



Doing Philosophy in Style: A New Look at the Analytic/Continental Divide

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Abstract

Questions of style are often deemed of marginal importance in philosophy, as well as in meta-philosophical debates concerning the analytic/Continental divide. I take issue with this common tendency by showing how style – suitably conceived not merely as a way of writing, but as a form of expression intimately linked to a form of life – occupies a central role in philosophy. After providing an analysis of the concept of style, I take a fresh look at the analytic/Continental division by examining the various stylistic differences between philosophers on each side. Despite these differences, I argue, both sides of the divide suffer from a common stylistic deficiency, and if this deficiency were rectified the gulf separating the two traditions may not appear as insurmountable as it presently does. To show this, I draw principally from the philosophy of religion, a field that has recently experienced a renewal in both the analytic and Continental traditions.

One thing is needful. – To “give style” to one’s character – a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye.

– Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (trans. W. Kaufmann, New York: Vintage, 1974, p. 232)

It may be thought that the very distinction between analytic and Continental philosophy is a spurious or unhelpful one, and so should be rejected or replaced with another typology. One consideration in favour of this view is the sheer diversity that exists within the Continental tradition: Is there anything, or at least anything of importance and of interest, that is held in common by exponents of existentialism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, structuralism, Frankfurt School Critical Theory, and postmodernism?¹ But if we wish to continue to hold that something of philosophical (and perhaps socio-political) value is revealed by distinguishing the Anglo-American analytic tradition from the various philosophical schools that are regularly classified as ‘Continental’, then how exactly are we to spell out the differences between the two traditions? One route often taken is to concentrate on substantive philosophical theses and presuppositions. It has been argued, for example, that analytic philosophers generally favour a realist or Platonist metaphysics, while Continental philosophers adopt a more historically and temporally oriented metaphysical framework, even when attempting to overcome metaphysics altogether.² It may also be thought that there are differences over what questions are asked (research problems) and how they are addressed (methodology). Analytic philosophy, for example, is often depicted as employing a quasi-scientific method that emphasises specialisation (a piecemeal accretionist approach to problem-solving, conducted within distinct sub-fields), formalisation and argumentation, with an attendant emphasis on clarification, precision (involving, e.g., conceptual and linguistic analysis) and the norms of cogent reasoning encapsulated by various systems of logic. Continental philosophy, on the other hand, is

said to look beyond the natural and formal sciences, taking the arts and humanities as its model of philosophical inquiry. These issues have been much discussed of late, and one of the central points of dispute has been whether (and, if so, how) these differences over doctrine and method can be overcome.

But what has gone relatively unnoticed is the question of style. Philosophy, no matter what else it may be, is a thoroughly and perhaps inescapably literary pursuit. But the literariness of philosophy is often ignored or downplayed. We fail to notice, for example, the wide variety of genres in which philosophy has been written: Augustine writes his *Confessions*, Maimonides produces a *Guide*, Aquinas composes commentaries, Montaigne writes his *Essays*, Pascal labours over his *Pensées*, Nietzsche publishes aphorisms, while dialogues are written by Plato, Berkeley and Hume. This rich variety in style, however, is not only diminishing in today's homogenised and professionalised academic discourse. It is also often assumed that style is philosophically unimportant. For example, it is not uncommon, in some quarters at least, to find philosophers presuming that the ideas found in (say) Plato's dialogues or Hume's inquiries can be extracted from their original home and placed into a neutral, context-free discourse, so that particular doctrines can be reconstructed, analysed and evaluated.

Similarly, in metaphilosophical discussions it is usually thought that even if significant stylistic differences exist between analytic and Continental philosophy, these differences are shallow: they do not run deep, or they do not touch on what is really important in the analytic/Continental divide.³ In other words style is superficial, or at the least differences in style, all on their own, will not go a long way towards explaining the division. Divergences in style, it is assumed, pale into insignificance in comparison with disagreements on a more fundamental level that have to do with doctrine, goals and methodology, and perhaps agreement on the fundamentals can be reached without attending to style: one can shed a style as easily as one changes one's clothes, but the body or content of one's worldview cannot be displaced or shaken off so quickly and easily.

However, this view is itself a shallow one: it fails to recognise the centrality of style in philosophy. By taking a fresh look at the analytic/Continental divide, it can be seen that, in spite of the clear stylistic differences between philosophers on each side, there is a common stylistic deficiency that both groups suffer from. And if this rarely diagnosed deficiency were rectified, the gulf separating the two traditions may not appear as insurmountable as it presently does. To show this, I will draw specifically, but not exclusively, from the philosophy of religion, a field that has recently experienced a renewal in both the analytic and Continental traditions. This field, unlike other more abstract and less existentially relevant areas of philosophy, often accords the question of style special prominence, for it is widely held that in this sphere at least the 'what' (what is true) is closely connected to the 'how' (the manner in which we discover and express that which is true).

Paradoxes of Style

Before proceeding any further, it may be worth briefly considering some self-referential problems that plague any philosophical discussion on the question of style. A common aim of these discussions is to show that a particular philosophical style, A, is preferable to an alternative philosophical style, B. But we then immediately confront the problem: In what style should one's defence of style A over style B be couched? Let's assume that one chooses style B. But then if one can mount a successful defence of style A over B while using the style of B, then it seems that A is not preferable to B after all. If, for

example, one manages to show, through the use of some poetic idiom, that the language of physics is preferable to the language of poetry (how exactly this could be done is unclear but not relevant for present purposes), then the poetic idiom one has chosen seems to be quite powerful and effective after all. This procedure, in other words, is self-undermining: one uses and (implicitly) endorses a particular style of language while at the same time (explicitly) rejecting that same style in favour of a competing one.

Let's assume, then, that one chooses style A in which to conduct one's defence of A. But then one has simply begged the question: one assumes from the outset the validity of style A (this is what 'using style A' amounts to), and then one proceeds to argue (from the standpoint of style A) that style A is better than style B. But it is the very validity of A that is in question.

A further problem, highlighted by Berel Lang,⁴ relates to the individuality and irreducibility of style. Let's focus, as does Lang, on the matter of genre. As mentioned earlier, philosophical works have been constructed in a plethora of genres. Consider, then, two very different philosophical genres: the dialogue and the treatise. How are we to compare the thoughts and arguments that occur in each? Can we, for example, simply 'translate' without significant distortion the ideas contained in a Platonic dialogue into a treatise like that of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (as Berkeley thought it could be done when he sought to recast or 'rescue' the arguments of his *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* in the form of *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*)? Or could we perhaps reconfigure the ideas and arguments of the dialogue and the treatise into a third, neutral genre and then undertake a comparative analysis within such a discourse? All this strikes me as very dubious.

Furthermore, how are we to compare the two genres themselves? If the genres of dialogue and treatise each have their own aims, methods, conventions and audience (some dialogues, for instance, may be thought of as aiming at clarity or even aporiae through conversation and debate, while the treatise often aims at truth and system-building through demonstration), then it may not be possible to develop genre-neutral criteria by which the different genres can be compared and judged. (This may not hold for all genres, but would gain greater credibility the greater the differences between the genres: consider, for example, the gulf between Nietzschean aphorisms and Kantian critiques.)

Thus, as Lang points out, if style is as unique as it appears to be, then perhaps the only response that can be made to a philosophical work written in a particular style is to produce more work in that style (or else shift to a different stylistic register altogether), much like the Romantics' view that the best response to a poem is to write another poem.

I'm not quite sure that these problems cannot be resolved (in fact, if they can't be resolved, then I'm not sure they are genuine problems!). But these problems do have consequences for the present paper. For in what style should the present discussion be carried out? And will not any choice inevitably skew the results of the enquiry? The idea that no particular style need be employed barely makes sense: even if one wishes to avoid or eschew style, some style or other must be employed. Is it any more reasonable to hope that some neutral style can be found or constructed, one which would have no more allegiance to (or connections with) one philosophical tradition over any other? This, again, is a dubious claim. All philosophical discussions, including philosophical discussions on style, must be conducted in a particular style, and it is plausible to suppose that whatever style one employs it will draw significantly from one or more philosophical schools or traditions. Consequently, the style one employs will inevitably be indebted to and biased towards these philosophical schools.

Leaving these aside for now as *aporiae*, I will proceed to the question of style in philosophy. I wish to say something first about the peculiar tendency amongst philosophers to avoid this question, and I will then briefly discuss the concept of style itself. This will provide the necessary backdrop to a reconsideration of the analytic/Continental divide in light of the question of style.

The Avoidance of Style

In a previous work on the analytic/Continental divide, I also discussed the various stylistic differences between the two camps as they have manifested themselves in contemporary philosophy of religion.⁵ But what was omitted from this discussion was an analysis of style itself: What is style, in philosophy and more generally?

Philosophy is a reflective enterprise, and when it becomes self-reflective it transmutes into meta-philosophy. But, although philosophers seem to have become more aware and critical of the nature, methods and goals of their discipline, there remains some resistance towards the deliberation and critique of their own styles, of the way they write what they write (and also of the way they read and teach, think and speak about philosophy). This is particularly evident in analytic philosophy, where a concern with style is seen as not merely irrelevant, but also a dangerous distraction from the search for truth and meaning – thus recalling Plato's ideal city where poets have no place since they can mislead and corrupt citizens by the seductions of their language. An aversion towards style, then, is present in many philosophical traditions, from ancient Greek philosophy to the contemporary analytic and Continental movements. As Berel Lang observes, "Even those writers most acutely aware of the embedding of style in philosophical discourse – Plato, Kierkegaard – do not fully give themselves away stylistically."⁶ Philosophers rarely halt their investigations and turn inward to examine the very style they have been employing when conducting their investigations, and this holds true not only of analytic philosophers but even of those who employ a variety of non-conventional stylistic techniques in their work (apart from Plato and Kierkegaard, one could also mention Nietzsche and Derrida).

The history of philosophy is the history of the avoidance of the question of style. For Lang, this becomes most clear when one focuses on how the relationship between style and method has been conceived by philosophers, past and present. According to Lang, "It is intentional concealment – that is, repression – that has governed the relation between method and style in philosophical discourse."⁷ In support of this view, he notes how philosophers have in the past elaborated various methodologies (e.g., Descartes' method of doubt, Spinoza's geometric method, Kant's transcendental method, Husserl's phenomenological method), "but with only brief glances (if any) at the medium in which they are inscribed, and still less at what the methods themselves, viewed through style, represent or express."⁸ Method has therefore taken precedence over style, creating an absence of style in two senses: firstly, there is little concern for style and instead a pronounced silence about the role of style in one's own work and in the work of other philosophers; and secondly, there is the persistence of a 'style-less' style, a flat and colourless way of writing, a kind of 'literary wasteland'.

Part of the reason for this neglect of style may be the presumption that, to make one's own style of writing the object of one's investigations, is an unhealthy form of self-consciousness that borders on narcissism. Related to this, it is sometimes presumed that there is an inverse correlation between this kind of self-consciousness and quality of style: though the correlation is by no means strict, the more conscious and deliberate one becomes about one's style (in philosophy, literature, and the arts more broadly), the more

likely it is that one's style will degenerate into hollow mannerism and affectation, or a display of vanity or even forgery (a failure to be original, to follow or find 'one's own style', seen especially in those who try to imitate the style of Derrida).⁹ There may well be some truth in this. Although great philosophers are often great stylists (think, for example, of Plato's dialogues, Descartes' *Meditations*, and the writings of Nietzsche and Wittgenstein), perhaps they could only have achieved this by refusing to be distracted by their own stylistic practices. This is not to deny that their style was something that they purposefully and carefully crafted over an entire lifetime, but only to point out that the very uniqueness and compelling nature of their style may have been undone had they made this (i.e., their own style) the focus of their philosophical inquiries. Style, as Dorothea Franck nicely puts it, "is a shy animal. It appears to belong to the category of things which change as soon as you take a sharp look at them, like quarks or the expression on a face."¹⁰ The best stylists, on this view, pay little attention to – and draw little attention to – their style, for they aspire to communicate in such a way that the content of their message and its form become inextricable, the one mirroring the other. When all that a reader can appreciate about a writer is their style, then that is a sure sign that that writer has failed – that is, failed *stylistically*.

But perhaps the silence over style has a darker motivation. Berel Lang, for example, argues that the neglect of style in favour of method is not a chance or innocent occurrence, but "reflects an ideological view that philosophy, corporately, has exhibited of itself."¹¹ On this view, philosophy's avoidance of style is strategic: it is an integral part of the image of itself (of the nature of philosophy) it wishes to project and promote. Lang brings this out by considering the differences between method and style. The kind of methodology usually practiced in philosophy, according to Lang, is impersonal and ahistorical, even when it professes to be interested in origins and genealogies. The rationale often lying behind a philosophical method is that "*anyone* can do or use it; the requirement of duplicability – the 're-application' of the method should yield the same results – presupposes this condition."¹² Style, on the other hand, is deeply personal and historical, "it is inseparable from the agent whose style it is," which is why we speak of 'the style of Dickens' or 'the style of Van Gogh' (thus establishing a close link between style and 'signature', where signature is that which helps identify the maker or provenance of a work). But then to privilege method over style is to promote a conception of philosophy that shuns individuality, history and context, that denies "the particularity of the particular," this being the occupational hazard of philosophers who attempt to "speak out-of-time even when, as often happens, they take time seriously as a subject for philosophical analysis."¹³

This aversion to style seems greatest when the ideals of objectivity and rationality (always construed, of course, in a particular kind of way) are at the forefront of a field of inquiry, as they are in the formal and natural sciences, but also in analytic philosophy. The fear in these circles is that any significant regard for style tends to lead to a departure from the standards of objectivity and rationality. A concern with style, on this view, belongs not to philosophy or science but to rhetoric and aesthetics, in other words to disciplines which do not have the goal of discovering truth, but have the (perhaps disreputable) aims of persuasion and eliciting artistic or sensual pleasure. As the editors of a collection of essays on style in philosophy put it,

Many philosophers are suspicious of the recent concern for philosophy's styles: what is at stake is the self-image of their discipline. They fear a trivialisation of philosophy, in which the rigorous reflection on time-honoured questions about the true, the good, and the beautiful is reduced to the rhetoric efficacy of advertising strategies.¹⁴

This fear is especially apparent in analytic philosophers, who like to think that they – no less than the logicians, mathematicians and natural scientists they seek to emulate – have not succumbed to the lures and snares of style. Bernard Williams highlights this attitude in an anecdote involving an “analytic philosopher who (in actual fact) said to another when they were trying to write a book together, ‘Let’s get it right first and you can put the style in afterwards.’”¹⁵ Priority is given to the content of the argument, and style becomes an afterthought.

The Idea of Style

Aversion, however, is not avoidance. Every philosophy, even that which purports to be the most objective and neutral, enshrines a particular style. Style is inescapable, and therefore no philosophy can be exempt from a stylistic analysis (or a ‘stylistics’), that is to say, an analysis of the many stylistic elements and techniques at play in a work, such as the use of metaphor and figurative language, authorial point of view, choice of genre, grammatical features such as sentence structure and prevalence of verbs over nouns, and so on. But to get clear on what it is that some philosophers seem to be running away from, we need to consider what exactly style is, whether in philosophy or elsewhere.

Etymologically, the English word ‘style’ derives from the Latin *stilus* (and possibly also the Greek *stylos*, meaning ‘column’, though there is some dispute about this). A *stilus* referred to an instrument for writing used during ancient and medieval times, and is described by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “made of metal, bone, etc., having one end sharp-pointed for incising letters on a wax tablet, and the other flat and broad for smoothing the tablet and erasing what is written.”¹⁶ In present-day ordinary English, of course, ‘style’ refers not to a writing instrument, but to “any distinctive, and therefore recognizable, way in which an act is performed or an artifact made or ought to be performed and made.”¹⁷ More narrowly, a style may describe a manner of writing or a mode of literary expression, as when we talk of ‘literary style’. Similarly, we may speak of a particular style of music, of painting, of architecture, of dress, and so on. In such cases, ‘style’ takes on a classificatory function, picking out a combination of distinctive features that are thought to characterise a specific person, group, school, or era (and so we speak of the dress style of the 1920s, the classical and the Gothic styles in architecture, the impressionist and realist styles in painting, etc.). But the notion of ‘style’ can also be generalised to refer to a particular manner or way of life, as when we speak of “the lifestyles of the rich and famous,” a point to which I will return later.

Returning to the narrower sense of ‘style’ as the manner of expression or presentation, this is usually understood in terms of the binary opposition of form and content. According to one view, style is separate from content; it is the way or manner in which a particular content, thought or meaning is conveyed or ‘packaged’. An important assumption lying behind this view is the possibility of synonymy, the possibility that the same content can be presented in different ways or in more than one style, so that the style can be varied without changing the content. But if this is so, then style has a purely instrumental and ornamental role. It is this conception of style that people have in mind when they charge that a particular person or piece of work is “all style and no substance.” And perhaps something similar lies behind Spinoza’s view that “God has no particular style in speaking”,¹⁸ insofar as the communication of divine revelation is not restricted to only one stylistic register.

However, the view of style as separable from content is particularly problematic when we turn from literary texts to artworks that rely predominantly on non-verbal communication, such as music and painting. For across works of this kind, it seems impossible to

identify any synonymous content. As the music theorist, Leonard Meyer, put it: “In music...are two pitches of 440 Hz. played by different instruments synonymous? or two authentic cadences at the close of different phrases? or two archetypal melodies belonging to the same class?”¹⁹ This leads to a conception that views style as inextricable from content; style just is (or is organically related to) the meaning and content of the work.²⁰ But if that is so, then “the medium both reflects and determines the message,”²¹ so that if the mode of presentation is altered, so is the content. There are problems with this notion of style as well, for if style and content are identified, then it will be impossible to present the same or a similar content in different forms (the so-called ‘heresy of paraphrase’²²) or even to say different things in the same style. I will come back to these views on style later, but for now it is important to recognise that ‘style’ is a contested concept and that this may help to explain the differences between the analytic and Continental traditions (it may be, in other words, not only their styles but their conception of style which separates them).

On either account of style, however, a style is regarded as an ensemble of traits or characteristics that are exemplary and distinctive of, or recurrent in, a particular body of work. These stylistic traits, moreover, are commonly thought to be *expressive* – but expressive of what exactly? Various options present themselves: style can be seen as expressive or representative of the personality and inward condition of an individual person, or of the character of a school, movement or culture, or of an entire way of living (and thinking). In these different dimensions of style, one can detect a certain normative and evaluative force in the very idea of style. There is, of course, a descriptive sense of style, where stylistic features simply identify aspects of a work or distinguish it from other works. But there are also various ways in which the identification of a style embodies aesthetic and moral judgements, or an implication of impressive accomplishment or achievement. We speak admiringly, for example, of a painter who “has style,” of a writer who is “a great stylist,” or something done “in style” (as in the title of this paper).

There is a further normative dimension to the notion of style, where style becomes “the codification of a notion of propriety.”²³ As Van Eck, McAllister and Van de Vall explain, style in this sense is a legitimating force or strategy, giving a particular practice or work authority and perhaps also indicating the impropriety of works created in other styles. For example, non-representational (or abstract) painting has or is a certain style of painting, and it is this style that encapsulates the norms as to how the idea of non-representation in painting is to be understood.²⁴ Similarly, the style of writing employed by philosophers is not as innocent or neutral as some of its practitioners would like to assume, but functions in a way that sanctions a particular form of discourse as authoritative and superior to other ways of proceeding in philosophy. It is not as if there are criteria, independent of stylistic concerns, as to what counts as (genuine) philosophy. Rather, these criteria are grounded in the style of the works themselves. A style, therefore, is not merely a classificatory scheme, but what gives content to cognitive norms such as truth, rationality and meaningfulness.

If we think of style, then, as both a form of expression and more broadly as that which governs notions of propriety and legitimacy, how should we characterise the specific style to be found in analytic philosophy, and how does it compare with its Continental counterparts?

Differences of Style in Analytic and Continental Philosophy

I will not attempt a lengthy characterisation of the style of each of these philosophical traditions, since my concerns lie elsewhere. But it will help to begin with a brief account,

and it is not too difficult to outline in a relatively uncontroversial way the style prevalent in each group.

To begin with analytic philosophy, an emphasis on *clarity* (or clarity of a certain kind) is distinctive of this form of philosophical discourse. This involves adopting a style of writing that is as simple, accessible and transparent as possible. The (often unarticulated) motive lying behind this emphasis on clarity is the metaphilosophical privileging of commonsense, as opposed to ‘woolly metaphysics’: the beliefs of the ‘common folk’ (that, e.g., there *really is* a world out there, that some things *really are* true, etc.) are to be respected as far as is possible, that is to say, they are not to be rejected unless there is very good reason to do so (where this usually means: unless science or the philosophy of science compels us to, as when some analytic philosophers hold that the folk conception of colour is untenable in the light of current physics). This preference for commonsense *beliefs* is then translated into, or accompanied by, a preference for the *style of expression* that is found in (or would appeal to) the lay, non-specialised community of ‘ordinary folk’: a style that is plain, clear and concise. But the drive towards clarity may also be motivated by pedagogical reasons, so as to give the reader, who may not be an expert in the field and who may not be conversant with the historical background of the debate, the opportunity to grasp the line of argument under discussion without too much difficulty. To achieve this, however, one must write in a certain kind of way: for example, short and crisp sentences are to be preferred to convoluted and verbose ones; technical and rhetorical language is to be avoided wherever possible in favour of straightforward and unadorned speech drawn from ordinary language; and where technical terms are introduced, they are to be precisely defined or explicated; and so on. This style of writing, in the hands of a Hume or a Russell, has the potential to achieve a degree of beauty, lucidity and elegance that is rarely encountered in even more explicitly literary works.

But often obstructing the goal of clarity is the analytic philosopher’s penchant for *formalisation*. The idea here is that the arguments under discussion, whether they be one’s own or one’s interlocutor’s, need to be set out in a particular way, and the ideal way is to formalise them using the tools of the deductive or probabilistic calculus. This process of formalisation involves identifying and carefully setting out the individual premises and their inferential relationships, and this is sometimes merely the first stage in the process of ‘translating’ an argument into the language of logic, so that the original argument is recast entirely in terms of logical symbols and rules of inference.

Formalisation, however, is only part of the process involved in the pursuit of (a certain sort of) *rigour* in philosophical reasoning. Also required is *precision*, and here we meet the customary practice in analytic philosophy of scrupulously defining key terms, making relevant distinctions, providing finely-grained analyses, and introducing technical vocabulary where necessary to overcome the ambiguities of ordinary language. Taken to its extreme, as in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, ordinary speech is seen as something to be entirely transplanted by a logically perfect language whose clarity and precision are such as to make transparent the fundamental structural features of the world.

Interestingly, a confluence can be observed between the literary style of works in the analytic tradition and more so-called ‘substantive’ aspects of such works, including their methodology and characteristic doctrines. A method that aligns itself with the sciences, and so privileges specialised forms of inquiry involving the construction of hypotheses and theories that can be tested through the use of ‘thought-experiments’, ‘counterexamples’ and arguments set out in a logically rigorous way, is a method that is best pursued in a particular kind of style or genre, one that furthers this method and the goals attached to it. This style, following Berel Lang, can be thought of as an instance of the ‘Neutralist

model', where "the form or structure of philosophical discourse is denied any intrinsic connection to its substance as philosophy; the relation is viewed as at most ornamental, at its least as accidental and irrelevant, even as a hindrance or occasion of philosophical obfuscation."²⁵ But although proponents of this model like to keep form and content apart, they do not entirely succeed. For a method of inquiry that favours, say, logical and conceptual analysis and argumentation will naturally lend itself to a neutral medium of discourse composed in an impersonal and disinterested style, so that the distinctive voice of the author is displaced by an impartial, probing and 'rational' voice (an 'ideal observer') that is devoid of bodily affect and cultural context.

A similar confluence of style and substance is evident in the works of Continental philosophers. Following Lang again, such works can be described as emulating an 'Interaction model', where "the writer in this second model, in choosing a form or structure for philosophical discourse, is, *in that act*, also shaping the substance or content which the form then – very loosely speaking now – will be 'of'."²⁶ On this model, form and content are dynamically related, the one influencing the other. But such interaction, as I pointed out, is also present in the works of those who follow the Neutralist model, thus suggesting that style and content can never be wholly separated. As Lang puts it, in the manner of Buffon's famous dictum, "style makes the philosopher (and then the philosophy)."²⁷

Given that the method and goals of Continental philosophy have more in common with the human sciences and the arts than the natural and formal sciences, it is no surprise to find that philosophical works from this tradition are more literary than scientific in style and temperament. Clarity and rigour, at least the kind that is highly valued in analytic philosophy, is rarely sought after in Continental philosophy. This may explain the exasperation of analytic philosophers who complain that the works of Continental writers are not merely difficult to read, but wilfully (or intentionally) obscure. The reality, I think, is more complex than this oft-heard complaint suggests. For one thing, there is the simple matter of one's education and inheritance. As Simon Glendinning points out, "a philosophical education gives one a distinctive kind of preparation for reading, a preparation that can lead to serious problems when what one is reading does not belong squarely within the purview of that education."²⁸ Someone reared almost exclusively on Carnap and Quine is hardly going to have an easy time of it with Heidegger and Levinas. But additionally, and more importantly, the complaints of unreadability may (in some cases) have less to do with the writings themselves and more to do with some unrealistic or dubious set of assumptions that the reader is bringing to the text. If you read Heidegger or Levinas in the expectation that you will find there the same style of reasoning and thinking that you are familiar with from your reading of Carnap and Quine, then you are obviously setting yourself up for disappointment. Not only that, you are doing the works themselves a grave injustice. Some texts, in order to be properly understood, may demand a different kind of reading or engagement than the one that we are accustomed to. As Derrida observed about those who react with anger and frustration to the difficulty of his writings:

They start to get involved but feel that it's not that easy, that to read my texts they have to change the rules, to read differently, if only at another rhythm. They have to change the way they usually read and that's why they get angry.²⁹

In some instances, at least, the reader who encounters an unfamiliar text must be willing to change (perhaps drastically) their style of reading, otherwise the language of the text will remain opaque, and its content may even be dismissed (in the worst of readers) as

incoherent (or, if coherent, then merely trivial). It is incumbent upon readers and critics of any literature to not impose alien standards that inevitably distort the texts. Carl Raschke puts this point well when he states, in defence of Derrida's style of writing, that

You're not supposed instantly to "understand it" or "even get it." Just like you don't wolf down a fine filet, you don't swallow in one gulp a great piece of literature or philosophy. Anyone who whines that a philosopher should "just say straightforwardly" what he or she means is sort of like the guy who douses ketchup on his beef Wellington. You've got to learn to appreciate what you're eating – or reading.³⁰

But whether or not one agrees with the judgement that Continental works are hopelessly unclear (and in select cases it is difficult to disagree with it), even a cursory reading of such works will indicate that a very different kind of style and idiom is operative here. One will usually find a language that makes use of a wide range of literary tropes and strategies, including undefined neologisms, parables and pseudonymous discourses, elaborate word-plays and paradoxical turns of speech, hyperbole, irony and metaphor, and so on. Although such stylistic features are not completely absent from the works of analytic philosophers – Stanley Cavell, for example, speaks of J. L. Austin's use of "jokes, puns, literary allusions, and the general, repeated invitation to have fun in philosophizing"³¹ – the overwhelming tendency in the analytic tradition has been to steer clear of these sorts of rhetorical forms and techniques, which are perceived as the preserve of literature (and perhaps advertising and propaganda), rather than (sober and serious) philosophy.³² Timothy Williamson candidly expressed this attitude in an interview where he stated that:

Certain advances in philosophical standards have been made within analytic philosophy, and for anyone who has taken these to heart, there would be a *serious loss of integrity* involved in abandoning them in the way that would be required to participate in continental philosophy as currently practised.³³

Immediately preceding this comment, Williamson stated: "I don't want to give the impression that I think nothing of value is done under the aegis of continental philosophy. That would be far too crude a view."³⁴ It must be wondered, however, whether the claim that Continental philosophy constitutes "a serious loss of integrity" is any less crude a view than the idea that there is nothing of value in Continental philosophy. In any case, Williamson's caricature is not an uncommon one, as critics often suppose that the style and methods of Continental philosophy dangerously lend themselves to a kind of obscurantism and mystification that breeds false prophets and tyrannical fascists.

The name of Heidegger naturally pops up at this point. Of course, other leading figures of the Continental canon (such as Derrida and Levinas) exemplify the stylistic 'vices' equally well. But Heidegger seems to be a favourite whipping-boy, thanks in no small part to the somewhat strange lexicon he coined (*Dasein*, *Ereignis*, *das Nichts*, *Kehre*, etc.) in order to express his developing philosophical views, but which often renders these views impenetrable to beginning students and analytic philosophers. There is, however, an important rationale in Heidegger's choice of style, as S. J. McGrath explains in his recent introductory book on Heidegger:

Heidegger justifies his violence to German by arguing that language shapes thought; if ontology is to be rethought from the ground up, the old terms will need to be overhauled if not completely discarded.³⁵

A new way of thinking, therefore, may require a new language, one that departs in significant ways from the literal, fact-stating language of science as well as the vocabulary

we have inherited from philosophers of the past. Thus Heidegger, in an attempt to move beyond the phenomenological project introduced in *Being and Time*, was compelled once again to fashion a new kind of language that would be more suitable for expressing his new insights, as McGrath points out:

The path of philosophy in Heidegger's later writings converges with poetry; what is said is subordinated to how it is said. The later Heidegger uses repetition, equivocation, and metaphor, deliberately blurring distinctions between key concepts in order to break the hold of calculative reasoning. The impressionistic language annihilates our expectations of what philosophical discourse should be.³⁶

There is a distinct *revolutionary* dimension here that is absent from much analytic philosophy. The aim is to achieve a breakthrough in awareness or consciousness, and this cannot be done without departing from entrenched ways of writing and thinking, so as to explore and refashion literary space, sometimes in violently erotic and terrifying ways, as in the work of Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot.

It is no surprise that these writers were intensely drawn to mystical religious traditions, and the same tendency is at work in Heidegger. His connections with Christian mysticism, for example, are touched upon in one commentator's astute observation that "Heidegger's later prose often moves with the slow rhythm and sonority of liturgy."³⁷ Other commentators have noticed how Heidegger's language closely approximates aspects of Buddhist Zen practice. According to the Zen doctrine of 'sudden awakening' (*satori*), enlightenment is not achieved gradually (through, e.g., the study of scriptures, or rites and ceremonies), as traditional Indian Buddhism taught, but suddenly and spontaneously, by a sudden breaking through of the boundaries of common, everyday, logical thought, especially our ordinary dualistic modes of thinking. There is therefore a distrust of reason: one must deliberately confuse or confound reason before one can find the truth. Different Zen schools have different methods for achieving this. The Rinzai school, for example, emphasizes meditation on *koans* – riddles or enigmatic statements that cannot be resolved or understood by rational or discursive modes of thought. A similar effort to overcome habitual but restrictive forms of reasoning that have captivated the Western mind can be found in Heidegger. Consider, for example, McGrath's perceptive response to a critic who stated that Heidegger "raises pompously and ponderously an allegedly central question of philosophy [viz., the question of being], and ends up by telling us that we cannot answer – indeed, cannot understand – this question."³⁸ In reply, McGrath notes that

It may be that Heidegger's question is not intended for answer; it may be that the question is designed to break down our comprehension, creating confusion, an incapacity to proceed with business as usual... On this reading, the ambiguity generated by Heidegger is not, then, the chaos generated by unclear thinking, but a deliberate and skillfully executed obfuscation – like a Zen koan – designed to break our heads and free us of the hardened categories that obstruct genuine understanding.³⁹

This inevitably creates difficulties in comprehension and interpretation, and so reading such works may be hard work. But who ever said that philosophy should be easy? To complain about the difficulty of, say, understanding Heidegger or Derrida would be to miss the point that a language less complex and less subtle may lack the faithfulness to the phenomena and realities they are attempting to describe and disclose.

Here we return to the question of difficulty. In literary studies there is a well-developed field of the *aesthetics of difficulty* which philosophers have barely broached.⁴⁰ The aim of research in this area is to study literary works (and other art works) that appear to

be intentionally difficult to understand or interpret, and to investigate the rationale behind such an approach to the creation of art. A genre of difficult and inaccessible literature was promulgated by the early German Romantics such as Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, in opposition to the fashionable (then and now) equation of art and entertainment. In more recent times, the genre has excelled in a number of writers experimenting at the edges of language with unorthodox forms and methods. One could point, for example, to the hermetic poetry of Paul Celan and Giuseppe Ungaretti, the 'alienation effects' of Bertolt Brecht's plays and the absurdist theatre of Samuel Beckett, the cryptic and perplexing stories of Franz Kafka and the innovative but forbidding language of James Joyce's last novels. (A similar degree of impenetrability is present in much twentieth-century painting and sculpture, particularly in movements such as minimalism, abstract expressionism and conceptual art.) In each case an unambiguous interpretation is refused, and instead the work only frustrates and alienates its audience or readership, thwarting their expectation of a unified narrative and their desire for resolution and closure. But this is not a case of being difficult for its own sake. Rather, the difficulty is intended to overturn settled ways of thinking and motivate the reader to question and to embark on their own quest for answers. As one commentator put it well with respect to Kafka's seemingly impregnable texts,

The narrator's ultimate move is to pull back, thereby prolonging the reader's inquiry. The truth can only be sought, never found; texts that place such a premium on their public's confusion are making the point that art is not about finding but about searching. Finding is coextensive with appropriation, and appropriation is what ends up freezing the aesthetic experience into a commonplace, hackneyed view of the world.⁴¹

There is an important message here for philosophers of religion, which has often gone unrecognised. If God cannot be represented, appropriated, or assimilated to our creaturely habits of mind, then our language about God will have to reflect this in terms of its iconoclasm and 'negativity', that is, its refusal of conceptual idols and its denial of our desire to understand God in the way in which we understand and talk about ordinary things in the universe. If theology (like poetry) is the attempt to say what cannot be said, then writing theology will always be like walking a tightrope, continually at risk of falling off into unintelligibility and nonsense. But it is precisely this difficulty that prevents the sacred from being trivialised, from being converted to the prosaic or, worse still, being commodified and thus made into an object for our own interests and amusement. Philosophers of religion, if not philosophers at large, have much to learn from work moulded by an aesthetics of difficulty, which as Frederic Jameson points out in reference to the work of Adorno,

insists relentlessly on the need for modern art and thought to be difficult, to guard their truth and freshness by the austere demands they make on the powers of concentration of their participants, by their refusal of all habitual response in their attempt to reawaken numb thinking and deadened perception to a raw, wholly unfamiliar real world.⁴²

The Lack of Style in Analytic and Continental Philosophy

But how deep do these stylistic differences between analytic and Continental philosophy run? Are these differences in style responsible for the other points of divergence between the two traditions, or is style merely an extraneous matter that has little to do with the methodological and doctrinal matters that are in dispute? I doubt that the question of

style can be neatly separated from the other questions in this manner. A more fruitful approach would look at the matter in a more holistic way, so that style, method and theory are viewed as intimately connected. But rather than attempt a defence of this seemingly obvious point, I wish to discuss something that has largely gone unnoticed in the metaphilosophical debates, and this relates to a stylistic deficiency in both the analytic and Continental streams.

This deficiency reveals itself when the notion of style is understood in a fairly broad, but not uncommon, way as something integrally connected with the kind of life one leads. This is the sense of style as ‘lifestyle’, mentioned earlier. John Kekes, in a recent book on what is involved in living an enjoyable life, makes much use of this notion of ‘style of life’, and attempts to show how giving style to one’s life is a means to having an enjoyable (and hence good) life.⁴³ A style of life, for Kekes, does not consist simply in a particular course of action on a particular occasion, but involves a complex combination of an attitude to life, a consistent pattern of actions through which that attitude is reflected, and the manner in which these actions are done. The narrower and more aesthetic senses of style (e.g., as a way of writing or painting) are often sharply separated from this broader idea of ‘style of life’, but there is no necessity in this. A particular way of writing is sometimes a reflection of, or influenced by, a certain way of living. But the quite stronger point I wish to make is that a way of writing (and, especially, a way of philosophical writing) should inform and inhere in a way of life. In other words, a style of writing is at its best when it is grounded in a certain, particularly admirable style of life. But, I wish to argue, it is this very connection between life and style that is lacking in both analytic and Continental philosophy.

Taking analytic philosophy first, the style employed in works from this tradition is underwritten by the broadly scientific ideal of objectivity in the pursuit of truth and the advancement of knowledge. And so, as mentioned earlier, analytic philosophers like to employ a logically rigorous and technical style, even when retaining a firm footing in ordinary language, thus creating a mood of disinterested and detached investigation, where the investigator simply follows the argument or evidence wherever it leads. The works of analytic philosophy thus become, one might say, the products of a bodiless or fleshless mind, one that purports to communicate its thoughts transparently and without the distorting effects of emotion, feeling and personal interests or prejudices. But if style is conceptualised not only as a way of giving shape to one’s writing, but more broadly as a way of shaping a whole life, then something deeply problematic emerges from this picture of the style of analytic philosophy.

To illustrate this I will turn to the work of David Kaplan, a leading analytic philosopher best known for his contributions to philosophy of language and logic. (I don’t mean to take anything away from Kaplan and his many achievements, and the problems I diagnose are not specific to him, but affect the entire tradition in which he stands.) Recently I was intrigued by a festschrift published for Kaplan, which included a short but revealing tribute of “The Man at Work” written by Joseph Almog (a colleague of Kaplan’s at UCLA).⁴⁴ Almog describes his mentor in ways that illuminate the nature and style of the entire tradition of analytic philosophy, especially as it is practiced today.

Almog begins by situating the work of Kaplan in a tradition of “distinguished formally minded teachers” from the 1950s and 1960s, including Rudolf Carnap, Richard Montague and Saul Kripke.⁴⁵ A feature of this tradition, according to Almog, is a “penchant for using set theoretic model theory to represent whatever, in the world and beyond it, is so representable.”⁴⁶ Following this tradition, Kaplan ensures that “index sets, model structures, functions (on functions...), and so forth are always stashed discreetly in his

miniature James Bond toolbox.”⁴⁷ Almog adds that Kaplan also inherited from this tradition “the tolerance for a plurality of philosophical approaches to a given subject,” though revealingly this is circumscribed by “an absolute intolerance for any obfuscation, equivocation, or rhetorical flourish.”⁴⁸ As already indicated, an emphasis on clarity and straightforward speech is common in analytic philosophy, but Kaplan does not follow Quine, Carnap and other scientific-minded philosophers from the analytic tradition in proposing a program of regimentation: that is to say, a program of clarifying and systematizing the language or conceptual scheme of science. Instead, Kaplan’s aim is to regiment or systematize ordinary language itself. As Almog states on behalf of Kaplan and his followers, “we treat English *as* a formal language, give it its *own* precise syntax and semantics, instead of *regimenting* it by a formal language.”⁴⁹

Despite this deference to ordinary language, there is an overwhelming emphasis on the techniques and vocabulary of formal logic. But as Almog highlights, this drive towards formalisation and technical ingenuity is physically arduous and demanding. To highlight Quine’s comment that reading and engaging with Kaplan’s philosophy amounts to a *work-out*,⁵⁰ Almog recounts his experience of attending Kaplan’s Locke Lectures at Oxford in 1979–80:

David was the first philosopher who brought home to me – as I am sure to many others – that philosophy is hard *physical* work. The setting was David’s Oxford Locke lectures. The local notables, led by the brilliant, witty, and elegantly dressed Gareth Evans...all sat in an arc at the higher reaches of the imposing Glubenkian auditorium, far away from the stage. A mere first-year grad student, I was sitting rather closer to the stage. On it, I saw David dressed to the nines in a three-piece suit that, he kept telling the audience, was forced on him by his mother for the distinguished occasion. And then, David started peeling off the pieces, as he was entering the lecture proper. At a certain point, he was down to a light blue shirt and tie, and I was worried that from here things could go no farther – at which point, David loosened up his tie, rolled the shirt’s sleeves, and turned to the blackboard to write a formula. And this was my moment of revelation – David was actually, *sweating*. It dawned on me that philosophy is a physical activity.⁵¹

There is an important insight hidden here that is usually neglected by analytic philosophers. Philosophy cannot be, and never really has been, a matter of comfortable and relaxed armchair theorizing, but requires physical work and exertion, thinking hard and persisting tenaciously in a certain line of inquiry. The example of Wittgenstein (which many subsequently parodied) comes to mind, especially his agonising and tortuous battles with what he saw as the confusions of language. I will return to Wittgenstein later, but in more mainstream analytic philosophy such as that represented by the work of Kaplan, the physical dimension of philosophising goes unacknowledged and untheorised. In particular, no attempt is made to bring out the importance of the physicality of philosophy, and to integrate this with a way of life or ‘discipline’ involving not only the intellectual and cognitive dimensions of human life, but also those relating to our emotional, psychological and social nature. There is no indication in Almog’s article, for example, that philosophy involves anything more than the kind of *intellectual* energy displayed by Kaplan. There is no doubting the sense of excitement and enthusiasm that Kaplan offers his students and colleagues, and I would not wish to begrudge him the many original and influential contributions he has made to philosophy. The problem is that this approach remains fixed on the intellectual plane, cut off from other, equally significant aspects of life, thus creating a style of philosophising that is one-dimensional. The sweat and struggle described so well by Almog are not the product of a critical engagement with, say,

the dark recesses of the body (in the form of emotions and desires) or the psyche (in the form of the unconscious), but are merely the result of trying to understand and resolve, to get one's head around, a purely theoretical problem (though 'puzzle' may be a better description in some cases). In a dualist gesture that Descartes would have been proud of, the mind is severed from the body, and the two barely meet. This is a style of philosophy where the fleshly and the earthly, the sexual and the spiritual, are neglected or suppressed, and play no regulative role in one's thinking.

Relevant in this context is a short but inventive essay by Derrida on Nietzsche's many styles, where Derrida discusses the subject of 'woman' (suggesting that this may well amount to the same thing as the question of style) and focuses in particular on Nietzsche's infamous comments on women.⁵² Derrida agrees with Nietzsche that feminism seeks to establish the "truth of woman in itself," and in this respect resembles "the masculine dogmatic philosopher" in laying claim to "truth, science and objectivity in all their castrated delusions of virility." We may similarly say that the kind of analytic philosophy practiced by Kaplan and others, in its dreams of dispassionate and disembodied truth, often produces only an emasculated form of rationality and philosophy. As Derrida concluded about this sorry state of affairs: *Perd le style, gone is the style.*⁵³

Continental philosophy seeks to redress this deficiency by adopting a more integrated and holistic approach, though it too resolutely fails in this respect. The problem in this case is not the neglect of the affective and non-cognitive dimensions of life, but the failure or even refusal to embed one's thinking of these various dimensions within a practice, a generalised style, a way of living. Philosophy of religion in the Continental tradition offers a good illustration of this deficiency.

Religiously inclined Continental philosophers, such as John Caputo, Merold Westphal and Jean-Luc Marion, like to draw a Pascalian distinction between the living God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the abstract God of speculative philosophy. The philosopher's God, on this view, is largely definable and comprehensible, is very much like a human being but only infinitely greater and better, and can be discovered and known like any other factual matter, by weighing and assessing evidence – hence the importance of natural theology, and the tendency to think of God as an explanatory hypothesis. Against such a conception of God, which holds sway in most quarters of analytic philosophy of religion, Continental philosophers conceive of God in a radically different – and radically 'negative' – way. By 'negative' I mean an emphasis on the otherness, incomprehensibility, mysteriousness and unknowability of God. This kind of negativity has, of course, its roots in the writings of negative or apophatic theologians and mystics, such as Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart, who are regularly studied and discussed in Continental philosophy but are generally neglected in the analytic tradition. The point behind apophatic discourse is to guard against conceptual idolatries, that is to say, ways of thinking and talking about God that reduce God to creaturely proportions, to one more object or being amongst others. But what has largely gone unnoticed is that Continental philosophers – unlike the medieval mystics they attempt to emulate – fail to contextualise their apophatic discourse within a broader way of life that would give their negativity not only rhetorical effect, but also genuine substance and style.

In an insightful article that details this deficiency, Jonathan Ellsworth points out that contemporary Continental philosopher-theologians have appropriated apophatic mystical texts in order to develop a philosophy, including a philosophy of religion, that is free from 'metaphysical' or onto-theological categories.⁵⁴ At the same time, Ellsworth argues, they have failed to see how these apophatic texts are embedded in, and constituted by, certain religious practices: "negative theologies do not merely suggest a way of talking,

but present techniques, philosophical disciplines or spiritual exercises, that aim at a fairly specific telos: uplift to the divine – or, if you prefer, an experience of alterity.”⁵⁵ Apophasis from ancient Greek philosophy to medieval Christian mysticism was directly linked with ascesis – spiritual practices aimed at self-transformation and self-transcendence.

Although Ellsworth does not delve in any detail into the Eastern Orthodox tradition, one will find there a close connection between apophasis and ascesis. Apophaticism is widely regarded as characteristic of the whole tradition of the Eastern Church, and apophasis in this tradition has never been a purely intellectual affair, but a way of life that is nourished by ascesis, contemplative prayer and the liturgical practices of the church (the emphasis on ascesis and contemplation helps to explain the importance placed on monastic institutions in the Eastern tradition). That apophaticism is firmly bound together with the spiritual life is brought out by Vladimir Lossky, who points out that the purpose of apophasis is to lead us “not to knowledge but to union – to deification”,⁵⁶ that is to say, to participation in the divine life, thus becoming by grace what God is by nature. But if the telos of apophasis is theosis, then apophasis cannot merely be an abstract battle with the antinomies presented to human reason, but must involve “a change of heart and mind enabling us to attain to the contemplation of the reality which reveals itself to us as it raises us to God, and unites us, according to our several capacities, to Him.”⁵⁷ A more concrete way of highlighting this connection between apophasis, ascesis and theosis is provided by the contemporary Orthodox theologian, Archimandrite Vasileios, in his beautiful portrait of the seventh-century theologian-monk, Isaac of Nineveh:

Approaching a saint, Abba Isaac the Syrian for instance, you do not feel that he is constructing for you an apophatic theology based simply on philosophical terminology. He dissects you in real life. He reveals apophaticism to you in practice. Theology is his saintliness. He receives you in your entirety into another world. Here you find all things different; quiet, calm, living, immortal, perfumed with an inexpressible scent. You find the world of a saint, of saintliness, of theology. And in that world there is room for the whole person.⁵⁸

There is no separation here between the way of negation and the way of union, between theology and life, for theology is conceived as not merely an activity of the mind, but something involving and transfiguring the whole person, including the will, the emotions and the body.

A similar trajectory of thought can be found in Graeco-Roman antiquity, as is brought out well in the studies of Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault. Hadot is well known for showing how philosophy in the ancient world was almost universally practiced as a way of life involving a form of ascesis, with ascesis conceived not as asceticism (in the modern-day sense of renunciation) but as ‘spiritual exercises’.⁵⁹ From the Socratic dialogues and Plato’s training for death to the *Meditations* of the Stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius and the Hellenistic and Neoplatonist schools, philosophy was never reduced simply to philosophical discourse, a purely formal or theoretical exercise aimed at the acquisition of abstract knowledge. Philosophy was rather seen as a set of spiritual exercises, which are not merely moral in character, but as Hadot explains, “have as their goal the transformation of our vision of the world, and the metamorphosis of our being. We are not just dealing here with a code of good moral conduct, but with a way of being, ...with exercises which engage the totality of the spirit,” which is why Hadot regards the term ‘spiritual exercises’ as the most appropriate.⁶⁰ Ancient philosophy, on this view, was a spiritual exercise, a way of life aiming not so much to inform as to transform every aspect of one’s existence, to achieve (through the diverse methodologies of the ancient schools) the kind of wisdom which brings peace of mind, inner freedom and a cosmic consciousness. (This

is why, incidentally, biographies, such as those of Diogenes Laertius, played an important role in the ancient philosophical world.) This daily practice of wisdom, where one's own life is continuously put into question, bears very little resemblance to the 'university philosophy' that takes refuge in scholasticism and professionalism: "Ancient philosophy proposed to mankind an art of living. By contrast, modern philosophy appears above all as the construction of a technical jargon reserved for specialists."⁶¹

Partly under the influence of Hadot, Foucault developed a notion of ethics as 'care of the self' (a translation of the Greek *epimeleia heautou*), centred on 'techniques of the self' and the 'arts of existence', which he defined as "those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria."⁶² Like Hadot, Foucault turned to the ideal of self-cultivation as expressed in classical Greek and Roman society, where the self was seen as something to be created and sculpted through various physical, psychological and intellectual regimens, as though it were a work of art.⁶³ For Foucault, the ascetic meshes with the artistic, thus producing an 'aesthetics of existence', a way of understanding life in aesthetic terms. As he himself put it in an interview: "But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object but not our life?"⁶⁴ In becoming more like an artwork, one's life is given a style, both in the aesthetic sense as something that is beautiful and enjoyable, and in the more philosophical sense as taking on a form or shape that makes it receptive to truth and wisdom. But this kind of receptivity demands ascesis, as Foucault pointed out:

Greek philosophy...always held that a subject could not have access to the truth if he did not first operate upon himself a certain work that would make him susceptible to knowing the truth – a work of purification, conversion of the soul by contemplation of the soul itself... In European culture up to the sixteenth century, the problem remains: What is the work I must effect upon myself so as to be capable and worthy of acceding to the truth? To put it another way: truth always has a price; no access to truth without ascesis.⁶⁵

Although Ellsworth does not mention Wittgenstein, the idea of ascesis as "the condition of possibility for truth," as Ellsworth puts it,⁶⁶ can also be found in Wittgenstein's life and thought. Wittgenstein conceived of philosophy as a kind of work on oneself, on one's own self-conception and on the way one sees things,⁶⁷ but this – Wittgenstein thought – inevitably demands great suffering. Indeed, as Norman Malcolm pointed out, Wittgenstein's own thought was often born out of great suffering:

As he [Wittgenstein] struggled to work through a problem one frequently felt that one was in the presence of real suffering. Wittgenstein liked to draw an analogy between philosophical thinking and swimming: just as one's body has a natural tendency towards the surface and one has to make an *exertion* to get to the *bottom* – so it is with thinking. In talking about human greatness, he once remarked that he thought that the measure of a man's greatness would be in terms of what his work *cost* him. There is no doubt that Wittgenstein's philosophical labours cost him a great deal.⁶⁸

Philosophy, on Wittgenstein's view, is difficult, and its characteristic difficulty is due to the fact that its insights presuppose a significant degree of ascesis, of plumbing the depths of one's soul in a way that is the cause of much suffering. The challenges of philosophy are not purely intellectual. For if one's philosophy is intimately tied to one's self, then the kind of challenges and resistances one must face will have to do not only with the intellect but also with the will and a (fundamental) change of attitude.⁶⁹ Ascesis, Wittgenstein

recognised, is what makes the reception and communication of truth possible: “No one *can* speak the truth; if he has still not mastered himself. He *cannot* speak it; – but not because he is not clever enough yet.”⁷⁰ If asceticism is avoided then philosophy will be too – and this will show in one’s style of writing. As Wittgenstein stated in one of his notebooks, dating from 1938: “If anyone is unwilling to descend into himself, because this is too painful, he will remain superficial in his writing.”⁷¹ Wittgenstein therefore frequently expressed an intense desire to become “a decent human being,” as he put it,⁷² and he went so far as to enlist as a volunteer in the army in 1914, even though he would have been exempt from military service on medical grounds. He wished to place himself in situations of extreme danger, to come face-to-face with death, so as to apprehend the true value and meaning of life and the true nature of his own self.

A conception of philosophy as a pursuit that demands the attention and discipline of the whole person readily comports with a style of writing that is designed to impact the reader not only intellectually, but also psychologically and physiologically. This is evident in Wittgenstein’s fragmentary and epigrammatic style, where the tightly knit, numbered theses of the *Tractatus* or the pithy remarks and short passages of his many later notebooks (his “broken texts,”⁷³) require from the reader a slow and difficult ‘translation’ process that will eventually lead from obscurity to revelation, from confusion to a kind of clarity that brings catharsis and therapy of the mind and the will. To achieve this effect Wittgenstein laboured over the form and method of his composition, deliberately making it complex (with, e.g., copious punctuation, unanswered questions, analogies and gnomic aphorisms) so as to force the reader to *slow down*. As Wittgenstein memorably put it, “In philosophy the winner of the race is the one who can run most slowly. Or: the one who gets there last.”⁷⁴ This view of philosophy leads Wittgenstein to draw parallels with music: “Sometimes a sentence can be understood only if it is read at the *right tempo*. My sentences are all supposed to be read *slowly*.”⁷⁵ The Wittgenstein family was known for its great appreciation of music,⁷⁶ and this is reflected in the unmistakable musical dimension of Ludwig’s philosophical style: tempo, rhythm, sound and movement inform his compositions, which are arranged like a musical work that seeks to move and cure both body and soul.⁷⁷

This is even more apparent in Nietzsche, who privileged music over philosophy and sought a musical style of philosophical writing. Nietzsche quotes the French painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres as saying to his students, “If I could make you all musicians you’d become better painters,”⁷⁸ and one can imagine Nietzsche saying something similar to his philosophical audience. Nietzsche indeed produced a form of writing that he himself described as “musical” and as representing a way of thinking that has to be learned by flatfooted philosophers as a light and nimble dancing “with the feet, with concepts, with words.”⁷⁹ As Kathleen Higgins shows, Nietzsche achieved this by employing a variety of strategies – including juxtaposition, allusion, parody and outlandish humour – with the aim of engaging readers not only cognitively, but also (and mainly) physically.⁸⁰ In this way, Higgins explains, Nietzsche “draws attention to the non-semantic characteristics of well-constructed writing – the rhythms and pacing and momentum that move the reader physiologically as well as intellectually.”⁸¹ For Nietzsche, then, a ‘musical aesthetics’ must underwrite philosophical thought, so that it becomes (is always in the process of becoming) an affective activity, finding expression in bodily motion and in rhythmic time. To quote Higgins again:

Consistently urging that we take art, with the joy it engenders, as a model for living, Nietzsche writes in a style that reflects the musicality of our experience, particularly our experience as

thinkers. The dynamics and pacing of Nietzsche's presentation display what he sees as the temporal movement of thought, its propulsions and reversals, its character as "a kind of dancing."⁸²

Contemporary philosophy, by contrast, often perpetuates the division between mind and body, truth and ascesis, semantic ascent (talk about talk) and spiritual ascent. Philosophy, however, needs to embrace all of one's being, from semantic capabilities to somatic and spiritual activity, without denying or downplaying one to the exclusion of the other. For as Ellsworth states, "apophysis is itself an askêsis."⁸³ Asceticism, in other words, includes not only the practices of meditation, prayer, silence, withdrawal and so on, but also the (intellectual) performance of negation: overcoming certain forms of reasoning, discarding certain concepts, renouncing attachment to certain names of the divine are also ascetical activities which, "like other purifications and the cultivation of virtues, function as significant prerequisites to mystical ascent."⁸⁴ The point, however, is to see asceticism as more than a purely intellectual operation, as constituting a whole way of life, a style of writing, thinking and living where the entire person – mind, body and spirit – is committed to the goal of transformation. The objection, I should clarify, is not that Continental philosophers do not themselves engage in spiritual exercises (they may or may not, it's not for me to judge), but that they do not represent philosophy as primarily a way of life, nor do they attempt to link up their philosophy (including their theory of language and their style of writing) with a style of life that is informed by spiritual disciplines or practices.

But is this merely a failure in certain forms of *philosophy of religion* (viz., those that are indebted to, or modelled on, the language of classical apophatic discourse), leaving the rest of philosophy largely unscathed? The argument developed above, however, can be generalised, so that asceticism is made the condition of possibility for all truth in philosophy, and not only in philosophy of religion. Secular-minded philosophers may balk at this suggestion, fearing that it will (once again) reduce philosophy to an *ancilla theologiae*, a branch or 'handmaiden' of the spiritual or even theological life. But as the work of Hadot and Foucault shows, philosophy can be grounded in spiritual exercises or work on the self of a kind that need not be tied to the doctrines and rituals of any specific religion. The fear, however, is not entirely unjustified, for it points to the realisation that the ideal of a purely secular philosophy – one that is purged from all spiritual practices – is nothing but a chimera. Philosophy, conceived as an ascetic discipline, cannot completely sever its religious roots, even if it is not practiced within the parameters of a religious tradition or institution.

What this means is that philosophy – insofar as it retains any interest in truth – must always be embedded in a way of life, and so it can no longer afford to be limited, as both analytic and Continental philosophy have been in their own way, to a predominantly theoretical inquiry. When philosophy is re-envisioned or (better) reclaimed in this way, it has the opportunity to not only be true, but to sound true, feel true and ring true (though, of course, there is no guarantee that it will). As Bernard Williams pointedly observed, "Of much philosophy purportedly about ethical or political subjects (and other kinds as well) one may reasonably ask: what if someone speaking to me actually sounded like that?"⁸⁵ But, it seems, even Williams cannot let go of the underlying problematic distinction, that between being true and ringing true, or between style and content – a pernicious dichotomy that feeds into oppositions such as those of truth and meaning, explanation and understanding, and knowledge and wisdom. Overcoming this kind of ingrained, dichotomous thinking is not necessarily a prescription for healing the divide between the analytic and Continental traditions. But in showing the failure of both to fully appreciate what it is to do philosophy 'with style', perhaps some confidence can be

restored to the hope that new avenues of communication will be opened that will bring the two closer together, making each more receptive to the insights of the other.

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Short Biography

N. N. ('Nick') Trakakis works at the intersection of philosophy (in both the analytic and Continental traditions), theology and religious studies. His publications in this area include the books, *The God Beyond Belief* (Springer 2007) and *The End of Philosophy of Religion* (Continuum 2008), as well as articles published in journals such as *Sophia*, *Ars Disputandi*, *Religious Studies*, and *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*. He has also co-edited a five-volume *History of Western Philosophy of Religion* (Acumen 2009) and *A Companion to Philosophy in Australia and New Zealand* (Monash University Publishing 2010). Apart from philosophy, he also writes poetry and has published three volumes and a chapbook to date. Currently a Research Fellow in the School of Philosophy at the Australian Catholic University, he has previously taught philosophy at Monash University and Deakin University, and in 2006–07 was awarded a postdoctoral fellowship at the Centre for Philosophy of Religion at the University of Notre Dame.

Notes

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¹ A view of this sort is defended by Glendinning (2006), who argues 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” (p. 12). A further instance of the variety and complexity of so-called Continental philosophy is the distinction that is sometimes made between the various Continental schools as they operate in the European mainland and these schools as they are received and appropriated in the Anglophone world. Consider, for instance, the marked differences between Derrida in France (where he was effectively marginalised) and his almost celebrity status in the United States.

² This is the view of Campbell (2001), where by ‘Platonism’ he has in mind the twin thesis that “the logical features of [a formally structured] language are faithful to reality” and that “truth is timeless, unchanging and perspectively neutral” (p. 344). For a response, see Buckle (2004).

³ Richard Campbell, for example, writes that, “I now think that whilst it is not altogether wrong to understand the clash [between analytic and Continental philosophy]...as largely stylistic, that does not get to the heart of the issue” (“The Covert Metaphysics,” p. 342).

⁴ See Lang (1990), pp. 18, 38–9.

⁵ See Trakakis (2008).

⁶ See Lang (1995), p. 26.

⁷ Lang, “The Style of Method,” p. 21.

⁸ Lang, “The Style of Method,” p. 21.

⁹ As Berel Lang points out, “Style can be imitated or forged, with the latter’s most successful examples no doubt hanging undetected in museums or wrongly attributed in library catalogs.” (‘Style.’ *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, vol. 4. Ed. Michael Kelly. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 321.

¹⁰ See Franck (1995), p. 222.

¹¹ Lang, “The Style of Method,” p. 22.

- ¹² Lang, "The Style of Method," p. 23, emphasis in the original. This, however, is not to say that *all* concern with method renders a philosophical work ahistorical, but only that a certain (view of) methodology, prevalent in philosophy, has this effect.
- ¹³ Lang, "The Style of Method," p. 24. It is not clear to me that style need be as inseparable from the individual artist as Lang makes out. For consider the style of those artists – such as Byzantine iconographers – for whom the cultivation of an individual style is not a goal and is even seen as a significant flaw.
- ¹⁴ See Van Eck et al. (1995), p. 2. It is this fear of trivialisation that lies behind the many denunciations of deconstruction and postmodern philosophy, which are criticised for seeking to reduce philosophy to merely a matter of style, where 'style' is taken as a purely rhetorical idiom. An example of this line of argument can be found in Nicholas Davey's essay, 'Beyond the Mannered: The Question of Style in Philosophy or Questionable Styles of Philosophy.' *The Question of Style in Philosophy and the Arts*. Eds. Van Eck, McAllister, and van de Vall, 177–200.
- ¹⁵ See Williams (2008), p. 205.
- ¹⁶ *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1989), p. 1008.
- ¹⁷ This is the definition given by Gombrich (1968), p. 352.
- ¹⁸ Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, ch. 2.
- ¹⁹ See Meyer (1987), p. 27, n11. There has also been some dispute, especially since Quine, as to whether it is possible to provide an adequate account of synonymy that has application to scientific theories and literary works.
- ²⁰ Monroe Beardsley upholds such a view when he states that "stylistic features, and hence style in general as consisting of stylistic features, are clearly connected with meaning. Thus texts that differ in style cannot, on my view, be synonymous." ('Verbal Style and Illocutionary Action.' *The Concept of Style*. Ed. Lang, p. 220).
- ²¹ See Lang (1980), p. x, who goes on to add that this is *especially* the case in philosophy.
- ²² This is the 'heresy' that the content of a work of art, such as a poem, can be translated or paraphrased without remainder into another art-form, such as an academic treatise.
- ²³ Van Eck, McAllister and Van de Vall, "Introduction," p. 4.
- ²⁴ Van Eck, McAllister and Van de Vall, "Introduction," p. 5.
- ²⁵ Berel Lang, *The Anatomy of Philosophical Style*, p. 12.
- ²⁶ Lang, *The Anatomy of Philosophical Style*, p. 18, emphasis in the original.
- ²⁷ Lang, *The Anatomy of Philosophical Style*, p. 18. What Buffon actually said was not "Le style c'est l'homme," as is usually thought, but "Le style est l'homme même" ("The style is the man himself"). The phrase occurs towards the end of his inaugural lecture, now known as his "Discourse on Style," as a new member of the Académie Française in 1753. For the full text of Buffon's address, see Lane Cooper, ed. *Theories of Style*. New York: Burt Franklin, 1968 [originally published 1907], pp. 170–8.
- ²⁸ Glendinning, *The Idea of Continental Philosophy*, p. 31.
- ²⁹ Derrida (2003), p. 17.
- ³⁰ See Raschke (2007). Similarly, Nelson Goodman, although no fan of Derrida, could recognise the significance of a difficult and demanding style: "The less accessible a style is to our approach and the more adjustment we are forced to make, the more insight we gain and the more our powers of discovery are developed." (*Ways of World-making*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1978, p. 40).
- ³¹ Cavell (2003), p. xii.
- ³² Cavell, for example, immediately after pointing to the aforementioned 'performative' features of Austin's writing goes on to concede that this aspect of Austin's work "has not only not been appropriated [by analytic philosophers], but must be regarded (apart from some private moments of enjoyment, providing topics of chats after work, like Austin's hobby of raising pigs), as philosophically strictly impertinent" ("Foreword," p.xii).
- ³³ In Baggini and Stangroom (2002), p. 151, emphasis mine.
- ³⁴ In Baggini and Stangroom (eds), *New British Philosophy*, p. 151.
- ³⁵ See McGrath (2008), p. 3.
- ³⁶ McGrath, *Heidegger*, p. 56.
- ³⁷ See Humphries (1999), 264.
- ³⁸ See Philipse (1998), p. 8.
- ³⁹ McGrath, *Heidegger*, p. 62.
- ⁴⁰ See van Zuylen's (1998).
- ⁴¹ Marina van Zuylen, "Aesthetics of Difficulty," p. 44.
- ⁴² See Jameson (1971), p. 3.
- ⁴³ See Kekes (2008). See also Olberding's (2009), on the significance given by Confucius to style in the matter of moral development.
- ⁴⁴ See Almog (2009).
- ⁴⁵ Almog, "David Kaplan: The Man at Work," p. 3.
- ⁴⁶ Almog, "David Kaplan: The Man at Work," p. 3.
- ⁴⁷ Almog, "David Kaplan: The Man at Work," p. 4.
- ⁴⁸ Almog, "David Kaplan: The Man at Work," p. 4.

- ⁴⁹ Almog, "David Kaplan: The Man at Work," p. 4, emphases in original. It is misleading of Almog to imply that regimentation involves the regimentation of ordinary language, when for Quine it is the "clarification of the conceptual scheme of science" that is at issue. See Quine (1960), §33, and Hylton (2007), pp. 238–45.
- ⁵⁰ See Quine (1986), p. 291.
- ⁵¹ Almog, "David Kaplan: The Man at Work," p. 9, emphases in original.
- ⁵² See Derrida (1979).
- ⁵³ Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, pp. 64–5.
- ⁵⁴ See Ellsworth (2002).
- ⁵⁵ Ellsworth, "Apophysis and Askêsis," p. 214.
- ⁵⁶ See Lossky (1991), p. 43.
- ⁵⁷ Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p. 43.
- ⁵⁸ See Vasileios (1984), p. 28 (translation slightly amended).
- ⁵⁹ See especially Hadot's (1995).
- ⁶⁰ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, p. 127, emphasis in the original.
- ⁶¹ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, p. 272.
- ⁶² See Foucault (1992), pp. 10–1.
- ⁶³ See Foucault (1988).
- ⁶⁴ See Foucault (2000), p. 261. Comments such as these have led some to object that Foucault is propounding an amoral (if not immoral) understanding of life, one where aesthetic or stylistic criteria trump moral criteria. This line of criticism is advanced by Wolin (1986). Robert Wicks, in defence of Foucault, notes that "Foucault's aesthetics does indeed harbour a sense in which traditional morality is challenged, and in this respect, he remained sympathetic to Nietzsche until the very end" ('Foucault.' *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*. 2nd edition. Eds. Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes. London: Routledge, 2005, 210). But this need not mean a rejection of morality, only a reconceptualisation of it, given that aesthetics (for Foucault) is not separable from morality.
- ⁶⁵ Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," pp. 278–9.
- ⁶⁶ Ellsworth, "Apophysis and Askêsis," p. 218.
- ⁶⁷ In *Culture and Value* (Ed. G. H. von Wright, Trans. Peter Winch, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), Wittgenstein writes: "Working in philosophy – like work in architecture in many respects – is really more a working on oneself. On one's own interpretation. On one's way of seeing things. (And what one expects of them.)" (p. 16e).
- ⁶⁸ See Malcolm (2001), p. 47, emphases in the original.
- ⁶⁹ See Wittgenstein (1993), 160–3.
- ⁷⁰ Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 35e, emphases in the original.
- ⁷¹ Rush Rhees, 'Postscript.' *Recollections of Wittgenstein*. Ed. Rush Rhees. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 174. A similar line of thought is expressed by Nietzsche's Zarathustra, who states: "Of all that is written I love only what a man has written with his blood. Write with blood, and you will experience that blood is spirit" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York: Penguin Books, 1978, p. 40).
- ⁷² Wittgenstein, diary entry for 15 September 1914, in Flowers (1999), p. 269.
- ⁷³ The phrase belongs to Avrum Stroll, who describes this as "a style of writing that is non-systematic, rambling, digressive, discontinuous, interrupted thematically and marked by rapid transitions from one subject to another." (*Wittgenstein*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2002, p. 93).
- ⁷⁴ Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 34e.
- ⁷⁵ Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 57e, emphases in the original; cf. p. 68e. In a paper originally delivered at the Melbourne Writers Festival (29 August 2009), Michelle Boulous Walker put forward an innovative 'ethics of reading' and 'open-ended philosophy', calling for a slow and 'essayistic' style of reading (and writing). "Such a reading," she states, "would be characterised by a slowness, a preparedness to return to the text and to re-read, not prematurely to have done with the text and finalise it in a reading (or a definitive interpretation). Such a reading would remain open to the text. Such a reading opens philosophy – and thought – to an indeterminate space from which the ethics of a 'receptive attitude' or 'patient attention to the other' may emerge. As such, philosophy can be enticed to relax its anxiety to know fully, and come that bit closer to being an open, slow and wondrous engagement with life." ('Becoming Slow: Philosophy, Reading, and the Essay.' *The Antipodean Philosopher, Volume 1: Public Lectures on Philosophy in Australia and New Zealand*. Eds. Graham Oppy and N.N. Trakakis. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011, p. 268, emphasis in the original.) For an earlier treatment of this theme, see Walker (2006).
- ⁷⁶ Alexander Waugh, in his biography of the Wittgenstein family, notes that the eight Wittgenstein siblings (Ludwig included) "were brought up both to recognise and to idolise classical composers and musical performers," and each of them "pursued music with an enthusiasm that, at times, bordered on the pathological. When music was around them they were at their freest and at their most amicable" (*The House of Wittgenstein: A Family at War*. London: Bloomsbury, 2009, p. 41).
- ⁷⁷ For an excellent discussion of Wittgenstein's style, see Peters and Marshall (1999), chs 9 and 10. Interestingly, Wittgenstein's work has inspired many musical compositions, including Elizabeth Lutyens' *Wittgenstein Motet* (1953), Michael Torke's *Bright Blue Music* (1985), M. A. Numminen's *Tractatus Suite* (1989), and more recently a soprano

solo based on the *Tractatus* by the Austrian composer Balduin Sulzer (premiered in 2007). See also Zwicky (1992), a work greatly influenced by Wittgenstein.

⁷⁸ Nietzsche (1968), §105 (p. 66). See also §810 (p. 428).

⁷⁹ See Nietzsche (1990), 77.

⁸⁰ See Higgins (1998).

⁸¹ Higgins, "Nietzsche's Literary Style," pp. 361–2.

⁸² Higgins, "Nietzsche's Literary Style," pp. 363–4. This emphasis on the essential temporality of human thought and experience is a characteristic (and perhaps defining) trait of Continental philosophy, as Jack Reynolds has argued. See Reynolds (2009), 261–7.

⁸³ Ellsworth, "Apophysis and Askêsis," p. 222.

⁸⁴ Ellsworth, "Apophysis and Askêsis," p. 223.

⁸⁵ Williams, "What Might Philosophy Become?" p. 206.

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