

# THE IDEA OF CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY

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*A PHILOSOPHICAL CHRONICLE*



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## Starting Points

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### *An Initiation into Philosophy*

I must have been about seventeen. From the hallway I could hear two of my older brothers talking very enthusiastically about things they were beginning to explore in their studies at university. They were talking about something called ‘semiotics’. The door to the room was open as usual and I moved closer, cautiously approaching my spirited brothers inside. At the doorway I asked for an explanation, but whatever I was given just hung in the air and left me out of the charmed circle of my brothers’ talk. I had no idea what they were on about and couldn’t get into the conversation about French literary theory that they were then getting into.

About four years later something of all this must have been lurking still in the delight I felt on stumbling over John Locke’s identification, on the very last page of my edition of the *Essay*, of ‘*Σημειωτική*’ as one of the three most basic sorts of human inquiry.<sup>1</sup> I was delighted above all that I would now be able to recall for others (it has taken me a long time to get round to this) that a serious engagement with a ‘doctrine of signs’ under that title wasn’t the special preserve of recent French thought.

That delightful discovery would come later in my time as a philosophy student, but my initial forays into this kind of talk at university left me more or less where I had been as a teenager: stationed firmly at the (I assumed open) doorway. In fact, the number of shiny words and closed conversations only grew, and their enigmatic obscurity became ever more exhausting. Third-year and graduate students were now talking about ‘postmodernism’, ‘poststructuralism’, ‘critical theory’ and ‘deconstruction’, as well as ‘semiotics’. And philosophical figures that remained largely invisible in an academic degree programme centred on the analytic tradition were also looming into some kind of hazy view: ‘Hegel’, ‘Kierkegaard’, ‘Nietzsche’, ‘Marx’, ‘Heidegger’, ‘Adorno’, ‘Barthes’, ‘Derrida’, ‘Deleuze and Guatarai’, ‘Irigaray’ . . . I started to engage in a

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serious effort to get my head round the basics of what was being called ‘Continental philosophy’. I wanted to come to terms with this distinctive and alternative philosophical tradition.

And yet that effort only served to heighten my confusion. There simply didn’t seem to be a philosophical mast to pin one’s colours to round here – not *one* at any rate. Over the next six years or so I continued to read work by some of the big names of so-called Continental philosophy. But despite many hours of often extremely profitable reading I wasn’t getting any closer to seeing how they might be grouped together. It’s not that these supposedly Continental philosophers seemed to belong with the analytic philosophers I had come to know in my university studies. Most clearly did not belong with them. But they didn’t seem to hang together either. The more I read the less sense I could make of the idea that there was a distinctive tradition of philosophy in view here at all.

In 1996, shortly after getting my first full-time job as a philosophy lecturer, I was invited by a commissioning editor from Edinburgh University Press to put together an encyclopedia on Continental philosophy. At last, I thought, I had a real chance of getting the frustrating restlessness I had been experiencing hitherto over with. As Editor I would have to write an Introduction in which I could (would have to) finally sort out a view of my own, ‘my view’, on what Continental philosophy is . . .

This book is an elaboration and development of that Editor’s Introduction.<sup>2</sup> And in this new text, as in the earlier one, I will defend a view that ploughs a relentlessly sceptical furrow with respect to the idea of a distinctive Continental tradition in modern philosophy. The opening sentences of the earlier Introduction prepared the reader for my doubts. I see now that they also generalise the initiation anxieties that I have just related:

Most people familiar with contemporary philosophy, particularly philosophy as it is taught at universities in the English-speaking world, will also be familiar with the category of ‘Continental philosophy’. However, such familiarity typically extends no further than being able to say whether or not a given author is typically called a ‘Continental philosopher’. Situations of this type normally reflect the shortcomings of a beginner or non-specialist, but in this case it seems to be more like a normal feature of the use of this label. Indeed, as I hope to show in this introduction, as a term of classification, the category of ‘Continental philosophy’ somewhat *lives* on being vague and free-floating.<sup>3</sup>

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You can imagine that I was not entirely confident that my own account wouldn't just 'reflect the shortcomings of a beginner or non-specialist'. And so you can imagine too how relieved I was to find that, in fact, I was not alone in finding the idea of a distinctive Continental tradition so problematic. At the same time as I was writing my Introduction, one of the leading British authorities on phenomenology and deconstruction, Simon Critchley, was writing one too for the same sort of publication – and was (totally independently) coming to a (broadly) similar conclusion.<sup>4</sup> What gets included in Continental philosophy comprises, he suggested in his Introduction, 'a highly eclectic and disparate series of intellectual currents that could hardly be said to amount to a unified tradition',<sup>5</sup> and more strongly still he concluded that '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'.<sup>6</sup> Yes, yes.

Both Critchley and I identified a darker side to this odd story too. It also struck us both as deeply significant that the title of 'Continental philosophy' did not initially arise as a result of self-designation, but from a form of other-designation that Critchley called 'projection' and I called 'exclusion'. Here is Critchley with the basic point:

Continental philosophy is an invention, or more accurately, a projection of the Anglo-American academy onto a Continental Europe that would not recognise the legitimacy of such an appellation – a little like asking for a Continental breakfast in Paris.<sup>7</sup>

The hunt for the inside track on Continental philosophy was over: there is no inside track to be found. Or at least that is what I had supposed and still suppose. As we shall see later in this book, Critchley thought otherwise and went on to affirm a positive, non-projective sense of a Continental tradition in philosophy. Since reading his 'Introduction' and later his book *Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* – a book which is, like this, an 'expanded' version of the earlier essay<sup>8</sup> – my ideas on the idea of Continental philosophy have developed with his in full view. However, although we are for long stretches fellow travellers, we are at crucial points quite sharply at odds. In particular, I remain convinced that his attempt to identify internal glue for a Continental tradition is doomed from the start. And not just doomed for him but for anyone: there is none.

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It can sometimes seem hard to believe that this could be an even remotely plausible conclusion. My own upbringing in philosophy took place in a culture powerfully informed by the idea that the differences within it should be comprehended in terms of the division between analytic and Continental philosophy. So the suggestion that the category of Continental philosophy is fundamentally ill-formed and problematic can seem hopelessly naive and scholastic. Yet I have gradually come to believe that, for the most part, recourse and reference to this division functions in a way that is more polemical and opportunistic than it is considered and well-founded. Even in contexts where no obvious judgement is being made about the quality of work being placed on either side, most appeals to the idea of a division or distinction between analytic and Continental philosophy seem to me at best troubling, and at worst simply awful.

This book aims to reconfigure our sense of the differences that inform our philosophical culture and tries to understand why those differences have been comprehended – and indeed *lived* – in terms which seem to me to be profoundly distorting and inadequate. In this chapter I will lay out three interpretive proposals which will guide my discussion throughout this book. I hope what I will say later on will reduce the dogmatic appearance of the proposals as they are introduced here. However, I want to be able to get going from what I consider to be the right starting points, and that requires getting ahead of the argument a little. Uncritical appeals to the schema ‘analytic or Continental’ betoken for me a failure to be alive to its (conceptual, existential, institutional) functioning and significance. I think we can do better than that and I want to try to do so from the start.

### *Interpreting Philosophy Today*

Perhaps I shouldn’t get so hung up about the problems with the division. It is not as if I don’t know that there really are significant differences in the vicinity, differences which are often sufficient to ruin every effort to engage in positive discussion, let alone a critical dispute. I know things are bad, sometimes really bad. But – and here is my first interpretive proposal – in my view *appeals to the idea of division belong to what is so rotten here*. That is, in a situation where communication between different parts of our philosophical culture has all but broken down, the thinking about the breakdown that is an appeal to the idea of a division between analytic and Continental philosophy does not so

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much as capture the scene as it is *part of it*. It 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.

So for some time now I have been trying to get to know what is going on here in a more measured way. And I keep concluding that a great many people who appeal to the division don’t know what they are doing, don’t know what they are talking about, don’t know or don’t want to know how the distinction is functioning in their discourse. It really is a fault in our culture.

Wanting to make things better the British philosophical logician Michael Dummett has said recently that it is only by going back to a point before the division occurred that we can hope to ‘re-establish communication’, that ‘it is no use now shouting across the gulf’.<sup>9</sup> I want to make things better too, and one of the reasons I think I can is that unlike many of my contemporaries I move around some of the supposedly gulf-separated texts in the stream of contemporary Western philosophy in ways which do not conform to this gulf-stricken image. I’m not saying, not pretending, that everything which finds a place in my life with philosophy is ‘really the same’ or that no one within me is shouting at anyone or failing to hear someone. Nor am I saying something of the kind that Dummett himself expressed when he found, to his surprise, that two seminal thinkers writing at the turn of the nineteenth century, Frege and Husserl, thinkers who he had supposed (because of the going terms of trade) should have been miles apart, were, in him, for him, not ‘deeply opposed thinkers’ but ‘remarkably close in orientation despite some divergence of interests’.<sup>10</sup> I’ve also had that kind of experience, and it is an important one. But I don’t want to ignore the other kind of experience, the experience of finding two writers who are supposed to be involved in the same subject speaking from radically different positions, positions which are not merely differences within (a given understanding of) philosophy but differences which attest to a conflict over what philosophy itself is or can be; differences over what can count as a philosophical remark or as a convincing appeal to people’s attention; differences over what can be regarded as a responsible way of going on in philosophy. I have had that kind of experience too.

Nevertheless, I want my thinking about the situation here to be more cautious and more refined than one generally finds. As I see it,

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for the most part people seem happier to render inaccessible to themselves whatever they are (for some reason) interested in underestimating. And that, I think, is one of the main functions of the idea of an analytic/Continental split. It rationalises a willingness not to read, at least a willingness not to render oneself capable of reading well.

Of course one can't read everything, let alone read everything well. And I know too that philosophical writings that do not belong to the mainstream of analytic philosophy will typically be experienced as *distinctively difficult* to read by people whose studies are centred on that mainstream. However (and fully accepting that), there are two related interpretive responses to that distinctive difficulty that I want fundamentally to challenge:

1. the response that rationalises that difficulty by identifying such work as belonging to a distinctive Continental tradition of philosophy;
2. the response that sweeps the problem away by affirming that work in the Continental tradition does not typically represent the most responsible way of going on in philosophy.

The second, profoundly evaluative response is not something I could hope directly to challenge in this book. Not even an engagement with textual details could rebut that kind of charge. Since what counts as a responsible way of going on in philosophy is not something one can establish independently of having a high regard for a given way or ways of going on in philosophy, one would be looking to turn people round in their conception of the subject to an extent which no introduction is likely to achieve. However, I will want to confront the first interpretive response head on. And my hope is that this confrontation will not leave the second in such good shape. Again, I want to stress that the fact that I want to challenge the first of these responses should not be taken to suggest that I think that the kinds of works of philosophy that get identified in this way are really not so very different to works of analytic philosophy. As Dummett came to see some are not so very different, and that is important for everyone to realise since it shows that the differences are not always so sharp as is sometimes supposed. But that is not the basis of my objection to the response. The point is that even if I accept (as I do) that, in some more or less obvious and unexceptional sense, *none* of the writings identified as 'Continental' should be thought of as works from the tradition of analytic philosophy, I am under no obligation to accept the stronger response that they are works from a distinctively different Continental (or Modern European or whatever



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other name one wants to give it) tradition of philosophy. And here I want to enter a proposal – my second and most basic interpretive proposal – that provides a very strong reason for thinking that the current idea of division belongs to the scene of breakdown it aims to describe. The basic reason for thinking the current idea of division belongs to the rotten scene it aims to describe is that *there is no such thing as the tradition of Continental philosophy*.

That sounds very exciting. And in all the excitement it can lead to misunderstandings too. Since I want to call into question the very idea of Continental philosophy in this way it is very difficult for me to avoid giving the impression that something significant and perhaps rather obvious about the present philosophical culture is being overlooked or denied by my approach. An example of this effect will help illustrate some of the other things I have been touching on to this point. In a recent review of a book which collected interviews with a number of the younger generation of British philosophers, the philosopher of science Donald Gillies wrote of his surprise to see what he called ‘a definite shift among new British philosophers away from the traditionally British analytic philosophy and towards Continental philosophy’.<sup>11</sup> Here we see the idea of the division within the contemporary philosophical culture between a traditionally British (or Anglophone) ‘analytic’ mode and a contrasting ‘Continental’ one appealed to in the way we might call *operational* rather than *thematic*: the idea of a difference is not the object of philosophical investigation so much as the matter of course resource for (meta)philosophising. Now, I am not certain that the same confidence in the distinction was really on show in all of the interviews in that book, but it is clear that Gillies did not think my thoughts on the matter had much going for them, and he wanted to see me as rather isolated in wanting to challenge the stereotypes in this area:

One philosopher Simon Glendinning in his interview in chapter 12 puts forward the view that the difference between analytic and Continental philosophy is not an important one. As he says (p. 204): ‘. . . the analytic and Continental distinction . . . ultimately lacks any deep philosophical significance.’ However, this view is not shared by any of the other philosophers who discuss the matter, and who assume there is a very significant difference between the two approaches to philosophy.

I am ruefully sure that I did not do myself many favours with that remark in the interview. At least that’s how I feel now when I see it

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extracted from a context where I was trying positively to identify the philosophical issues which most deeply divide philosophers in our time, issues which I conceive as circulating around the relationship of philosophy to science and which I was sure then as now cannot be held within the frame of the analytic/Continental difference. In any case, the burden of my argument was not at all to suggest that the analytic/Continental difference 'is not an important one' as Gillies puts it for me (do the words he cites really support that strong construal?), but rather to identify or specify the kind of importance, the kind of philosophical significance, it has. Indeed, in my defence I might note that I explicitly stressed that my approach 'does *not* mean that the account of the growth of the distinction and division, the developing idea of a wide gulf, has no philosophical significance'.<sup>12</sup> The division belongs *centrally* to the understanding of Western philosophy as it goes on today, and one cannot move without bumping into it – as 'the other philosophers who discuss the matter' in the interviews also significantly show. Since I think that the very idea of a distinctive Continental tradition – a way of going on in philosophy with its own distinctive style, method or problematic field – is deeply questionable I can hardly accept that the analytic/Continental distinction is, as such, of 'deep philosophical significance'. That it touches all of us (all the time and sometimes deeply), however, is simply beyond question, and I have never suggested otherwise.

Still, I have clearly given the impression that I wanted to ignore something important about the present situation. And it is worth reminding ourselves of the force of a distinction which still dominates (and for some has really messed up) the lives of philosophers in our time. While insisting that the differences 'between so-called Continental and Anglo-Saxon philosophies' *cannot* be understood in terms of intraphilosophical 'questions of style, method or even problematic field', Jacques Derrida, writing back in 1978, summarised well a situation in which,

[differences] are sometimes so serious that the minimal conditions for communication and co-operation are lacking. The minimal contract of a common code is no longer ensured, and when I speak of a code I do not mean only the strictly linguistic element of these rules of exchange. Within a single linguistic area, for example, the Anglophone world of Britain and America, the same interference or opacity can prevent philosophical communication and even make one doubt the unity of *the* philosophical, of the concept or project behind the word *philosophy*, which then constantly risks being but a homonymic lure.<sup>13</sup>

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For Derrida – and I think he is right about this – the breakdown ‘between *so-called* [note that careful attention to a questionable name] Continental and Anglo-Saxon philosophies’ can ‘sometimes [note that equally scrupulous attention to the variability of the difficulty]’ suffice to make the idea of philosophy itself, the idea of a distinctive form of inquiry, a specific mode of questioning among others, seem ‘precarious and enigmatic’.<sup>14</sup> We are quite close (and in view of the attention to details, also quite far) with this worry to the British moral philosopher R. M. Hare’s view, stated some twenty years earlier, and to which I will return later in this book, that philosophy as it stands in our time is not (or is no longer) one: there are, he boldly claimed in 1960, ‘two different ways’ in which philosophy is now studied, ways concerning which ‘one might be forgiven for thinking . . . are really two quite different subjects’.<sup>15</sup> As Dummett put it more recently ‘we have reached a point at which it is *as if* we’re working in different subjects’.<sup>16</sup>

If only there really were now two subjects, if only it were now such that it was more than only ‘*as if*’ it were so, if only the title really was now nothing but ‘a homonymic lure’ masking the fact that the contemporary inheritance of the subject that used to be called philosophy had bifurcated into two different subjects . . . If only all that were true then everything would be so much simpler. The differences would be tractable, traceable to identifiable differences of style, method or problematic field of the two subjects. But it is not. And that non-simplicity, for me, is quite enough to demand of us something better, something more refined than a machine-like reiteration of the assumption that what is at issue ‘is a very significant difference between the two approaches to philosophy’. That the situation is one in which the philosophical culture is at times deeply divided, divided in ways which are ‘sometimes so serious’ as to make communication nearly impossible, is, as I say, beyond question. But precisely because of the ‘precarious and enigmatic’ condition of philosophy today, a serious engagement with the nature and significance of that all too secure and clear idea of division is, it seems to me, a timely one. In any case that is what I am going to attempt in this book.

A measure of the distinction’s power and cultural reach today was brought home to me recently when I was getting ready to leave a party. I was just putting my jacket on to go home when someone said to me ‘Ah, now you look the complete *Continental* philosopher’.<sup>17</sup> The pertinence of the friendly remark (and the reason it took putting a black leather jacket on to look the part) would not be lost on anyone who is

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at all familiar with contemporary images of Continental intellectuals. The distinction between that (supposedly) rather exotic breed of *engagé* thinkers and their (supposedly) less glamorous and sedentary Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-American or Anglophone analytic version is very precisely recorded by Simon Critchley, someone who (I think) knows very well what one should wear when:

One is used to thinking of the distinction between the analytic and Continental traditions [in terms] where analytic philosophy is conservative and stuffy in a sort of senior common room, leather arm-patch sort of way, and Continental philosophy is its funky streetwise, leather-jacketed obverse.<sup>18</sup>

The idea of being (or at least appearing to be) something of a radical, a roguish outsider to the dominant establishment and the mainstream, is often considered central to the ethos of those who engage in Continental philosophy today, and it may even be what draws some people towards it. Those who these days take the title for themselves – wherever they live or work – commonly see what they do as an attempt to revitalise the discipline, offering as one subscriber in America puts it, ‘a way out of the doldrums that philosophy has accomplished for itself in the past several decades’.<sup>19</sup> So it can all seem so very vital, so very different from the arid-seeming terrain of the analytic mainstream. (That’s not totally wrong.)

Of course, things look rather different from the terrain of the analytic mainstream. Doldrums? What doldrums? ‘You may find our arguments dry, but do you really think the barely readable, esoteric, *ex cathedra* words of your Continental masters are going to revitalise anything . . .’ (That’s not totally wrong either.)

And so it goes on. But with this difference of perception – a difference I can readily acknowledge myself – something becomes visible that is of enormous significance to an understanding of the idea of an analytic/Continental division in general: namely, that it belongs to a bifurcation in what I want to call *reception-responses*. More specifically, what is at issue with the idea of Continental philosophy is the reception ‘over here’ of work that is going on ‘over there’.

In this context ‘over here’ now designates something like ‘from the English-speaking world’. However, for reasons that are far from negligible, this English-language reception context is, in fact, originally, a British one. It is not only that the spatial designators (over here/over there) work better from Britain (we really can point from here, it is that close), the very title ‘Continental’ clearly signals a British source. The

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English word ‘continent’ (deriving from Latin sources from which we also get the word ‘container’) had, by the middle of the seventeenth century, already taken on its current geographical sense of ‘a vast land-mass not broken by seas’, but around this time, when preceded by a definite article (and often with a capitalised initial), it was also beginning to be used as the name for ‘the mainland of Europe, as distinguished from the British Isles’. The idea of the Continent is in itself a designation from over here of a place which is, essentially, over there. There is a reference to an elsewhere inscribed in the name, and this is something that the idea of Continental philosophy imports into itself from its British origins. The British title may now have travelled the world, and was unquestioningly taken up by most of the American philosophical academy some forty years ago now,<sup>20</sup> but there are trailing clouds of British history which are not sloughed off in this passage, and the idea of Continental philosophy is never radically free of its taint of being that form of (broadly speaking) Western philosophy that is *not what we do round here* – most of us anyway, those who have managed not to succumb to what a Cambridge don recently called the ‘common taste for mystification’ or ‘inflated trivialities’ of many of his colleagues in the humanities.<sup>21</sup>

Now, saying it is not what we do round here may be regarded ‘purely descriptively’, but there is no doubt that for the majority of philosophers in the English-speaking world during the twentieth century the idea of Continental philosophy has had a profoundly *evaluative* accent, representing quite precisely what is beyond the pale philosophically speaking – the Cambridge don’s dig is a cat coming out of the bag. It is not only *What we do not do*, but *What ought not be done* if one wants to think seriously within the central channels of the Western philosophical tradition. On this view, the idea of Continental philosophy is the idea of a kind of bastard offshoot of that tradition, an offshoot which, although in a very broad sense part of the history of the subject, is not part of the central strand. Specifically, it is an offshoot that is marked by a kind of failure of inheritance, an abandonment of the standards which should characterise properly philosophical inquiry. Thus authors engaged in what, at least since the time of J. S. Mill, British philosophy has been calling ‘the Continental philosophy’ are regarded as doing work which is not only of a supposedly distinctive kind but also, it must be said, of a decidedly *inferior* quality.<sup>22</sup>

During the second half of the twentieth century this view came to dominate philosophical institutions right across the English-speaking

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world. No English-speaking philosopher educated since the late 1950s could fail to appreciate that 'Continental philosophy' is regarded as the harbinger of all that is 'arbitrary, pretentious and soul-destroying' in contemporary thought, wherever it is written.<sup>23</sup>

So the idea of Continental philosophy, and the idea of participating in a distinctive Continental tradition, does not actually emerge from where one might have thought it should have emerged from. In fact, it is difficult even to articulate the idea in a language other than English. (It is notable that the Collins-Robert dictionary (1992) details the capitalised use of 'Continental' in the English/French section but not in the French/English section.) In this respect, as we have seen Critchley point out already, the use of the title 'Continental philosophy' can be compared to that of a 'Continental breakfast'. No one who lives on mainland Europe would have thought of giving their morning meal that name, but now there is not only a kind of breakfast called a 'Continental breakfast', it is possible to eat one anywhere. In fact, it is now a truly intercontinental phenomenon. One can ever order it, to some bemusement of the locals, on the Continent.

Some parallel points can be made about Continental philosophy. It is not simply that, as it is understood today, it can now be 'done' elsewhere or anywhere, but the generic sense it now has is of a style or species of philosophy which *can* be done anywhere. It can be done in America or Australia too, or, again, on the Continent.

Of course, this understanding assumes that there really *is* something which has an identity sufficiently robust to be spotted, repeated and here or there indulged in. While I am happy to concede that this is now the case with a Continental breakfast, I am far less confident that the same can be said for Continental philosophy. In the chapters that follow I will argue that the very idea of a fruitfully distinguishable philosophical tradition of Continental philosophy is, first and foremost, part of the mythological history of (the movement that came to call itself) analytic philosophy. That is, and this is my third interpretive proposal, *the very idea of such a tradition is best thought of as an item that has its original home in the conceptual armoury of analytic philosophy*. In this respect, 'Continental philosophy' is less the name for an other kind of philosophy than analytic philosophy, but a term that functions *within* analytic philosophy as the name of its own other, that part of its lexicon which represents what is '*not part*' of it. In what follows I will often say that Continental philosophy is, for this reason, 'the Other' of analytic philosophy. The point of this capitalisation is

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visually to mark a difference (which I think is actual) between modes of philosophy that are not part of the mainstream of contemporary analytic philosophy (they are genuinely other to analytic philosophy) and analytic philosophy's own conception of those modes as comprising a distinctive and significantly different approach to philosophy (the Other of analytic philosophy).

As we shall see in later chapters, analytic philosophy itself *suffers* from this understanding. However, as I have already indicated, there is a complication to this point brought about by the fact that, in recent years, many people have appropriated the title positively to define what they do themselves. I will delve into that recent history later, and when I do I will show that the appropriation of this title for a vital 'new wave'<sup>24</sup> in philosophy is, as many of the advocates of the idea know full well, essentially separable from the (I think) totally implausible suggestion that their work relates to a distinctive Continental tradition of philosophy.

So we have three interpretive proposals:

1. In a situation where communication has all but broken down between self-styled analytic philosophers and other voices in the contemporary philosophical culture, the thinking about the breakdown that is an appeal to the idea of a division between analytic and Continental philosophy does not so much as capture the rotten scene as it is part of it.
2. There is no such thing as the tradition of Continental philosophy
3. The idea of a distinctive Continental tradition is best thought of as an item in the conceptual armoury of analytic philosophy; it is the idea of its own Other.

To conclude this chapter I want briefly to clarify the second and perhaps most radical of these proposals.

### *A Working Distinction: Works of and Works in*

My approach to the topic of this book is iconoclastic, but I hope that it will not be regarded as inaccurate or unrealistic, nor indeed unsympathetic to those in the English-speaking world (or anywhere else for that matter) who now (or now and then) take the title of Continental philosophy for what they do, myself included. In order to clarify the historical and institutional situation as I see it I am going to make use of a distinction between, on the one hand, writings as they are

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	Frege	Russell	Vienna Circle	Quine	Oxford	TLP	PI
Linguistic turn	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rejection of metaphysics	✗	✗	✓	✗	(✓)	(✓)	✓
Philosophy ≠ science	(✗)	✗	(✓)	✗	✓	✓	✓
Reductive analysis	(✗)	✓	✓	(✓)	✗	✓	✗
Formal logic	✓	✓	✓	✓	(✗)	✓	✗
Science oriented	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗
Argument	✓	✓	(✓)	(✓)	✓	(✗)	(✓)
Clarity	✓	✓	✓	(✓)	✓	✗	(✗)

*Figure 1.1 Analytic philosophy at a glance.*

gathered under a certain title (‘works of X’) and, on the other hand, writings as they are committed to a certain outlook or adhere to a certain methodological conception (‘works in X’).<sup>25</sup> Now, one might expect that the sets of works identified by these specifications to be co-extensional. So while the relations between different texts may be complex and marked more by Wittgensteinian family resemblances rather than by ubiquitous common features, it would seem unproblematic to affirm, for example, that ‘the primary works of logical positivism’ precisely comprise those texts that are ‘the primary works in logical positivism’. Can the same be said of analytic philosophy? Although the family resemblances are less determinate in this case, in a rough and ready way I think it can. Hanjo Glock provides a conceptual schema which seems to me to capture things very nicely in this area (see Figure 1.1).<sup>26</sup>

If you tick the majority of the boxes you are an analytic philosopher, if you do not you are not. Glock’s table gives a few illustrative examples from the movement of analytic philosophy, but it is instructive to try it out on any of those who do *not* normally count as analytical philosophers as well. And it seems to me that people who do not normally count don’t count here either.<sup>27</sup> Doubtless this result would provide an opening for the idea that these authors belong to a distinctively different tradition in contemporary philosophy. However, the fact that one can produce a set in this way (a set formed by virtue of its members sharing the property of ‘not being an analytic philosopher’) does not mean that one has unearthed a tradition: there are an indefinite number of ways of not being something. As I hope to show, coming to appreciate (if not exactly to admire) why certain texts have been brought together as the Continental collection helps one clearly to see



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why what one can in this way call the primary works of Continental philosophy do not comprise the primary works *in* it.

In order to account for the more recent idea that Continental philosophy is a distinctive and vital ‘new wave’ on the contemporary philosophical scene I will, in due course, need to complicate matters somewhat and add the further category of ‘works *on* works of Continental philosophy’. To complicate matters further still these works tend to go by the name of ‘studies *in* Continental philosophy’. However, my claim will be that even the most exemplary and influential of such writings remain historically and methodologically *secondary* to the major works of Continental philosophy that they engage with, and so do not, in that sense, comprise ‘*primary* texts *in* Continental philosophy’ either. My second interpretive proposal can be helpfully reformulated like this: *there are no primary texts in Continental philosophy*.

Even this refinement of my second and most blunt proposal may seem too blunt. After all, the authors and texts which are typically grouped together under this title, the various ‘currents of thought’<sup>28</sup> or ‘philosophical practices’<sup>29</sup> that are brought together under the single banner, *are* more or less (sometimes more, sometimes less) closely related to each other. For this reason it might be thought that my rejection of the very idea of a distinctive tradition in this case must presuppose an unhelpful and far too demanding understanding of what does and what does not constitute a *tradition* in the first place. For example, am I saying that a set of texts can only belong to a philosophical tradition if they all or nearly all share certain basic principles or assumptions? Aren’t traditions just a bit more rough-and-ready, a bit more unprincipled than that?

In fact, as I hope should already be evident, I am completely convinced that traditions are *not* formal unities, *not* fully rational structures. Hence, I do not suppose that the fact that there are clear objections to the idea that there is a recognisable or determinate methodological kernel or characteristic outlook shared by the primary texts of Continental philosophy automatically discredits the idea that there is good reason to think that what is at issue here may, indeed, be a distinctive tradition in it. No, what discredits that idea is something else, something that most experts working in the field know full well: namely, the fact that what gets grouped together as the primary works of Continental philosophy ‘is a highly eclectic and disparate series of intellectual currents that could hardly be said to amount to a unified tradition’<sup>30</sup> or, again, and more pointedly that ‘there is simply no category

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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'.<sup>31</sup> That is all, but if it is right it should be quite enough to ruin the suggestion of a distinctive tradition.

So while the thinkers and movements that are usually included under the banner do comprise, as one commentator has put it, 'a variety of more or less closely related currents of thought',<sup>32</sup> this does not, in my view, justify talk of a distinctive tradition. Indeed, so weak is the internal bonding in this group that analytic philosophers are often 'more or less closely related' (sometimes more, sometimes less) to them too. Thus, in my view, what these interrelations really point towards is ultimately the profound 'enigma' of philosophy itself as a subject touched on earlier. I mean, what holds them *all* together – analytic and non-analytic, and all among each other – is about as far from being a simple matter as one can get. The question 'What is philosophy?' is itself a question in the subject that goes by the name 'philosophy'. And there is, I think, no way out of that interpretive and contested circle.

The Wittgensteinian image of family resemblances helps us to understand how a conceptual unity can tolerate a wide diversity of cases. However, it can also be invoked to support a certain way of going on with the idea of the division of the contemporary culture that I find just as misleading and unhelpful as more cut and dry views. In ecumenical spirit someone might say 'Of course there is no rigid division, no unbridgeable chasm between analytic and Continental philosophy. There is a spectrum of cases, and they shade over in the middle'. What is right in that spectrum image is the idea that the different movements or currents in the stream of Western philosophy typically shade across each other. But the mistake is to think of that stream as amenable to a cross-section that divides it roughly into two: that there is one (transverse) line running across the river with, as it were, Logic at one bank and Poetry at the other, and a fuzzy overlapping bit in the middle. The banal truth is that there are various currents in the contemporary philosophical culture and they sweep and seep into each other at various points and in various ways, and sometimes they are not close at all.<sup>33</sup> There is no future in erasing such differences and trying to make everyone seem the same, neither when we are looking at differences between thinkers who are in the analytic mainstream and thinkers who are not, nor when we are looking at differences between the motley of thinkers who are not. In the chapters that follow I will

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try to show that existing attempts to justify the idea that the primary works of Continental philosophy comprise something like a philosophical tradition that stands in a more or less clear contrast to the analytic tradition are (in various ways) inadequate. More ambitiously, I will try to show too that these inadequacies could not be overcome by a more powerful or more nuanced account. I will also try to indicate where this leaves those working and thinking within the current philosophical culture, steeped as it still is in the idea of a distinctive 'Continental mode' of pursuing philosophy.

## Notes

1. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. A. D. Woozley, Glasgow: Collins, 1964, p. 443. The most natural modern-English translation of 'σημειωτική' would be, of course, precisely, 'Semiotics'.
2. Simon Glendinning, 'Introduction', *Encyclopedia of Continental Philosophy*, ed. S. Glendinning, Edinburgh: EUP, 1999. A more recent version of that Introduction is published in *Fundamentals of Philosophy*, ed. J. Shand, London: Routledge, 2003.
3. Simon Glendinning, 'Introduction', p. 3.
4. Simon Critchley, 'Introduction', in *A Companion to Continental Philosophy*, eds S. Critchley and W. Schroeder, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.
5. Simon Critchley, 'Introduction', p. 5.
6. Simon Critchley, 'Introduction', p. 6.
7. Simon Critchley, 'Introduction', p. 5.
8. Simon Critchley, *Very Short Introduction to Continental Philosophy*, Oxford: OUP, 2001, p. 137.
9. Michael Dummett, cited in Critchley, *Very Short Introduction to Continental Philosophy*, p. 15.
10. Michael Dummett cited in Critchley, *Very Short Introduction to Continental Philosophy*, p. 15.
11. David Gillies's review of *New British Philosophy: The Interviews*, eds J. Baggini and J. Strangroom, London: Routledge, 2002, 'Some Reflections on New British Philosophy' is posted at <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/kis/schools/hums/philosophy/frames/Staff/Gillies/newbritishphilosophy.html>. The Appendix to this book will offer considerable support for Gillies' perception of a shift in the cultural formation of philosophy in Britain in recent years. Everything which precedes the Appendix will, however, call into question his way of articulating that shift.
12. Simon Glendinning, *New British Philosophy: The Interviews*, p. 205.
13. Jacques Derrida, *Who's Afraid of Philosophy*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 104.
14. Jacques Derrida, *Who's Afraid of Philosophy*, p. 104.
15. R. M. Hare 'A School for Philosophers', *Ratio*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1960, p. 107.

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16. Michael Dummett, cited in Critchley, *Very Short Introduction to Continental Philosophy*, p. 15. Emphasis mine.
17. Kevin O'Sullivan (personal communication).
18. Simon Critchley, *Very Short Introduction to Continental Philosophy*, p. 45.
19. Hugh Silverman, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Merleau-Ponty*, ed. H. J. Silverman, London: Routledge, 1988, p. 2.
20. John McCumber has suggested that the term crossed the big pond (another British expression which indicates a (different) kind of proximity of an 'over there') 'in the mid 1960's' (John, McCumber, *Time in the Ditch*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001, p. 50).
21. Nicholas Denyer, 'The Charms of Jacques Derrida', *Cambridge Review*, vol. 113, no. 2318, October 1992, p. 104.
22. Simon Critchley has identified two essays by Mill from the 1830s and 1840s which may be the first writings in print to make use of the terms 'Continental philosophers' and 'the Continental philosophy' (Simon Critchley, *Very Short Introduction to Continental Philosophy*, p. 42). It should be remembered, however, that Mill himself conceived his own work as in crucial ways trying to *overcome* an antagonism between what he called 'English' and 'Continental' thought about politics – between a mode of political thought based fundamentally on a theory of human *nature* (the outlook of his father(s) with its roots in Cicero's attempt to derive a – political – theory of human nature from Plato) and one based on a view of human *history* (an outlook with its roots in Polybius' attempt to derive a – political – theory of human history from Plato). Mill retained a priority of the psychological over the historical but his own position is strikingly 'mixed'. This series of footnotes to Plato is brilliantly outlined in Robert Cumming's study of the development of liberal thought *Human Nature and History* (2 vols, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1969). We might note for the record that Cumming regards the result of Mill's reconciliation as the effective transformation of political theory into what Mill calls 'mental history', i.e. into the history of ideas. Cumming calls this turn to a genre that is 'slacker than philosophy' (Vol. 2, p. 432) 'a final and fatal weakening' of traditional political philosophy (Vol. 2, p. 426).
23. John Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, London: Penguin, 1957, p. 467.
24. Hugh Silverman, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Merleau-Ponty*, p. 2.
25. I am indebted to conversations with Peter Osborne for showing me the significance of this distinction, and will cite his own formulation of it in the final chapter. The main argument of this book develops and I hope systematically accounts for Osborne's hunch that in the case of Continental philosophy the two dimensions come apart. I will not always advert to the distinction with italics but the reader should be aware that I always try to keep the distinction in view.
26. H.-J. Glock, 'Was Wittgenstein an Analytic Philosopher?', *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2004, p. 438. A crucial element that remains

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totally unrepresented in this schema is something that Simon Critchley emphasises, perhaps equally one-sidedly, as ‘what matters’ with respect to whether on is ‘in’ or ‘out’ of a tradition: namely, the question of ‘which tradition the philosopher feels part of’ (Simon Critchley, ‘Introduction’, p. 9). So while I think that Glock’s table will give a fairly reliable prediction of who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’ of the analytic movement that does not mean that it can be relied upon (at all really) to explain what makes people *feel* ‘in’, still less whether those who are ‘out’ belong together or not. It is not, in that sense, an analysis of a widely shared idea of analytic philosophy. As Glock is aware, most people who provide ‘doctrinal definitions’ of analytic philosophy define it in terms of what they think it *ought* to be (with definitions which express their own commitments, and so express why they themselves feel part of the movement), and so are, as predictors, always ‘too narrow’ (H.-J. Glock, ‘Was Wittgenstein an Analytic Philosopher?’, p. 429).

27. Glock’s parentheses indicate either that he regards the verdict as ‘contestable’ or that the feature is ‘partly present or partly absent’. A distinctive feature of this table is that it makes perspicuous the central place of the Vienna Circle in the self-understanding of the analytic movement, something Glock thinks is historically undeniable and which many more recent analytic philosophers would either resist or want to forget. However, in that regard one should not infer that because Vienna Circle thinkers tick all the analytic boxes they belong together in a philosophical school with determinate frontiers. If one were to make a table that detailed the family traits of the Vienna Circle one would want to add additional parameters. In a personal communication, Glock noted that, in particular, one would need to include a parameter that would mark ‘the split between those who accepted a Wittgensteinian *distinction* between philosophy and science (Schlick, Carnap, Waismann) and those who rejected it (Neurath, Hahn)’. One should also bear in mind that (as Glock himself acknowledges) the case for an individual philosopher’s placement on this or any other such ‘at a glance’ table is not itself typically judgeable at a glance and that different kinds of philosophy might call into question the criteria of (for example) clarity and argument that most analytic philosophers would cleave to in making such judgements. For a rough count of the varieties of clarity one might seek in philosophy – and the common-sense criteria for stylistic clarity that Glock is (not unproblematically) relying on here – see H.-J. Glock, ‘“Clarity” is not Enough’, in *Wittgenstein and the Future of Philosophy: Proceedings of the 24th International Wittgenstein Symposium*, eds R. Haller and K. Puhl, Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 2002, pp. 81–98.
28. David West, *An Introduction to Continental Philosophy*, Oxford: Polity, 1996, p. 1.
29. Hugh Silverman, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Merleau-Ponty*, p. 1
30. Simon Critchley, ‘Introduction’, p. 5.
31. Simon Critchley, ‘Introduction’, p. 6.
32. David West, *An Introduction to Continental Philosophy*, p. 1.

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33. In the final chapter I will employ the spectrum image myself to represent various possible relations that philosophers with a serious working interest in non-analytic kinds of philosophy might have to the primary texts of analytic philosophy. But by that stage the image will not be used to mark distinctions between philosophers who are more or less 'Continental' (in view of their distance from an analytic mainstream), but simply to map an array of reading and research interests that focus *more or less* exclusively on non-analytic figures and resources.