

Introduction: analytic, Continental and the question of a bridge¹

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Abstract

In philosophy and political theory, divisions come and go, but some persist despite being obviously problematic. The analytic and Continental divide is one such division. In political philosophy and political theory, the division has been particularly pronounced. Analytic and Continental thinkers are divided not only over substantial issues, but also over the very nature of political theorising. In spite of this fundamental nature, theorists often seem to assume that, as a division, the analytic/Continental divide requires no explanation. We suggest that, as a central division within political theory, and despite being acknowledged as problematic for quite some time, it has persisted because it has not been adequately examined. Once examined, the division turns out to be operationally weaker than it once was. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in engaging thinkers from the other side. This has been accompanied by a corresponding tendency, among both analytic and Continental philosophers and political thinkers, to reflect on the nature of their own tradition and 'philosophy'. Both traditions have entered a self-conscious period of meta-reflection. Such questioning indicates the possibility of transformation within both groups, in the absence of settled frameworks and divisions. However, it is also clear that such signs are the beginning of the possibility of a new relation rather than a sign of the eclipse of the division. The

continued institutional separation and the space between their respective philosophical vocabularies suggest that, while the time is ripe for work here, there is still much to be done.

Keywords

analytic; Continental; political philosophy; political theory

In philosophy and political theory, divisions come and go, but some persist despite being obviously problematic. The analytic and Continental divide is one such division.² Coming out of debates between analytic theory and phenomenology in the 1950s (Glendinning, 2008: 71), the divide has been read backwards into history; continues to structure academic discourse, publishing and appointments in philosophy and political theory; and has even underwritten methodological differences between different camps in sociology, history, anthropology, literary theory, law and many other fields. It has thus had a fundamental impact on academic thought and practice.

In political theory, these effects have been particularly pronounced. Analytic and Continental thinkers are divided not only over substantial issues, but also over the very nature of political theorising. Those working within one tradition often view with scepticism the work and conclusions of theorists within the other tradition, and the two traditions often speak past one another disagreeing about such fundamental categories as theorising, politics and the political in the first place. Consequently, analytic and Continental political theory, and the associated division between liberal normative theory and post-structuralism, operate with different understandings of the role of, and relationship between, philosophy and politics.

In spite of this fundamental nature, theorists often seem to assume that, as a division, the analytic/Continental divide requires no explanation. It is immediately understood when invoked by those in the field, and most theorists, if not readily identifying with one or the other side of the division, implicitly assume or employ it in their choice of questions and sources. Equally, when it is engaged there is little consensus over the nature of the division and what actually divides 'analytic' from 'Continental'. We suggest that, as a central division within political theory, and despite being acknowledged as problematic for quite some time and in many ways,³ it has persisted because it has not been adequately examined.

This characterization is not meant to side-line the productive discussions of the division which have occurred and upon which many of the present contributions build. However, these accounts have often been problematic in one of two ways (Chase et al. 2011). First, they have often 'essentialized' the division to one degree or another. Here analytic and Continental are cast as distinct and mutually exclusive categories, characterized by fundamentally different approaches, methods and ideas. Numerous accounts of the central aspect of this division have been offered. Simon Critchley (2001) draws a line between analytic 'problems' and Continental 'historicity'; David Cooper (1994) distinguishes between the naturalism of analytic philosophy and the anti-scientism of Continental philosophy; and Stephen K White and Robert Pippin divides analytics and Continentals according to whether they subscribe to the project of modernity or focus on identifying its malignancies.

There are two problems with the essentialized approach. Beyond the common concern that these various characterizations might ignore or marginalize important work within these traditions that does not fit within these typologies, they also tend to only reinforce the divide. They come with the implication that there is no need or possibility of engaging with the other side. Each account tends to depend upon programmatic statements of what philosophy is. Such an approach precludes the possibility of productive work across the division.

Second, in contrast to those essentialist accounts, there is a growing tendency to *deflate* the analytic and Continental divide, both in wider philosophy and in political thought. Here, it is brushed aside as an essentialist relic,⁴ and real attempts are made for common conversation, for instance, the employment of a figure from the other side. In this latter case though, when the other side is engaged, the tendency is to do so only on one's own set of terms and questions. You rarely find enquiries engaging the other framework as such. For example, agonistic critiques of John Rawls, which do work across the division, still fail to delineate the nature of this opposition (e.g., Honig 1993). Especially within political theory and philosophy, there has been little reflection on the different modes of theorising *as* different modes of theorising, and no attempt to employ such differences to advance the common project of political theorising on the whole.⁵

And yet, the division is operationally weaker than it once was. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in engaging thinkers from the other side. This has been accompanied by a corresponding tendency, among both analytic and Continental philosophers and political thinkers, to reflect on the nature of their own tradition and 'philosophy'. Both traditions seem to have now entered a self-conscious period of meta-reflection (e.g., Arnold Forthcoming; Chase et al. 2011). Such questioning indicates the possibility of transformation within both groups, in the absence of settled frameworks and divisions. However, it is also clear that such signs are the beginning of the possibility of a new relation rather than a sign of the eclipse of the division. The continued institutional separation – in terms of employment, publishing and research activities – and the space between their respective philosophical vocabularies suggest that, while the time is ripe for work here, there is still much to be done.

This special issue begins to rectify these omissions through several approaches. First, several of the contributions here offer new ways of understanding the division and its

particular form within political theory and philosophy. In their contribution, Thomas J. Donahue and Paulina Ochoa Espejo, connect the divide to a broad typology of the various *styles* of addressing problems within political theory. This allows them both to identify the increasing areas of methodological overlap that have developed in recent literatures, and the continued areas of division. Jonathan Floyd and David Owen's contributions also offer reconstructed understandings of the division. Floyd centres the division on an unarticulated disagreement about human nature, from which different (and problematic) conceptions of theorising and method flow. Owen focuses on the methodological division between these two groups in terms of the 'structural problematics' they confront. While analytic theorists attempt to generate reasons that can support fundamental norms (the guidance problem), Continental theorists are oriented to critically assessing existing practices of reasoning (the critique problem).

Importantly, Floyd and Owen also look past merely re-framing the divide, to offer the bones of approaches that go beyond these divisions; what they call 'normative behaviourism' and 'activist political theory' respectively. In this, they anticipate the second cluster of contributions in this special issue. Stephen K. White, Clayton Chin and Paul Patton offer readings of groups and emerging dynamics that work across and destabilize the analytic-Continental divide. White re-reads Habermas' communicative action paradigm to illustrate its complementarity with both the analytic and Continental frameworks. This importantly situates a tradition that has always stood in an awkward relation to this division, while offering a fresh take on Habermas' work that addresses some of its most common criticisms. Chin's contribution connects emerging dynamics from several clusters of literature that are all making similar moves toward situated, social-practice based methodologies for political thought. Drawing together elements of new realism, genealogy and pragmatism in what he dubs a 'situated turn', he then argues that the pragmatism of Richard Rorty offers unique

resources for a methodological pluralist approach to contemporary political theory that enables moving across the division. Finally, Patton's contribution further develops his recent work on Foucault and Rawls. In a way that overlaps with Owen's typology, Patton argues that analytic and Continental political philosophy prioritize the normative and descriptive differently, and, with this in mind, he employs an analysis of the work of Michel Foucault and John Rawls to argue for the complementarity of these projects for political theory.

In this manner, the first three contributions (Donahue and Ochoa Espejo, Floyd and Owen) in this special issue offer new and insightful typologies of the division, ones that provide real insight without essentializing. The later three contributions (White, Chin and Patton) argue for particular areas of overlap and the consequent opportunities for productive work across the analytic-Continental divide without deflating its importance. Together, they offer us dramatic new insights into the limitations and potentialities of political thought today.

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Notes

¹ This special issue grew out of a May 2013 Conference, held in the School of Politics and International Relations at Queen Mary, University of London, entitled 'Continental and Analytical Political Theory: An Insurmountable Divide?' We would like to thank all the participants there for the richness of the discussion and its direct and indirect contributions to this special issue.

² For general introductions, see Chase et al. 2011; Gutting 2012; Leiter (No Date); Prado 2003. We have chosen not to standardise the use of terms like theory and philosophy, and analytic and analytical across the contributions to the special issue. The exception is to capitalise Continental and not analytic/al.

³ Bernard Williams (1995: 66) makes perhaps the strongest objection to the analytic-Continental divide when he observes that it is based upon a conflation of methodological and geographical categories, ‘as though one classified cars into front-wheel drive and Japanese’.

⁴ The archetypal example of such deflation is Glendinning 2006.

⁵ There are exceptions though: some political theorists have engaged the divide, for instance Patton (2006) and White (2011), both of whom are included here and build on their earlier accounts.