

## A note on continental and analytic philosophy

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How much attention do you pay to footnotes? I don't mean: 'Do you read them?' (Though it *can* be difficult to break away from the main body of a text if you are absorbed or in a rush.) I mean: 'How often do you notice what they're *like*?' It's something I've had to notice over the last couple of months. Most journals have a single footnote style that all authors have to adopt. One only allows page references, no explanation or argument. Another allows brief asides, but only references in the Chicago style. The BJUP is, as far as I'm aware, unique in allowing authors to keep their own natural footnote style. We made the decision to allow this for two reasons:

First, footnote style contributes to the flavour of an essay. Whether all branches of an argument are dealt with in the body of a text, or controlled by footnote is a personal choice. In this issue alone, Finlayson's footnotes include a sly aside for the alert reader; Deakin's are often technical elucidations or specifications that could otherwise swamp the clarity of a point being made; Chan's carry no content at all, but serve to tie her commentary into the texts as if offering evidence in a court case. To flatten all of these to a single style would be to miss out on some of the joyous individuality of these pieces of work.

Which – and this was the second reason – no longer seems necessary. Some elements of style must be homogeneous for this journal to feel like a unified entity. It hardly needs a Wittgenstein to point out the relation between resemblance and ontology. A non-comprehensive list of characteristics these essays need to share includes a common typeface, layout and English language. Otherwise heterogeneous characteristics overwhelm the papers' resemblances, and they no longer feel like *the same sort of thing*. In the past,

editors believed footnote style should be on this list of shared characteristics. I believe that our contemporary world-wide-web usage and literary promiscuity have effectively made such uniformity unnecessary. We are used to extracting information from webpages with wildly different formats, and photocopied papers from journals with completely different footnote styles. There are some conventions that need to be followed, and some that do not. This changes depending on the context of the reading public, but get it *right* and the papers have greater power, and are still recognisably the same sort of thing.

Which is where continental philosophy comes in. Most philosophy undergraduates in the UK fall within the analytic tradition. They fall on the side of a one-hundred-year-old distinction that has *modus ponens* and *tollens* arguments, necessity and sufficiency, and definitions as central features. There are plenty of others in Europe, America and British humanities and sociology faculties who fall on the other side. Their work has voices, paradoxical self-negation, multiple meanings and the concept of a *jump* – of only being able to lead to a certain point through instruction before a thinker must make their own way forwards – at its heart.

Relations between the two traditions have not always been cordial. Analytic philosophers have claimed that continental philosophy is poorly-written, relativist, Communist mysticism. Continental philosophers have retorted that analytic philosophers are mired in a set of intransigent techniques that are too limited to give any true wisdom, are oppressive and unable to see the subtleties in even their own flat prose. Both sides have accused one another of jargon-heavy fetishism and hero-worship of key authors. The two sides have largely separated. Mainstream British philosophy departments and their core courses have remained analytic at least in the essay style they will accept from students. History, sociology and literature departments have largely become a home base for postmodernists and poststructuralists who cluster around continental philosophy writers. There are separate journals, societies and conferences for the two disciplines.

Recently it has become fashionable to say you are ‘sympathetic’ to continental work – as is the case with McDowell or Dancy to a greater or lesser extent; or

to organise ‘interdisciplinary’ interaction. The problem with both these approaches is that they – intentionally or unintentionally – must fudge certain key issues. There are fundamental incompatibilities between the two traditions. Certain words – for example *différence*, *differance* – mean different things to the two sides. Absolute key assumptions – such as the principle of bivalence or the desirability of using unequivocal language in the analytic discipline – are immediately contradicted by the multiple readings of a text’s meaning that is in turn central to continental thought.

Have you ever seen a Mercator and Polar Gnomonic map placed next to one another? One is like a road map, in that there is a square grid overlay, with right angles matching North, South, East and West; but on it Greenland is represented as the same size as Africa (in reality the latter is 13 times the size of the former) due to equatorial and polar scales having to vary wildly to map a globe to a rectangle of paper. The other uses a circle rather than a rectangle to alleviate this problem, and ensures that a line drawn between any two points on it is indeed the shortest distance; but shows East and West as curves rather than simple straight-line, right-angle directions you could intuitively match a compass to, and can only show half the world on a single map. If you tried to travel around the world with an exclusively-Mercator navigator and an exclusively-Polar-Gnomonic navigator working shifts, you would get very lost very quickly. If you were a Mercator-map-follower who decided he was ‘sympathetic’ to the Polar Gnomonic system, so split the difference in degrees between the courses recommended, you would similarly find yourself going in circles. This, historically, has been the problem with splicing analytic and continental traditions together. The end result gets you nowhere you want to be; and both sides find the journey objectionable.

At which point analytic readers may be wondering: ‘Well why bother? Analytic philosophy is great. We’re not missing anything – why engage with this stuff?’ As an analytic philosopher myself who was sceptical for a long time as to the value of continental philosophy, I can offer three reasons why I have started to seriously rate some of it. The first is that the most outrageous pieces you’ve probably heard are usually the peripheral, grandstanding work. Plenty of bad philosophy gets written every year, irrespective of tradition – you have to ask someone who’s read a lot of the stuff to point you in the direction of

the really good writing. If you do so with continental philosophy, I think you may well be surprised at how different a lot of it is from the stereotype.

Second, it is not as self-contradictory or incoherent as is often claimed. What comes across as relativism or contravention of bivalence is actually often just rumination on interpretation: an enjoyment of the many different thoughts that can emerge or be sparked by a single set of words. Even here, limits are observed. The Communist Manifesto is rarely suggested to be a cake recipe or ipod instruction manual. And actually the *ladder* or *jump* is something we use in analytic philosophy all the time, but raised to a methodological axiom: a metaphor. I've used maps here, Descartes used a house to represent an epistemic edifice, Locke had his *tabula rasa*. There is a point being made in each of these images that the author has failed to describe using plain definition or clauses of necessary and sufficient conditions. This is something we already do.

Finally, there is great *insight* in continental writing. Its authors have pointed out things of great perception, whose *rightness* I can immediately see, but which I have no idea how they could be established by chains of deduction. Kierkegaard on the state of being he calls *anxiety in the world* was the first of these I found. It seems plausible to occasionally penetrate to something true directly and clearly. A rich seam of these kinds of insight runs through the best continental work. I only write analytic pieces myself, but the direction I try to travel through deduction has been changed a couple of times by the insight I have found in continental writers. There is something to be gained here for analytic philosophers. And any continental paper that does not include a fair few *modus tollens* and *ponens* moves, and draw a few bivalence-dependant conclusions is unlikely to be read more than once. I take it that continental philosophers – when they are honest with themselves – do implicitly acknowledge the great value of analytic writing. They do enough of it themselves.

But what to do about the splicing problem, then? Well, my answer is: 'Don't try.' Just as Mercator and Polar Gnomonic maps, analytic and continental arguments and analyses may be directly incompatible, *unintegrable*. But

*crucially* they are both identifiable about the same thing: the world. And they both yield something that is plausibly wisdom. They are both philosophy.

I am suggesting that the difference between the two to a well-read current philosophy student is far closer to that of 'style of footnote' than 'not written in English'. It may take a bit of extra thought and work if you aren't used to it, but it *is* something that insight and wisdom can be gained from. Don't read just analytic philosophy or continental philosophy, read *both*.

The BJUP requires that all essays it publishes are clear, carefully-argued and accessible to non-topic-specialists, irrespective of the tradition the author comes from. All of these are characteristics of the following, continental paper by Duschinsky. You will continue to find great examples of both continental and analytic philosophy in the journal as long as I am editor.

You *can* choose how you write your own footnotes.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> At least, that's *my* interpretation...