**Is the Royaumont colloquium the locus classicus of the divide between Analytic and Continental Philosophy?: Reply to Overgaard**

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1. Introduction

Numerous commentators have considered the 1958 colloque de Royaumont, titled ‘La Philosophie Analytique’, to be the ‘*locus classicus*’ (Glendinning 2006, 70) of the divide between the two main strands of twentieth century Western philosophy, analytic and continental. The single page ‘avant propos’ to the publication of its proceedings in 1962[[1]](#footnote-1) is largely responsible for the creation of the mythic tale of a traumatic encounter between Merleau-Ponty and Ryle at Royaumont. According to this story, Merleau-Ponty made an offer of reconciliation between the two sides by suggesting that the programmes of analytic philosophy and continental phenomenology might be the same (‘notre programme n’est-il pas le même?’),[[2]](#footnote-2) to which Ryle rudely objected by saying ‘I hope not’ (Beck *et al.* 1962, 7).[[3]](#footnote-3) This tale has often been used as the quintessential example of division between analytic and continental philosophy, despite being the product of misquotation by Beck, author of the preface. A quick glance at the pages which Beck misquotes,[[4]](#footnote-4) included in the same volume (Beck *et al*. 1962, 98), serves to falsify his claim: Ryle’s ‘I hope not’ was an answer to Merleau-Ponty’s question regarding whether Wittgenstein and Russell’s programme was continued by Ryle,[[5]](#footnote-5) and not a rejection of some noble gesture of reconciliation by Merleau-Ponty.

This myth has only been dispelled relatively recently, and within the context of questioning the divide between analytic and continental philosophy.[[6]](#footnote-6) This realisation has come slightly late, as the tale of the failed offer of reconciliation has already played its role in determining the subsequent reception of the colloquium as paradigmatic of the divide. Already in 1962, reviewing the publication of the proceedings, Taylor describes it as a ‘dialogue de sourds’ (1964, 132), reinforcing the picture offered by Beck. Rée later takes it as paradigmatic of the insularity of Oxford philosophers in the fifties, proclaiming them to have ‘huddled together in self-defence, as if they feared some kind of intellectual infection from the over-friendly continentals’ (1993, 15). Critchley even goes as far as to compare Ryle’s mythical rejection of Merleau-Ponty’s offer with Baroness Thatcher’s answer to Jacques Delors’ plans for European Union: ‘No. No. No’ (Critchley 2001, 35). Overall, Royaumont is viewed as an outcome of the divide between analytic and continental philosophy,[[7]](#footnote-7) which is thought to have already existed, in some form or other, prior to 1958.

This all-encompassing divide, which is perceived as having its hold over a large part of twentieth century philosophy, is generally seen to have as its representatives at Royaumont the adherents of two particular schools existing within the two dominant traditions. On the one hand, ‘analytic philosophy’ tends to be seen as represented by the proponents of the Oxford ‘ordinary language’ school of philosophy. Participants at the colloquium who are (not uncontroversially) considered proponents of this school include Ryle, Austin, Strawson, and Urmson.[[8]](#footnote-8) ‘Continental philosophy’, on the other hand, is commonly reduced to the list of those proponents of the school of phenomenology, widely construed, who attended the colloquium. Among the participants of the colloquium, some have counted Merleau-Ponty, Jean Wahl, and Fr. Van Breda as phenomenologists.**[[9]](#footnote-9)**

Royaumont has thus been viewed as a kind of battleground between phenomenology, fighting on behalf of ‘continental philosophy’ at large, and Oxford linguistic philosophy, representing ‘analytic philosophy’ in its entirety. In his recent article, ‘Royaumont Revisited’, Overgaard contributes towards the effort of dispelling the myth of the battle of Royaumont, by showing that, at Royaumont, there were indeed grounds for starting a dialogue between Oxford linguistic philosophers and phenomenologists. Though the project of showing how the particular exchanges between Oxford analysts (namely Strawson and Urmson) and phenomenologists (namely Van Breda) may lead towards the commencement of dialogue is in itself valuable, it problematically emphasises Royaumont’s significance in relation to the idea of a divide between analytic and continental philosophy. Overgaard runs the risk of unquestioningly inheriting the view of Royaumont as a battleground between two factions, a view which serves to sideline and obscure the plurality of philosophical approaches involved in the colloquium. In what follows, I show that there are more than two supposedly monolithic and mutually exclusive sides involved in the Royaumont colloquium. Closer scrutiny of the colloquium reveals that a number of philosophers present at Royaumont, and the schools of philosophy they represented, do not fall neatly into the dualistic taxonomic image, but rather straddle the supposed analytic-continental divide.

2. *Contra* Dummett

Overgaard (2010, 899-900) begins by correctly reprimanding Dummett for seeking to address the divide through bridge-building that consists in re-evaluating its origins in the late nineteenth century. Overgaard points out that Dummett’s turn to these supposed origins of the divide is justified by the widespread acceptance, embraced also by Dummett, of the failure of subsequent attempts at communication between the two sides. Since genuine communication between these two sides had failed throughout the twentieth century, then according to Dummett one needs to go as far back as Husserl and Frege, who are thought to be the grandfathers of the two traditions respectively, in order to find examples of dialogue. This is necessary if one seeks to re-establish a dialogue between the two sides. Overgaard apparently accepts Dummett’s claim that a historical point of intersection between the two traditions is necessary for re-establishing dialogue. Nevertheless, he challenges Dummett’s claim that no such intersection occurred throughout the twentieth century, by attempting to show the possibility for genuine dialogue between those who were otherwise deemed deaf to each other at Royaumont. If Royaumont was not an utter failure, as Beck’s tale advertised, then it is possible to show how genuine communication could have taken place.

Overgaard is right to challenge the false idea that dialogue was impossible at Royaumont. The potential for overcoming the minor differences between philosophers on particular points is clearly evident in the dialogue that took place at the colloquium, as Overgaard shows.

Nevertheless, there is something problematic about exclusively focusing on Royaumont’s relation to the analytic-continental divide. The problem originates with the kinds of preconceptions which became attached to the colloquium from its inception.[[10]](#footnote-10) Royaumont seems to have been conceived as an attempt to bring the ‘analytic’ philosophy of the Anglophone world closer to Francophone philosophy. This was subsequently judged as a failure, and thus transformed the colloquium into a good excuse for philosophers from either side not to engage in dialogue.

It is not clear whether this was due to the actual proceedings of the colloquium (i.e. because Royaumont was indeed a failed opportunity for dialogue between *two* sides), or rather due to the subsequent mode of presentation of Royaumont as a failed dialogue. Thus, for example, in 1959, prior to the publication of Royaumont’s proceedings in 1962 and therefore prior to the widespread dissemination of the rumour of Royaumont’s failure, the Aristotelian society held a conference on phenomenology with Charles Taylor and A. J. Ayer, both participants at Royaumont, agreeing on the connections between phenomenology and Oxford linguistic analysis.[[11]](#footnote-11) Following the publication, and the various reviews which announced the ‘analytic’-‘continental’ divide,[[12]](#footnote-12) it took around a decade for similarly themed conferences to take place. By then, Royaumont was declared a predecessor to be avoided.[[13]](#footnote-13)

3. Continental analysts

Though Royaumont’s effect was that of enforcing the divide, its status as an encounter between two and only two monolithic philosophical traditions is questionable. Already in his introduction to the course, Jean Wahl mentions José Ferrater Mora, who talks of at least *three* traditions in his contemporary philosophy: dialectical materialism, the ‘badly defined’ (Beck *et al.* 1962, 9) continental tradition in all its ‘diverse forms’ (p. 9) including phenomenology and existentialism, and analytic philosophy (which, Wahl claims, also goes under the name logical positivism or neo-positivism). Wahl’s statement reveals the self-consciousness of ‘continental’ philosophers regarding the inappropriateness of the term as a designator of even the ‘diverse forms’ of *one* tradition. It is possibly Wahl’s relative distance from the analytic tradition which put him in a position to identify it with logical positivism and neo-positivism (names which are in any case associated with continental movements), in an attempt to find some overarching thread that unifies its diverse forms. Instead, Wahl could have emphasised the differences between currents which at Royaumont went under the banner analytic philosophy, something which Urmson, Strawson and Ryle would insist on during the colloquium.[[14]](#footnote-14) Combining Wahl’s emphasis on diversity, coupled with the Oxonians’ dissatisfaction with different approaches to analysis, already renders the idea of Royaumont as a battleground between ‘analytic’ and ‘continental’ philosophy deeply problematic.

The biographies of the ‘continental’ (i.e. French, Belgian, Dutch, Polish) philosophers present at Royaumont serve to prove that the perceived struggle between two mutually exclusive approaches to philosophy at Royaumont is deceiving. Two ‘continental’ professors presented papers at the conference, Leo Apostel,[[15]](#footnote-15) and Evert Willem Beth.[[16]](#footnote-16) They were both logicians, and in some way or another akin to the analytic tradition in philosophy: Apostel had been a student of Rudolf Carnap and Carl Hempel,[[17]](#footnote-17) and Beth had been a research assistant to Alfred Tarski.[[18]](#footnote-18) Among the audience one finds Chaïm Perelman, the Polish philosopher, who was deeply influenced by logical positivism in his studies of the philosophy of law and the theory of argumentation.[[19]](#footnote-19) Philippe Devaux, the Belgian logician and philosopher, had studied with Whitehead and had introduced Whitehead and Russell’s work to France through his translations of their texts.[[20]](#footnote-20) The Polish philosopher Józef Maria Bocheński’s work ranged from logic to the critique of Soviet Marxism.[[21]](#footnote-21) Even Jean Wahl, who is most commonly associated with the French existentialist tradition, had introduced pragmatism and early analytic philosophy to France.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Thus a large number of the so-called ‘continental’ philosophers present at the colloquium were quite deeply acquainted with analytic philosophy, and some were its proponents and practitioners. Though some of these philosophers were, like most analytic philosophers, critical towards particular aspects of work in analytic philosophy, their presence at Royaumont makes it obvious that analytic philosophy was not an exclusively Anglophone phenomenon, restricted geographically to areas outside the continent. This blatantly contradicted the claims of someone like Ryle, who declared in his presentation the Britishness of ‘the massive developments of our logical theory’, a ‘fact’ which he held ‘responsible for the wide gulf that has existed for three-quarters of a century between Anglo-Saxon and Continental philosophy’ (Ryle 1971, 182). Ryle’s feigned ignorance of the Germanophone developments in logic, which he himself later acknowledged as influential on his thought,[[23]](#footnote-23) is puzzling. Nevertheless, the Oxonians did not leave the presence of continental analytic philosophers at Royaumont unacknowledged, and Austin’s recognition of a kindred spirit in Leo Apostel was met with a ‘Hear, Hear’ by the ‘choeur des analystes d’Oxford’ (Beck *et al*. 1962, 230).

4. Who represents phenomenology?

Besides the fact that a number of ‘continental’ philosophers at the colloque were also analytic philosophers, one must furthermore admit that almost no philosopher at Royaumont belonged exclusively, or even predominantly, to any one of the traditions which are nowadays commonly associated with ‘continental philosophy’. Gaston Berger had been associated with Husserlian phenomenology,[[24]](#footnote-24) but his activities had ranged from the study of possible futures (a field which he named ‘prospective’) to the reformation of French state-provided education.[[25]](#footnote-25) Jean Brun was a scholar of ancient philosophy who had also written on Kierkegaard and Christian philosophy in general.[[26]](#footnote-26) Ferdinand Alquié, a philosopher and historian of early modern philosophy (who also wrote on surrealism), had also been an influence on Gilles Deleuze’s writings on Spinoza.[[27]](#footnote-27) Though all the abovementioned participants lay relatively close to some of the mainstream trends in their contemporary French philosophy (i.e. phenomenology and existentialism), their main interests lay elsewhere.

The most notable exception to this is Merleau-Ponty, who is generally considered to be in the mainstream of ‘continental’ philosophy, in whichever way one attempts to define this term.[[28]](#footnote-28) Merleau-Ponty’s name is probably the most recognisable in the list of the ‘continental’ participants, in contrast to the impressive array of historical personalities on the side of the analytics. Furthermore, despite being the most prominent representative of continental phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty’s contribution to the colloque consisted of a single question in response to Ryle; Merleau-Ponty was absent from the remainder of the presentations. Significantly, it is within this context that one should see Merleau-Ponty’s often quoted exchange with Ryle, which has served to shape the view of Royaumont as engendering the divide.

In Merleau-Ponty’s absence, the candidacy for representing the continental side falls to Fr. Herman Leo Van Breda. Van Breda, a Franciscan priest, was the founder and keeper of the Husserl archives at Leuven, and should be seen as an excellent Husserl scholar rather than an original ‘continental’ philosopher.[[29]](#footnote-29) Van Breda’s valuable contribution to continental philosophy was his preservation of Husserl’s enormous Nachlass, which he had smuggled from Freiburg (then under the Nazis) to Leuven. He had presented part of this work at the previous Royaumont colloquium,[[30]](#footnote-30) which had been dedicated to Husserl; thus when he came to rightly question Ryle’s self-avowed ‘caricature’ of Husserl, Ryle’s response was that he did not wish his debate with him to ‘degenerate into another colloquium on Husserl’ (Merleau-Ponty 2005, 61). Ryle’s implication that analytic philosophers work outside the programmes of a particular school led by some ‘master’ branded Van Breda a continental. This brand is one which Van Breda seems not only to accept, but even to over-emphasise by stating that he is ‘a representative of the phenomenological movement’ (Strawson 1992, 325/Beck *et al*. 1962, 127) and by identifying the views of this movement with those of ‘les “continenteaux”’ (Beck *et al*. 1962, 127).[[31]](#footnote-31) Van Breda seems convinced of the striking ‘failure of communication between all (or most) Continental philosophers on the one hand and Anglo-American philosophers on the other’ (Strawson 1992, 325).[[32]](#footnote-32) Later on, following what he takes to be a cue from Ayer, Van Breda concludes that the ‘pure and simple truth’ (Beck *et al*. 1962, 344) is that neither many continentals are interested in Anglophone philosophy, nor vice versa.[[33]](#footnote-33) Van Breda’s statements set the tone for the subsequent reception of the colloquium, despite contradicting the real multiplicity of approaches present at Royaumont,[[34]](#footnote-34) some of which were interesting to both Anglo-Americans and Continentals.

5. Questioning the unity of Anglophone philosophy

We have seen that the majority of philosophers from the continent were not uniquely ‘continental’ in their interests, and that most were only loosely associated with the badly defined grouping of phenomenology and existentialism under the banner ‘continental philosophy’. A similar phenomenon is to be observed in the case of a number of Anglo-American philosophers present at Royaumont in their relation to ‘analytic’ philosophy. Many of those Anglo-American philosophers present, such as for example, H. B. Acton,[[35]](#footnote-35) Charles Taylor, or Alan Gewirth,[[36]](#footnote-36) were clearly neither practitioners nor clear proponents of analytic philosophy. Some, like Gewirth,[[37]](#footnote-37) were to define themselves, however problematically, as neutral, neither ‘continental’ nor ‘analytic’. For others, e.g. Bernard Williams, there holds a critical relationship to analysis which is rather more ambiguous.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Yet, beyond the fact of the existence of non-analytic Angloamerican philosophers, what is more troubling about Royaumont is the way in which a single unified ‘analytic philosophy’ is attributed not only to the Oxford school but also to Anglophone philosophers who are otherwise opposed to it. Whether Quinean naturalism is part of analytic philosophy is still disputed by historians.[[39]](#footnote-39) Quine, Ayer, and various continental analysts followed approaches to analysis which were explicitly attacked by the Oxonians at Royaumont and elsewhere.[[40]](#footnote-40) To make things more complicated, the attempt to write a history of analytic philosophy which unifies various heterogeneous conceptions of analysis is explicitly addressed by Urmson’s Royaumont paper. Several presentations by Oxford philosophers at Royaumont demarcate between approaches to analysis,[[41]](#footnote-41) distinguishing Oxford analytic philosophy from its predecessors. The prevailing idea here is one of a quasi-unity of ‘analytic philosophy’, in which Oxford linguistic analysis partakes. Oxford philosophy is presented by its proponents as the latest and implicitly superior form of analysis, with past approaches to analysis being possibly the most prominent object of polemics during the colloquium. The puzzling unity of analytic philosophy, which remains to this day highly problematic, is nowhere argued over but rather implicitly assumed as that which contrasts the Anglophones from the ‘continentals’. Emphasising this supposed divide goes hand in hand with glossing over the very real differences which existed between the ‘analytic’ philosophers at Royaumont.

6. Multiplying the sides involved

One is mistaken to conceive of Royaumont as the site of conflict between two mutually exclusive approaches to philosophy. If anything, the research interests of those gathered at Royaumont point us towards the diverse multiplicity of approaches to the practice of philosophy employed in different parts of Europe and America. The mere co-presence of these philosophers at the colloquium demonstrates the incongruity of any geographical conception of a radical split in approaches to what philosophy is and how it should be practised. The association of a geo-political territory called ‘Europe’ with ‘continental’ philosophy, or of Britain and America with ‘analytic’ philosophy is clearly wrong.

The colloquium itself disproves any geo-political conception of a type of philosophy exclusive to some or other nation or territory. Instead it offers consistent designations of the cross-pollination of ideas among different territories, and of the peculiar effects of the ‘territorialisation’ of philosophy, e.g. the Vienna Circle’s influence on Belgian philosophy,[[42]](#footnote-42) the peculiar fate of analytic philosophy in Poland,[[43]](#footnote-43) the gradual emergence of ‘continental’ philosophy in Canada, the insular existence of a philosophical school at a single university in Britain,[[44]](#footnote-44) or the dialectical relationship between fashionable existentialism and scholarly academic philosophy in France.

What is perhaps most interesting about the Royaumont colloquium is that, in the face of such a multiplicity of diverse approaches to philosophy, a dichotomy between *two*, and only two, types of philosophy emerged. It is remarkable that in the presence of such diverse approaches to philosophy, a (mis)conception of a split between *two*, and only two, quasi-geographical territories, encompassing the entirety of twentieth century philosophy, prevailed. The question which remains is that of why, in the midst of all evidence to the contrary, Royaumont has persisted in appearing as if it were the *locus classicus* of the confrontation between analytic and continental philosophy.

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1. This records the bilingual dialogue in French translation, with future translators confusingly translating many texts back from their French translation into English. Though most of the English texts were reprinted in collected works by their authors in the sixties and seventies, some important texts and records of discussions remain to this day untranslated. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This sentence does not appear in the original dialogue, and as far as I can tell, it is invented by Beck (Beck, *et al*. 1962, 7); Merleau-Ponty clearly speaks of Russell and Wittgenstein’s ‘programme’ (Beck, *et al*. 1962, 95). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cf. Beck 1962, 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Beck does not cite the page numbers. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See also Merleau-Ponty 2005, 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Glendinning 2006, 73. Cf.Overgaard 2010, 901-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See also Glock 2008, 62-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Of course, the inclusion of Ryle at the head of this list is problematic, given his dissociation from the type of philosophy that Austin was doing; furthermore, both Strawson’s and Urmson’s work clearly differ from Austinian ‘linguistic phenomenology’. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. These are all names Overgaard (2010, 901) includes in his list of continentals. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Jean Wahl, who might have been involved in organising the colloquium, was present at the first announcement of the divide between Anglophone and Francophone philosophy, made by Bataille in 1951. Bataille’s verdict that a ‘sort of abyss’ (1986, 80) divides English and French philosophy was prompted by his encounter with A. J. Ayer, with whom he and Merleau-Ponty (both Ayer’s personal friends) came to a disagreement over the question of whether the sun existed before humans; see Bataille 1986; cf. Himanka 2000. Note that Ayer, (Merleau-Ponty 2005, 63-4), Wahl (e.g. Beck, *et al*. 1962, 9-10) and Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty 2005, 65-8) all played a central role in disseminating the idea of the divide at Royaumont, through their attempts at reconciling what they considered to be the two sides of the divide. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Taylor & Ayer 1959. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See e.g. Taylor 1964. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The ‘Philosophers into Europe’ series of symposia, organised in 1969 by the University of Southampton, had as part of its mission statement the attempt to ‘avoid […] a repetition of the Royaumont Colloquium’ (Mays & Brown 1972, 20); see Mays & Brown 1972. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Cf. Urmson 1992; Strawson 1992; Merleau-Ponty 2005, 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Apostel 1962. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Beth 1962. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Batens 1996, 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Cf. Feferman & Feferman 2004, 181, 206, & 249-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See Gross & Dearin 2003, 1-13. Perelman had been Apostel’s supervisor and, together with Devaux, they formed a Belgian ‘school’ of philosophers affiliated with (and also critical of) early developments in ‘analytic’ philosophy; see Gochet 1975. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Cf. Whitehead 1939, & 1969; Russell 1965, 1969, 1971a, & 1971b; Devaux 1967, & 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Cf. Bocheński 1961, & 1963. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Wahl 1925 & 1932. Wahl’s commentary on Whitehead and Russell had been particularly influential on Deleuze; cf. Sellars 2007, 555. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See Ryle 1970, 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See Berger 1972. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Cf. Cournand & Lévy 1973. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See Brun 1965, 1981, & 1988. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See Alquié 1950, 1955, 1974, & 1981. Cf. Deleuze & Parnet 2007, 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Umberto Galimberti (Beck, *et al*. 1962, 365) is another exception, though his contribution to the colloque consists of one brief comment. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See Van Breda & Taminiaux 1956, & 1959; Van Breda 1959. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Van Breda 1959. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. In the English translation, the quotation marks are dropped (Strawson 1992, 325). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Van Breda in fact talks, more subtly, of ‘les penseurs du Continent ou du moins entre beaucoup de représentants de la pensée sur le continent d'un cote, et les milieux philosophiques anglo-saxons de l'autre’ (Beck, *et al*. 1962, 127), i.e. of multiple entities rather than two mutually exclusive and opposed monolithic traditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Beck, *et al* 1962, 344. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. As noted above, the English translation of Van Breda’s comments misses his acknowledgment of this multiplicity. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See Acton 1939 & 1947; Ryle, Hodges & Acton 1932. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Cf. Gewirth 1996, 28-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See Beck, *et al*. 1962, 369. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Williams describes himself as ‘both deniably and undeniably, an analytic philosopher’ (2006,201). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. See e.g. Hacker 1996; *contra* Soames 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. See e.g. Urmson 1992; Austin 1963; Merleau-Ponty 2005, 67. See also e.g. Austin 1962. Cf. Stroll 2000, 146-8; Rée 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. E.g. Urmson 1992; Ryle 1971; Strawson 1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. See e.g. Gochet 1975. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. See Smith 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. See Rée 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)