2 Reflections on the Present Conflict
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This book is an introduction to European philosophy for English-speaking readers. This is a neutral description, both of the subject matter and of the intended audience – but to be neutral covers up the unavoidable fact that the situation is, and for a long time has been, extremely polemical: European philosophy and Anglo-Saxon thought are supposed to be two opposing – and maybe irreconcilable – camps, and the authors of a book such as this cannot do to forget such circumstances. Whether one likes it or not, one is involved in the polemic.

But neither can one assume that the issues of the polemic are easy to comprehend. We may take sides, but we should not assume that we can describe accurately either our own side’s position or that of the “enemy”. Caricatures abound: for example, the picture of analytic philosophy, wedded to clarity and common sense, versus a deliberately obscure and irrational European philosophy. Or – from the other side – the picture of a mechanistic, “positivist” analytic philosophy, uncaring about life or art, opposed to a humanistically oriented, politically engaged philosophical tradition. These caricatures are gravely wrong, and almost impossible to pin down in any exact terms. Most attempts to describe the opposition in some non-geographic way come to grief. Consider, for example, the problem of “metaphysics”. Forty years ago, when logical positivism flourished, analytical philosophers were against metaphysics – or at any rate quite a lot of them were. Now, however, it seems that many French philosophers deny the possibility of metaphysics – they think it has “come to an end” – whereas analytical philosophers are busily writing about the subject (see, for example, the works of Michael Dummett). One finds this sort of thing over and over again: hardly any term that one chooses will reliably demarcate one side from the other, but will change sides with bewildering rapidity.

The worst culprit here is the word ‘positivism’; it has a fairly exact meaning – roughly speaking, a positivist is someone who believes that science should only correlate and describe observations, and should not talk about unobservable entities. The problem is, however, that many unlikely people turn out to be positivists in this sense (Goethe, for exam-
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pie, had a fairly positivist philosophy of science, *avant le lettre*), whereas
most people who are accused of being positivists are definitely not posi-
tivists: the majority of analytic philosophers are not positivist in the exact
sense, and hardly any scientists are. Scientists really *believe* in quarks and
genes and microbes and such like unobservables. So when someone gets
called a “positivist”, what does it usually mean? It mostly seems to get
used, by people who are not analytic philosophers, of analytic philosophy,
and usually about arguments which are technical, or which use some logi-
cal symbolism, or are in some similar way difficult for an outsider to
comprehend. These may or may not be valid grounds for accusation, but
using a term like ‘positivist’ in this context does nothing but mystify.

Things are even worse when politics enters the picture. It certainly is
true that a good deal of French and German philosophy is rather more
directly politicised than Anglo-Saxon philosophy, and there is, of course,
nothing wrong with that: politics has, after all, a very wide scope, and
there is nothing in our philosophical activity that could remove it some-
how from the sphere of the political. But what is not good for philosophy
(or, indeed, politics) is when the politicisation of philosophy happens – as
it often does – by the construction of what one could call a politico-phi-
osophical dictionary. By this I mean a list, with philosophical concepts on
one side, and, on the other side, their supposedly fixed political meanings.
Thus – to take some contemporary examples – essentialism is supposed to
be right wing, constructivism is supposed to be left wing, realism is sup-
posed to be right wing, and so on. This is a hindrance to thought and to
good politics, because it assumes that the political significance of a given
philosophical concept is somehow fixed and independent of subject matter
or of the occasion of use. In any case, these alignments change sides every
so often: nowadays realism is supposed to be right wing; about thirty
years ago, realism was supposed to be left wing, and idealism right wing.

What is an Introduction, Anyway?

The usual genre for an introduction to a book of this sort would be like
this. One would firstly give a brief history of German philosophy since
Kant (Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and so on), then one would tell a continu-
ing story on that basis, locating each of one’s authors within that story.
This would serve several purposes. Firstly, it would give each of one’s
authors a place in some meaningful pattern. Secondly, it would tell one
what each of the authors was trying to do, since the story is the story of a
group of thinkers each building on the results of the previous one and