

# Tunnels Under the Sea: Reflections on Contemporary Philosophy and Its Contrasts

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## *1. Introduction*

The idea of building a tunnel beneath the waters of the English Channel has been around for many years – Brunel attempted construction of such a tunnel in the 1830's – unsuccessfully of course. It wasn't until 1985, however, that such a project was begun in earnest and tunnelling began from both the French and English sides. The two tunnels met in 1992 to much Anglo–French celebration. If the tunnel project can be taken as a symbol of the increased British closeness to Europe (and it is of course also symbolic of the desire to undertake engineering marvels), so one might suppose that that closeness would be reflected in intellectual life as much as in politics and society. Yet while the British move towards Europe has been a feature of British political and economic life almost since the end of the Second World War, for much of that time there has been very little communication between British – or more generally 'Anglo-Saxon' or 'analytic' – philosophy and Continental thought.

In recent years, however, some philosophers seem to have seen signs of a change, and just as we now have a tunnel beneath the sea of the English Channel, so they see signs of a breaking down of the old barriers between English speaking and non-english speaking philosophers. Thus Jacques Bouveresse writes, in 1983, that '[e]verything leads one to believe that the opposition between the analytic and the continental traditions is gradually being transformed into a marked anachronism'<sup>1</sup>. Often this talk of a breakdown in the traditional opposition seems to be tied to a view of analytic philosophy as itself in decline. Christopher J. Arthur writes, in the Introduction to the recent *Radical Philosophy Reader*, that: "The Radical Philosophy Group was formed in 1971. . . . Since those days much has changed: analytical philosophy is in decline and no new paradigm has established itself; the thinkers previously excluded from the curriculum (such as Hegel, Marx and Sartre) are now generally taught".<sup>2</sup> This view is reflected in the titles of books such as John Rajchman and Cornel West's *Post-Analytic Philosophy*.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, I have even heard mainstream analytic philosophers talk of the decline in analytic philosophy, citing the current rise of interest in the historical origins of analytic philosophy as a response to this decline.

In this brief foray I want to reflect on the contrast between so-called analytic and continental philosophy. What is the difference between the two – if there is a difference – and in what respects do the old contrasts still hold now. Is analytic philosophy indeed in decline and what would such decline entail? What possibilities are there for engagement between these two modes of thinking?

## 2. Mapping the Great Divide

Having already invoked the idea of there being a 'great divide' within contemporary philosophy, it is worth asking in what exactly is that divide is supposed to consist. During the 1960's and 1970's and even into the 1980's the distinction did not seem all that difficult to make. As an undergraduate in the late 1970's it seemed very clear that there were two broad divisions in philosophy: there were those philosophers who read mainly from a list that included Heidegger, Husserl and Sartre (and while elsewhere Marx and Freud figured on that list, they were less prominent in New Zealand) and those that read instead from another list that included Frege, Wittgenstein, Moore, Russell and Quine. Even those whose main interests were in pre-twentieth century history of philosophy usually lined up on one or another side of this divide.

Yet while the Anglo-Saxon/Continental distinction was a familiar one, and easy enough to discern in its rough outlines, it was always, of course, problematic. For neither 'Anglo-Saxon' nor 'Continental' philosophy presents a unified face – rather each represents a loose ensemble, a family, perhaps, of varying philosophical practices and interests. Thus, there is an enormity of difference between the work of, for instance, John Searle and David Armstrong, even though both can be placed within the Anglo-Saxon camp; while the differences between two continental philosophers, say, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Michel Foucault, can be as great, if not more so. Moreover, even as an ethno-geographical distinction, the Anglo-Saxon/Continental divide is, as Jean-Luc Nancy comments, 'extremely fragile. There is "Anglo-Saxon" philosophy in Europe, as there is "continental" and "French" philosophy in the Anglo-Saxon world (to say nothing of the one and the other in the rest of the world, nor of this rest itself, of this immense "rest" as the space of unimaginable possibilities for these philosophies, beyond each of them . . .).<sup>14</sup> And while the use of ethno-geographic terms may be misleading, so too is the use of the term analytic.<sup>5</sup> For one might justifiably claim that analytic practice is not restricted merely to Anglo-Saxon philosophers, but is also to be found on the Continent. Thus one might speak of the existential analytic of Heidegger's *Being and Time* or the deconstructive analyses to be found in the works of Derrida or De Man.

This, of course, raises the question of what is to count as analytic, and in what the practice of analysis might consist. Clearly when we speak of 'analytic' philosophy we mean a specific sort of analysis. Urmson's *Concise Encyclopaedia of Western Philosophy and Philosophers* defines 'analytic' as meaning 'the resolution of a complex whole into its parts'<sup>6</sup>, and goes on to tell us that '[i]n recent times continental philosophy has tended to be synthetic (Kant is an important exception) and British philosophy to be analytic'.<sup>7</sup> Such an account is not particularly helpful, however, since not only is the definition of 'analytic' rather too broad, but neither does it make clear what is meant by saying that continental philosophy 'has tended to be synthetic' (especially since the only definition of 'synthetic' we are given is that it is 'the opposite of analytic'<sup>8</sup>) and matters are not helped by excepting Kant – since Kant himself called his method in the *Critique of Pure Reason* synthetic, as distinct from the analytic approach of the *Prolegomena*. But it seems that, in fact, in Urmson's *Encyclopaedia* analysis is taken to mean something quite specific,

more specific than merely 'resolution . . . into parts'. For the practice of analysis is exemplified through the particular analytical practices of Moore, Russell and the logical positivists. And where 'analytic' philosophers no longer carry on the same techniques as these thinkers, 'the survival of the name "analysis" is only a just tribute which some philosophers pay to those who have greatly influenced them and from whose work their own work stems'.<sup>9</sup> 'Analysis' thus seems to mean something more like definitional, logical or linguistic analysis and analytic philosophers are those who employ such techniques or who acknowledge a major influence from those who do. Significantly such analytic philosophers are also said to be committed, in the main, to a view of philosophy according to which it involves 'not the acquisition of new knowledge (which is the function of the special sciences), but the clarification and articulation of what we already know'.<sup>10</sup> Analysis, it seems, is to serve the aim of clarification.

If clarification is the aim, then one might suppose that aim to be best served, not merely, perhaps, by analytical techniques, but also by clarity of expression. And, indeed, the emphasis on clarity as a philosophical ideal, even if not always carried through to practice, has seemed to be the characteristic mark of analytic philosophy. Certainly it has often been taken to be so by many analytic philosophers themselves. Thus Jonathan Cohen writes that 'most (though nowadays, unfortunately, not all) analytical philosophers attach a high value to clarity of exposition. Unlike Hegelians or Heideggerians, they deliberately eschew tortuous syntax, elliptical exposition, and the replacement of plain statement by enigmatic hints, rhetorical paradoxes, or woolly metaphor'.<sup>11</sup> Cohen's way of putting matters here is probably indicative of the reaction of many analytic philosophers to the work of continental theorists such as Heidegger especially. And, while it is certainly true that Heidegger can often be exasperatingly obscure, one might certainly wonder at the extent to which the reaction found in Cohen and others is determined, as much as anything else, by a certain stereotypical view of continental thought. But this aside, what is 'clarity of exposition' in philosophy such that we should attach a high value to it? And what does the desire for such clarity signify?

One thing that is obscured in the demand for clarity is that clarity is not a property intrinsic to texts. Whether some piece of writing is clear or not is largely dependent on the context in which that text is placed, on the larger body of text of which it is a part, on our grasp of the vocabulary it assumes and of the rhythms of its language, and on our understanding of the philosophical problems with which it deals and the methods employed. In this respect one might say that clarity is as much a product of familiarity as it is of an effort on the part of the writer. But more importantly, perhaps, the emphasis on clarity as a prime virtue of philosophical writing itself derives, of course, from a particular view of the nature and possibilities of philosophy. In the case of analytic philosophy the emphasis on clarity is indeed tied to the conception of philosophical work as aiming at some sort of clarification.

It assumes that philosophical problems can be made clear — that there is a literality, a propriety, a plainness to them. But it also seems to involve both a distrust and a confidence in language. It is as if we distrusted the power of language to 'bewitch' us — as Wittgenstein suggests it may — and yet also believe

that through attending to language more closely we can escape such bewitchment. Language both casts the spell and also breaks it. In this respect too we can perhaps see the desire for clarity as a desire for control over the dangerous capacities of language.

The desire for clarity and for clarification depends, of course, on a conception of reason. For the clarity that the analytic philosopher seeks is the clarity of reason. Indeed the notion of rationality has been particularly important in analytic philosophy. Jonathan Cohen claims, in The Dialogue of Reason, that analytic philosophy is best characterised in terms of an interest in rationality:

If we examine seriatim the problems that actually puzzle analytical philosophers we shall find that the problems of analytical philosophy are all normative problems connected in various ways with rationality of judgement, rationality of attitude, rationality of procedure, or rationality of action. Analytical philosophy seeks a reasoned resolution of such problems.<sup>12</sup>

This quote from Cohen is an interesting one, interesting as much as for what it implies as for what it explicitly states. For if, as Cohen says, analytic philosophy is an inquiry into normative problems connected with rationality, it purports, according to Cohen, to resolve those problems through reason, through rationality. The suggestion is that rationality is not itself in question here – a conception of rationality is already assumed in the idea of philosophy as seeking 'a reasoned resolution'. In fact, it is this idea, implied rather than explicit, that provides one way (and there is no single way) of characterising the difference between the varieties of continental and analytic philosophy. For continental philosophers are less concerned to seek reasoned solutions to normative problems concerned with rationality as to question the notion of rationality itself – not of course to question the idea of rationality as it features in all our inquiries, but the way in which the notion of rationality is articulated, codified, interpreted, institutionalised.

Such a self-critical interest – a turning of reason on itself – is in many ways quintessentially philosophical, yet it makes for some special difficulties. For while, in one sense, rationality is not questioned, cannot be questioned, there is also a profound suspicion of our attempts to interpret rationality and to codify rationality in our practices. This means that much continental philosophy is necessarily oppositional in character, not because it is opposed to analytic philosophy, but because it stands opposed to itself and to the tradition that constitutes it. The history of philosophy is important, then, because such thinking is vitally concerned with its own foundations and with excavating those foundations. Such thinking is always manifests a concern with origins and a suspicion of itself as much as of anything itself – Philosophy as metaphysical suspicion. This suspicion can lead to difficulties – it can make writing more difficult and require stylistic innovation to make writing even possible. It can also open up new possibilities in philosophical thinking – since it can lead to asking questions of a different sort – since it is suspicious even of philosophical fashions, fashions will proliferate. Why is this mode

more prevalent on the continent than in Anglo-Saxon countries? Partly it is the influence of Marxism, partly the greater sensitivity of philosophy to other disciplines and to the arts and literature, partly the different political experiences of France, Germany and Italy.

The focus on differing approaches to rationality provides indeed perhaps the most useful way of understanding the difference between that mélange of practices that is continental philosophy and that equally heterogeneous grouping that is the analytic. But given the differences in practice that follow from this difference in approach to rationality, what possibility is there for fruitful interchange between these traditions? What possibility is there to break down the boundaries?

### *3. Crossing the Sea*

The idea that the two traditions are moving closer together is, as I said earlier, something suggested by a number of contemporary commentators. Certainly there have been a number of recent publications that have looked to a convergence of analytic and continental styles of thought. Rorty's mixing of Davidson, Quine and Sellars with continental writers such as Hegel, Heidegger, Derrida first came to prominence in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, although it was already a theme in his introduction to *The Linguistic Turn*. His most recent works – *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* and the two volumes of *Philosophical Papers* have continued to develop these ideas, although they have received much less publicity in analytic circles than did *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Rorty has argued that the most important theme in contemporary philosophy is a certain form of anti-representationalism and this unites Davidson and Quine with Heidegger and Derrida. It seems, however, that Rorty's influence on contemporary philosophical discussion has not been especially great. He has contributed to an enormous upsurge in interest in pragmatism in America, but within continental circles his work is often seen as merely an appropriation of Derrida and others to American pragmatism, while many analytic philosophers view his work as, at best, a form of misguided anti-realism.

Where Rorty has had a bigger impact is in literary theory and here in fact is where most of the interchange between analytic and continental philosophy has taken place. Significantly, however, it has taken place through the efforts of literary and cultural theorists much more than philosophers. Writers such as Christopher Norris, Jonathan Culler, Edward Said and others have engaged in critical discussions of continental and analytic thought, but typically from within the realm of literary theory rather than philosophy. Indeed this reflects the fact that interest in writers such as Derrida has largely entered Anglo-Saxon world through literary and cultural studies rather than philosophy. Thus Derrida tends to have a reputation as a literary critic rather than a philosopher. Such a view of Derrida is odd indeed when one reflects on the fact that his writings are largely involved with discussions of the major thinkers in the Western philosophical tradition – Parmenides, Heraclitus, Hegel, Kant, Heidegger, and Nietzsche. Derrida's work has largely been an exploration of the structures of philosophical discourse itself as of literary texts.

Thus, outside of Rorty's work and various pragmatist appropriations of continental thought, the major area of interaction between analytic and continental theory has been in literary and cultural theory. In an area external to philosophy itself. Thus in 1988 Antony Easthope, in a survey of the influence of post-structuralist thought in British philosophy could say that 'There is almost nothing to say about British philosophy and Derrida's deconstruction because no mainstream major philosopher in England has been engaged with what is generally regarded as an alien tradition'<sup>13</sup> Of the journal *Radical Philosophy* Easthope comments that:

RP has not fulfilled its mission and shows no signs of doing so. It should have entered thoroughly into a critique of the prevailing tradition, fighting the battle of ideas on that ground. Instead, after a few skirmishes, it has tended to leave the orthodox tradition largely in place and gone for the making of an alternative tradition, putting its energies into versions of Marxist philosophy, writings in and about the Marxist tradition, along with an interest in various figures and issues from outside the mainstream. Except for David Wood's essay of 1979, serious debate in it about Derrida has been slight.<sup>14</sup>

Easthope is more optimistic about the chances of encounter between the two traditions in the American environment. Here, however, as he acknowledges, it is largely focused around Rorty's work, and, as I have already suggested there are reasons to regard Rorty as closing off avenues rather than opening them up. There have indeed been few real exchanges between the two traditions – most exchanges consist in merely the placing of articles by Putnam and Davidson in anthologies that also include articles by Derrida and Foucault. This is scarcely interaction. Moreover when there has been real exchange it has usually been unproductive. The most celebrated encounter was that between Searle and Derrida in the pages of *Glyph*, but this encounter was very much like those encounters described by Jonathan Cohen:

when serious discussions, or exchanges of criticism, have taken place between analytical philosophers and outsiders, these have tended not to constitute fruitful and continuing controversies, but occasional set piece affairs, where the participants meet once, as it were, and rather sterilely agree to differ.<sup>15</sup>

This suggests that, for all the talk of a breakdown in barriers, the lines remain very similar to what they were ten or twenty years ago. Thus if the two divisions are not quite as clear as they once were, still in a book published in 1991, *The Analytic Ambition*, a book that aims, with regard to analytical philosophy, "to vindicate it by showing that it works",<sup>16</sup> William Charlton writes: "Analytical philosophy is the variety of philosophy favoured by the majority of philosophers working in English-speaking countries; those working on the Continent of Europe mostly practice a different variety sometimes called 'Continental'".<sup>17</sup>

I wonder whether attitudes have really changed that much within contemporary analytic circles.

Continental philosophy may be tolerated more than it was, but my suspicion is that it is only tolerated. That there is little recognition of its significance as philosophically respectable. It is still the case that the power and prestige generally is accorded to those, usually men, working within the harder areas of analytic philosophy. If other forms of philosophical practice have developed it is largely through moving out of philosophy departments into areas of literary theory and elsewhere.

If this claim appears unfounded consider what happened earlier this year at Cambridge and the little incident that occurred when it was decided to award an honorary degree to a well-known French philosopher, author of some books and numerous articles and well-respected amongst continental theorists as having had a major impact on European philosophy. What does this affair indicate? That analytic philosophy is now more tolerant? That it is in decline and these are manifestations of that decline?

It is intriguing to find talk of the decline of analytic philosophy in association with talk of the breakdown of the old analytic-continental divide – as if the vigour of analytic philosophy was dependent on the clear opposition between itself and the continental alternative. But what is this talk of decline? What does it mean for analytic philosophy to be in decline? Indeed one finds, alongside talk of the decline of analytic philosophy but one might wonder too how much the old divide has really broken down.

One is thus led to wonder whether the work currently being done at the intersection of analytic and continental approaches is really indication of any sort of rapprochement or whether such work will always remain a solitary and localised activity – whether such work is indicative of some drift in the continents of philosophy or whether, in the end, it will amount merely to a series of tunnels beneath a sea of difference.

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<sup>1</sup>'Why I Am So Very Un-French', in Alan Montefiore (ed.), Philosophy in France Today (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p.14.

<sup>2</sup> 'Introduction', in Sean Sayers and Peter Osborne (eds.), Socialism, Feminism and Philosophy: A Radical Philosophy Reader (London: Routledge, 1990), p.1.

<sup>3</sup>New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.

<sup>4</sup>Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Who Comes After the Subject?', Topoi, 7 (1988), p.88.

<sup>5</sup>'One says "analytic philosophy", for example, which leads to a misconception about both the diversity of kinds of "analysis" with which it deals, and the variety of logical, linguistic, ethical, aesthetic and political preoccupations within the "Anglo-Saxon" domain', Jean-Luc Nancy, 'What Comes After the Subject?', p.88.

<sup>6</sup>*The Concise Encyclopaedia of Western Philosophy and Philosophers*, ed. J. O. Urmson (London: Hutchinson, 1960), p.17.

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<sup>7</sup> *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Western Philosophy and Philosophers*, p.17.

<sup>8</sup> *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Western Philosophy and Philosophers*, p.376.

<sup>9</sup> *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Western Philosophy and Philosophers* , p.20.

<sup>10</sup> *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Western Philosophy and Philosophers*, p17.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Cohen, The Dialogue of Reason, p.42.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Cohen, The Dialogue of Reason, p.49.

<sup>13</sup> Antony Easthope, *British Post-Structuralism Since 1968* (London: Routledge, 1988), p.130.

<sup>14</sup> Anthony Easthope, British Post-Structuralism Since 1968 (London: Routledge, 1988), p.131.

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Cohen, The Dialogue of Reason: An Analysis of Analytical Philosophy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p.5.

<sup>16</sup> The Analytic Ambition (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p.3.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.2.