

LETTER BY LESTER EMBREE

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ANAL/CONT

Dear Lilia Gurova¹,

Your concise characterization of the situation of the two camps of analytical philosophy and so-called continental philosophy is well stated, but I must say that your hope of bridging the gap is overly optimistic. Let me try to explain why.

I am a student of Dorion Cairns and Aron Gurwitsch, who were direct disciples of the mature Husserl and think I know something about phenomenology. I am the one who reconceived of 'continental philosophy' in the contemporary signification, something I now greatly regret.² I regret it because, while all source figures considered 'continental' in the USA, e.g., Jacques Lacan, share having struggled early on with the positions of Heidegger, Husserl, and usually also Scheler and went on thereafter to interact with one another, while Rudolf Carnap (who also started that way) did not—the result is a *political alliance* against the dominant analytical philosophy here that actually has no intellectual coherence and forgets its origin. Moreover, it seems that continental philosophy is similarly structured in the rest of the former British Empire except that it has been extended in the UK not just back to Husserl

but beyond him to Descartes, Hegel, and Kant and perhaps by now also to Thales. How much 'analytical' philosophy—to use its original name from 1945 in British English—is more than another political alliance I do not know.

I consider your project overly optimistic for many reasons some of which I will try to sketch. To begin with, I have had many discouraging experiences in the past 40 years. In the first that I recall I was chatting with a guy at a convention who said I really should read Carnap, I said in return that he really should read Scheler, and he sneered "Who is Scheler?" Probably that was mostly due to ignorance, but now there is the book, *Phenomenology and Philosophy of Mind*,³ which cannot have that excuse. The way in which its chapters ignore literally hundreds of items of previous critical literature in English, not to speak of those in French, German, Spanish, etc. on Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, etc. by actual phenomenologists reminds me of how the British explorers came Australia and declared it uninhabited by humans. Do you really want me to overlook such disrespect? By the way, most who call for building bridges are in weak minorities within departments and societies dominated by analysts and any bridges they succeed in building tend to carry one-way traffic.

Over the years I have come to enjoy on occasion offering a couple of conversation-stopping remarks. One is that "Of course, the cultural sciences have priority over the naturalistic sciences." Sometimes my interlocutors seem able and willing to try

¹ Lilia Gurova is Assoc. Prof. in the New Bulgarian University, Sofia, Bulgaria and a member of the Editorial Board of *Balkan Journal of Philosophy*. She was so kind to give the permission to publish this letter, because of its importance for the topic of the present issue.

² Lester Embree, "Husserl as Trunk of the American Continental Tree," in *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 11 (2), 2002, 177-190.

³ David Woodruff Smith and Amie L. Thomason (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2005)

to understand clarification, in which case I go on to tell how the cultural sciences address the concrete socio-cultural world, while the naturalistic sciences begin with the substratum of nature within that world, which is to say with an abstraction, and suggest that the concrete has priority over the abstract. Sometimes this is understood but usually not. For many outside phenomenology in at least my country 'science' is just naturalistic science and the rest story telling or worse.

My other conversation stopper is "Of course, phenomenology is a descriptive approach and hardly ever offers arguments." Incredulity follows. Few can even begin to comprehend the idea of a philosophy not constantly making assumptions, drawing inferences, and stating conclusions, i.e., developed argumentatively. When I observe somebody expressing assumptions and then grinding out strings of consequences, I know for sure that s/he is an analyst. I cannot account for the ignorance of this difference of phenomenology, which is multidisciplinary, over a century old and currently supported by over 3,500 colleagues across the planet.⁴

Because continental philosophy is, in my opinion, incoherent, let me just mention some differences between analytical and phenomenological approaches. (I won't get into the usual scary talk about universal essences and transcendentalism.) Where subject matters and basic methods are concerned, one school of thought is about sentences and relies on logic to analyze them, while the other is about mental processes, attitudes, and things-as-intended-to and relies on reflective observation and description, which the early William James in 1890 called 'introspection' before that became a pejorative word in the 1920s. Phenomenology has included much reflection on thinking and sentences, but there is little reflective description of mental processes in analytical philosophy, which is quite unreflective, at least as far as I have seen.

Besides the typically 'unreflective argumentalism,' as it might be called, analytical philosophy and the related positivistic social science tend as intimated to be naturalistic. In contrast, reflection on things-as-intended-to in attitudes and mental processes discloses that things—in the broad signification whereby anything is a thing—always already have positive and negative intrinsic and extrinsic values and uses and thus philosophy needs to include axiology and praxiology as much as epistemology. Moreover, the reflective investigation of such values and uses and the correlative components of mental processes best called valuings and willings shows that they change over time and are learned in habit and tradition, i.e., are cultural and historical. Naturalism tries to overlook such things that make the world originally cultural. If that is to avoid relativism, it is done too cheaply.

Interestingly, all the phenomenologists in my country in 1950 could sit in one parlor, but today are many hundreds in dozens of disciplines. This seems easiest explained in part by how college students have electives and find phenomenology and other continental tendencies much less boring. At the same time, one can wonder if the current increase in the historiography of analytical philosophy indicates the exhaustion of a paradigm. Time will tell.

I could go on, but perhaps this is enough. It is urged in the Rogers and Hammerstein musical, "Oklahoma," of 1943 that the cowboy and farmer should be friends. Since one wants an open range and free access to water and the other wants fences to keep cattle out of crops and to control water for irrigation, that call for friendship is similarly overly optimistic. The histories of all forms of high culture have had competing schools of thought; look at how long it took for Aristolian physics to be superseded. Why expect anything different in philosophy?

Sincerely,
Lester EMBREE

⁴ Cf. *The Encyclopedia of Phenomenology*, edited by Lester Embree et al. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997, The Organization of Phenomenological Organizations <http://www.o-p-o.net/> and The Newsletter of Phenomenology <http://www.phenomenology.ro/newsletter/>