

CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY

Using the term 'Continental' for most of the philosophy produced by a large and vigorous civilization may appear ignorant or patronising, but it is generally agreed that the ill-chosen word labels a fairly distinct branch of the subject. In the period now known as 'early modern' there was a community of ideas across Europe, with shared roots in ancient thought, and in the philosophy which emerged at the same time as modern science. It is at the beginning of the period we label 'Romantic' that a division in theories and approaches began to appear. A radical critique of the possibilities for philosophy, and a display of its limitations, appeared in mainland Europe, but was largely ignored in the English-speaking world. The British had never been keen on metaphysics, and their empirical philosophy allied the subject closely with the emerging sciences. Hence English language philosophy worked its way forward by studying practical theories for moral behaviour, and eventually becoming interested in logic and language, culminating in Analytic Philosophy, or (in America) in Pragmatism.

Across the English Channel (La Manche) a sense of despair, desperation and revolution crept into philosophy, and much more dramatic attitudes and systems emerged. One approach placed politics and economic history at the centre of human thought. Philosophers had always theorised about social organisation, but this view went much deeper, claiming that philosophy itself was at the mercy of social forces it did not understand. Another approach took a careful and critical look at ancient philosophy, reinterpreting what had been written, and trying to understand our own thinking in terms of how our ancestors may have gone wrong. A third strand placed the thinker right at the centre of philosophy, as a person faced with anguishing life-decisions that took priority over any semi-scientific thinking that calmer philosophers might aim at. The raw experience of being alive (stripped down to basics) became a topic for philosophers in a way that bewildered the more detached Anglo-Americans. When theories about the subconscious mind and childhood influences were added to the mix, a quite different group of views about the world had emerged.

A few rebels in each camp espoused the ideas of the other side, and there were English 'Idealists' (who talked of 'the Absolute'), and French 'Positivists' (who focused on 'observation' and 'laws of nature'), but mostly the two schools went their separate ways, with little friendly communication. In the mainstream of continental thought there was a process which we might call 'stripping away', in which we first suspend worries about big metaphysical issues, and try to accurately capture the nature of our raw experiences. At first this seemed promising, but the amount that needed to be stripped away continually increased, and what remained correspondingly diminished. The aspiration was to identify the presuppositions and influences that mould our thought, but other disciplines identified a huge array of such things. Anthropologists laid bare the frameworks of languages among non-European peoples, psychiatrists revealed layer after layer of unconscious mental life, and its influences on our motives, economic historians showed us that the control of wealthy industrialists and their acolytes actually shaped the very contents of our minds, as well as material status.

More recent continental philosophy is torn between a political commitment to confront the social forces which excessively control both our lives and our thinking, and a despairing retreat from philosophy, into purely descriptive writing about the nature of our culture. From the analytic perspective the continental philosopher often looks more like a sociologist or cultural commentator than like a lone mind confronting the universe.

Because of its focus on the situation of the individual within a culture, the work of continental philosophers is much more individual in character than the labours of their analytic rivals. In analytic philosophy there has been a sense of a shared enterprise, based on a quest for an successful account of logic, language and conceptual schemes which will fit the dominant framework created by the successes of science. There is much less interest in the physical sciences among continental philosophers, and their knowledge of cultural history is correspondingly much greater.

The worst fears of the analytic critics of the continental approach are that on the one hand their thought starts from an almost unquestioned political commitment to 'liberating' us from the innumerable forces which oppress us, and on the other hand a series of sceptical views about the traditional basics of the subject, resulting in a very widespread relativism, about such things as science, logic, evidence, knowledge, values, and so on. The response of the continentals to their analytic rivals is a widespread charge of naivety and triviality. It seems that confident analytic philosophers have simply failed to grasp that the mat has long ago been pulled from under them, and that they are now locked in the modern equivalent of asking how many angels can dance on a pinhead, even though it is dressed up in the obscurities of mathematical logic.

It is certainly a weakness of continental philosophers that they tend to base huge philosophical hopes on one big idea, such as identifying some particular mode of Being, or interpreting everything in terms of Power, or pinning all our hopes on achieving Authenticity. Their strength is what analytic philosophers would call 'thinking outside the box' (which the analytic tradition does not encourage). Thus by examining features of popular culture, or sexual experience, or mental illness, or neglected works of art, they can produce startling insights, and bold new concepts, in a way that more cautious 'analysis' can never manage. Hence their leading thinkers can often have a starring role in the own cultures, and achieve considerable fame and cult status, where the most eminent analytic philosophers are entirely unknown to the wider public.

There are signs in recent years that analytic philosophy is on the increase in the very countries where this 'continental' approach has been most dominant. There is an excitement about continental philosophy, with its bold creativity, but also a danger that its profusion of multi-layered doubts has made it hard to believe that philosophy is worth pursuing. The rival analytic school, even if its questions run less deep, at least seems to have a coherent research programme to which new students can contribute. The continental school, though, is continually revitalised by the arrival of dramatic new thinkers, and so we can always expect new waves of interest to point it in new directions.