The analytical-Continental divide: styles of dealing with problems

Thomas J. Donahue
Haverford College, tjdonahue@haverford.edu

Paulina Ochoa Espejo
Haverford College, pochoaespe@haverford.edu

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The analytical–Continental divide: Styles of dealing with problems

Thomas J. Donahue and Paulina Ochoa Espejo
Haverford College, USA

Abstract
What today divides analytical from Continental philosophy? This paper argues that the present divide is not what it once was. Today, the divide concerns the styles in which philosophers deal with intellectual problems: solving them, pressing them, resolving them, or dissolving them. Using ‘the boundary problem’, or ‘the democratic paradox’, as an example, we argue for two theses. First, the difference between most analytical and most Continental philosophers today is that Continental philosophers find intelligible two styles of dealing with problems that most analytical philosophers find unintelligible: pressing them and resolving them. Second, when it comes to a genuine divide in which not understanding the other side’s basic philosophical purposes combines with disagreement on fundamental questions of doctrine, the only such divide today is that between those analytical philosophers who tend to solve problems and those Continental philosophers who tend to press problems (roughly, the heirs of Derrida). It is among these subgroups that there is a real philosophical divide today. So the analytical–Continental divide is more a matter of style than of substance; but as we try to show, differences in style shape differences over substance.

Keywords
Analytical philosophy, boundary problem, Continental philosophy, methods, problems, styles

Introduction
What, for political theorists, does the divide between analytical and Continental philosophy amount to today? On the one hand, it is notorious that many political theorists and philosophers today identify exclusively with one or the other philosophical family, deem the other fundamentally misguided, and use radically
different conceptual toolkits. Where analytical political theorists today use and debate such technical concepts as ‘the fair value of the political liberties’, ‘exclusory reasons’, or ‘option luck’, Continental political theorists discuss ‘chains of equivalences’, ‘desiring-machines’, and ‘ideological dis-identification’. Most members of one or other family would be hard put to accurately explain the meaning of the other’s technical concepts.

On the other hand, it is obvious that the divide between the two philosophical families has changed since, say, 1975. Then, one could say that analytical philosophers cleaved to a tradition descended from Frege, Russell, Moore, Wittgenstein, Carnap, Ryle, J. L. Austin, Quine, and Searle; a tradition that put a premium on arguments, distinctions, definitions, counter-examples, and choice among rival theories; a tradition that wanted little truck with the ideas of the leading lights of Continental philosophy. One could also say that, in 1975, Continental philosophers adhered to a tradition that included Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, Adorno, and Foucault; a tradition that valued describing and interpreting the forms, limits, and underlying motives of states of consciousness, whether individual or collective; a tradition that wanted little truck with the ideas of the leading lights of analytical philosophy.

Today that barrier of separation has been toppled. In most of the subfields of analytical philosophy, one or more of those Continental leading lights is a central figure. Nietzsche’s and Sartre’s views are hotly debated in analytical meta-ethics and moral psychology. Beauvoir is hands-down the central figure in analytical feminism. Adorno and Heidegger are much discussed in analytical aesthetics, Merleau-Ponty is central in philosophy of cognitive science, and Husserl and Foucault have even entered the hallowed halls of analytical metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of language. Moreover, in contemporary discussions among theorists of unimpeachable Continental credentials, the ideas of Wittgenstein, Austin, Quine, Searle, and even Russell are constant references and sources of insight (cf. Constable, 2014, ch. 1; Livingston, 2009; Mouffe, 2000, ch. 3; Shapiro, 1981). So, on the one hand, it seems that there is some sort of divide between analytical and Continental philosophy today. On the other hand, that divide is not the traditional one we find retailed in histories of 20th-century philosophy. Where, then, lies the divide today? And what should political theorists make of it?

We suggest that today there is little left of the old divide. Continental philosophy is today a large family of different traditions and schools of thought. So large, indeed, that it is almost impossible to find a philosophically interesting difference between almost all contemporary Continental philosophers and almost all contemporary analytical philosophers. After all, Continental philosophy must include the philosophical heirs of Ortega and of Olivecrona, of Buber and of Bobbio, of Kelsen and of Cassirer. Hence today, none of the criteria for demarcating ‘analytical’ and ‘Continental’ that have been suggested in the past – whether doctrinal, methodological, political, moral, or even religious – seems to capture any philosophically
interesting difference between the vast majority of Continental philosophers and the vast majority of analytical philosophers.

Yet we believe that there remains one philosophically interesting difference between the two philosophical families. It is a matter of styles of dealing with intellectual problems. Continental philosophers today find intelligible two styles of dealing with problems that a large majority of current analytical philosophers do not find intelligible. Those styles, we suggest, are today widely employed by those Continental philosophers who have been especially influenced by post-structuralism. We call these styles pressing the problem and resolving the problem. By contrast, we argue, analytical philosophers almost never adopt these styles. They almost always employ two other styles: solving intellectual problems or dissolving them. It is, we suggest, because hardly any analytical philosopher ever presses or resolves a problem that they tend to find these styles unintelligible. On the other hand, enough Continental philosophers do occasionally employ these styles that they collectively find them intelligible ways of tackling problems. Moreover, to the extent that there is a divide or chasm between analytical and Continental philosophers, we suggest that it lies between those Continental philosophers who focus on pressing intellectual problems – they tend to be the philosophical heirs of Jacques Derrida – and those analytical philosophers who focus on solving intellectual problems. So we shall be giving a new explanation of analytical philosophers’ notorious hostility to Derrida’s style of philosophising.

The rest of this paper explores this account of the current divide between analytical and Continental philosophy, with special attention to how the divide manifests itself in current political theory. In the first section, we review previous proposals for demarcating analytical and Continental philosophy, and their weaknesses. The second section begins the argument for our suggested criterion, viz. styles of dealing with problems, by explaining what we mean by ‘styles’, and by describing how styles of treating problems differ from other types of styles of procedure, such as Ian Hacking’s styles of reasoning. The third section describes the four main styles of treating intellectual problems that we find in present-day analytical and Continental philosophy, gives examples of each style applied to a problem in political theory, and describes the motivations for each style. The fourth section then lays out, as we see it, the difference between analytical and Continental philosophy today. It describes how Continental philosophers see the point in the pressing and resolving of problems, even while they may not do it themselves; and how most analytical philosophers find both styles unintelligible. This, the section claims, is the philosophically interesting difference between Continental and analytical philosophy today. It then suggests that the only Continental–analytical divide worthy of the name today is that between those analytical philosophers who solve problems and those Continental philosophers who press problems. We amplify these claims by looking at the attitudes taken by those who address in different styles the famous ‘boundary problem’ or ‘democratic paradox’ in political theory.
Analytical and Continental: Problems with the current criteria of demarcation

How does one distinguish between analytical and Continental philosophy? The problem is by now a venerable one, dating at least from Gilbert Ryle’s notorious address – ‘Phenomenology versus The Concept of Mind’ – to the 1958 Royaumont Conference on ‘La philosophie analytique’. This conference was organised by leading French philosophers, with the aim of having analytical philosophers explain their French counterparts how analytical philosophy had developed since Frege and Russell gave birth to it, and why these developments mattered. Most of the speakers – who included several leading and emerging Oxford analysts, as well as Quine – gave just such explanations (Royaumont, 1962). Ryle’s (1962) address was the only one to examine the differences between analytical and Continental philosophy. In it, Ryle claimed that there was an analytical–Continental divide, and that it consisted in Continental philosophy aspiring to be the Queen of the sciences, and ignoring philosophical logic; with analytical philosophy refusing to consider itself a science, and making philosophical logic the touchstone of its inquiries (Glendinning, 2008: 71). Following in Ryle’s wake, there have been a host of proposals for criteria of demarcation between the two philosophical families. To take just three, Simon Critchley (2001: 11) says that Continental philosophers seek Wisdom, while analytical philosophers seek Knowledge; David Cooper (1994: 9–10) maintains that Continental philosophy opposes the view that science will achieve the goals of the Enlightenment, while analytical philosophy is much more sympathetic to that view; and Anthony Quinton (1998: 63–65) says that Continental philosophy stresses metaphor and conceptual surprise, and a disregard for logical explicitness, while analytical philosophy seeks knowledge and logical explicitness.

The trouble with all of these demarcation criteria is that they fail to capture the vast diversity that is Continental philosophy today. A successful criterion must be able to sort the vast majority of Continental philosophers onto one side of the line and the vast majority of analytical philosophers onto the other side. Yet suppose we define Continental philosophy Franco-Teutonically – as philosophy done on the Continent of Europe since Frege’s death; inspired either by Husserl, Heidegger, and their heirs; by the Marburg Neo-Kantians and their heirs; or by the Frankfurt School; and done by people who are not analytical philosophers. Even on that narrow definition, the field is still so vast that there are today large numbers of Continental philosophers who display each of the allegedly ‘analytical’ characteristics and vice versa. Husserl and Hans Kelsen, to take but two, display each of the three allegedly ‘analytical’ features mentioned earlier, while Wittgenstein and many of his radical followers in analytical philosophy – think of Stanley Cavell – are often said to display all three ‘Continental’ features. So, given these problems with these and other demarcation criteria, we suggest that it is worth considering a new account: that the difference is a matter of styles of treating problems.
Styles of dealing with problems, methods of inquiry, and styles of reasoning

What, then, are styles? We draw the idea of ‘a style’ from art history, where it tends to be conceived as coherence in qualities in periods or in a group of artists’ works. In our view, a style is a repetition of patterning that results from a series of choices made within a set of constraints – this repetition has a marked character, such that it can be distinguished from other repetitions with their own marked characters. So, for example, Mark Rothko’s style of painting is the repetition of patterning (say, deployment of rectangular blocks of contrasting colour over a soft monochrome background) that results from a series of choices Rothko made within a set of constraints (say, choosing big-format easel paintings and abstract form within the constraining context of post-war New York City avant-garde art circles). But Jackson Pollock’s late style of painting is splashes and splotches of paint on a canvas set face up on the floor, performed under constraints similar to those faced by Rothko. Those choices, in turn, reflect some of the values and assumptions Rothko and Pollock held while making them. So styles correlate with particular beliefs and doctrines. The style in which you do x reveals something about how you think about, and evaluate, x. Hence styles are open to rational discussion and evaluation, in the same way that emotions are. Much of art criticism is devoted precisely to such evaluation.

Styles can be particular to individuals, to groups, or to historical periods. Rothko had an individual style of painting, which distinguished him from his fellow Abstract Expressionists; but he shared with Pollock and others the movement’s style of painting – Abstract Expressionism; and the Abstract Expressionists shared with their contemporary groups in the 1940s–1950s avant-garde the high modernist style of painting – a period style, distinct from that of the Baroque period style. Notice, however, that neither individuals nor groups are bound by either the individual or the group style with which they are associated. Rothko could have done an Abstract Expressionist painting in the style of Jackson Pollock, instead of in his own individual style. He could also have done a surrealist painting, à la Salvador Dali, rather than an Abstract Expressionist painting. Pari passu, the Abstract Expressionists could collectively have done a few paintings in the surrealist style.

So much for styles in general. The styles that interest us are styles of dealing with problems. All inquiry, we argue, and certainly all theorising or philosophising, is a wrestling with intellectual problems. To inquire is to pose an intellectual problem. When a thinker poses such a problem, she asks a question which is either known to lack a satisfactory answer or can be shown to lack one. She then shows how the lack of such an answer hinders our ability to advance knowledge in the area where the problem arises.

For example, in this paper we are posing an intellectual problem. For we are asking a question to which we think our audience lacks a satisfactory answer, and this lack hinders that group’s ability to advance knowledge about the
similarities about analytical and Continental approaches to political theory. Here is another example of an intellectual problem: Under what conditions is the state legitimate? No answer to that question commands universal consent. Many political theorists disagree about what the correct answer is, and some even deny that the question makes sense at all. But they do agree that the lack of a satisfactory answer hinders our ability to advance knowledge in the area of political authority and obligations.

We are interested in styles of dealing with intellectual problems, so understood. There are several styles of dealing with such problems, styles that groups of political theorists and philosophers can be observed to adopt. A particular style of dealing with a problem concerns what happens after the problem is posed. To foreshadow: one style solves the problem, one presses the problem, one style resolves the problem, and one dissolves it. So a style of dealing with problems concerns how a thinker proceeds after posing the problem.

Styles of dealing with problems are thus styles of intellectual procedure. Yet they are neither methods of inquiry nor the styles of reasoning made famous by Ian Hacking. First, styles in general are not to be confused with methods. A method is a systematic procedure, in that it involves a regular manner of doing things, and a set of doctrines about why that is an appropriate way to do things in that domain.¹ For example, many analytical political theorists follow the method of logical derivation of subsidiary normative principles from more basic principles, as when Rawls (1999: 303–305) derives the obligation to keep promises from the principle of fairness. There are rules and norms about how to do this, which analytical philosophers learn to follow, and these rules can be articulated as doctrines. But a style is not a systematic procedure. To share a method with someone, you need to agree on certain doctrines. To share a style with someone, you need not agree on any doctrines. To be sure, acting in a certain style will produce things that resemble each other, but neither those products nor the process that produced them implicate doctrines that must be shared with all other users of the style. If they do implicate doctrines, they have become methods. Styles are simply repetitions of patterning and the choice to repeat them. True, people often associate styles with doctrines, but this does not mean that the style itself implicates the doctrine. For example, a style of dress like punk is often associated with the doctrine of anarchism, but many users of the style do not accept anarchism. What a style implicates is one thing, what it is associated with is another.


Hacking says two things about these styles of reasoning which also apply to our styles of dealing with problems. First, he says that styles are characteristic ways of
proceeding in an intellectual endeavour, but there is no weighty reason why we should use these particular styles rather than others. The set of styles of reasoning is our canon of reason because they are what we use, not because of any external objective reason that these are better than any alternative styles (Hacking, 2012: 601). Similarly, our four styles of dealing with problems are prominent, not because they are the only ones validated by an external reason, but because they are the styles of dealing with problems that have evolved out of various felt historical needs. “There is no “reason” why these types of argument [or, in our case, of dealing with problems] have become part of our canon of what we call right reason. But they are our canon” (Hacking, 2012: 600). The second claim that our view of styles shares with Hacking’s is that the set of current styles never exhaust the possibilities: new styles may appear in the future. Moreover, the emergence of styles produces new possibilities, including new concepts and new responses to particular problems (Hacking, 2002: 189). In these respects, our conception of styles of dealing with problems is similar to Hacking’s.

But our styles differ from Hacking’s styles of reasoning in at least two ways. First, Hacking’s styles produce their own standards of truth. Hypothetical modelling produces different standards of truth than statistical analysis. This is not the case with styles of dealing with problems, which produce no standards of truth. Two people can hold radically different standards of truth or justification and yet treat a problem in the same style. Second, Hacking maintains that each style of reasoning produces distinct and different problems on which its adherents tend to focus their attention. An experimenter will tackle different problems than a hypothetical modeller, even when both work on the same domain of target entities: say, voter turnout drives. By contrast, as we will argue at the end of the following section, each of our four different styles of dealing with problems can be, and is, applied to the very same problems.

**Styles of dealing with problems: A taxonomy**

What, then, are these styles of dealing with intellectual problems? How do they appear in political theory and philosophy? On our view, there are at present four prominent styles of dealing with intellectual problems in political theory and philosophy: theorists today solve, press, resolve, or dissolve their problems. In this section, we discuss the features of each of these styles, illustrating them with examples. In the following section, we discuss how they help illuminate the differences between analytical and Continental philosophy.

The first and most familiar of these styles deals with problems by *solving* them. By ‘solving an intellectual problem’, we mean offering an answer to the problem’s question while providing reasons for thinking that the answer is correct. So, for example, John Rawls (1999) solves the problem of what justice requires in contemporary political societies by offering a distinct answer to the problem’s question – the principles of justice as fairness – and by providing reasons for thinking that the answer he has given correctly answers the question, while rival answers, such as utilitarian or perfectionist theories of justice, do not.
A famous example of this style can be found in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The opening of Book I of his *On the Social Contract* addresses the following problem: What is

the form of association which will defend the person and goods of each member with the collective force of all, and under which each individual, while uniting himself with the others, obeys no one but himself and remains as free as before?

Rousseau immediately offers what he takes to be the correct answer to the question: the Social Contract. More specifically, the form of association satisfying those conditions is one in which the association is contractually constituted as a moral and collective body whose decision-making process obeys the following constraints: (i) the subject matter of the deliberations prior to decision is perfectly general, (ii) the conclusions of the deliberations apply equally to all the members of the association, (iii) all the members of the association participate in the deliberations, and (iv) all parties to the deliberations think for themselves.2

This answer to the question is direct. And Rousseau clearly thinks that it is correct, for he gives reasons for thinking that it is the answer we ought to accept. If this is right, then Rousseau believes that he has solved his problem. (Notice that Rousseau’s using this style for dealing with the problem of the state’s legitimacy does not mean that it is his own individual style of dealing with intellectual problems. For Rousseau uses different styles on other problems that he poses.)

As a style, solving problems has three main strengths, which together are part of what motivate people to adopt it. First, the solution style advances our knowledge. If we adopt this style and search for satisfactory answers to the questions embedded in intellectual problems, then with hard work and a little luck, we shall discover answers that we had never before considered (or had forgotten). Second, solving problems gives us a reasonable confidence in what we take to be our knowledge. If investigators have carefully posed their questions and carefully searched for satisfactory answers, then it is more likely than not that those answers approximate to the truth. Since our knowledge is the set of answers to our questions that are both satisfactory and true, we can have a reasonable confidence that these answers constitute knowledge. Third, this style gives us confidence that intellectual progress is in the offing: if new problems can be solved, we can always forge ahead.

Yet, as a style, solving problems also has weaknesses. Since this is the most familiar style of dealing with problems, we think it worth mentioning one. Those who habitually work in the problem-solving style might well come to believe that all genuine problems can be solved given the expenditure of a certain amount of effort. From this belief, it is tempting to infer that all problems that cannot be solved given the expenditure of that amount of effort ought to be rejected as false problems. For example, T. D. Weldon (1953: 36–44) notoriously maintained that the classical problems of political philosophy, such as ‘Under what conditions is the state legitimate?’ were false problems, because it is not clear that there are real solutions to them.

Let us then turn to the second of our four styles of dealing with problems: pressing the problem. A theorist who adopts this style towards an intellectual
first poses an intellectual problem, and then argues that it can never be solved. Instead, she argues, it will press itself upon us and haunt us until the end of time.

Consider a prominent example of this style. In a paper entitled ‘Declarations of Independence’, Jacques Derrida (1986) addresses the problem of the state’s legitimacy. In his hands, the problem takes the following form: ‘Under what conditions would the signing of the Declaration of Independence have made the American state legitimate?’ Derrida stresses that this is a serious problem, to which we should want a solution. He then argues that there can be no satisfactory answer to the problem’s question. His rationale is that a signing is a speech act, all speech acts are indeterminate, and so we cannot identify any conditions under which the signing would have made the American state legitimate, even though there must surely be some. Derrida has thereby our second style to deal with the problem. He has posed the problem of the state’s legitimacy. He has given an argument to show that it can never be solved. He has intimated that the problem will always haunt us: so he has pressed the problem.

Pressing problems is a style with distinct strengths: three in particular. First, the style encourages us to appreciate all the features and all the complexity of problems. By denying that a particular, important problem can ever be solved and affirming that it will always haunt us, pressing a problem encourages us to carefully examine all the features of the problem: what are its presuppositions? What do its terms really mean? And so on. Second, pressing a problem encourages us to go deeper into the problem field. By examining all the features of a problem – as pressing problems uniquely inclines us to do – we may discover previously unknown connections to other questions and concerns in our field. Thus, this style allows us to discern clusters and interconnections among problems that we had not hitherto discerned. It may lead us, therefore, to a clearer view of how the problem fits within the network of our problems. Third, pressing problems is a tonic against superficiality and simple-minded inquiry. By asserting that a problem can never be solved, it leads its practitioners to cast a critical eye on proposed solutions to problems. By pressing a problem, a theorist can point up those ‘solutions’ that miss genuinely important features of the problems they ‘solve’. It can thus prevent against shoddy solutions and slovenly workmanship.

The third style of dealing with intellectual problems consists in what we call ‘resolving the problem’. This approach, like pressing problems, argues that the problem will never be solved. Yet, unlike the pressing style, the resolving style also shows how we can reconcile ourselves to the problem’s eternal presence. In addition, resolving problems shows how our lives are none the worse – indeed better – for tackling it and having it around. The resolving style thus gives us resources for coping with the problem.

Our example of this style comes from the work of Thomas Nagel (1991). In his book on Equality and Partiality, Nagel addresses what he considers the central problem of political theory. The problem, which comes in various guises, may be formulated as follows. How do we design social and political institutions which do justice to the equal importance of all persons, whose basic framework is capable of approaching unanimity of support, and yet at the same time never make demands
on individuals that are incompatible with how they can reasonably be expected to live (Nagel, 1991: 5, 8)? One of the book’s main theses is that solving this problem is, if not impossible, extremely difficult. Moreover, it will not be solved within our lifetimes or in the lifetimes of anyone born before we are dead. Nagel supports this thesis by claiming that we have not found the right relation between the personal and impersonal standpoints to which every individual is drawn: the standpoint of the self with uniquely important and valuable projects, and the standpoint of a person among equal persons (5).

This may seem a grim argument. But then Nagel begins to resolve the problem. He claims that disciplined attention to this near-insoluble problem will take us further along the path of progress towards moral equality, and that it may well lead to improvements in the human condition (4, 9). We should, it seems, always approach the problem with an attitude of sober, disciplined optimism, knowing that good things will result from our continued grappling with it.

What motivates political theorists to adopt this style? What are the strengths of the resolving style? Two at least: First, it allows us to cope with problems to which we have not found solutions. By resolving problems, theorists find antidotes to the quietism or the absolute license that often result from the view that all problems are insoluble. Moreover, a resolution allows us to attend only to a part of the problem, or to put it aside and attend to something else. Second, the resolution style allows us to discover new aspects of leading problems in political theory. By denying that intellectual problems can be solved, but admitting that practical problems can be, the style encourages us to better understand those features of intellectual problems that link up with practical problems.

Our fourth style dissolves problems. A theorist who adopts this style first poses a problem and then argues that the problem is not a genuine problem. It is rather a pseudo-problem, resting on a false presupposition. Moreover, it masks a novel, genuine problem, which the theorist then discusses and recommends that others tackle. We call this approach ‘dissolving the problem’.

When thinkers employ this style, they deal with a problem to which others have already offered different solutions. Suppose there to be a problem over whose solution three schools ceaselessly battle. Each school maintains that its own solution to the problem is correct – that is, that the answer it gives to the problem’s question is alone the correct answer. A dissolver then enters, tries to show to the satisfaction of some of the members of the three schools that the problem in fact makes a false presupposition, and then argues that another problem, which deals with objects and properties similar to those dealt with by the problem at issue, is by contrast a problem of real importance. If the argument is rhetorically successful, some of the members of the schools will cease grappling with the alleged pseudo-problem and will turn their attention to the new problem.

Here is an example of dissolving an important problem in political theory. In his In Defense of Anarchism, Robert Paul Wolff (1970) tackles the classic question: Under what conditions is the state legitimate? Wolff notes that this problem has been influentially formulated and posed by such eminent writers as Rousseau. Wolff then sets out to dissolve the problem as follows. On his view, it is a
conceptual truth that every state has authority over its citizens, and he maintains
that, if some entity has authority over another, then the second entity is under the
will of the first. According to Wolff, whenever any one thing is under the will of
another, then the second expunges the first’s autonomy. On his view, no form of
association can be legitimate if it expunges the associates’ autonomy. The state is a
form of association, and its citizens are the associates. So no state can ever be
legitimate. Hence the problem of the legitimacy of the state – ‘Under what condi-
tions is the state legitimate?’ – falsely presupposes that there are some conditions
under which the state can be legitimate. It is a pseudo-problem. Wolff then suggests
that the real problem in the domain of the problem of state legitimacy is the chief
problem of practical anarchism: How do we achieve a society in which the moral
autonomy of all members could be upheld while simultaneously solving the coord-
ination problems that any society faces? Wolff has dissolved the problem of the
state’s legitimacy, and he has shown to his satisfaction that this famous problem
makes a false presupposition, and so is a pseudo-problem. And he has substituted
for it what he takes to be a new, genuine, and important problem – the problem of
achieving a functioning anarchic society.

The dissolving style has two strengths worth mentioning. First, it allows us to
unearth important new problems. In arguing that an important problem is really
just a pseudo-problem, one stands a good chance of unearthing a new problem that
is also fruitful. Second, the style keeps us from becoming bogged down in a single
set of concerns. By asking challenging questions about the presuppositions of
problems, the dissolving style gives us incentives to keep a careful eye on other
parts of the problem field than the one in which we are currently working.

That, then, is our taxonomy of the styles of dealing with problems in contem-
porary political theory. With this account in hand, we can now return to the second
difference between these styles and Hacking’s styles of reasoning. Our account
maintains that there are problems that exist independently of the styles of dealing
with them, while each of Hacking’s styles of reasoning lead their users to tackle
different problems. What, then, justifies our claim that there are problems that exist
independently of styles of dealing with them?

In answer, we maintain that two political theorists who ask the same question
and who share a method of inquiry can come up with very different responses to
the problem if they use different styles. To show this, we adduce an example of two
political theorists who use the same method of inquiry, tackle the same intellectual
problem, and yet deal with it using different styles.

The example concerns the differences between Thomas Nagel’s and John
Rawls’s responses to the problem of political legitimacy. As we have seen, that
problem is: under what conditions is the state legitimate? Both theorists share a
method of inquiry: conceptual analysis and logical derivation of subsidiary norma-
tive principles from more general principles. But they deal with the problem in
different styles. Nagel, as we have seen, resolves the problem. Rawls (1993: 137)
solves it, by presenting his ‘liberal principle of legitimacy’.

A final question that might be asked about this taxonomy is whether the styles
might be further reducible. Might there be a more basic style that subsumes solving
and dissolving, on the one hand, and pressing and resolving, on the other? We think not. For styles, as we have said, implicate no doctrines. So there is no doctrine shared by solvers and dissolvers as such where an incompatible doctrine is held by pressers and resolvers as such. Styles concern choices and associations, not doctrines and implications.

The analytical–Continental difference and the analytical–Continental divide

How do these different styles of dealing with problems illuminate the analytical–Continental divide in 2015? First, observe that there is a tendency among analytical philosophers to prefer certain styles and avoid others, while Continental philosophers, as the very large group that they are, are more open to all four styles. Analytical philosophers tend to solve and dissolve problems, and they also tend to find the styles of pressing or resolving difficult to understand. Continental philosophers, on the other hand, adopt all of these styles, and they all tend to understand what a thinker is doing when she presses or resolves a problem.

It is here, we suggest, that we can demarcate present-day Continental philosophy from present-day analytical philosophy. The difference between almost all contemporary analytical philosophers and almost all of their Continental counterparts today, we suggest, is that a large majority of analytical philosophers find the pressing and resolving of problems – particularly when done by Continentals – unintelligible. They cannot see the point of dealing with problems in that way. By contrast, the vast majority of Continentals today do see the point, even if they themselves eschew pressing and resolving. They may say, ‘That’s not what I would have done, but I see the point of doing it’. Whereas, we suggest, most analytical philosophers think such styles confused or misguided; they think such uses of these styles fail to achieve the theorist’s job of clarifying matters. This, we maintain, is the philosophically interesting present-day difference between Continental and analytical philosophy.

However, a difference is not yet a divide. For the fact that most of one group find intelligible what most of another group find unintelligible is not enough to generate a divide. A divide of the kind that Ryle tried to foster 60 years ago requires both incomprehension of philosophical purposes and substantive disagreement on some doctrines – that is, on whether philosophy is the Queen of the sciences. Today, we suggest, the real such divide is between those analytical philosophers who exclusively focus on solving problems and those Continental philosophers who focus only on pressing problems. Prominent in the latter group are the branch of the post-structuralist tradition associated with Jacques Derrida.

Here, we suggest, there is a genuine divide, because while there can be understanding and collaboration between practitioners of the other styles, Continental problem pressers and analytical problem solvers will always stand at loggerheads. For any important problem, some analytical problem solvers will earnestly present a solution, and some Continental problem pressers will insist...
that the solution will not do. The difficulty is not simply ‘a problem’, the latter will claim, but rather an insoluble paradox that cannot be hidden, negotiated, or put away. The best we can do, they will say, is to make the paradox visible and remind the reader of its irreducibility. To this the analytical problem solvers will respond by clarifying concepts, making distinctions, refining arguments, and providing a new solution. In reply, the Continental problem pressers will not so much challenge the new solution by finding flaws in it, as problem solvers with rival solutions would. Rather, the problem pressers will challenge the very idea that the problem could even in principle be solved, by showing analogies, making connections, and pointing to new impassable paradoxes in the ‘solution’. At some point, the members of both groups will throw their hands in the air and declare further engagement impossible.

To illustrate this divide, consider a debate in recent political theory. In the past two decades, political theorists have devoted much discussion to a problem that has come to be known as the ‘democratic paradox’ or ‘the boundary problem’. The problem is that, on the one hand, in a democracy, all fundamental decisions should be made by the people-as-*demos*; yet, on the other hand, determining who the people-as-*demos* are is just such a fundamental decision. So you need a people-as-*demos* to democratically decide who the people-as-*demos* are, but you need to democratically decide who the people-as-*demos* are in order to have a people-as-*demos*. Hence, to try to define democratically who precisely the people are leads to a vicious circle or an infinite regress (Goodin, 2007; Honig, 2007; Miller, 2009; Mouffe, 2000; Näström, 2007; Ochoa Espejo, 2011; Whelan, 1983). Whether one chooses to call this difficulty a *paradox* or a *problem* is telling, because it signals whether one holds that the problem can be solved, or is an insoluble paradox which should be affirmed and brought to the fore.

In the past, many had chosen to dismiss this difficulty by pretending it did not exist. They sought to *circumvent* the difficulty. For example, in his theory of justice, John Rawls (1999) sought to circumvent the problem by assuming a society in which the boundary problem had been solved. Today, however, most political theorists working in this field agree that the difficulty is a genuine, vexing problem. Yet they deal with this problem in different styles.

Many political theorists working on the boundary problem or paradox have chosen to deal with it by dissolving it. At least two ways of dissolving it have been attempted. Paulina Ochoa Espejo (2011: 194), for one, tries to dissolve the problem by analysing the terms in the paradox. She argues that if we do not conceive of the people as a collection of individuals, but, instead, define the people as a process extended in time, then ‘the problems do not arise’. A second type of dissolution is proposed by those theorists who believe that the paradox’s democratic costs can be offset by using liberal criteria to determine the people’s boundaries. These theorists hold that a well-chosen liberal criterion can create a just boundary, even if this decision has not been made democratically (Miller, 2009; Whelan, 1983). So, for these theorists, ‘the boundary problem’ is not the real concern; the real problem is how to specify a proper criterion of exclusion – a criterion that must be fully compatible with liberal values at a cosmopolitan...
level (e.g. Goodin, 2007). Thus, these authors dissolve the problem and move on to other, new problems.

Other theorists, however, eschew attempts to dissolve the boundary problem. Instead, they try to solve it in its own terms. Famously, Habermas (2001) claims to solve the chicken-and-egg problem of citizens that create democratic institutions and democratic institutions that create citizens by proposing the ‘co-original constitution’ of both these terms. On this view, there is a positive feedback loop between liberal rights and popular sovereignty: the loop then dissolves the vicious circle over time.

These then are leading dissolutions and solutions of the boundary problem. As such, they do not satisfy other political theorists. These deal with the problem in a different style. Bonnie Honig (2007: 1), for example, poses the paradox and argues that it ‘cannot be resolved, transcended, managed or even affirmed as an irreducible binary conflict’. That sounds to us like a classic case of pressing the problem.

At this point, we can see that there is a conflict between those who press the boundary paradox and those who solve it. To those pressing it, even the suggestion that it could in any way be ‘solved’ undermines democracy. For it claims a specious and illegitimate authority where genuine democracy requires the disavowal of any authority for any proposals. Honig, in particular, repudiates any attempt at solution, even if the proposed ‘solution’ takes the form of declaring the paradox an irreducible binary that must be decided authoritatively. By contrast, to those who attempt to solve the problem, the pressing style’s insistence on paradox shows an unwillingness to understand either the nuances of argument or the distinctions that allow for intellectual progress. The two styles thus begin to reinforce methodological and ideological divides – divides that track traditional divisions between analytical philosophers and some Continental theorists. For an analytical philosopher who prefers the solving style, the combination of her analytical commitments and the unintelligibility of the pressing style is likely to make impossible much communication and understanding with Continental problem pressers.

But not all approaches to the boundary problem dissolve, solve, or press it. There are some prominent attempts to resolve it, such as that of Sofia Näsström (2007: 626), who holds that

contrary to what is assumed by many liberal and deliberative theorists of legitimacy, the gap in the constitution of the people is therefore not [only] a problem. It is productive, a generative device that helps to foster ever more claims for legitimacy.

Just as Nagel resolved his insoluble problem of the justification conditions for the state, so Näsström treats the boundary problem as insoluble, but resoluble (similarly, see Mouffe, 2000). But because the resolution of the problem allows for some intellectual progress, and does not claim that any attempt to solve the problem is an illegitimate power grab, this style does not cause a rift with the solving style.

It is, therefore, in the rift between the styles of solving and pressing, that there still exists a divide between some Continental and some analytical philosophers. This divide does not follow the line between all Continental and all analytical
philosophers – far from it. Habermas, for example, is a Continental problem solver. And even figures associated with Parisian pensée 68 – for many, the paradigm cases of ‘Continental’ philosophers – have been known to adopt the solving style: Gilles Deleuze is perhaps the most prominent. But a large number of analytical political theorists today do focus their efforts on solving problems, and a large number of Continental political theorists do focus on pressing problems. Between them there is a genuine chasm. That chasm, we suggest, is what remains today of the notorious analytical–Continental divide.

Conclusion

We have argued that the divide between Continental and analytical philosophy is not what it once was. Today, in 2015, there is no sharp divide between almost all Continental philosophers and almost all analytical philosophers. There remains, however, a philosophically interesting difference between the two groups taken as wholes. A large majority of Continental philosophers find intelligible, while a large majority of analytical philosophers do not find intelligible, two styles of dealing with intellectual problems: pressing them and resolving them. So to the extent that there is an analytical–Continental divide today, we have argued, it lies between those analytical philosophers who prefer to solve problems, and those Continental philosophers who prefer to press problems. Hence the chasm looks more bridgeable than ever.

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Notes

1. For an interesting discussion of the distinction between method-driven research and problem-driven research, see Shapiro (2002).
2. Here we follow the account in Sreenivasan (2000).
3. Derrida (1986) speculates that such a condition might be a transcendent ‘last instance’. But he does not want to claim that it is. See also Honig (1991).
4. For an interesting attempt at drawing together Continental problem pressers like Derrida with analytical problem dissolvers like R. P. Wolff and A. John Simmons, see Arnold (forthcoming).
5. A good example is Thomassen (2006).

References


