

# The Analytical - Continental Philosophy Divide

14 October The Analytical - Continental Philosophy Divide - Robert Sinnerbrink

Robert looks the distinction between analytical and continental philosophy

Notes on the Analytic/Continental Divide

Robert Sinnerbrink

rsinnerb@scmp.mq.edu.au

Philagora, Glebe, October 14, 2008

## 1. What is the Analytic/Continental Distinction?

A familiar but vexing distinction that belongs in part to the pre-philosophical doxa that we bring to the practice of philosophy; a distinction that belongs in part to the history of philosophy and the cultural self-definition of competing philosophical schools, movements and traditions; and one that belongs in part to the institutional practice and politics of academic/ &lsquo;professional' philosophy today.

## 2. Origins and History of the Analytic/Continental Distinction

The term &lsquo;Continental Philosophy' came into vogue in the Anglophone world after WWII (the 1950s), particularly by promoters of the emerging Analytic movement distinguishing 20C British philosophy (Fregean logic, Russellian conceptual analysis, Moorean commonsense realism, Oxbridge linguistic analysis, along with Vienna Circle/logical positivist attack on metaphysical speculation). Key figures here include Gilbert Ryle, R. M. Hare, Geoffrey Warnock, who all engaged in polemical attempts to shore up the self-definition of AP against, in particular, French and German phenomenology, which were both cast as the sophisticated Other of AP.

Ryle's 1958 Essay, "Phenomenology vs. The Concept of Mind" is a case in point. Ryle celebrates philosophers of the British cast as refusing to assimilate philosophical to scientific inquiry, as deflating the grand systems of metaphysics, as adopting a sceptical empiricism, and, tellingly, as eschewing any "Führerprinzip" in philosophy (Heidegger). Ryle's deliberately provocative, inflammatory dismissal of "Continental philosophy" was designed to positively define analytic philosophy as enjoying the benefits of British commonsense as well as profiting from "the massive developments of our logical theory". This British way of doing things is contrasted with the naïve, ill-informed, "Führer-happy" nonsense peddled by disreputable &lsquo;Continental' rivals.

Ryle's construction of "our logic," however, conveniently ignores the well-documented cross-fertilisation between European and English philosophers (the contributions of Cantor, Dedekind, Frege, and so on). It also ignores the interesting exchanges that were commonplace only decades before (Ryle reviewed Heidegger's *Being and Time* for a 1930 issue of *Mind*, and extensively taught Brentano and Husserl). Ryle, Hare, and Warnock all characterise CP (phenomenology/existentialism) as the irrational other to AP: CP is criticised as a form of sophism with potentially corrupting effects, as compared with the clarity, logical rigour, scientific empiricism, and moral probity of AP—a philosophy with genuinely 'scientific' credentials. This is the basic template for the unflattering contrast between CP and AP that persists even today.

### 3. Critique of the Very Idea of CP (Glendinning)

Simon Glendinning's sceptical response: despite efforts to show the contrary (Pippin, Critchley) there is no such thing as a unified tradition of CP. Rather, CP is a projection, the despised Other of AP that functions as its own 'non-part, as a way of shoring up its own self-definition. Stereotypically, CP is described as irrational rather than rational, obscure rather than clear, rhetorical rather than conceptual, synthetic rather than analytical, literary rather than scientific, concerned with meaning rather than with truth, textually-based rather than focussed on problems, historical-philological rather than philosophical-conceptual, etc.

In short, CP is sophistry: but Glendinning argues that this (the risk of illusion, non-meaning) is a risk inherent to any kind of philosophising, which we should acknowledge as philosophers rather than projecting this risk on to a despised Other.

For Glendinning, CP philosophers have, curiously, adopted the term themselves as a pragmatic form of self-definition, even though it remains an empty concept (metaphysical nonsense!). Though he does admit there are pragmatic situations where it is necessary to describe oneself as doing CP rather than using a more neutral term like non-AP! To overcome the 'divide' between the two philosophical cultures, he argues, we should therefore do away with AP/CP distinction altogether (Ender). Or alternatively, we might want to retain, despite its flaws, some version of the AP/CP distinction as having institutional/political significance (Bender).

### 4. Defending the Idea of CP

A Pluralist concept of CP:

Cf. concept of art (Danto), or concept of a film genre (Cavell): no definitive list of necessary and sufficient criteria that would pick out a clear concept of CP forming a unified tradition. Rather, a 'portmanteau' term or concept comprising at least three distinct senses:

a/ Historical (1) 1950s English attack on German and French phenomenology; 2) the sharp break between phenomenology and conceptual analysis/logical positivism in the 1920s and 30s (epitomised in the Carnap vs. Heidegger dispute); 3) the impetus of early analytic philosophy (Russell, Moore) in their revolt against the prevailing school of (British) idealism, drawing on Hegel; 4) mid nineteenth-century descriptions (Mill on Bentham and Coleridge) of the difference between scientific and humanistic approaches to knowledge and understanding; 5) the fundamental break between 19C post-Kantian thinkers over the legacy of Kant's critical philosophy (Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, the Left and Right Hegelians through to Marx and post-Marxist thought); 6) the 19C historical distinction between "British empiricism" (Locke, Berkeley, Hume) and "Continental rationalism" (Spinoza, Descartes, Leibniz)—perhaps the original source of the confusing amalgam of geographical/cultural and methodological/philosophical meanings of the analytic/Continental divide.

b/ Philosophical: the importance of the post-Kantian legacy (Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, phenomenology, hermeneutics, critical theory) and post-war French and German philosophy (critical theory, structuralism, post-structuralism) centred on problems of critique, praxis, and emancipation (Critchley); history of philosophy as integral to philosophical practice; humanistic model of knowledge and understanding rather than scientific (though cf. Marxism); greater interdisciplinary affiliation with art, literature, culture, history, politics and generally more pluralist conception of the relationship between philosophy and other (humanistic) disciplines. Relevant distinction is not so much CP/AP as the distinction between humanist and scientific models of philosophy. Cf. C. P. Snow's 'two cultures' problem: divorce between the humanities and the sciences played out in different conceptions of philosophy.

c/ Institutional-political: importance of retaining CP as a term to designate a pluralist tradition or style of philosophising in order to ensure institutional recognition of this alternative way of doing philosophy. Otherwise there is a risk of assimilating CP as minority philosophical culture into AP/post-AP mainstream.

Any attempt to find a 'pure' concept of CP usually fails; but this doesn't mean that the distinction is therefore null and void. Concept of CP as dependent upon the singular character of the works produced in its name (or even independently of this label); historically evolving plurality of styles and approaches that do not form a unified tradition but nonetheless do define an alternative way of going on in philosophy.