in order to simply survive in the new economy. Yet the very pursuit of such expertise in no way requires reflection on the wider significance of the significance of the pursuits in which one becomes expert. At least pragmatically, in the sense that there is limited time available for any one to pay political attention, the culture of specialisation mitigates against making any such attempt. Even if this were not so, the objective complexity of the global system means that no one can wholly understand it, no nation-state any longer lastingly harness or control it, and that the success or failure of any one individual or enterprise has only minute significance for the system as a whole. Then there is the further evident irrationality which is lately again very much in the news: that the system is periodically crisis-bound, and systematically oblivious to its own external or natural preconditions.

The consequence of all this, say Lukacs and Horkheimer, is that, in the refined realm of philosophical reflection, certain types of one-sided philosophical perspectives become much more *prima facie* rational in late modernity, as accurate reflections of the objectively divided world in which we live.

On one side, there is the chaotic specialization of whichever local enterprises can gain and maintain a market share, even in today’s ‘marketplace of ideas’. This is where I would situate analytic philosophy, conceived as it is, as an

avowedly humble, limited affair which eschews traditional philosophy's aspiration to know the whole.

On the other side, the inability of people to comprehend or control the globalizing social totality in which we live makes forms of vitalism and irrationalism speak much more powerfully to people than they evidently did, say, to people living in the medieval or classical periods. The world is, for instance, will to power: which means that it is as profligate, indifferent to any of us, and magnificently overpowering as the global economy is today. Or the way things show themselves has an irreducible abyssal dimension that renders critical rationality allegedly 'the most stiff-necked opponent to thought' (Heidegger), which we should eschew in the same "thought" as mindless technological triumphalism. One can in any case not know, substantively, why one course of action is better than any other. And this can only leave us rationally tempted (within just one or two suppressed premises) to opt for ethical positions which either (i.) messianically hypostasize some unforeseeable Otherness (witness Derrida, Levinas, post-secularism) or (ii.) valorize authentically ungroundable events or actions (witness Badiou and Zizek).

Concluding Remarks

Because of the format and of my own ignorance, I have had to move very briskly to this end-point. I do not expect to convince people on either side of the divide. I hope that people will even question my perspective, which—if left as I have left it—would be open to the charge of historicism which I have leveled here against the Heideggerian wing of continental thought. My defense is not only that all positions tend to tar what they disagree with with deficient forms of rationality. To historicise positions one considers partial says nothing about the possibility, indeed the performative presupposition, that there at least ought to be perspectives which are more comprehensive—and in that Hegelian or Philosophical sense more true.

My claims are simply these: the analytic-continental divide in philosophy is here to stay. Each side has just criticisms of the excesses and partialities of the other side, but—from a Marxian perspective—remains blind to how the division itself, in its irrationality, might reflect the wider social and political irrationality of our world. This is understandable, since no position likes to have its explicit claims relativized or read symptomatically. Ideology is always what the other guy does. My position also leaves out the work of figures like Robert Brandom and the second generation Frankfurt School theorists, which are making important synthetic moves, across the analytic-continental divide. As I said in my Introduction, I also cannot speak except in nearly complete ignorance about 'continental' middle Eastern or Asian thought.

Yet the historical uniqueness of the analytic-continental division in Anglo-American academe, which goes not only to methods and presuppositions, but to metaphilosophical conceptions of what philosophy *is*, seems to me to license risking a wider perspective. In this perspective, we live in a divided, profoundly irrational social totality, one in which the modern faith in unlimited progress is fast collapsing, outside of specialized fields of expertise. This wholesale irrationality affects even the ways we experience our life worlds. The demand to choose a career and specialize is the flipside of a growing sense of the imminent and immanent irrationality of our world as a whole. We note the popularity of risk theory, new age philosophies, motivational cults, and quasi-post-structuralist managerial discourses that celebrate, in the words of one guru, that “now even the meaning of change has changed”. No previous society has, cumulatively, had an nth proportion of the cumulative technical expertise of our world. Yet the contemporary emergence of forms of decisionistic fundamentalism, from Badiou within philosophy to Islamic and Christian movements, shows that people’s ancient and perhaps natural demand for a normatively orienting conception of the whole, if it is not rationally addressed, will be duly filled in by principled forms of irrationalism.

So my concluding remarks are grim, although despair is always a little bit dishonest. The last three decades have seen the most complete triumph of liberalism in economics of the modern period, certainly since the advent of universal suffrage. The effects on the university, which is being privatized and rendered subservient to the demands of the new economy, make the “chaotic specialization” Horkheimer decried in 1930 seem tame. Anyone who has worked within a tertiary teaching job over the last five years, and not been subjected, with minimal collegial input, to at least one reshaping of the disciplinary make-up of their schools—many performed in the most nominalistic abstraction from considerations concerning the object domains of the disciplines in question—is a fortunate person indeed. The *telos* of the university, as a place wherein teaching is prioritized, and pure research possible, is being replaced by *teloi* delivered to the university from outside, wherein the market is the ‘value-neutral’ arbiter of all *teloi*.

So however successful Brandom’s work, or the good will of continentals, may be in building bridges between the analytics and their others, they will be fighting against the tide of wider trends which encourage exactly such philosophical and prejudicial divisions. The ideal student of philosophy would surely be one who has mastered both traditions, and so can use her analytic acumen to read and critique continental thinkers, and transcend the normative deficits of both traditions by situating both sides in a more comprehensive, rational understanding of the whole. Whether we are likely to have the hope, interest, desire, time, or money to produce such philosophers of the future is,

it seems to me, in the lap of the gods—which seems to mean, for the foreseeable future, the market.

Thank you

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