

How Great Is the Great Divide?: On Jeremy Arnold's Aporetic Political Theory

Kei Hiruta | Orcid 0000-0002-9668-4704

Aarhus University

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Edinburgh University Press in the [Journal of Social and Political Philosophy 1:2 \(2022\)](#).

Written in a highly accessible style, *Across the Great Divide: Between Analytic and Continental Political Theory* is a relatively short book with bold ambitions. Its main part consists of three comparative studies, each focusing on one issue that connects major political theorists from the analytic and continental traditions. The first study (Chapters 1 and 2) focuses on the problem of state violence and juxtaposes Bernard Williams and his realist followers with Stanley Cavell. The second (Chapters 3 and 4) and third (Chapter 5) turn to Hannah Arendt and Philip Pettit on freedom, and John Rawls and Jacques Derrida on justice, respectively. Each of these studies may be read as a stand-alone piece of scholarship, but the book as a whole makes an original argument as to how political theory might cross the analytic/continental divide to become more attuned to the complexity of political life. This methodological argument is in two parts. First, negatively, Arnold rejects a 'synthetic' approach, associated with realists and Cavell, which aims to combine different elements from each tradition to overcome the divide. Second, positively, Arnold proposes an alternative 'aporetic' approach, which 'intensifies, without resolving, the tension between the needs met by the analytic and continental traditions by emphasizing the power, persuasiveness, and incompatibility of a theory of a political phenomenon taken from each tradition' (17). Arnold's guiding idea is that political phenomena that interest political theorists are so

complex, multifaceted and internally conflicting – ‘dense’, to use his term – that neither the analytic tradition nor the continental nor some combination of the two can adequately capture the whole of a given phenomenon. Consequently, it is advisable that we carefully examine how political theorists from each tradition have looked at a given phenomenon from irreconcilably different perspectives. Only then can we begin to understand dense political phenomena that are at the heart of political life.

Chapters 3-5 demonstrate how Arnold’s aporetic method can be applied in practice. Obviously, whether one finds his method promising depends on how successful his discussion of Pettit, Arendt, Rawls and Derrida turns out to be. However, one does not need to agree with Arnold’s methodological ideas to appreciate his effort to bring this eclectic group of theorists together. His unusual juxtaposition provides a refreshing interpretive perspective on those four figures, each of whom has been studied extensively. For example, following Pettit’s lead, Arnold distinguishes between ‘freedom as such’ and political freedom, and considers freedom outside as well as inside the political sphere in Arendt’s work. Similarly, Arnold shows how Rawls and Derrida inherit different aspects of Kant’s legacy, complicating the standard understanding of Rawls as a Kantian constructivist and Derrida as an anti-metaphysician. Arnold is aware that those individual findings by themselves do not fully substantiate his methodological claims. Nevertheless, he provides ample evidence to show that his aporetic method can be stimulating, rewarding, and worth trying.

Arnold, however, tends to overstate the depth and width of the analytic/continental divide and to pigeonhole his protagonists as belonging to either side. For example, he presents Arendt’s theory of freedom as first and foremost a response to the ‘nihilism of modernity’ (134), associating her with a host of continental thinkers such as Nietzsche, Weber, Heidegger, Adorno, Horkheimer and Foucault. This is certainly an important part of

the story. But it is only a part, for some aspects of Arendt's theory of freedom are political in a more conventional sense and best read in conjunction with such thinkers as Montesquieu, Jefferson, Madison, Tocqueville and, more recently, Jeremy Waldron. Arnold is certainly aware of this and briefly mentions deliberative democrats' interpretations of Arendt's work (134). However, he does not give them due credit and downplays the heterodoxy of Arendt's thought vis-à-vis the main currents of the continental tradition. Similarly, Arnold does not tell us that Pettit occasionally trespasses on the continental territory to the extent that he critically discusses Arendt's theory of freedom. Of course, as Keith Breen (Breen 2019) has shown, Pettit's reading of Arendt is fraught with misunderstandings, and his criticism of her work is hardly plausible. Nevertheless, Pettit and Arendt are not divided in the same way as Rawls and Derrida are, and discussing those two pairs equally to illustrate the same 'great divide' obscures some avenues for cross-tradition theorising.

More problematic still is Arnold's discussion of political realists. On the one hand, he characterises their approach as synthetic, drawing on both the analytic and continental traditions. On the other hand, observing that 'realism largely operates within an analytic philosophical idiom' (27), Arnold criticises it for sharing some of the deeply problematic features of analytical political theory. Unlike continental political theory proper, realism in Arnold's view underestimates the centrality of conflict and discord in political life and ultimately remains as a diluted form of analytical political theory. This may be true of the particular strand of realism Arnold focuses on: Bernard Williams and those influenced by Williams's work. Yet, as Arnold acknowledges (27-28), Raymond Geuss is no less a founding figure of the contemporary realist movement than Williams is, and there is significant disagreement among contemporary realists, some of whom are more concerned with conflict and discord than others. One wonders what story Arnold would have told had he

focused on Geuss instead of Williams, or had he paid more attention to the less analytic strands of contemporary realism inspired by Geuss's work.

At this point, it is worth asking what Arnold means when he describes himself as someone who 'ha[s] chosen ... to remain suspended between' the two traditions (23). What kind of suspension is he in, and how did he get there? I do not know his intellectual itinerary, apart from the little he says in *Across the Great Divide*, especially in the Conclusion (178-183). But the impression I get from this book as a whole is that he is not evenly divided between the two traditions. Arnold seems more akin to a native European who as an adult came to split her time between the two sides of the English Channel, feeling increasingly at home in such in-between places as the Eurostar terminals. She has dual citizenship, but her cultural home remains Continental Europe. Likewise, Arnold seems to me like a Continental native, who is familiar with and yet remains somewhat mystified by the inhabitants of the analytic land, finding their habits and conventions part alluring, part irritating. Of course, my quibbles may originate from my own partiality rather than Arnold's, but I find his discussion of the analytic tradition less nuanced and less charitable than that of the continental.

For example, Arnold exaggerates when he writes in the Conclusion that the 'myth' pervasive among analytical political theorists is that '[w]here we are ... isn't as important as the problem at hand, the problem to solve' (173). This claim is challenged by none other than Arnold himself, in his discussion of John Rawls in Chapter 5. Far from subscribing to the alleged 'analytic myth', the late Rawls provides a normatively loaded history of the liberal democratic West, a story of where we are and how we got here since the Reformation and the ensuing wars of religion. In so doing, Rawls introduces a number of key ideas such as the fact of pluralism and the public political culture, which play a crucial role in his justification of political liberalism. Arnold thus shows that, for the late Rawls, the historical question of where we are is inseparable from the normative question of how to solve pressing political

problems at hand. Just a few pages later, however, Arnold introduces the ‘analytic myth’, in which analytical political theorists are depicted as problem solvers unconcerned with where we are. I fail to see how Chapter 5 and the Conclusion cohere.

Similarly, Arnold over-simplifies when he writes that analytical political theorists are committed to a ‘justificatory project’ or consensus building through rational argumentation, and that they share the ‘assumption that political reality, however messy, may be tidied up by normative theory’ (46). In response, we may remind ourselves that most analytical political theorists, rather like Arnold’s aporetic theorists, accept that important normative concepts are essentially contested and that no single conception of a given concept can capture the entirety of that concept. Unsurprisingly, the first task of analytical political theory is to *analyze*, that is, to separate different concepts from each other and identify competing conceptions of a given concept, so that we may see why disputing parties may *reasonably* disagree over freedom, justice and other such issues that involve essential contestation. Of course, some in the analytic tradition undertake the *additional* task of justification, attempting to show why one conception of a given concept is normatively more defensible than others. They do so, however, not because they are *analytic* theorists but because they are *normative* theorists. True, thanks to Rawls’s influence, many in the analytic tradition today are normative theorists also, and they are disposed to produce justification of a systematic kind. But being analytic is one thing; being normative is another; and being systematic is yet another. These three things are not necessarily connected to each other. In fact, first-generation analytic philosophers in the early twentieth century repeatedly attacked continental philosophy, especially its ‘Hegelian’ variant, as suffocatingly moralistic and prone to subordinate empirical reality to a rigid metaphysical system. They saw themselves as philosophical revolutionaries, rising against Hegelian orthodoxy and undertaking the task of demolition and subversion. It is unfortunate that Arnold does not tell how analytic philosophy *changed over*

time as it moved from the insurgent position to the hegemonic, perhaps morphing dialectically into the party of counter-revolutionaries along the way. Be that as it may, remnants of the original impetus are still found in some quarters of the analytic school, for example among value pluralists, most of whom endorse Isaiah Berlin's injunction: 'I don't want the universe to be too tidy' (Berlin and Polanowska-Sygulska 2006: 125).

Finally, I would like to draw attention to what I think is an elephant in the room in the debate over the analytic/continental divide. In Anglophone political theory today, the two competing camps are not equal in power. Although there are important institutions that may be described as continental strongholds, the analytic tribe claims hegemony over the discipline as a whole. Arnold is aware of this because he correctly observes that '[r]eading Rawls, for many theorists, is a professional necessity', whereas reading Derrida is not (181, 137). It is therefore slightly inaccurate to say that 'political theorists from one tradition don't read theorists in the other tradition' (178). The truth, rather, is two-fold: (1) the two traditions are equally skeptical of each other; (2) yet Continental political theorists are pressurized into reading analytic texts due to 'a professional necessity', whereas analytical political theorists are under no comparable pressure to read continental texts. Given this asymmetry, it is worth asking how likely it is that attempts at cross-tradition theorizing inadvertently yield domination of one tradition over the other, with the result that continental ideas get tamed as they are 'translated' into the analytic language and style.

One of the great virtues of *Across the Great Divide* is that it never lets one tradition dominate over the other, and Arnold's ability to move freely from one tradition to the other must be lauded. Will his example inspire those in the analytic tradition, though? As Arnold points out, it takes *a lot* of time and effort for a theorist trained in one tradition to acquire even the minimum competence in the other. If so, will analytical political theorists be persuaded to cross the divide, while knowing that they have no professional necessity to do

so? Is the love of knowledge enough to motivate them? If it is not, what does that say about them, and also about philosophy and political theory in today's Anglophone academia, of which all of us in the profession – across the divide – are half victims, half accomplices?

References

Berlin, Isaiah and Beata Polanowska-Syngulska (2006) *Unfinished Dialogue*, Amherst, NY:

Prometheus Books.

Breen, Keith (2019) 'Arendt, Republicanism, and Political Freedom', in Kei Hiruta ed.

Arendt on Freedom, Liberation, and Revolution, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 47-78.