Globethics Repository



On The History Of Continental Philosophy [Swiss Philosophical Preprint Series.No-65]

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see https://www.globethics.net. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy.

Item Type	Preprint
Authors	Mulligan, Kevin
Publisher	Philosophie.ch
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-11-15 01:42:32
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/190362

philosophie.ch
SWISS PORTAL FOR PHILOSOPHY

Swiss Philosophical Preprint Series

65

Kevin Mulligan

On The History Of Continental Philosophy

Added 28/02/2009

ISSN 1662-937X

© Kevin Mulligan

Topoi, Volume 10, No. 2, 115-120
Topos: Continental Philosophy Analysed, Guest editor: Kevin Mulligan

INTRODUCTION:
ON THE HISTORY OF CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY

Kevin Mulligan

"Continental philosophy" is now a well-established term in the English-speaking world: it has a point and is taken to refer to a fairly well-defined entity. It is, for example, regularly used in job descriptions. But any explanation that goes beyond something like the following, "Continental philosophy is the sort of philosophy produced by or in the wake of philosophers such as Heidegger and Adorno, Habermas and Apel, Sartre and Lévinas, Foucault, Lacan, Althusser and Derrida" is likely to be controversial. The term excludes analytical and other types of exact philosophy done on the continent.[1] Nor is the contrast between Analytic and Continental Philosophy supposed to encourage the assumption that Wittgenstein and Carnap are honorary Anglo-Saxons.

Continental Philosophy is often held to have the following distinctive features : it is inherently obscure and obscurantist, often closer to the genre of literature than to that of philosophy; it is devoid of arguments, distinctions, examples and analysis; it is *problemarm*. "Ask me what I'm working on, and I'll reply with the name of a problem", the Analytical philosopher will proudly say, "ask them, and they'll reply with a proper name"; (a variant on this: Continental Philosopher to an Analytical Philosopher: "I'm a Phenomenologist", "I'm an Analytical Philosopher, I think for myself"). It is also, he will ruefully add, terribly popular, but, he will happily continue, mainly in departments of literature and in some of the human sciences. He might also add that Continental Philosophy came to prominence in the English-speaking world because it seemed to address issues that analytical philosophy had conspicuously failed to address: the nature of textual interpretation, aesthetic questions, as well as a variety of issues in social and political philosophy. The fact that this one-sidedness had all but disappeared by the 1970's does not, he will have to go on to say, seem to have impeded the career of Continental Philosophy.

Such reactions (once described to me as "hot Ayer") are almost as typical as the descriptions often given on the continent of the analytical philosopher as a logical positivist, or a philosopher for whom philosophy is just the philosophy of language. These descriptions are, it may safely be said, wildly inaccurate. But what of the Analytical clichés about Continental Philosophy ?[2]

[1] See, for example, “Contemporary Continental Analytic Philosophy”, *Monist* 65/1, 1982, and Engel, 1988.

[2] I confess that, after or in spite of studying and teaching philosophy in West Germany, Italy and Switzerland for 15 years, such clichés seem to me to be one and all true. The impressions and generalisations that follow are therefore perhaps no more than an accumulation of prejudices.

Three types of consideration that may help to fix the most striking differences between Analytical and Continental Philosophy concern method, the rôle of History in the two traditions and the rôle of German philosophy in the genesis of Continental Philosophy.

Method

Within Analytical philosophy problems have a life of their own. And there can be little doubt about the importance within this tradition of the method of arguments for and against clearly stated positions, the explicit introduction of constraints on possible solutions and the detailed evaluation of such solutions. Even Analytical Philosophy on the large scale is invariably based on arguments about the details. And the method seems to be as applicable in political philosophy and ethics as in the philosophy of language.

Such an approach to philosophy is already omnipresent at the beginning of this tradition. Frege refers, at the beginning of one of his most influential papers, to "questions that challenge us to reflect" ("Sense and Reference"); Russell's phrase *The Problems of Philosophy* figures prominently in Wittgenstein's preface to the *Tractatus*. And in one of the first explicit analytic programs, a text which, as fate would have it, appeared in French in 1911, Russell describes the way good philosophy is to be done as follows:

> There have been far too many heroic solutions in philosophy; detailed work has too often been neglected; there has been too little patience. As was once the case in physics, a hypothesis is invented, and on top of this hypothesis a bizarre world is constructed, there is no effort to compare this world with the real world. The true method, in philosophy as in science, will be inductive, meticulous, and will not believe that it is the duty of every philosopher to solve every problem by himself. This is the method that inspires analytic realism and it is the only method, if I am not mistaken, by which philosophy will succeed in obtaining results which are as solid as those of science (Russell 1911 61)[3]

[3] It is interesting to note that Russell is here repeating his 1904 characterisation of Meinong’s way of doing philosophy :

> Although empiricism as a philosophy does not appear to be tenable, there is an empirical method of investigating, which should be applied in every subject-matter. This is possessed in very perfect form by the work we are considering. A frank recongition of the data, as inspection reveals them, precedes all theorising; when a theory is propounded, the greatest skill is shown in the selection of facts favourable or unfavourable, and in eliciting all consequences of the facts adduced. There is thus a rare combination of acute inference with capacity for observation. The method of philosophy is not fundamentally unlike that of other sciences: the differences seem to be only in degree (Russell 1973, 22-23, first published in 1904).

That “the true method of philosophy is none other than that of the natural sciences” was a slogan with which all Brentano’s influential pupils – Twardowski, Husserl and Meinong – were thoroughly familiar (Brentano, 1929, 136, from a lecture of 1866). On the two Austrian philosophers, Bolzano and Husserl, as proto-analytic philosophers, see Dummett 1988; see also Simons, 1986, Mulligan, 1986.

Although the criteria for identifying problems and arguments within philosophy are not entirely self-evident it is, I believe, very difficult to find arguments in the writings of Heidegger, Adorno and Lacan or Serres. And even when one has found some of the signs of an argument ("also", "donc") the argument and the problem dealt with are rarely returned to as such - either by the philosopher in question, or by his adepts or by his enemies. Parisian philosophers have, for example, written a great deal about structures and structuralism and their relation to the subject and history but it is extraordinarily difficult to find any continuous or ongoing argument about what a linguistic or anthropological structure might be. Nor is this surprising in the light of the fact that there is only a very small number of French attempts to say what a structure is beyond hand-waving in the direction of de Saussure or mathematics. This absence of argument is closely connected with an institutional fact: the book, not the paper, is the preferred philosophical genre on the continent. It is thus entire positions which are confronted with one another rather than individual arguments. This genre fits, like a glove, what I can only describe as a habit of conceiving of philosophy as an expression of the self: punctual criticisms of a thesis are criticisms of the the author; the more adequate response, it is felt, is for the critic to go away and produce a book expressing his self.

History

History looms large in Continental Philosophy. This is first of all because of the very intimate relation between philosophy and history of philosophy. This relation has two important consequences. The least well-known is the very great knowledge of the great texts of the tradition exhibited by the most junior member of the average continental Philosophy Department. The second is the enormous quantity of history of philosophy written on the continent which is free of a what is increasingly taken to be a characteristic vice of analytical discussions of ideas that happen to have been put forward hundreds of years ago: the failure to understand the significance of an argument or thesis in its context, where the context is the rest of the oeuvre and the philosophy contemporaneous with it. Whether or not this is a vice, it is difficult to believe that the gap exemplified by the following two quotations is likely to be bridged. The first is Bennett on a part of Guéroult's Spinoza commentary:"That sounds good, and stays close to the text, but what does it mean ? I find this, like most of Guéroult's philosophical offerings, to be too vague and soft to help me in my thinking about Spinoza" (Bennett 1984, 67; cf. 187). Contrast this with Gadamer: "One can win a certain clarity by analysing the argumentation of a Platonic dialogue with logical means, showing up incoherence, filling in jumps in logic, unmasking false conclusions, and so forth. But is this the way to read Plato, to make his questions one's own ? Can one learn from him in this way, or does one simply confirm one's own superiority ? What holds for Plato holds *mutatis mutandis* for all philosophy" (Gadamer 1986, 38).

Secondly, there is a historical dimension to much Continental Philosophical reflection on mind, society and ethics - a dimension which still has no counterpart in Analytic Philosophy. Only in Analytical Philosophy of Science has there been a genuine historical turn (as opposed to the recognition of the need for such a turn). Interestingly, Continental Philosophy of the Natural Sciences is a very rare creature.

The third reason history plays such an important rôle in Contental Philosophy is that that the influence of one or another very strong version of the thesis that both the object and the methods of the natural and human sciences differ radically from one another has been extremely widespread within Continental Philosophy since Dilthey. The defences by Sartre and Habermas of such theses are well known. And the widespread refusal to accept that there any constraints at all on what is to count as knowledge within psychoanalysis in any of its forms is a symptom of the same tendency.

Germany's Rôle in the History of Continental Philosophy

If we go back to the beginning of the century we find a situation that could not be more different from that of philosophy in the West in the 1990's. William James is read everywhere, particularly by Husserl and other heirs of Brentano; Mach is studied intensively in England and France; Stout functions as a conduit in Britain for the analytic psychology of the Brentanians; Moore recognises the deep kinship between his work on ethics and that of Brentano; Russell, after incorporating many ideas of Meinong in his Principles of Mathematics, subjects Meinong's theory of descriptions to a famous series of criticisms; Poincaré criticises Russell, and anticipates, amongst other things, the later Viennese thesis of the incommunicability of content as Duhem anticipates later and more influential holistic doctrines. And so on.

How, then, did we get from there to here ? From what was to all intents and purposes a philosophical universe as open, mobile and receptive as any since the Middle Ages to the present split ?

The divide has deep historical roots, a point the Continental Philosopher should be happy to acknowledge provided he is not sceptical about the very existence of Continental Philosophy. Perhaps it is only visible from afar. Perhaps it will come to be seen as a spurious fiction, a function merely of the American philosophy job market and Anglo-Saxon ignorance. But perhaps, too, it will increasingly come to be seen that there really is or was such an entity, and that its origins are German (rather than Austro-Hungarian or French). Important as are such factors as a continuing suspicion in France about the importance of logic, a suspicion that goes back to Poincaré; the early deaths of Nicod and Herbrand; and the introduction by Bergson and Bachélard of the genre of philosophy as poetry into French philosophy.

In Paris, as Robert Blanché put it, at the very moment the German troops left the capital, it was invaded by German metaphysics. Sartre played a very important rôle in introducing both Heidegger and Hegel into French philosophy. Hyppolite and Kojève helped to make Hegel a central philosophical reference.

The effect of Hegel, Heidegger and the later Husserl as well as of Nietzsche seems to have been much more enduring than that of the different existentialisms, even in the case of the numerous Parisian excursions into the philosophy of society and philosophical anthropology. A preoccupation with "Life", in all the varieties described by Hegel and Heidegger, lends such anthropologies a dimension which is not present in the much more bloodless accounts of, say, practical deliberation or autonomy within analytic philosophy. Whether or not Death - à la Hegel, Freud, Heidegger or Derrida - can stand up to examination of the sort current in such accounts is still, surprisingly, an unexamined question.[4]

In Germany and in West Germany Heidegger and German Idealism, reintroduced into the philosophical mainstream first of all by Dilthey, have dominated the philosophical landscape the philosophical landscape from the 1920's on. One crucial step in this direction was provided by Husserl's philosophical conversion between his *Logical Investigations* of 1900/01 and his Ideas of 1913[5]: his turn towards transcendental phenomenology, egology and idealism decisively marked Heidegger and through Heidegger, and in very different ways, both Sartre and Derrida. Husserl's turn was itself a considerable break with his own roots, the Austrian philosophy of Bolzano and Brentano, a tradition marked by the conviction that transcendental philosophy was obscurantist as well as by a rhetoric in favour of exact philosophy and the unity of science as strident as that to be met with in the Vienna Circle. Husserl was obliged to note, with some dismay, how his later transcendental idealism had come to resemble the philosophy of Fichte. From then on the die was cast. The Marxist route to taking Hegel seriously in the Frankfurt School and in Lukacs only reinforced the position of German idealism within philosophy in German.

Thus the West German philosopher Dieter Henrich wrote in a 1984 article entitled "Whither German Philosophy ?" of "classical German philosophy" - which is, he says, with the Athens of Plato, one of the two highpoints of philosophy - that "we can neither merely administer it nor think we can reject it in favour of refined imports" (Henrich 1984, 935).

Taking German idealism seriously is, I suggest, one of the marks of Continental Philosophy. One symptom of this is the out of hand dismissal of realism by Continental Philosophers. Another the pervasiveness of some transcendental/empirical distinction. Another is the persistent habit of recycling the philosophemes of German Idealism. The continuing presence of transcendental philosophy is much more fundamental than the different linguistic turns that mark both current French and German philosophy, structuralist in the former case and Heideggerian or transcendental-semiotic-pragmatic (a "synthesis" of transcendental philosophy and analytic philosophy of language) in the latter case. This is one reason why the analogy between continental and analytical linguistic turns is so empty.[6]

[4] One interesting exception is Tugendhat, 1979.
[5] See Mulligan, 1990, §3.
[6] Another is that the very thesis about the central rôle of language in analytical philosophy – for example in the strong form defended by Dummett (1988) – has the unfortunate question that it ill fits Moore, Russell, R. Chisholm, H.-N. Castañeda and G. Evans.

Social, as well as historical factors, are also important. The existence of large communities of secondary school teachers of philosophy in Italy, Germany and France both marks philosophy in the university and contributes to determining the type of philosophy that is produced. Jacques Bouveresse has suggested to me that such communities create a demand for philosophical titillation. And indeed already in 1912 Julien Benda had noted the appetite for "philosophical emotions", rather than philosophical ideas or statements, emotions caused by the idea of a very general phenomenon.[7] The existence of such communities is a symptom of the very different public conception and role of philosophy from those which are to be found in the anglophone world. Continental Philosophers are no strangers to the media. Finally, the close link on the Continent between philosophy and letters, in particular Faculties of Letters, not only pre-selects the subject- matter of philosophy but also encourages a purely nationalist conception of philosophy. (Philosophy in French is read because it is in French).

Whether or not these bald and sketchy considerations go some way towards justifying the Analytical clichés about Continental Philosophy (to which could be added the tolerant reaction: "Maybe there is something to Continental Philosophy, it would be arrogant to think otherwise", perhaps combined with the confession of ignorance: "Actually I know so little about it"), there can be little doubt about the almost complete absence of debate between Continental and Analytical philosophers, a debate as absent in the English-speaking world as it is on the Continent. Such a situation is a historical curiosity: it is difficult to think of a similar example of widespread, almost complete mutual isolation and indifference between philosophical communities. Within Europe the impending political changes and the growing presence of an analytic minority in many countries (not to mention the near majorities in Scandinavia and Spain) render the situation even more curious.

John Searle is one of the very few analytical philosophers to have accorded to a Continental philosopher the privilege he so frequently accords his analytic peers: that of explaining at length his disagreements. A second example of this all too rare species is Jacques Bouveresse, whose wide-ranging critical forays do for his Parisian colleagues what Benda had done for their predecessors.[8] The recent flurry of oecumenical efforts, stimulated above all by the writings of Richard Rorty, do nothing by their very nature to advance the cause of articulating in a precise way the disagreements and differences which are widely felt to exist. The undoubted impact of analytical philosophy on contemporary German Continental philosophy, an engagement entirely absent from French Continental Philosophy (German commitment to rationalism and its obligations is widespread; in Paris, rationalism is held to be an attribute of a police state), seems to have found no echo in the pages of *Mind* or the *Journal of Philosophy*.

[7] Benda, 1912, 105-110. Cf. the French translation of Wittgenstein's preface to the *Tractatus*: "[Its] object would be attained if it provided pleasure to the person who reads it"; Wittgenstein had, of course, written: "who reads it with understanding".
[8] See Searle 1977, Bouveresse, 1984, 1984a, Albert, 1975, Gauthier, 1978, and Barnes, 1990.

The contributions that follow are intended to go some way towards remedying this situation. Lorenz Puntel, in *The History of Philosophy in Contemporary Philosophy: the View from Germany*, describes an aspect of the wider philosophical culture on the continent, the background to the work of the Continental Philosophers read so assiduously in N. America: the pervasive continental identification of Philosophy and the History of Philosophy. A story very like Puntel's dismal tale could be told about both contemporary French and Italian philosophy. In Italy the philosophical justification for an extreme historicist identification of Philosophy and its History goes back to Croce and is immensely influential; German versions of this identification are also an essential part of the background to the work of such Italian Continental Philosophers as Gianni Vattimo and Emanuele Severino. (The lack of any discussion of contemporary Italian philosophy in the present volume is a regrettable omission). Bernard Harrison's *Heidegger and the Analytic Tradition on Truth* sketches an account of truth and truth-conditions that turns out to be characterizable by some of Heidegger's pronouncements on truth as unconcealment. What makes the world semantically scrutable, Harrison argues, are recognition and relevance conditions and the latter are essentially a matter of practical activity.[9] Pascal Engel's *Interpretation without Hermeneutics. A Plea against Oecumenism* describes differences between analytic accounts of interpretation and continental hermeneutics. (Although the principle of charity was described by the eighteenth century German philosopher Georg Friedrich Meier[10] the analysis of this and other principles of interpretation is not an achievement of continental hermeneutics which, in this as in other things, is proud to have left the eighteenth century behind). Barry Smith, in *German Philosophy: Language and Style* analyses what is often the first impression made on the analytic philosopher who plunges into Heidegger, Adorno or Habermas for the first time and suggests that first impressions are often the best. Richard Wollheim's *Dr. Lacan's Cabinet* is a reprint of a review, yellowing copies of which are carefully cherished by those appreciate the genre of the "Verriss" and by those who think that of all the disservices done to Freud by Freudians that of Lacan is not only the most recent and most influential but also the most catastrophic. Lacan's "discours" *is* a philosophy, in a way that many interpretations of Freud are not, above all because of the strange marriage of Hegel and structuralism at its centre. John M. Vickers' *Objectivity and Ideology in the Human Sciences* provides a sophisticated defence of the conception of power and ideology developed by Foucault, a philosopher who, like Sartre, has long interested a small minority of Analytic Philosophers. His article also bypasses almost completely many of the more obvious ways of getting to grips with Continental philosophy (by rarely mentioning Foucault). Newton Garver's *Derrida's Language-Games* concludes (provisionally ?) a series of reflections on Derrida's work with an explanation of why, in spite of their great interest, Derrida's "texts" are not (to be) recognized as contributions to the philosophical corpus. My own contribution, *How Not to Read: Derrida on Husserl*, adds an exhibit to the case for an affirmative answer to the question "Does Literary Theory rest on a Mistake ?", where "Theory" is used in the way now widespread in the United States.

When the History of Continental Philosophy is eventually addressed in a suitably thorough fashion one question that might be considered is: when did Continental Philosophy come into being ? In 1927 ? In 1913 ? In fact the lineaments of what is recognisably Continental Philosophy are already clearly described in a short review that appeared in 1884 of Dilthey's *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften. Versuch einer Grundlegung für das Studium der Gesellschaft und der Geschichte*, I. Band (1883). The review's author is given as Franz Hillebrand, a minor Brentanian. But, as Roderick Chisholm, who discovered it, has pointed out to me, there are good reasons for thinking that the review is actually by Brentano himself. The author of the review criticizes the historical school to which Dilthey belongs, contrasting Dilthey unfavourably with Menger, since it completely divorces the methods of the human sciences and philosophy from those of the natural sciences; Dilthey's incomprehensible reduction of truth to "a part of reality which is thought completely"; his denial of truth to practical judgements; his account of the unity of each science in terms of communication; his conviction that man's entire "life" is the clue to the problem of the existence of the external world.

Of the historical school to which Dilthey belongs, it is claimed, Brentano notes, that its "brilliant successes" have led to its triumph over the ideas of the French Enlightenment. These ideas, as Brentano's Continental contemporary Nietzsche noted two years later in *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (§253), are the "modern ideas" against which the German *Geist* has rebelled with deep disgust. German philosophy, then, I suppose, must be called *post-modern*. Nietzsche also notes that these French ideas are actually English. (The Nietzschean and Continental habit of describing Hume, say, as an English philosopher is a historical error as widespread and ineradicable as the description of Wittgenstein as a German philosopher.)

Dilthey's obscurity, many errors and lack of logical sharpness do not augur well for this new approach to philosophy, says Brentano or his pupil. At least on this last point, the unusually prescient Brentano was wrong. Not only was Dilthey, as Heidegger put it, "on the way to the question of life", "life as a whole" (*Sein und Zeit* §10), but the philosophemes, theses as well as the obscurity criticised by Brentano had a long life ahead of them. For this reason, and because 1884 saw the appearance of Frege's *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik*, we may say that this review is the first attempt to analyse Continental Philosophy.

Notes

[9] The plausbility of Harrison's account of truth as an interpretation of Heidegger is supported by the fact that Heidegger's master, Husserl, also wanted to ground truth-saying in the connexion between interest, activity and practical dispositions that he described under the rubric of *passive genesis*.

[10] *Versuch einer allgemeinen Auslegungskunst*, 1757; reprint: Stern-Verlag, Düsseldorf, 1965. I owe the reference to Axel Bühler.

Albert, H. 1975 *Transzendentale Träumereien*, Hamburg: Hoffmann & campe

Bachmaier, H. (ed.) 1990 *Paradigmen der Moderne*, Amsterdam: Benjamins

Barnes, J. 1990 "Heidegger spéléologue", *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 95/2, 173-195.

Benda, J. 1912 *Le Bergsonisme ou Une Philosophie de la Mobilité*, Paris: Mercure de France

Bennett, Jonathan 1984 *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, CUP

Bouveresse, J. 1984 *Le philosophe chez les autophages*, Paris: Minuit.
1984a *Rationalité et cynisme*, Paris: Minuit.

Brentano, F. 1929 *Ueber die Zukunft der Philosophie*, Leipzig: Meiner

Dummett, M. 1988 *Ursprünge der analytischen Philosophie*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp

Engel, P. 1988 "Continental Insularity: Contemporary French Analytical Philosophy", *Contemporary French Philosophy*, (ed.) A. P. Griffiths, CUP.

Gadamer, H.-G. 1986 *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, Yale.

Gauthier, Y. 1978 “L’épistémologie française des mathématiques”, *Critique*, 368.

Henrich, D. 1984 "Wohin die deutsche Philosophie ?", *Merkur*, 38, 929-935.

Hillebrand, F. 1884 "Ueber einen neuen Versuch zur Grundlegung der Geisteswissenschaften", *Zeitschrift für das Privat- und öffentliche Recht der Gegenwart*, 632-642.

Mulligan, K. 1986 "Exactness, Description and Variation: How Austrian Analytic Philosophy was Done", in (ed.) Nyiri 1986, 86-97.

Mulligan, K. 1989 "Genauigkeit und Geschwätz - Glossen zu einem paradigmatischen Gegensatz in der Philosophie: Brentano und die Brentanisten", in (ed.) Bachmaier 1990, 209-36.

Nyiri, J. C. 1986 *From Bolzano to Wittgenstein. The Tradition of Austrian Philosophy*, Vienna: Hölder

Russell, B. 1911 "Le réalisme analytique", *Bulletin de la société française de philosophie*, 11, 53-61
1973 "Meinong's Theory of Complexes", and Assumptions, *Essays in Analysis*, (ed.) Lackey, D., London: Allen & Unwin

Searle, J. 1977 "Reiterating the Differences", Glyph, I, 172- 208.

Simons, P. 1986 "The Anglo-Austrian Analytic Axis", in (ed.) Nyiri 1986, 98-107.

Tugendhat, E. 1979 *Selbstbewusstsein und Selbstbestimmung*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp