

Two Cultures

British philosophers have recently witnessed the foundation of two new organisations, both dedicated to the study and dissemination of continental philosophy [refs]. The electronic advertisement for one of these new societies provoked a range of hostile responses from anger to contemptuous dismissal. Even allowing for the natural tendency of e-mail debates to degenerate into flame wars, it was clear that the schism in western philosophy between its `analytic' and `continental' traditions has yet to be repaired. Those outside the small world of professional philosophy may wonder how a discipline can survive in such a condition.

The fragmentation of western philosophy is sometimes explained by pointing to the eclipse of Latin as the common language of scholarship. This development alone cannot be the whole story because all disciplines eventually passed from Latin into modern European languages. This sometimes combined with the professionalisation of academia to produce national `schools' of one or another specialism. However, these national and linguistic divisions have rarely engendered the sort of bitterness and mutual incomprehension that has characterised the split between analytic and continental philosophers. Moreover, the continental tradition uses several different languages. If simple language barriers were to blame, it would be a mystery why the line should fall between the English-speaking world and the rest. The fact that it does explains why continental philosophy is sometimes contrasted with `Anglo-American' philosophy (which leaves the rest of the Anglophone world out in the cold) or `Anglo-Saxon' philosophy (which suggests that blond hair and blue eyes are somehow relevant). Ideally, one would like to find names for the mainstream tradition in twentieth-century English-speaking philosophy and the collection of traditions normally associated with continental Europe which make no reference to language, geography or ethnicity. For the real basis of the schism in philosophy is methodological and doctrinal.

Here, though, we face a difficulty. It is impossible to specify precisely a set of doctrines and methods that crisply distinguishes one side from the other. Experience can give one a feel for the sorts of things that philosophers on either side of the fence tend to believe and the sorts of methods that they tend to use. However, the sheer variety of philosophical activity within either camp prevents us from drawing up a neat list of necessary and sufficient conditions for membership of one or other philosophical tribe. Faced with this difficulty, most writers on the subject opt for a genetic account of the matter. Lines of influence are traced and ancestral father-Abraham figures identified. Gottlob Frege is usually cited as the founding patriarch of analytic philosophy. The internal diversity of continental philosophy makes paternity harder to establish, but Edmund Husserl is normally held responsible for its phenomenological strain. Scholars differ over the details but it is generally agreed that the schism originated late in the last century as philosophers debated the significance of the (then) new formal logic. According to most genetic accounts, today's analytic philosophers are the intellectual descendants of those (like Bertrand Russell) in whom the new predicate logic caused a philosophical revolution.

This explains the odd circumstance that `analytic philosophy' (a methodological label) is contrasted with `continental philosophy' (a geographical title). If today's `continental' philosophers are the intellectual descendants of those who declined to embark on any of the philosophical research programmes made possible by the new logic, then the natural epithet for them would seem to be `non-analytic European'. However, these philosophers appear to have more in common than can be explained simply by a shared refusal to board the analytic bandwagon. From an analytic perspective, continental philosophy has a palpable unity which somehow eludes description. Convinced that their European rivals share more than a blindness to the advantages of the analytic approach, yet unable to say what this extra element

is, analytic philosophers seem to have settled on the term 'continental' out of exasperation. Continental philosophers themselves usually prefer to identify with specific movements such as critical theory or structuralism.

The genetic approach to understanding the analytic/continental divide may offer a solution to this naming puzzle, but at the cost of much closer attention to the details of the history of philosophy than is appropriate here. Moreover it can foster the impression that Europe has been locked in a philosophical cold war for the whole of this century. In fact the state of mutual hostility and ignorance (as opposed to the usual academic condition of disagreement and dispute) is largely a post-war phenomenon. In 1929 Gilbert Ryle (a paradigmatic Oxford philosopher) reviewed Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time in Mind*. Heidegger's work is, for many analytic philosophers, the plainest example of the wickedness and worthlessness of continental philosophy. One might have expected Ryle to denounce the obscurity of Heidegger's style and the pretentious bombast of his aspirations. In fact, Ryle praises "the immense subtlety and searchingness of his examination of consciousness,... the boldness and originality of his methods and conclusions, and... the unflagging energy with which he tries to think behind the stock categories of orthodox philosophy and psychology". Ryle does not agree with Heidegger's conclusions or his methods, but he takes pains to explain what *Being and Time* is about and why an intelligent person might be persuaded by it. Nowhere does Ryle suggest that Heidegger's work is not really philosophy.

The general tone of Ryle's review is crystallised in the final paragraph:

While it is my personal view that *quâ* First Philosophy Phenomenology is at present heading for bankruptcy and disaster and will end either in self-ruinous Subjectivism or in a windy mysticism, I hazard this opinion with humility and with reservations since I am well aware how far I have fallen short of understanding this difficult work. (p. 370)

More recent generations of analytic philosophers have, on the whole, retained Ryle's verdict but dispensed with his humility and his reservations. Why did this happen? As an undergraduate in the late nineteenth century, Bertrand Russell was raised on a sort of idealist monism which would nowadays be regarded as 'continental' philosophy. He came to regard this approach as a profound mistake, and had a leading role in developing the analytic alternative. However, he could not dismiss his undergraduate philosophy as unintelligible gibberish because he had himself understood it, believed it, discussed it and written on it. Similarly, Ryle was not initially trained as an 'Oxford' philosopher. Figures such as Russell and Ryle were educated in philosophical traditions that they later abandoned, and the experience of changing their minds gave them a perpetual awareness that they might still be barking up the wrong tree. Indeed it became a standing joke that Russell produced a new philosophical system every few years or so. All of this changed when analytic philosophy took over the undergraduate curriculum in most Anglophone universities. These undergraduate courses in analytic philosophy produced the next generations of researchers and lecturers, until eventually the English-speaking philosophical world was almost entirely populated with students and professors who had never known anything except analytic philosophy. *Then* the long winter of mutual ignorance and condescension (as opposed to common-and-garden disagreement) set in.

If the genetic approach to understanding the split between analytic and continental philosophers is inappropriate (here at least) how else can the relation between the two traditions be understood? One way is to look at the kinds of moves that people make at academic meetings. The usual practice at a philosophical colloquium is for a principal speaker to read a paper or give a lecture before taking questions from the floor. These 'questions' are rarely straightforward requests for further information. A questioner usually has a point to make which may support the speaker's thesis or (more likely) may be altogether

hostile to it. Sometimes the question has no more purpose than to show off the questioner's philosophical acumen and erudition. In short, the question-period in a philosophical seminar is often depressingly similar to Prime Minister's question time in the House of Commons. This much is common to both philosophical traditions. Where they differ is in the logic of questioners' efforts to impress.

Analytic philosophers, when racking their brains for an impressively critical question, tend to look for a clarifying insight. The ideal analytic contribution is a remark that reveals the structure of what had previously seemed to be a mass of incoherent detail. The logic of this move is best illustrated with an example drawn not from philosophy but from mathematics. Imagine that fifty-seven tennis players enter a knockout tournament. Since fifty-seven is not a power of two, it is necessary that some of them get byes into the second round. How many matches are required in total? One could calculate this by working out how many matches must be played in the first round, how many in the second and so on, before adding all these figures up. However, there is a quicker way, based on the insight that each match disposes of one player. Since we start with fifty-seven players and we wish to be left with one champion, there must be fifty-six matches played to get rid of the other fifty-six players. The result is easily generalised: if n players enter, there must be $n-1$ matches played. The perfect contribution for an analytic philosopher is a remark that cuts through the detail and gets to the heart of the matter in just this fashion. He (as it usually is) wants to be able to say, "All this really is much simpler than you make it seem".

Questioners at continental colloquia are no less keen to impress than their analytic colleagues. However, the preferred move is to show that the speaker has not appreciated the fine details of the problem; that there are significant features missing from his account which render it simplistic, crudely one-sided or plainly misleading; that the matter in hand looks quite different when placed in its proper context; or that the speaker has significantly failed to consider issues of gender, race, class or colonialism. Thus, the questioner challenges the speaker not to a contest of quasi-mathematical logical acumen, but to a contest of scholarship. In this game, a critical question typically suggests that significant facts have been left out either because the speaker is ignorant of them or because he fails to recognise their importance. The logic of these moves resembles most closely that of history. Faced with a clear thesis ("The Great War was caused by German expansionism") a competent historian will produce a string of considerations to show that this cannot have been the whole story. He might point, for example, at the destabilising effect on the Balkans of the decay of the Ottoman Empire. Indeed, anticipation of this kind of criticism may hinder a sensitive historian's efforts to write anything at all. Here is G.R. Elton,

The more the historian knows, the more he despairs of his ability to tell it, for the sheer complexity of the historical process stands inexorably in his way... Every simple statement immediately seems too simple; every piece of description and explanation calls forth informed doubts in the writer; every clear expression of opinion seems to him to demand qualification, even denial, as he contemplates the variety of experience which he is trying to reduce to order on paper. (p. 114)

Historians and continental philosophers alike work with the burdensome knowledge that every question has infinitely many facets, and each of these facets bears some relation to each of the infinitely many facets belonging to every other thing. To sum up this scholarly-historical sensibility, historians and continental philosophers normally want to say, "Things are far more complex than you are painting them".

Things are certainly more complex in the world of philosophy than I have painted them here. It would be false to suggest that all analytic philosophers are wholly unreceptive to arguments of a historical sort (most analytic philosophers have some interest in the history

of philosophy, for one thing). Equally, we should not imagine that the scientific spirit is entirely absent from continental philosophy (indeed some of the best philosophy of science lies on the continental side). Nevertheless, it remains broadly true that continental philosophy tends to be historically-minded while analytic philosophy tends to orient itself towards the exact sciences. (The tale is told of an analytic philosopher who would not allow a philosophy book to remain on his shelves if it was more than seven years old, on the grounds that physicists do not study the history of their discipline. They leave that to historians of science, and philosophers, he thought, should do the same.) A genetic account would explain this by tracing lines of influence on the continental side back to Hegel, for whom philosophy is nothing less than a special kind of history. As a historian-philosopher he saw change everywhere and in everything. In his view, nothing is quite the same today as it was yesterday. Frege (the grandfather of analytic philosophy, remember) was as much a mathematician as a philosopher. Mathematical objects and their relations do not change from day to day, and they can be described with extraordinary clarity. A detailed genetic account would show how a deep historical sense and a passion for clarity respectively have been inherited by the heirs to the philosophical patriarchs of the nineteenth century.

I shall content myself with the following suggestion: the schism between analytic and continental philosophy resists repair because it is not confined to philosophers. It is a local manifestation of a far more profound and pervasive division. In 1959 C.P. Snow lamented the partition of intellectual life in to 'two cultures': that of the scientist and that of the literary intellectual. If we follow the practice of most universities and bundle historical and literary studies together in the faculty of humanities on the one hand, and count pure mathematics among the sciences on the other, then it is fair to say that the mutual ignorance and occasional hostility between scientists and humanists decried by Snow is still with us. And it runs through the middle of philosophy. Philosophy aspires to say something about everything, so it is unsurprising that philosophers have reproduced in miniature the division between the arts and the sciences. What is worrying is that we have failed to overcome it.

Elton, G.R. *The Practice of History*. London: Fontana, 1969.

Ryle, Gilbert (1929) Review of Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* in **Mind Vol. xxxviii No. 149** pp. 355–370.

Snow, C.P. *The Two Cultures and a second look*. Cambridge: CUP, 1964 (original essay 1959).