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On the Unity of “Continental Philosophy”

It was in my capacity as a teacher of philosophy that I witnessed, in 2005, the creation of a new discipline within my department, a discipline called Continental Philosophy. In truth, I was more than a witness to this event. I protested it vociferously.

Is it not incongruous, I asked, for a department of philosophy *in* continental Europe to characterize the philosophical approaches typical *of* continental Europe as so distinctive that they ought to constitute a separate branch of philosophy, or even a discipline unto themselves? Would not such a taxonomic maneuver be better suited to an American or British philosophy department? Would not introducing such a discipline merely escalate the old but still unofficial feud between “analytic” and “continental” philosophy, hardening it into a formal schism within philosophy? Finally, would not this change have the effect of relegating all of the department’s other research areas to the

“analytic” domain, and so contribute still further to the hegemony of analytic philosophy in Scandinavia?

In raising these worries, I found myself in an odd position. I was protesting the establishment of a new discipline, Continental Philosophy, not at all on account of that proposed discipline’s projected content – which was to include many of the texts and thinkers with which my own research is centrally occupied – but rather because the idea was to isolate that content from now on as “continental,” rather than to permit it (as, in my view, both the “analytic” and “continental” approaches should be permitted) to continue permeating all of the other traditional branches of philosophy, such as metaphysics, ethics, or logic.

Soon my position grew stranger still. Just after I lost the debate within my department about establishing the new discipline, it emerged – ironically enough – that I was to be the faculty member charged with supervising it. Here I paused to take stock. Up to this point my teaching had ranged across the history of philosophy, from the ancients to the present. It was true that I had taken my degrees in France, where I had been lucky enough to have Gérard Granel as my mentor. It was also true that I had translated Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida and Agamben into Danish, my native language. But I had never before regarded the material that I had worked with, either as a student or as a translator, as belonging to a peculiar *type* of philosophy, let alone a type called “continental.” I regarded it simply as philosophy. What is more: while it is true that I am an admirer of the thinkers I have just listed, I am also an admirer of Austin and Kripke. Are not those two also representatives of philosophy, full stop?

When I first assumed formal responsibility for the discipline of “Continental Philosophy” at Copenhagen, my starting task was to ask what should be regarded as the distinguishing mark of the philosophy typical of the European continent – and to consider what philosophy as a whole can learn from that kind of philosophy. These questions were, in the first instance, eminently practical: if Continental Philosophy was to be a discipline, it would need a unified, clearly demarcated subject-matter.

But is such a demarcation even possible? Is there in fact any firm connection – let alone any unity – to be found among schools of thought as widely divergent as existentialism, phenomenology, the Frankfurt School, hermeneutics, and deconstruction? Certainly there is no ready-made category into which all of these schools fit. The term “continental philosophy” will hardly do, for though analytic philosophy has indeed defined itself as “analytic,” “continental philosophy” has never defined itself as “continental.” Historically, the term “continental” grew widespread only in the wake of analytic philosophers’ self-identification as occupied with the “analysis” of language, which they regarded as fundamental to the philosophical enterprise. (The decisive criterion was not the actual centrality of linguistic analysis to a thinker’s work – for if so, then a host of older thinkers, such as Augustine or Anselm, would count as analytic philosophers too – but the notion that the philosophical enterprise is centrally constituted by linguistic analysis.) In this early twentieth-century context, “continental philosophers” emerged as a mere placeholder for “the others.” The term “continental” had significance, at most, as a geographical designator.

Today, however, there is more to say. After some reflection on my experience teaching these “continental” texts, I came to the view that there is in fact a determinate

mode of philosophizing that can be associated with the European continent – though it is not definable in terms of any of the particular twentieth-century schools of thought listed above. The definition that is needed must be sought earlier in philosophy's history. It is a definition that underlies the activity of all of the twentieth-century streams of continental thought, but which cannot be said to play as significant a role in the analytic tradition of Anglo-American philosophy.

In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy we find a gap between continental and British philosophy that corresponds roughly to the divide between rationalism and empiricism. Today it is widely acknowledged that the latter divide was less stark than it once appeared. On certain decisive points, in fact, there was no essential difference between the two schools. Most fundamentally, both empiricists and rationalists asserted a basic split between the realms of matters of fact and relations of ideas, as in Hume, or between *vérités de fait* and *vérités de raison*, as in Leibniz. To be sure, there were important differences in how empiricists and rationalists respectively motivated these shared distinctions, but in the long run, it was this fundamental split shared by rationalists and empiricists, rather than the differences between rationalists and empiricists, that provoked nothing less than the great crisis that led Kant to critical philosophy.

At the close of the eighteenth century and the start of the nineteenth, philosophy defined itself as transcendental philosophy (with Kant) and speculative philosophy (with Hegel). According to Hegel, every philosophical proposition is to be understood as speculative, whereas propositions that are not philosophical are to be understood as merely empirical. In philosophy, therefore, empirical objections do not qualify as genuine

objections. For they overlook the fact that the empirical can only be understood by means of a process of reflecting on the empirical itself – which cannot itself be understood purely empirically. (Thus, for example, the fact that there are irrational human beings cannot be cited as a genuine objection to the definition of man as a rational being. On the contrary, the fact at issue is an observation that can only be made in light of the definition in question.) Similarly, in his “Transcendental Deduction of the Categories of Human Understanding,” Kant dismisses as merely psychological the empiricists’ efforts to deduce the same. Kant’s empiricist predecessors and contemporaries sought an account of how knowledge becomes possible in practice; but such an account cannot itself establish that that possibility will persist into the future. To deduce the conditions of the possibility of knowledge, Kant insists, one must reason not simply from what knowledge requires in practice, but from what knowledge requires in principle (though of course the latter can only be found in conjunction with the former). For both Kant and Hegel, the decisive condition lies neither in what precedes knowledge nor in what follows it, but rather in the movement from before knowing happens to after knowledge has been attained. Knowledge *is* precisely this movement.

Thus it is that with Kant (and with Hegel) we find a decisive fissure in philosophy’s development. The same split that divides Kant’s precritical writings from his critical philosophy can also be detected in the gap between the philosophical methods typical of the British Isles and those typical of continental European thinkers. In the former sphere, the sharp distinction between the empirical and the rational was maintained unabated; in the latter sphere, philosophy’s main concern came to be with the connections and transitions between the two. Moreover, as continental thinkers focused

ever more closely on the *processual* quality of knowledge, it became increasingly clear that philosophy would need not only to abandon its traditional distinctions between the ideal and the factual, or between the rational and the empirical, but ultimately to dispense with all of the fixed stances on which it had traditionally depended. In time, even the distinction between *historical* and *systematic* thinking would itself prove to be untenable.

This is of course not to say that all “continental” philosophers are in agreement with Kant and Hegel. I do wish to point out, on the other hand, that even today, when so-called continental philosophers defend their approaches to philosophy against “analytic” naysayers, they sometimes reach back to the distinction between critical and precritical philosophy introduced by Kant. A recent example is Derrida’s use of “pre-critical” in his 1990 counteroffensive against the objections of John R. Searle.¹ But there are also further, more wide-ranging consequences to consider.

In the Anglo-American philosophical community, one often finds extraordinary expertise in Kant and Hegel on the part of historians of philosophy who do their work in isolation from – albeit in peaceful coexistence with – their systematician colleagues. This division goes unremarked, as though it were a wholly logical division of labor. The unfortunate result of this separation is that the historians’ work in transcendental and speculative thinking is kept from having any real impact on current developments in systematic philosophy (for one now merely “knows about” those philosophical approaches²). This phenomenon ultimately encourages unproductive characterizations of the difference between analytic and continental philosophy, particularly on the part of analytic philosophers who confine themselves to the historical matters of fact and never confront the deeper philosophical incompatibilities at issue.³ A common result is that

attempts to unite analytic and continental philosophy, as for example in what are called “philosophy of mind” and “the cognitive sciences,” take forms that are even less congenial to continental thought than is existing analytic work.⁴

¹ See Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, tr. Samuel Weber et al. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988) 66; [*Limited Inc.* (Paris: Galilée, 1990) 127].

² Another method is to relegate such knowledge and its representatives to the Departments of Literature, German or French, in order to be able to argue at a later point that this knowledge cannot be considered genuine philosophy *because* it is only to be found in the Departments of Literature, German, or French. For an example of this, see Barry Smith et al., “Revisiting the Derrida Affair with Barry Smith,” *Sophia*, 38, no. 2 (1999): 142–169.

³ Peter Simons, in “Whose Fault? The Origins and Evitability of the Analytic-Continental Rift,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 9 (2001) 3: 295–311, attempts to explain the divide between continental and analytic philosophy in terms of such events as the two World Wars. Michael Friedman, in *A Parting of the Ways. Carnap, Cassirer and Heidegger* (Chicago: Open Court, 2000) offers a detailed summary of the disagreements among these three philosophers stemming from the 1929 Davos colloquium; this proceeds from the incorrect assumption that, up until that point, the figures in question were still speaking the same philosophical language.

⁴ On this point see Chapter 1 of Miguel de Beistegui, *The New Heidegger* (London: Continuum, 2001), and §2 of Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).