



Analytic and Continental Philosophy¹

The difference between continental and analytic philosophy can appear obvious when looking from afar. This difference can however become blurred as the topic is approached more closely. In the early 20th century, British and Austrian philosophers developed a radical approach to philosophy based on mathematics and the new techniques of symbolic logic initiated by Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell. Today, analytic philosophy is the main philosophical style practiced in Britain, the USA, as well as in many other countries. Continental philosophy remains the “old” way of philosophizing and is historically linked to continental Europe. Problems arise with regard to the geographical distinction: by now, several generations of “continental” philosophers have been working in the USA and elsewhere and have made important contributions. Also, much of the initial impetus of analytic philosophy came from philosophers rooted in Europe. A further problem is that neither current is very coherent. Continental philosophy appears very much like a patchwork of newer and older traditions such as phenomenology, hermeneutics, existentialism, critical theory, feminist theory, race theories, post-structuralism, deconstructionism, and postmodernism. In a similar vein, analytic philosophy is composed of sub-currents and mixed with disciplines like cognitive science and mathematics. Any comparisons of both traditions are problematical because the analytic/continental gap widens or tightens depending on which texts have been selected for comparison. Comparisons are often unfair as opponents pick the worst examples of the other tradition in order to make their own tradition appear superior. In terms of content, none of the two traditions has core topics, but fields of expertise overlap: analytic philosophy even has its own film studies. A topic like film would have been more naturally linked to continental philosophy. There is only one *substantial* difference between the two: analytic philosophers prefer to study the “mind” when it comes to questions about mental events, whereas continental philosophers prefer to study the “self.” It should be noted also that cognitive science does have a continental branch, which obviously *is* interested in the mind (see Gallagher 1997).

It is equally difficult to spell out differences with regard to thinking techniques. It is popular to link analytic philosophy to logic and continental philosophy to models of reasoning that are incompatible with logic, which is inaccurate, too. While early analytic philosophy was inspired by symbolic logic, today little formal logic appears in analytical texts. It is also true that most of continental philosophers believe that understanding operates rather through historical and

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hermeneutic mediation and not through logical analysis. Heidegger, the most important modern continental philosopher, held that phenomena should be studied prior to any logical interpretation simply because Being precedes knowledge. However, such convictions have never led to the creation of a “continental technique.” Apart from that, historical and hermeneutic mediation is not entirely incompatible with logic.

Often analytic philosophy is believed to scrutinize arguments more carefully; however, it is impossible to say that Heidegger did not invest much care into the analysis of problems and arguments. “Analysis” is even one of the cornerstones of his philosophy if we think of *Daseinsanalyse* (analysis of being-there). Again, the difference does not permit the crystallization of different techniques. Other observations are invalid because of hasty generalizations. Dagfinn Føllesdal states that continental philosophers like Heidegger and Derrida make predominant use of rhetoric (1997: 12). While this might be true for those philosophers, it cannot be generalized for the entire body of continental philosophy. Sometimes the difference is established by pitting an analytical “naturalist” way of seeing against a continental, “humanist” way. However, though a part of analytic philosophy has indeed tended towards naturalism, overall, the role of naturalism in analytic philosophy is more minor than is often assumed.

The “history” point might represent the most pertinent difference. Compared with continental philosophy, most – though not all – analytic philosophy is ahistorical. Interdisciplinarity, on the other hand, does exist in both, though the disciplines chosen by each are different. Analytic philosophy maintains close ties with mathematics, biology, physics, law, computer science, and economics, and looser ties with psychology and linguistics. The “partner disciplines” of continental philosophy are most typically located in the humanities. Discussions of literature appear in continental philosophy and are almost absent in the analytic tradition. Analytic philosophy avoids psychoanalytical and sociological elements, and since the 1970s, cognition-based models have increasingly been favored over linguistic based models. Continental philosophy is clearly more eclectic.

The difference cannot be established in terms of two different schools. There is little difference in substance, but there are different styles or different “ways” of doing philosophy. Coherence and incoherence are determined neither by particular philosophical questions nor by methods. Formal logic, for example, is not predominantly used as a technique; but it has had a strong influence on analytic philosophy’s style. Similarly, the link with the hard sciences has fostered qualities such as precision and clarity, which concerns style and does not represent a method. Equally, in continental philosophy, the abstract poetry and creative word play with concepts must be identified as a style rather than as a technique. J.J. Ross (1998), Levy (2003), Priest (2003), and Williams (1996) support the idea that the difference is mainly a matter of style.

Thoughts on the difference between analytic and continental philosophy have sporadically emerged since the 1960s, but have become much more frequent and substantial since the early 1990s. Pragmatists were among the first who took up the topic. The reason is that pragmatism’s own position is not entirely clear in that respect: it can be seen as a third way independent of both traditions or as a fusion of both. Richard Rorty’s article from 1999, “A Pragmatist View of

Contemporary Analytic Philosophy” represents an early reflection on the topic. Most studies appearing in the 1990s are not explicitly comparative; still they offer *implicit* comparisons by defining their own tradition through reflections against the other. An early example is Michael Dummett’s *Origins of Analytical Philosophy* (1993). Dummett refers to “continental” only once but says that he wishes to close “the absurd gulf” (xi). Attempts to define the particularity of each tradition are contained in “What is...” books and articles on continental and analytic philosophy. Georg Henrik von Wright “Analytic Philosophy” (1993) and Hans-Johann Glock’s edited volume *The Rise of Analytic Philosophy* (1997) are typical examples. The latter contains an explicitly comparative chapter by Dagfinn Føllesdal entitled “Analytic Philosophy: What is it and Why Should One Engage in It?” In 1996, Ray Monk published “What is Analytical Philosophy,” and appearing in 1998 was Biletzki’s and Matar’s edited volume entitled *The Story of Analytic Philosophy: Plot and Heroes*, in which two authors also contribute comparative chapters: Anat Biletzki with “Wittgenstein: Analytic Philosopher?” and Eli Friedlander with “Heidegger, Carnap, Wittgenstein: Much Ado about Nothing.” In the same year, Mezei and Smith’s *The Four Phases of Philosophy* (1998) attempted to apply Brentano’s scientific-philosophical method not only to analytic but also to continental philosophy, stating that its more recent phase (consisting of Rorty, Levinas and Derrida) has brought about a scientific decline. In 2008 appeared Glock’s *What is Analytic Philosophy?* and in 2013, Panu Raatikainen’s article “What Was Analytic Philosophy?”

It is impossible to list all “companions to continental philosophy,” but it is safe to assume that all of them offer some reflections on the difference with analytic philosophy at least in the introduction. Early essays attempting this task are Michael Rosen’s “Continental Philosophy from Hegel” (1998) and Simon Critchley’s “What is Continental Philosophy?” (1998). Since then, several book length studies have dealt with this topic, such as Cutrofello’s *Continental Philosophy: A Contemporary Introduction* (2005), West’s *Continental Philosophy: An Introduction* (2010), Glendinning’s *The Idea of Continental Philosophy* (2006), and McCumber’s *Time and Philosophy: A History of Continental Thought* (2011).

Some studies are clearly comparative containing more than implicit comparisons. They have been written by both analytic and continental philosophers. The earliest one comes from D.E. Cooper who presented a paper called “Analytical and Continental Philosophy” at the Aristotelian Society in 1994. Several explicitly comparative books appear in the 2000s. C.G. Prado’s edited volume *A House Divided: Comparing Analytic and Continental Philosophy* (2003) traces the history of the analytic-continental divide. Prado believes that at the heart of the opposition are different methodologies and he described continental philosophy as “synthetic” as opposed to analytic (Prado 2003: 10). The 2000s brought forth several book length studies comparing individual philosophers from both traditions: for example, Friedman’s *A Parting of the Ways: Carnap, Cassirer, and Heidegger* (2000), and Chris Lawn’s *Wittgenstein and Gadamer: Towards a Post-Analytic Philosophy of Language* (2004). Some comparisons (like those in Prado’s book) are inspired by “real” encounters: the Russell-Bergson encounter, the Carnap-Heidegger encounter, the Derrida-Searle encounter...

“Metaphilosophy” picks up the topic. In 2003 Neil Levy published the article “Analytic and Continental Philosophy: Explaining the Differences” in *Metaphilosophy*. Levy describes analytic philosophy as a “problem-solving activity” and continental philosophy as closer to the humanistic traditions and to literature and art. The pragmatist output on the analytic-continental divide keeps growing, too. In 2004, Eggington and Sandbothe published the edited volume *The Pragmatic Turn in Philosophy: Contemporary Engagements between Analytic and Continental Thought*. In 2011 appeared the arguably most important book on the divide, Chase and Reynolds’ *Analytic versus Continental: Arguments on the Methods and Value of Philosophy*. It was preceded by an edited volume by the same authors called *Postanalytic and Metacontinental: Crossing Philosophical Divides* (2010). Chapters 13 and 14 of *Analytic versus Continental* examine the different attitudes to issues of style and clarity as well as the place of philosophy in relation to the sciences and the arts.

Metaphilosophy remains interested in the topic. *An Introduction to Metaphilosophy* by Overgaard et al. (2013) contains a chapter entitled “Analytic and Continental Philosophy.” A comparative study has also been published in 2012 by Santiago Zabala focusing on Ernst Tugendhat. In the 1990s, Rorty, von Wright, Føllesdal, and also Ernst Tugendhat could be seen as prominent communicators between both traditions. It therefore makes sense to introduce Tugendhat into the discussion. One also needs to mention Brian Leiter’s blog “Philosophical Gourmet Report” (2006-2008), which has sparked vivid and often quoted discussions on the topic.

Some writings offer to overcome the divide. Peter Simons’ “Whose Fault? The Origins and Evitability of the Analytic–Continental Rift” (2001) sketches the arbitrariness of the divide. *Beyond the Analytic-Continental Divide* by Bell et al. (2015) searches contemporary philosophy for “synthetic” tendencies transcending the divide. A powerful attempt at reunification is made by Bernhard Williams’ *Truth and Truthfulness* (2004) where the analytical philosopher works in the tradition of Nietzsche’s genealogy.

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