A House Divided: Comparing Analytic and Continental Philosophy
C. G. PRADO, Ed.
Amherst, NY: Humanity Books (Prometheus), 2003; 326 pages.

A volume that promises to "compare analytic and Continental philosophy" has a difficult—some will say impossible—task ahead of it, yet several essays in this collection do an impressive job of bringing into fruitful association not whole traditions of thought but manageable portions thereof. If intelligent comparisons, for instance, of postmodernism and analytic epistemology are unlikely to succeed, then perhaps something approaching genuine rapprochement is possible by bringing into dialogue—or a dialogue of sorts—individual thinkers on both sides of the divide. Thus, essays in this volume compare, for example, Gadamer and Davidson on interpretation, Foucault and Searle on truth and realism, Heidegger and Quine on logic, and Davidson and Wittgenstein on social justice. "The aim[s] of this collection," in the words of the volume's editor, C. G. Prado, are "to explore differences and similarities among philosophers in the 'analytic' and 'Continental' traditions," and "to reconsider the often facile characterization of major thinkers as belonging to one or the other tradition, and the problematic conception of the two traditions as incommensurable" (9). A key premise of the volume is that "[g]eneralities about traditions are less useful than better understanding of the work of particular seminal thinkers. The articles that follow compare individual philosophers who have had major influence in the analytic and Continental traditions with a view to clarifying just how and where they differ in the conception of the issues they address, but also where and how they complement each other's work" (9–10). A House Divided comprises eleven essays and an editor's introduction; the contributors are (in order of appearance) Richard Rorty, Barry Allen, Babette Babich, David Cerbone, Sharyn Clough and Jonathon Kaplan, Richard Matthews, C. G. Prado, Bjørn Torgrim Ramberg, Mike Sandbothe, Barry Stocker, and Edward Witherspoon. I shall discuss briefly a few of the more notable essays below.

Among the latter is undoubtedly Rorty's contribution, titled "Analytic and Conversational Philosophy." Rorty is at his provocative best in characterizing the rift between analytic and Continental philosophy as a product of academic parochialism and of imperatives related more to professional advancement than the demands of scholarship. As Rorty puts it, "[t]he majority of philosophy professors in every country never move far beyond the horizons that were set for them by their teachers.... Ideally, we philosophers are supposed to be constantly questioning our own presuppositions. In fact, we are no better at doing so than anybody else" (19). If there is any genuine difference between the two (sets of) traditions, it lies, Rorty maintains, in competing conceptions of philosophy's self-image. Analysts continue to conceive of philosophy on the model of the natural sciences, to train graduate students as technicians, and to eschew approaches that too readily resemble mere "intellectual history" or literary criticism, while Continentalists (including Rorty) accentuate philosophy's conversational dimension. If the former still aim to "get it right," to identify stable meanings and concepts of the kind the Greeks first sought but in the manner (however approximately) of modern science, the latter are concerned with "suggesting changes in the uses of
words, and ... putting new words in circulation—thereby breaking down impasses and making conversation more fruitful” (22). The image and the point of the kind of philosophy that Rorty prefers, and which he attributes (with as much accuracy as such generalizations allow) to Continental thought, is neither to place human thought on the secure path of a science nor “to find out what anything is ‘really’ like, but to help us grow up—to make us happier, freer, and more flexible. The maturation of our concepts, and the increasing richness of our conceptual repertoire, constitute cultural progress” (22). For Rorty, the salient distinction is no longer between analytic and Continental philosophy, but between philosophy as quasi-scientific analysis and as conversation.

Babette Babich, on the other hand, argues strenuously in favor of preserving the analytic-Continental distinction and for the merits of the latter over the former. Undoubtedly the boldest, and in my view the strongest, essay in this collection, Babich’s “On the Analytic-Continental Divide in Philosophy: Nietzsche’s Lying Truth, Heidegger’s Speaking Language, and Philosophy” argues that the distinction turns upon whether we conceive of philosophy fundamentally as deflationary analysis or as critical questioning, or “thinking”—including in Heidegger’s sense of this term when he famously declares (in *What is Called Thinking?*) that “We are still not thinking.” “Continental philosophy,” Babich writes, “differs from analytic philosophy in its openness to questioning, which also means that it is less concerned with solutions than it is with critical questioning (including the question of its own presumptions or prejudices). But this focus on critical questioning also means, at least ideally, that Continental philosophy does not aspire to take its rational warrant from science itself as analytic philosophy does” (65). After proffering no fewer than twenty-two claims about, and against, analytic philosophy, Babich goes on to argue that the effort to jettison the analytic-Continental distinction is often far from innocent, being motivated in the main by the desire of many analysts to annex Continental themes and figures while squeezing out of their texts everything that is genuinely philosophical, beginning with their complexity and ambiguity. As cases in point, Babich points to the increased interest in Nietzsche, Heidegger, and more recent Continental thinkers within analytically oriented philosophy departments. What this represents, she argues, is not a Continental turn within analytic philosophy but its veritable opposite: an annexation that does violence to both the texts and the traditions from which they emerge. It ignores that “Continental philosophers tend less to answer or conclude inquiry than to compound their own (and our responding) questions—adverting to ambiguity, unclarity, complexity and all the detail that ultimately is required to begin to think philosophy as the meaning of life” (91).

Also among the more noteworthy contributions to this volume is Barry Allen’s “Carnap’s Contexts: Comte, Heidegger, Nietzsche,” in which Allen locates this key figure in analytic philosophy within the contexts of positivism and the reception, and gross misrepresentation, of Heidegger and Nietzsche. It was such misreadings, Allen remarks, that created “the metaphilosophical myth of a woolly ‘Continental’ tradition in philosophy, distinct from the austere precision of ‘analysis’” (34). It is Heidegger in particular whom Carnap takes to task in his polemic against metaphysics, failing utterly to comprehend what Heidegger was doing—even failing to realize
that Heidegger had pronounced his own critique of metaphysics, and more tellingly—while Nietzsche is commended, after a fashion, for having abandoned philosophy for poetry in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Allen very correctly points out not only Carnap’s profound misreadings of Nietzsche and Heidegger, but the manner in which such misreadings informed, or misinformed, the course of positivist and later analytic philosophy. Allen also points out “an underappreciated continuity between the original positivism of Auguste Comte and the austere formality of the later logical positivists, from whom analytic philosophy largely descends” (37). Carnap’s views that science could be foundational for philosophy and that logical analysis and “language planning” might put a decisive end to metaphysics have their source in this “original positivism,” traces of which remain with us. Allen’s essay concludes with some interesting remarks on the fascination with order within positivist thought, noting that “[o]rder, control, predictability, may be by-products or side-consequences of knowledge, and contribute to the practicality of its pursuit, but they are not what drives knowledge forward, least of all where it is experimental and inventive” (54).

This unique volume is important both in its inspiration—to place on speaking terms philosophers on both sides of the analytic-Continental divide—and for what, for the most part, it accomplishes. As with any edited collection, some contributions are more noteworthy than others, but the overall quality of its eleven chapters is relatively even. If a sizeable portion of contemporary philosophy, not all of it Continental, endeavors in a serious way to build bridges between traditions, many of which speak to each other only with tremendous difficulty, then what is needed is more volumes of this kind—ones that foster productive exchanges that do not deteriorate into overly facile “compare and contrast” essays. Analytic and Continental philosophers alike will find much of interest in this collection.

PAUL FAIRFIELD, Queen’s University

*The Grace and the Severity of the Ideal: John Dewey and the Transcendent*

VICTOR KESTENBAUM


À propos the merits of vagueness in philosophical discourse, Hans-Georg Gadamer once remarked that “It is not so terribly easy to speak in such a way that many ideas are awakened in a person without his being hammered on the head.... It may be a cultivated thing to eat with a knife and fork, but that is not the right approach to philosophy.” This emphasis on interpretivity over transitivity, on awakening ideas rather than conveying propositions, is especially useful when one considers a philosophical movement such as pragmatism, which is so easily and frequently oversimplified as “cash-value” thinking.

Victor Kestenbaum’s *The Grace and the Severity of the Ideal: John Dewey and the Transcendent* is a subtle, evocative and—in Kestenbaum’s own word for Dewey’s writing—“painterly” consideration of the place of the ideal in Dewey’s philosophy.