The ‘Continental’ Tradition?

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Abstract
There is – of course – no one such thing as *the* continental tradition in philosophy, but rather a whole discordant family of notably distinct traditions. They are, nevertheless, broadly recognisable to each other. For much of the last century, however, most of those engaged in or with philosophy in continental Europe, on the one hand, and in the English-speaking world, on the other hand, had surprisingly little knowledge of, interest in or even respect for what was going on in the other. Happily, the situation today is vastly improved on each side of the philosophical channel. What follows is an attempt to gain some understanding of the background to this long-standing (and still to some diminishing extent persistent) mutual incomprehension from the standpoint of one who came to philosophy as a PPE student in the Oxford of the late 1940s.

My invitation to contribute to this series of lectures on ‘Philosophical Traditions’ came with the kindly flattering explanation that it was being made in the light of (what was alleged to be) my ‘expertise in continental philosophy’. There are, however, two problems with this explanation. In the first place it is by now pretty widely recognised that the term ‘continental philosophy’ is one of a far from precise art rather than of any sort of geographical, or indeed numerical, accuracy – there is, of course, no such thing as one identifiable school of thought that might be called ‘continental philosophy’. And secondly, although there are by now a considerable number of people in the English-speaking philosophical world who do have a genuinely specialist knowledge of the loose group of traditions which came to be more or less recognisably referred to by this term, I cannot in all honesty pretend to belong to their expert company. Moreover, there now exist a respectable number of books designed to explain this ensemble of traditions, many of which include useful bibliographies listing their fellows. Let me here refer simply to two of them that, in their brevity as in their clarity, are most accessible, namely Simon Critchley’s *Continental Philosophy – A Very Short Introduction*, published (by Oxford University Press) in 2001 and Simon Glendinning’s *The Idea of Continental Philosophy* published (by Edinburgh University Press) in 2006. (Both authors, incidentally, express strong reservations about the key term appearing in the very titles of their books.)

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The story of how and why I may have acquired a thus doubly misleading reputation has, inevitably, its purely personal side, which as such is of no general interest. However, it does also have aspects that belong to the (still on-going) history of a certain academic culture – one in which the boundaries between it and the not so strictly academic are both uncertain and potentially shifting. In what follows I shall try to reflect on those aspects of this story as I have seen it, and in particular on the factors that made it so difficult for us, students in the middle of the last century, to recognise what presented itself as philosophy coming from across the Channel as belonging to the same subject as that on which we ourselves were embarked. I should make it clear at the outset, however, that my own, in fact relatively quite limited and non-expert, experience of the kinds of philosophy going on in continental Europe grew essentially from an effort to try and make sense of what was being produced, published and debated under the title of philosophy in France – much of which, of course, derived from philosophy which had come to France from Germany).

It is fair to say, then, that when I first came, in the autumn of 1948, to study philosophy as an undergraduate at Oxford reading for the ex-serviceman's shortened version of PPE, it was there quite generally held that whatever might be thought of as falling under the heading of 'continental philosophy' could safely be dismissed as irrelevant to any serious philosophical study or debate. Not that this was an assumption for which anyone seemed to feel a need to present us students with detailed exemplification or argument; most of us, indeed, very largely took it on board as going in effect without saying. It was in any case very effectively embodied in what was and, even more significantly, what was not available to us in the philosophy syllabuses and in the philosophy tutorials, lectures and seminars on offer.

Students taking courses in literature, and more especially in French literature, were, no doubt, less cut off than were we from the writings of, for example, Sartre, Gabriel Marcel, Camus and perhaps even Merleau-Ponty, the first three of them at least being not infrequently lumped together under the broad title of Existentialists. Indeed much of what they produced was regarded as being quite properly to be appreciated as novels, plays or essays of a type belonging to what was recognisable as broadly one and the same, if internally highly discordant, literary (-cum-political-cum-ideological) field rather than to what we were learning to think of as philosophy as such. Of the first three, it was Sartre whose writings, or at least some of them, seemed to make most obvious claim to the status of philosophy, in

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particular, of course, his massive *L'Etre et le Néant* (1943). But, as I say, no hint of its existence, let alone of any possible significance that it might have had, was to be found on any of the philosophy syllabuses available to us in Oxford or, so far as I know at any rate, on those provided by the philosophy departments of any other British universities of that time.

The article on Sartre in the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy starts with the assertion that 'Sartre (1905–1980) is arguably the best known philosopher of the twentieth century.' So, even if the argument in question is one that may be impossibly hard to pin down, one may well ask how it could be that as a student embarking on a course of philosophy in the very middle of that century, I should have found myself so much at a loss to know what to make of a work such as *L'Etre et le Néant* – with, moreover, the at least tacit discouragement from the great majority of my philosophical elders and betters from spending (or 'wasting') my time in struggling over it rather than any suggestion that I should do philosophically well to persevere?[1]

There were, it seems to me, two fairly straightforward immediate reasons why we should have found ourselves left in such a state of perplexity. The first was that we were being taught, by explicit precept, by constant encounter with appropriate example and by regular exposure to detailed and probing discussion, that it was fundamentally incumbent on philosophers to tease out and to establish the proper

[1] Things seemed not to have changed very much, indeed, when I returned to Oxford at the beginning of the 60s as a philosophy Fellow and tutor at Balliol. At some point during those years I found myself, together with two very senior and well-known philosophers of the time, as the third (and very junior) member of a Bodleian Library philosophy book selection sub-committee, when among the books presented to us for decision was *La Voix et le Phénomène* by Jacques Derrida, whose name clearly meant nothing to either of my colleagues. As one of them flicked over its pages in order to get an idea of what was inside, he noticed that one of its chapters bore the title 'Le signe et le clin d'oeil' ('The sign and the wink'), saying, as he passed it over to my other senior colleague, something to the effect of 'The Library surely won't want a book containing chapters with a title such as that in its philosophy section'. To this the other senior colleague in question immediately agreed, and if I, who happened to have met Derrida at a conference in France, had not been there to point out (rather meekly) that this book and its author had already acquired a certain importance across the Channel, *La Voix et le Phénomène* would not have been available to would-be readers at the Bodleian for at least some time to come.

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working of arguments – that is to say, to check on their validity or invalidity, to determine whatever might count as confirming or falsifying their premises and/or their conclusions and to make explicit their relevance (or irrelevance) to the issues in question. There was, moreover, a general presumption that in looking for the structures of arguments we should seek always to present the concepts crucial to their construction in terms that were as perspicuous as possible. There were, of course, well-known differences of view as to just how such structures should be modelled or re-presented and as to how best to understand the relations between the given terms of the arguments under analysis and those of their analytically clarified versions. (Should one, for example, take some version of formal logic as one's ideal model, or was it more appropriate to think in terms of some kind of informal or so-called 'contextual' logic?) But though it was largely accepted - in the title words of H.H. Price's Inaugural Address to the first post-war meeting of the Aristotelian Society – that 'clarity is not enough', it was generally taken for granted that to seek such conceptual clarity as might be possible was, if not a sufficient, then at least a necessary mark of any serious philosopher. No doubt there might be considerable room for uncertainty as to in what exactly the proper criteria of clarity might consist. But, it is fair to say, it did not seem to us that a concern for clarity or rigour of argument as such had any sort of priority for philosophers of the then contemporary continent.

The second main reason was that the works of the philosophers with and against whom Sartre was primarily arguing – and with their works much of their conceptual vocabulary – were almost entirely absent from the lists of reading prescribed to students of my generation. In particular these absences included the writings of such relatively recent figures as Bergson, Husserl and Heidegger. Virtually every serious student of philosophy in France of the time could be expected to have at least some familiarity with the leading ideas and terms of their philosophies, as well as of those earlier philosophers whose writings, agreements and disagreements would in turn have formed such a major part of their own background – above all, perhaps, the writings of Hegel, mediated as often as not through their differing presentations by such influential commentators as Jean Hyppolite and Alexandre Kojève. One has also to bear very much in mind the historical reasons for which virtually all French intellectuals at the time felt obliged to situate themselves in relation to the different versions of Marxism that were then competing with each other and, in more directly political terms, in relation to the Communist party itself.

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So far as I myself was concerned, Hegel himself figured on none of my reading lists in his own right, as it were, but only indirectly in the contexts, on the one hand, of such references to Marxism as were to be found in the otherwise little that there was of political philosophy at that time and, on the other, in the still surviving references on our reading lists to such works of earlier British philosophers as F.H. Bradley's *Ethical Studies*, T.H. Green's *Lectures on Political Obligation*, (which were as much Kantian in inspiration as Hegelian) and Bernard Bosanquet's *The Philosophical Theory of the State* – and, as an accompanying antidote to this latter, L.T. Hobhouse's *The Metaphysical Theory of the State*. Marx, himself, of course, made no appearance at all in our philosophy courses as such other than in those specifically designated as political philosophy. (We may have known or been told virtually nothing of Hegel, but I do still remember the impression made on me when I first came across it in my edition of Hobhouse's book,[2] by the letter to his son, then a lieutenant in the RAF, which served as the book's introductory dedication. In it Hobhouse tells of how he had been working on Hegel's theory of freedom in his garden in the summer of 1917 at the moment of a bombing raid by three German aircraft: 'In the bombing of London', he wrote, 'I had just witnessed the visible and tangible outcome of a false and wicked doctrine, the foundations of which lay, as I believe, in the book before me. To combat this doctrine effectively is to take such part in the fight as the physical disabilities of middle age allow. Hegel himself carried the proof-sheets of his first work to the printer through streets crowded with fugitives from the field of Jena. With that work began the most penetrating and subtle of all the intellectual influences which have sapped the rational humanitarianism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and in the Hegelian theory of the god-state all that I had witnessed lay implicit.')

Hegel's virtual disappearance from the syllabus as it came down to us is not, of course, to be explained simply as a result of this sort of reading (or mis-reading). Of the many factors involved, one of the most important lay in the fact that while access to Hegel's thought, as to that of the other German idealists and their successors, lies in a certain way of reading and of reacting to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, only very few of the philosophy students of my time and place actually studied Kant at all – or indeed were

[2] *The Metaphysical Theory of the State* (George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1918)

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encouraged to do so[3]; and for those who did, 'up to date' commentaries on and/or discussions of his great Critiques were still few and far between. As Simon Critchley so rightly says, 'Much of the difference between analytic and Continental philosophy simply turns on *how* one reads Kant and *how much* Kant one reads.'[4] Of the Kantian commentaries that were then available, strikingly few were in tune with the dominant and widely taught 'analytic' philosophy of the time, whether in its so-called ordinary language or its more formally, or quasi-formally, logical versions. (Sir Peter Strawson's widely influential *The Bounds of Sense* and Jonathan Bennett's *Kant's Analytic* were both only published in 1966.[5])

Kant had thought that the only way to deal with the problems inherent in the accounts of consciously reflective experience proposed by his various (but all still essentially Cartesian) rationalist and empiricist predecessors, was to accept that the human subject must somehow belong to, or participate in, two *prima facie* incompatible realms of being at one and the same time – in that of a causally determinate order of nature, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, in an unknowable (and even strictly speaking unconceptualisable) order of self-determining rational autonomy. (Even this use of the expression 'at one and the same time' is, of course, strictly out of place, as time, according to the Kantian account, belongs only to the natural order as an indissociable element of its very structure.) He thus left himself and his successors with the problem of what to make of this transcendentally dual status – transcendental in the sense that the presumption of its existence rests on its claim to be a necessary presupposition of our very capacity for meaningful conceptualisation and thought, i.e. of our capacity to make sense of all of which in practice we find ourselves already making some sort of sense – of our ability to direct our lives as embodied inhabitants of our everyday physical world and of our abilities both to think of what we may there set out to do and to communicate meaningfully with others.

[3] I remember one at the time well-known philosopher saying to me that, given that a central Kantian preoccupation was with the attempt to exhibit the strategic possibilities of synthetic a priori propositions (or, rather, judgments), and that it was now well-known that there could be no such propositions, he could see no point is expending a great deal of effort on the study of Kant.

[4] *Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press), 17

[5] *The Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (London, Methuen, 1966). *Kant's Analytic* was published, also in 1966, by Cambridge University Press.

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It would, of course, normally be thought to be a likewise necessary condition not only of philosophical argument, but of rational (and practically effective) thought in general that it should be uncompromisingly committed to the resolution of any and all such contradictions as might seem to arise within it. And yet any attempt to explain of what sort of elements the postulated realm of things-in-themselves might really consist or how it might interact – as it allegedly must – with the natural order of space and time would seem to run into ever renewed contradiction.

My own reading of Kant is that, however reluctant he may have been to admit it even to himself, he increasingly came to find himself having to struggle with the higher order contradiction involved in his commitments *both* to the rationally imperative demand to resolve or to eliminate from his philosophy any element of contradiction *and* to the recognition that at one level or another contradiction would nevertheless always recur. Taken together, these may be thought of as amounting to an (however unwilling) commitment to an acknowledgment of paradox as an ultimate limit to rational enquiry, a limit that may be endlessly deferred but never definitively set aside. Acceptance of any such limit would be evidently unacceptable to the great majority of philosophers, above all to those who, like Kant himself, held fast to the values of the great Enlightenment. Broadly speaking, then, his successors reacted to the challenges presented by his Transcendental Idealism in two very different ways, leading – it is fair to say – to the onward development of the mutually estranged traditions of what have come to be known as Continental and Analytic or Anglo-Saxon philosophy. There were those who thought that, if Kant had found himself in such an impasse, this was because he had not gone far enough in showing how all the essential structures of natural experience were to be understood as deriving from those of subjective consciousness as such. Efforts to work out the fuller implications of this view resulted in the movement known as German Idealism; and it was above all in Hegel's version that it became for those following in its wake the model against which to measure the nature and extent of their own reservations and modifications. Others reacted by taking in effect the view that if Kant had dug himself into this sort of hole, it made better sense not to follow him into it, but rather to pick up the threads from where their own ancestors, those would-be hard-headed and common-sensible empiricists, had left them. Broadly speaking still, it was this view that took most lasting hold in the English-speaking world, while across the Channel Hegel, whether in his own terms or in his

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Marxist-inverted version, retained his stature as one of the great figures with whom any serious student of philosophy would be expected to be at least reasonably familiar and to come to some sort of terms.

These are, of course very broad generalisations and neither development took place without there being a number of notable exceptions along the way. There was, for instance, the once influential but now largely neglected movement known as British Idealism, composed mainly of philosophers also known as the British Hegelians.[6] I have already cited Hobhouse's startlingly vigorous reaction to what he took to have been the overall influence of Hegel and his philosophy. Wikipedia's article on British Idealism puts the matter almost equally starkly: 'The doctrines of British idealism so provoked the young Cambridge philosophers G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell that they began a new philosophical tradition, analytic philosophy.' Although this too is an example of very abruptly potted history, it is certainly the case that while both Russell and Moore figured prominently on my reading lists as a budding student, the only fleeting references to be found there to anything remotely Hegelian were, as I have already mentioned, to the political and ethical writings of Bradley, Bosanquet and T.H. Green, none of which would have provided much help to the understanding of such leading 'continental' philosophers of the time as, for example, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Karl Jaspers or Gabriel Marcel. Merleau-Ponty was, in patches at any rate, perhaps a little more accessible.

The reason, however, why we found it so difficult to gain any foothold of understanding of what these 'continental' philosophers were on about – and why, it has to be admitted, the struggle seemed to be so little worth while – was not simply that we lacked the right sort of historical background; the fact is that the philosophy that we were taught

[6] There were also, of course, a few – though, I think it is fair to say, only a few – later exceptions of note. One certainly worth remembering would be that of J.N. Findlay, a distinguished scholar who both taught and wrote not only on Plato and Wittgenstein, but also on Meinong, Kant and (extensively) on Hegel, as well as being both an admirer and translator of Husserl. Findlay retired from his Chair in London in 1966, from where he moved to the States, where he taught at one university or another for the rest of his life. Around the first half of the sixties at any rate I was certainly very aware of Findlay and his philosophical views, which indeed struck me as both stimulating and well worth engaging with; but this was, I have to say, a reaction from a certain distance, and my impression was and is that, for whatever reasons, he remained overall a philosophically very lone wolf.

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and encouraged to practise for ourselves carried with it what may now seem to be curiously little concern for its own culturally embedded history. This is not to say that the syllabuses on offer did not provide for – or even to some extent insist on - the study of any of the great philosophers of the past. For Oxford PPE students the so-called General Paper, whose core component consisted of the basic works in the theory of knowledge of Descartes, Locke, Berkeley and Hume, was a compulsory element, and for most of us the given starting-point of our course. We had also the options of taking a special paper on the 'Rationalists' and/or that on Kant (with an overwhelmingly heavy concentration on the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Groundwork to the Metaphysic of Morals*); but those availing themselves of either of these options were very much a minority. Those reading for Greats (or Literae Humaniores) were, of course, required to study both Plato and Aristotle. But in all these cases, over and above the requirement to exhibit a good knowledge of the relevant texts, the emphasis was above all on a critical evaluation of the arguments contained therein rather than on any attempt to interpret them in the light of the contexts in which they had been produced and to which they belonged. The distinction was well and strikingly brought out by Bernard Williams in the Preface to his Pelican book on Descartes, which, as he made clear in his opening sentence, was explicitly intended as 'a study in the history of philosophy rather than in the history of ideas.... [and] is meant to consist, to a considerable extent, of philosophical argument, the direction of it shaped by what I take to be, now, the most interesting philosophical concerns of Descartes.'[7]

'Continental' philosophers, on the other hand, have generally tended to incorporate their awareness of the ways in which their predecessors expressed themselves in the development and expression of their own thinking with the result that such philosophically historical references become built into the very texture of their own texts. Given that many, if not indeed most, of the references in question were largely absent from our own syllabuses and curricula, and given that we were anyhow being taught to work out our lines of argument in our own non-historically loaded terms, these differences in relation to the historical background constituted a formidable further barrier to any effective mutual understanding between students on opposite sides of the Channel.

There were undoubtedly many other important (and in many ways interconnected) factors at work, but whose importance is hard to

[7] *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (Pelican Books, 1978), 9/10

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measure. I remember, for example, how, when I was still a young and inexperienced lecturer, one of my more senior colleagues explained to me that, however interesting in itself the history of philosophy might be, a knowledge of it was no more relevant to the contemporary production of first-rate philosophy than was a knowledge of the history of physics to the production of first-rate work in, say, contemporary quantum mechanics. Again, it is in general the case – so far at any rate as my experience goes – that in the English-speaking world philosophy has closer institutional links with the natural and social sciences as compared with those that exist between philosophy and letters on the continent of Europe. In France, certainly, philosophy is generally first taught within a context of learning to express oneself effectively and with what I would be inclined to call distinctive literary effect. The result may seem to be, as an unsympathetic critic once put it, that rhetoric (in the modern pejorative sense of the term) tends only too easily to take the place of argument – though it might be that what may strike a typical analytic philosopher as 'mere' rhetoric is better understood as functioning as a different form of argument.

Rhetoric, according to the Wikipedia article on the subject, 'is the art of discourse, an art that aims to improve the facility of speakers or writers who attempt to inform, persuade, or motivate particular audiences in specific situations' – an art that, as Aristotle saw it, can be just as essential to the pursuit of good as to bad or dishonest purposes. Thus a philosopher with a trained sense of his intellectual allegiances within an historical tradition may, in setting out his position to an audience with a similar awareness of history, be able to convey the general context of his thinking 'simply' by use of terms belonging to, say, a recognisably Hegelian, Heideggerian or, one might add, Freudian (or Lacanian) discourse. To those in the know this may function very well as a way of situating, if not exactly proving, one's argument; while those not in the relevant know will be left frustratingly in the dark.

It is thus understandable that where philosophy finds itself institutionally so embedded within the extended family of literary disciplines, it should come to express itself in such historically and traditionally fashioned forms of rhetoric and argumentation – and understandable too that the use of such forms should make for mutual failures of understanding between insiders and outsiders to the relevant traditions. But this is not the only way in which the nature of the institutions within which philosophy is produced and disseminated may impact on the structure and content of what is there produced. In my lifetime, certainly, it would have been (and,

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no doubt, still is) most unusual for any philosophical work of any importance in the analytic or English-speaking tradition to be published that had not already been tried out in the form of papers given in seminars and/or at meetings of one relatively small and face-to face philosophy society or another, all of these being contexts in which there is opportunity for critically detailed examination of the very nuts and bolts of the arguments deployed. Again, it is quite common in the English-speaking world for books eventually to emerge as a considered reaction to criticisms and comments received in responses to a previously disseminated series of articles. And even in cases where there has in fact been little or no such previous interchange, there is a tendency to think and to write as if in already prepared response to such potentially significant objections as one may anticipate, as an ingrained way of clarifying for all concerned one's own meaning and intent.

While it is true that in more recent times there have been increasing signs of change taking place on the other side of the Channel, during the greater part of my philosophical lifetime philosophical exchange there has tended, at one end of the scale, to take the form of the publication of books and counter-books, and, at the other end, that of more or less openly polemical interventions in the media – with little by way of detailed co-operative discussion in between. Again there are a number of reasons why this should have been so. In France most notably, as to some varying extent no doubt in the other countries of continental Europe, philosophy – and philosophers – belong very much to the public culture. To quote from the blurb on the back cover of Jean-Louis Fabiani's widely informative book on the sociology of what it is to be a French philosopher: 'The philosopher constitutes one of the most remarkable figures of French intellectual life…[French philosophy] is a conceptual construction all of whose readings and impacts are to be taken into account; it is an institution and an ensemble of social practices ranging from those of the classroom to the public media.'[8] (Fabiani also notes[9] the revealing remark by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their

[8] *Qu'est-ce qu'un philosophe français? – la vie sociale des concepts (1880 – 1980)*, Edition de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 2010: 'Le philosophe français constitue l'une des figures les plus remarquables de la vie intellectuelle française…[la philosophie française est] une construction conceptuelle, dont toutes les lectures et les receptions sont à prendre en compte, une institution et des pratiques sociales, de la salle de classe à la scène médiatique.'

[9] Ibid, 23

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Qu'est-ce que la philosophie? of 1991 that 'le philosophe ne discute jamais'.) A high proportion of the educated public in France will have studied philosophy to at least some extent in their final year of secondary school, and every lycée will include among its staff at least one qualified teacher of philosophy, which makes for an already significant number of qualified philosophers in the country as a whole. Philosophers are, moreover, very much among those readily recognisable in the traditionally familiar role of 'public intellectual'. There is thus a potential readership for books of philosophy – and an even wider one for the interventions of well-known philosophers on matters of public debate, but in both cases a readership interested for the most part less in the logical nitty-gritty of such arguments as may – hopefully – be found in professional philosophical journals than in the overall positions that may be presented to them for adoption, rejection or support.

Another striking feature of philosophical activity on the continent during the greater part of my philosophical lifetime has been the often open and explicit political significance attached to the different ways in which it might be pursued almost as much as to the particular positions adopted. It has been hard, if not indeed virtually impossible, for philosophers there to carry on their philosophical work in a wholly non-political or politically neutral way, even if that was their own conception of what most philosophy was or should be about; the very claim to political neutrality was quite generally taken on the left to be (whether intentionally or simply in practical effect) a hypocritical posturing typical of the political right. Any philosopher intent on working in areas of the conceptual-cum-logical analysis more typical of 'Anglo-Saxon' and American philosophy would have been automatically regarded by many of their most vocal colleagues and students as belonging to 'the right', and thus as ideological opponents with whom serious discussion, as contrasted with polemical exchange, was hardly to be envisaged. It was not that anyone thought that any great political significance attached to the particular way in which one might, for instance, analyse the logical status of a proposition such as 'Nothing can be both red and green all over'; what *was* held to be politically significant was a readiness to treat such a matter as being of any philosophical interest or importance whatsoever.

It is hardly surprising, then, that when I first came to philosophy – and for some continuing time thereafter – communication between philosophers on either side of the Channel should in general have been so lamentably bad. From here, 'philosophy' from the other side seemed to consist very largely of a kind of intellectual posturing,

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at once learned, empty and opaque; seen from the other side, our own efforts struck them as both historically and politically naive and superficial. If I nevertheless showed some persistence in trying to make some better sense of our respective situations than this, I have to admit that this was due less to any specifically philosophical motivation than to a set of circumstances through which I came to find myself with a whole range of personal contacts and commitments in France. Whatever the differences in our background experiences – I, for instance, had been safely at school in this country during the whole of the still very recent war, while they had been living the many and varied stresses, traumas and divisions of the German occupation – and whatever the differences in the (largely hidden) assumptions underlying our different ways of thinking, I could not believe that these obviously intelligent and often passionately committed people, most of them much better read than myself, were, when it came to philosophy, all simply engaged in a literary enterprise accountable to no recognisably determinable rules of argumentation. That there was some element of public and/or political display in much of what was produced under the banner of philosophy was certainly one feature of the prevailing culture. But surely this could not have been all that there was to it. (No doubt too that there was an element of pure cussedness in my reaction to the then prevailing 'Anglo-Saxon' tendency to dismiss all that was lumped together under the heading of 'Continental philosophy' as mere literary hot air.)

Be that as it may, my occasional participation in philosophical events in France must have started to attract some degree of notice among my 'Anglo' contemporaries and colleagues – notice of what was no doubt regarded as a certain eccentricity. Certainly, when I came back to Balliol in 1961 as a PPE Fellow (after ten years teaching at the then new University College of North Staffordshire), I was one of the very few philosophers in Oxford to show signs of knowing anything at all about the mysterious world of 'Continental' philosophy. So when it started to become impossible simply to ignore a new and growing, even if still very small, student demand for a paper allowing for the study of such philosophers as Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, Patrick Gardiner, Charles Taylor and I were constituted a small sub-committee charged with the responsibility of devising such an option. Taylor, having himself a dual francophone and anglo-phone background, was admirably well equipped for this task; and Patrick Gardiner too in his own way, through his special knowledge of such nineteenth century philosophers as Schopenhauer, Hegel and Nietzsche, who also, and very properly,

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found their way onto the new syllabus as we then determined it. But, it is worth noting, when this new option was first introduced (under the title of Post-Kantian Philosophy), it was decided that it could not yet be made available to the whole range of courses of which philosophy was a component, the simple fact being that there were still not enough philosophers in Oxford capable of acting, year after year, as examiners in such a subject.

Gradually, then, my interest in current French philosophy and in what lay behind it, came to be seen as an eccentricity of a certain usefulness. It was almost as if there existed an assumption that, since some of my philosophical interests were distinctly odd, graduate students who wished to work on 'odd' subjects of one sort or another, and for whom no other supervisor could be found, might not unreasonably be sent to me – whether I actually knew very much about them or not! (There were indeed times when I found myself with a share of responsibility for students working on topics wholly unfamiliar to the great majority of colleagues from my own Sub-Faculty of Philosophy, topics about which I knew just about enough to find them of genuine interest, but about whose substance I quite certainly learnt more from the graduates working on them than they could possibly have learnt from me.)

By now, happily, things are looking distinctly different on both sides of this strange philosophical Channel. Increasing numbers of French philosophers – especially, but not only, the younger among them – are showing themselves to be not only very well-read, as indeed one would expect of philosophers trained and working in France, but genuinely expert in such typically 'analytic' areas of philosophy as (often, but not only, Wittgensteinian) philosophy of language and moral and political philosophy. Where, for example, the work of John Rawls was once regarded as belonging too indisputably to the 'liberal' right to be worthy of serious attention, there are now few, if any, countries in continental Europe – including France – where there are not young philosophers to be found deeply engaged in detailed Rawlsian studies and debates. Part of the explanation for this transformation undoubtedly lies in the virtual collapse of what for a long time after the war had been the dominating preoccupation of most intellectuals with Marxist related concerns. But there have certainly been other, if not wholly dissociated, factors at play, such, for example, as the fact that increasing numbers of young philosophers from the continent – including very notably from France – have been spending some time working in British or, above all, in American universities.)

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The English-speaking world too, has seen a steadily increasing interest in a wide range of what still tends to be called 'continental' philosophy. Many of the philosophers concerned have been trained in and are in some cases very expert in whole areas of the most strictly analytic philosophy. In particular, there has been an almost extraordinary explosion of interest in such philosophers as Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, Habermas and now Badiou. And if the word 'extraordinary' comes to mind in this context, it is when I think of the contrast between the way things are now and how they were when, for example, I first embarked with Jacques Derrida, on a (very limited) programme of exchange visits between Oxford and the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, where he was then teaching. The (now long ago) arrangement was that once a term one or two of us from Oxford would go to address his group of students in Paris, while he, or later one of his colleagues, would in turn come to Oxford to talk to the then very small *ad hoc* group, mainly of graduate students, interested to try and make out what he was about. But this group included none of my more senior colleagues from the Philosophy Sub-Faculty, while Derrida's students in Paris, preoccupied as they were with the looming competitive examinations on the outcome of which their future career prospects depended, displayed very little interest in whatever we might have to say. Or again I remember how Habermas on an early visit to Oxford was for the most part met with what may not unfairly be described as a mixture of more or less polite disinterest and incomprehension. (As for the reaction to Lacan when he came to talk at the Maison Française in Oxford, that is in itself a whole other story.) Nowadays, of course, experts on all these philosophers are to be found virtually all over the so-called Anglo-Saxon world.

So what lessons may be drawn from this, I fear over-personalised, story? First, that if anyone should have come to think of me as possessing any sort of expertise in continental philosophy, this can best be understood as an illustration of just how wide was the gulf, between philosophers at any rate, of mutual ignorance, mutual misunderstanding and – it is hardly too strong an expression – mutual cultural contempt in the middle of the last century. For a long time I myself only understood much too little of what then counted as philosophy on the other side of the intellectual Channel; but then there were very few philosophers on this side who knew anything about it at all – or if they did, as was certainly the case with a few of the more senior of them, they tended, in philosophical public at least, to pretend that they did not. Secondly, but this should not be of any surprise, that there is not really any such thing as *the* tradition of continental

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philosophy. There has existed rather a somewhat unruly, but to some extent inter-related, 'continental' family of traditions – Marxist, Thomist, phenomenological, psychoanalytical, existentialist in some broadly contestable sense of the term, traditions which, however much they may have differed among themselves, nevertheless had enough in common to understand what their differences and disagreements were. Thirdly, that what they did have crucially in common, and what we most notably did not share, was a common framework of reference grounded in a thoroughgoing training in the historical philosophical background – and in particular in those of its aspects to which entrance could only be secured through a certain knowledge of Kant and, beyond him, of Hegel and his successors.

Fourthly, that the origins of this gulf of failure of mutual understanding lay not in intellectual differences alone, but also in deep differences of background political, institutional and historical experience. One of those great differences lies, of course, in the dominant importance in the history of so many continental countries, and in particular in that of France, of the political and cultural role played by the Catholic Church and by philosophies both associated with and opposed to it. The prospect of engaging in detailed critical discussion, and the importance of such discussion for the testing and clarification of arguments, must inevitably have presented itself very differently to adherents of such hierarchically authoritarian intellectual structures as the traditional Church or to its in many ways mirror image, the traditional Communist party in as much as such discussion carries always a potential threat to established authority and, by further implication, the counter-threat of authoritative sanctions against any over-persistent critics. Hence a certain pervasive wariness of uninhibited discussion within the membership of such powerful institutions, which, in remoter turn, may have had not a little to do with differences in the practices of working out and presenting arguments in what we have here still been calling the continental and analytic traditions.

And, fifthly, that things are by now significantly different on both sides of the philosophical Channel, across which genuinely informed discussion and working exchange has once again become possible. The how and why of this evolution would involve once again the telling of a number of interconnected stories. On both sides of the Channel there were in the beginning, no doubt, significant elements of anti-establishment reaction involved. But, of course, the prevailing establishments on each side were and are very different, and so to react against them carries very different significance in both

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intellectual, career and, in the broadest sense, institutional practice. However, the proper telling of these stories would call for far more time and space than we can dispose of here – and, for that matter, a far greater and more confident mastery of their varied circumstances than any I can pretend to possess.

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