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The Problem of Continental Philosophy

Lee Nok'si Livingston
Global Center for Advanced Studies (GCAS)
lee.noksi.livingston@gcas.ie

Abstract: Since at least the mid-20th century, Western philosophy has been split between the categories of Analytic and Continental philosophy. This division has been codified by doctoral programs, departmental distributions, professional organizations, and academic publications, and further exaggerated by modern crises of privatization and professionalization in spaces of higher education. This article examines the history of these categorizations and presents several analyses of their impacts, particularly the viability of Continental philosophy as a cohesive, oppositional category to the Analytic tradition, in an attempt to present the critical interrogation and disruption of these categories as a starting point for necessary change in the methodologies of current philosophical production.

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Introduction

Since at least the mid-20th century, Western philosophy has been split into the two warring camps of Analytic philosophy, a description of methodology, in which philosophy is done by analyzing concepts using techniques of symbolic logic with an emphasis on clarity, precision, and logical rigor resembling mathematics and the sciences, and Continental philosophy, a geographic category referring to philosophy done on the European continent including phenomenology, existentialism, critical theory, post-structuralism, deconstruction, and hermeneutics. The divide between the two schools is so deeply entrenched that they are often defined in contrast to one another. The term Continental philosophy is not an autnonym, but a name given to philosophers working primarily in Germany and France by those within Analytic philosophy, which is predominantly Anglo-American.[1] The differentiation is a slippery one, especially considering that several founders of analytic philosophy (such as Frege and Carnap) were themselves German. The major figures and schools of thought within Continental philosophy often do not resemble each other very much at all, or are actively oppositional. Do Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, and Deleuze actually have anything in common, other than being German or French? What exactly is Continental philosophy? Is there such a thing at all? And how has the entrenchment of this division impacted contemporary philosophical work and institutions.

Body

Edmund Husserl developed his ideas of phenomenology alongside the development of Analytic philosophy. While Husserl shared values of clarity and precision with Analytic philosophers (whom he occasionally even worked with), he was more concerned with applying these in the description of experience rather than the analysis of concepts. His student, Martin Heidegger, would use this phenomenology as the basis for his existentialist philosophy, which was later expanded and elaborated on, primarily by French and German philosophers, into various other forms of phenomenologically-based existentialism. By the mid-20th century, Analytic philosophers such as Gilbert Ryle had coined the phrase "Continental philosophy" to (somewhat pejoratively) distinguish their work from that of such phenomenologists and

[1] Though also, interestingly, the dominant school of philosophy in Scandinavia, according to a Swedish art theorist friend.

existentialists. The 1962 creation of an American professional organization of Continental philosophy, The Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, as an alternative (and often rival) to the overwhelmingly Analytic American Philosophical Association, institutionally codified this separation. Since then, European movements from Marxism to postructuralism to hermeneutics have all been shoved into the category of "Continental philosophy," even when they are in active opposition to phenomenology and existentialism. Continental philosophy has become a patchwork catch-all category of partially overlapping figures. As philosopher and intellectual historian Simon Critchley writes: "there is simply no category that would begin to cover the diversity of work produced by thinkers as methodologically and thematically opposed as Hegel and Kierkegaard, Freud and Buber, Heidegger and Adorno, or Lacan and Deleuze."

Even when Continental philosophy's tricky, perhaps even impossible, definition is recognized, it does not dissuade attempts to validate the Analytic/Continental divide on a methodological or content-based level, especially by Analytic philosophers. These arguments are often drawn from, or said to be embodied by, debates between specific Continental and Analytic philosophers themselves—phenomenological ontology vs. logical positivism (Heidegger vs. Carnap), deconstruction vs. correspondence theories of truth (Derrida vs. Searle), etc.

The historical problematization of Continental philosophy and its lack of cohesiveness has led philosophers such as Simon Glendinnings to argue that the category is defunct, and should be destroyed entirely. He argues that "the category of Continental philosophy is fundamentally ill-formed and problematic," and that "recourse and reference to this division functions in a way that is more polemical and opportunistic than it is considered and well-founded."[2] According to Glendinnings, there is no internal glue for some supposedly Continental tradition, only a selection of philosophers who have been deemed "Continental." Continental philosophy is simply an Anglo-American academic projection onto a selection of philosophers from continental Europe, one that distorts and distances engagement with these so-called Continental philosophers, or gives Analytic philosophers an excuse to not engage with their work in the first place. For example, Anglo-American philosophers in leading philosophy departments are often specialists in metaphysics, but very few have read, or even seriously considered, Heidegger's landmark metaphysical work *Being and Time*. This, for Glendinnings, is exemplary of how the Continental/Analytic divide harms the entire field of

[2] Simon Glendinnings, *The Idea of Continental Philosophy*. Edinburgh University Press, 2006. pg. 4

philosophy. Communication between different parts of philosophical culture breaks down, and this breakdown is only recognized in ways that appeal to the inevitability of the Analytic/Continental divide. Glendinnings writes that this appeal "is itself a form of philosophical failure, a dimension of our inhabitation of the economy of our philosophical culture that is in so much of a hurry to say plainly 'what is what' that it is insensitive to the fundamentally questionable character of its own terms of trade."[3] The only solution to this division, for him, is to do away with the two categories entirely in hopes of reunifying philosophy.

Other philosophers, such as Simon Critchley, attempt to solve the categorical divide by redefining and reinvestigating the tradition of Continental philosophy. For them, abolishing the categories of Analytic and/or Continental philosophy is throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Critchley wields many of the same critiques of the Analytic/Continental divide as Glendinnings, particularly in regards to the professionalization of philosophy that, they both argue, has both produced and exacerbated the division while obscuring deeper, more pressing debates about the identity of philosophy outside of professional confines. However, Critchley does see an internal glue to the Continental tradition, though it is one that differs from the geographic or methodological lines drawn by Anglo-American philosophers in the 1950s. Critchley argues that Continental philosophy can be defined by a centrality of tradition and history that affects practices of argumentation and interpretation; an emergence out of German idealist reception of Kant's critique of metaphysics, most significantly continued by Nietzsche's nihilism; the centrality of concepts of critique, emancipation, and praxis; an underpinning theme of crisis; and, finally, a pervasive anti-scientism.[4] Others draw different borders around Continental philosophy, though critiques of the professionalization of philosophy and its role in furthering the Continental/Analytic divide remain forefront. The former president of the American Philosophical Association's Eastern Division, Linda Martín Alcoff, describes the divide as a difference on the neutrality of knowledge: where Analytic philosophers hold knowledge to be politically neutral, Continental philosophers are specifically concerned with power and desire's impacts on knowing.[5] Professor of philosophy Ellie Anderson differentiates Continental philosophy as a closer relative to poetry and literature in contrast to Analytic philosophy's kinship with mathematics, though she argues that both can be equally rigorous in

[3] Simon Glendinnings, *The Idea of Continental Philosophy*, pg. 5
[4] Simon Critchley, "What is continental philosophy?" *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 5 (3): pgs. 347 – 363. 1997
[5] Linda Martín Alcoff, "Philosophy's Civil Wars: 2012 Presidential Address, American Philosophical Association (Eastern Division)" 1:21:49 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Ud2yh6dV2I\

their arguments and analyses. She argues that Continental philosophy's particular proximity to art is best embodied in Deleuze and Guattari's idea of "concept creation," which defines philosophy as an art of "forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts."[6] According to her, Continental philosophers, using Deleuze and Guattari's terms, are particular "friends of concepts," and argues that more of these friends are needed in professional philosophy, not less—which is what would happen if Continental philosophy's distinction was dissolved. Western philosophy would become synonymous with Analytic philosophy, and Continental philosophy would either disappear or be absorbed into fields such as comparative literature.

This is a genuine concern worth highlighting, even for those in Glendinnings' camp calling for the abolition of Analytic and Continental categories entirely. Our institutions and practices are still built on the Analytic/Continental divide, and across all areas of debate over this problem, just about everyone seems to agree that it is being exacerbated by waves of professional codification seemingly dedicated to keeping the two traditions separated. At least in the Anglo-American world, Analytic philosophy dominates over graduate programs, job listings, and academic resources, only engaging with Continental philosophers to translate their work into Analytic terms. The global influence of Anglo-American philosophy, often through intellectual and cultural imperialism, creates even larger ripples of this effect. Destroying the linguistic differentiation of these categories without first addressing the ways their division's influence has seeped into the nooks and crannies of Western philosophy as a whole would likely just further tip the scales of power imbalance and see the work categorized under the Continental umbrella lost in the shuffle.

While we continue to utilize Analytic and Continental categories, we can start to treat them as the historical frameworks they are rather than as actual absolute, definitive categories, approaching them as genealogical inheritances in the history of Western philosophy rather than concrete landmarks by which we must all orient ourselves. Approaching these categories critically allows us to see the thousand other potential lines of differentiation to potentially be drawn in our study of them, some of which have already been posited—origins in empiricism vs. rationalism, analytic vs. synthetic post-Kantian judgements, hypotactical vs. paratactical writing methods, and more. Regardless of the degrees and manners of differentiation between Analytic and Continental philosophy, and whether Continental philosophy can be truly defined as a cohesive tradition, these categories are undeniably important figures in the history of Western philosophy. But by treating them as inevitabilities rather than as constructions we

[6] Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari. *What is Philosophy?* Verso, 1994. pg. 4

allow them to be weaponized and concretized into professional and academic divides in philosophical spaces, which then self-legitimize and reproduce themselves through those very institutions. Taking these divisions for granted is the foundation by which we take our very philosophical methodologies as inevitable, and remain defined by these inherited constructions in ways we may not often even realize. Glendinnings is correct to call this "a philosophical failure," especially when it compromises so much potential within philosophical inquiry. The interfacing between so-called Analytic and Continental philosophy is woefully underexplored due to the Analytic tradition's unwillingness to engage with Continental conceptual apparatuses and the Continental tradition's quasi-journalistic, sometimes even fetishistic dedication to a specific canon of philosophers.

An important first step to facilitate this interfacing must be to shake off Analytic philosophy's chokehold on philosophical structures and resources. The slippery category of Continental philosophy could be mobilized to this end by Gayatri Spivak's "strategic essentialism." Analytic philosophers, such as Glendinnings, can take steps to engage with Continental philosophy without the betrayal of translation, and Continental philosophers can move towards practicing their creative, grafting juxtapositions with a more expansive collection of philosophers and theories—and by no longer defining themselves in opposition to a rival Western tradition, hopefully engage more with philosophers and traditions outside of the realm of Western philosophy as well.

The worsening fracture between Analytic and Continental threads in the Western philosophical tapestry is undeniably symptomatic of increasing professionalization in the field, including the privatization of higher education and client-ization of students in an increasingly hyper-capitalistic Global North, but it also presents an approach by which we can combat this problem internally, as we are both uniquely positioned and uniquely responsible to do as actors in these institutions. I suspect that there is more space to bridge the divide within Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's university undercommons, where alternative, collaborative, anti-professional practices of study are free to operate outside of the confines of corporate-academic productivity, and adopting these types of speculative philosophical methodologies will be an extremely beneficial step for those of us looking to dismantle the Analytic/Continental divide, as well as other categories that divide our philosophical work into Us and Them, Subject and Object, Self and Other. Since the Analytic/Continental divide is baked into the very means by which we do philosophy, we will need new methodologies along with new terminologies and institutions if we wish to overcome it.

Conclusion

The cycles of the Western world, rhythms built on bloodshed and global exploitation, have once again arrived at the stage we call fascism. Here in the heart of empire, even us haughty philosophers are plagued by phantasms and starved for meaning. But every tragedy presents us with an opportunity, and an obligation, to do things differently. We are in desperate need of contemporary philosophies that offer us frameworks by which we can arrive at useful, actionable truths. How could we shake off the phantasms that lead us through the same destructive spirals if we cannot even see our own work clearly? We cannot move towards the limits of what Western philosophy can be if the systems that produce our philosophies are stuck in a vision of the past. Interrogating the divisions baked into our philosophical heritage and the practices by which continually construct and reproduce them presents us with a useful entry point into creating these new practices; a fissure by which to curiously, carefully, even lovingly rip open our philosophical heritages and reckon with their messy insides. Many of us feel lost in the scale of the troubles, unsure how to make our work impactful in the face of dark times, and sometimes the most impactful thing is just a place to start. I think this is a good place to start.