

1 What Is Continental Philosophy of Religion?

It is difficult to give a precise definition of ‘continental philosophy of religion’. In this section we will first consider the nature of continental philosophy before moving on to examine the relationship between continental philosophy and questions about the nature of religious belief.

1.1 Continental Philosophy

Broadly speaking, ‘continental’ refers to the continent of Europe, excluding the British Isles and other Anglophone (English-speaking) countries, particularly the United States. The beginning of what is now known as ‘continental philosophy’ may be said to have occurred with the work of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), in his critical response to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) (West, 2010: 3). Continental philosophy is distinguished from analytic philosophy, which became particularly distinctive early in the twentieth century in the work of Gottlob Frege (1848–1925), Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) and G. E. Moore (1873–1958) (West, 2010: 3–4).

Since the key features of continental philosophy are often identified by contrasting them with the key features of analytic philosophy, it might be helpful to set out, first, some common characteristics of analytic philosophy. Again broadly speaking, philosophers working in the analytic tradition aim to construct arguments consisting of clear and precise premises (statements, assumed to be true, from which a conclusion is deduced or inferred) in which unfamiliar, technical or ambiguous terms are defined. An argument may be deductive (if a logically certain conclusion follows from the premises), inductive (if the premises support the conclusion) or abductive (if the conclusion is the best explanation for the premises). The success – or otherwise – of an argument is determined, sometimes using the tools of symbolic logic, by assessing whether it is valid and sound. An argument is valid if the conclusion follows from the premises, and sound if it is both valid and all its premises are true. With respect to religious belief, however, it is often difficult to ascertain whether the premises of an argument are true and, if they are, the extent to which we can be certain that the conclusion follows from those premises. For example, Alvin Plantinga claims that Michael Behe’s argument that an intelligent designer is required to explain some features of the natural world (in, e.g., Behe, 2003) supports theism, but admits that the degree to which it supports theism is unclear and that this is therefore ‘a wet noodle conclusion’ (Plantinga, 2011: 264). Analytic philosophy tends to be divided into distinct sub-disciplines, of which philosophy of religion is one.

By contrast, continental philosophers reject the use of reason as it is conceived by analytic philosophers. For example, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) suggests that ‘[t]hinking begins only when we have come to know that reason, glorified for centuries, is the most stiff-necked adversary of thought’ (1977 [1952]: 112). Continental philosophy therefore adopts a more literary style which is often difficult to understand. Nick Trakakis notes, for example, that the writings of Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) and Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) ‘are saturated with dense sentence constructions, highly idiosyncratic (even experimental) forms of language, all manner of literary devices or tropes, and technical jargon that is rarely precisely defined’ (2007: §28). Examples of literary devices from the writings of Derrida and John Caputo (b 1940) include ‘prayers, parables, pseudonymous discourses, witty jokes, word-plays, paradoxical turns of speech, irony and metaphor’ (§28).

Overall structure in such works is also often difficult to discern. For example, Julian Young remarks of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) that ‘there appears to be no genuine principle of organisation: the discussion swerves from topic to unrelated topic in a way that has led some readers to suggest that the *Phenomenology* was written under the influence of drugs and others to compare it to the works of James Joyce – to view it as the product of an unmediated “stream of consciousness”’ (Young, 2014: 87).

Trakakis argues, however, that some readers find these texts difficult because they make unrealistic assumptions about the way in which philosophy ought to be written and read. The technique for reading these texts might be different than that required to read the texts of analytical philosophy. Furthermore, he suggests, it is possible that difficult ideas can only be described in difficult language; we cannot simply assert that only clear and precise language can lead to and convey philosophical insight (Trakakis, 2007: §28). Trakakis suggests, however, that it is more accurate to say that continental philosophers do make use of arguments, evidence and justification in order to seek truth, but that, in continental philosophy, the meaning of these terms differs from their meaning in the context of analytical philosophy (§29). So, for example, Heidegger says of the concept of the *Übermensch* in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) (about which more in section 3) that it is ‘easy but irresponsible to be indignant at the idea . . . and to make this indignation pass for a refutation’ (Heidegger, 1977 [1952]: 98). Rather, he suggests, ‘[w]e show respect for a thinker only when we think. This demands that we think everything essential which is thought in his thought.’ (99) Thus Young, despite his negative judgement of the quality of Hegel’s writing, is able to acknowledge that the *Phenomenology* ‘has had an extraordinary influence on world history, on nineteenth-century German philosophy and on twentieth-century French philosophy’ (Young, 2014 [2003]: 87).

The aim of continental philosophy, then, is to find not truth but practical wisdom, often by deconstructing common ways of thinking to show how they are spiritually or socially detrimental to humankind, and constructing a new and inspirational vision of ‘liberation’ which leads to action of the kind which will make a positive contribution to human happiness (Trakakis, 2007: §§39–40; 43). In order to do this, continental philosophers often draw on other fields from the humanities such as literary, cultural or political theory, psychoanalysis or history, and choose their vision not because a series of arguments has shown its likely truth, but on the basis of its ethical and socio-political implications, or the extent to which it promotes particular values, or fits in with ‘lived human experience and practices (e.g. personal freedom, authentic existence)’ (§29).

Although continental philosophy was initially defined in terms of its geographical location, it is no longer so clearly associated with mainland Europe. As David West points out, for example, ‘Frege played a significant role in the development of analytical philosophy despite being German, as did the logical positivists of the Vienna Circle and Ludwig Wittgenstein [1889–1951], who were Austrian’ (West, 2010: 6). There are now schools of analytic philosophy in France and Germany, and English-speaking philosophers such as Richard Rorty (1931–2007), Alasdair MacIntyre (b 1929), and Charles Taylor (b 1931) have worked on themes which are more commonly discussed in continental philosophy (West, 2010: 6). It might therefore be more accurate to refer to continental and analytic philosophy as styles of philosophical writing.

Continental philosophy may be divided, at least roughly, into schools of philosophical writing which include the following:

1.1.1 Phenomenology

Phenomenology as a discipline may be defined as the study of the way things appear to us, while the historical movement of phenomenology began in the early twentieth century with the work of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) and Heidegger, and may be characterised, at least in outline, as holding that phenomenology is the foundation of all philosophy (Smith, 2016: §1). Michael Wheeler argues that, for both Husserl and Heidegger, although phenomenology begins with the study of the way things appear to us, by examining that experience they aim to uncover the underlying conditions which shape and structure our experience (2017: §2.2.1).

1.1.2 Existentialism

The term ‘existentialism’ was first used by Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), but Sartre was inspired by Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1962 [1927]).

Heidegger employs Husserl's phenomenological method, which is concerned not with questions about how things came to exist or what they are made of but with the nature of their meaning for humankind. Heidegger uses this method to consider what he regards as the most important question for humankind – that of the nature of being, of what it means for a person to be. For Heidegger, concepts of a person as a substance with reason or a subject with self-consciousness ignore the fact that a fundamental aspect of our existence as persons is our existence in the world. We can therefore increase our understanding of what it means to exist only if we explore the nature of our existence in the world. In order to do this, Heidegger drew on the work of Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) and Nietzsche (Crowell, 2016: §1).

1.1.3 Postmodernism

Modernism began with Kant's claim in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787 [1781]) that we can know things only as they appear to us, and not as they are in themselves, and that, although we cannot experience God, freedom or immortality, a rational account of the nature of our world requires that they exist. The idea that there is some kind of residual reality or truth which cannot be perceived but which must, nonetheless, exist gradually began to break down, however. Gary Aylesworth suggests that both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche may be regarded as precursors to postmodernism. Kierkegaard argues that 'the public' is an idea created by the press to describe a collection of otherwise unconnected individuals (Kierkegaard, 1962 [1846]: 59–60), while Nietzsche argues that the distinction between the real world and the world as it appears to us has been gradually breaking down since the time of Plato (427–347 BCE), and that the idea that there is a 'true world' is no longer of any use to us (Nietzsche, 1954 [1889]: 485–486). Heidegger, influenced by Nietzsche, argues that, although we are surrounded by beings who we think of as present to us (the metaphysics of presence), the modern world's focus on the utility of beings leads to a gradual loss of the sense of being. This can only be regained by focusing our attention on the eternal process of 'becoming', the coming into and passing out of existence of individual beings in the context of the whole community of beings (Aylesworth, 2015: §1).

The term 'postmodernism' was introduced by Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998) in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Lyotard 1984 [1979]). Lyotard draws on Wittgenstein's language game theory which, on one interpretation at least, claims that different spheres of human endeavour are associated with different 'languages', each of which has its own rules which may be learned by those who wish to speak it (Wittgenstein, 1953). For

example, a religious practitioner is someone who learns how to speak the language of his/her religion from other practitioners; he/she does not acquire a set of religious beliefs by means of philosophical arguments about what is real or true. Lyotard dispenses entirely with the idea that our perceptions are linked in some way to an unknowable object. This means that there is no longer any need to struggle towards a better collective understanding of what is real and true, and postmodernism is free to invent new language games, with new rules (Aylesworth, 2015: §2).

1.1.4 Deconstruction

The philosophical method which came to be called ‘postmodernism’ often employs the technique of ‘deconstruction’, introduced into philosophy by Derrida in 1967, in *Of Grammatology*, *Writing and Difference*, and *Speech and Phenomena*, although Derrida himself does not describe deconstruction as a technique of postmodernism. Deconstruction focuses on the function rather than the meaning of a text. In outline (which will be developed further in section 5), deconstruction attempts to show how parts of a text – words and/or sentences – are related to each other; together, they constitute an interrelated system of signs, each of which may be defined by its difference from others. Derrida calls the relationship between signs ‘*différance*’, a word which intentionally resists easy definition. Since it can be differentiated from the French ‘*différence*’ only when written and read, it emphasises the focus of deconstruction on the interpretation of writing as a series of signs which may be defined predominantly in terms of their relationship to each other. As such, all language, including the spoken word, may be regarded as writing, because all language is a series of interrelated signs. The purpose of deconstruction, then, is not to try to determine the meaning of a text, but to examine its component parts in order to consider whether it might have a function which differs from that which it was previously thought to have (Aylesworth, 2015: §5).

Although it might be helpful to assign philosophers to various schools of philosophical writing, however, there are two caveats which we must bear in mind. First, some philosophers are not easy to categorise. The work of Heidegger may be regarded as both phenomenology and existentialism, for example. Secondly, we must not use such categorisations to ignore important differences between the members of each category. So, for example, as Walter Kaufmann suggests, we should not assume that knowing about existentialism qualifies us to ‘talk about a large number of authors without actually having read their books’ (1967: 7). In order to avoid these possible pitfalls, it might be helpful to apply the ‘family resemblance approach’ which is often used in

definitions of religion (see, for example, a modified family resemblance approach in Harrison, 2006). In this context, we might say that a philosophical school is associated with a range of characteristics, at least some of which will be possessed by each of its members. This allows us to say that the work of some philosophers might have aspects in common with more than one philosophical school, but to note that the work of each philosopher also contains features which are, in some respects, distinctive.

1.2 Continental Philosophy of Religion

In the sections which follow, we will turn our attention to the impact of these schools of continental philosophy on continental philosophy of religion. In section 2, I will consider the nature of faith in the work of Hegel and Kierkegaard, while section 3 outlines the atheism of Nietzsche and Heidegger. Twentieth-century existentialism as it is found in the work of Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929) and Paul Tillich (1886–1965) will be examined in section 4, while deconstruction as it is related to religious belief in the work of Derrida is the topic of section 5. The existential problem of evil in the work of Nietzsche, Levinas and Pierre Hadot (1922–2010) features in section 6, while section 7 examines the feminist philosophy of religion of Grace Jantzen (1948–2006) and Pamela Sue Anderson (1955–2017). The concluding section, section 8, examines objections which are common to many, if not all, of the philosophical positions outlined in the preceding sections, and argues in favour of a philosophy of religion which uses a hybrid methodology – one which employs the most helpful features of both continental and analytic methodologies – akin to that recommended by John Cottingham (b. 1945).

1.3 On Reading This Book

This book is, as the series title suggests, a guide to some of the key elements in the work of some of the key thinkers in continental philosophy of religion. The nature of my task means that there is space to consider only a small selection of passages from the writings of those philosophers. Necessarily, what is offered is an interpretation of each primary source and, as Heidegger notes, every exposition draws on the text which it attempts to expound, but also contributes something to that text. This contribution, Heidegger suggests, the layperson, ‘judging on the basis of what he holds to be the content of the text, constantly perceives as a meaning read in, and with the right that he claims for himself criticizes as an arbitrary imposition’ (1977 [1952]: 58). For Heidegger, even a correct interpretation of a text never provides an understanding of that text which is better than that

of the author, and it does understand the text differently. Heidegger argues that this different interpretation does, nonetheless, gives us glimpses of what the author intends to convey (1977 [1952]: 58) and this will be my aspiration for this book. Ultimately there is no substitute for reading the text for oneself, however. Rosenzweig provides readers of *The Star of Redemption* (2005 [1919]) with ‘pointers’ in his subsequent essay ‘The New Thinking’ (1925), but remarks that, if the reader really wants to know what is in the book, ‘he must actually read it’; that, Rosenzweig says, he is unable to spare him (2000 [1925]: 117).

Although many of the authors whose work is discussed do not value clarity, precision and structure – and, in some cases, see these as detrimental to their objectives – in common with the hybrid methodology for which I argue in section 8, this book does aim to achieve clarity and (where possible) precision in its expositions, and to impose a structure on a wide-ranging and disparate body of material with often indeterminate boundaries. Clarity, precision and structure do help us to understand ideas, and to remember them. By eliminating unnecessary repetition and introducing some degree of order to the ideas which remain we might be able to see more clearly how one idea relates to another, and where there might be a positive contribution to our accumulated human wisdom. But perhaps the reader who is persuaded by the postmodern way of understanding our world might, in the manner of Gianni Vattimo (b. 1936), regard the structure which I have attempted to impose on this material as a work of rhetoric, and/or even a work of art (Vattimo 1988 [1985]: 179; Aylesworth, 2015: §7).

2 The Nature of Faith: Hegel and Kierkegaard

2.1 Hegel

As we saw in section 1, the beginning of continental philosophy is sometimes traced back to the work of Hegel. Key sources for Hegel’s philosophy of religion are his essay *Faith and Knowledge* (1977a [1802]), the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977b [1807]), and the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (2007 [1987, 1985, 1984] [1821, 1824, 1827, 1831]), compiled from his lecture notes and student transcripts of lectures given at the University of Berlin.

Hegel is notoriously difficult to understand, at least in part due to his style of writing. He adapts the meanings of words and the conventions of grammar to construct an ongoing dialectic – a debate between conflicting viewpoints, the aim of which is to discover the truth. What follows here can therefore be no more than a selection and summary of some of the key aspects of Hegel’s philosophy of religion, occasionally interspersed with comments on their

interpretation. Further comments on the interpretation of Hegel may be found in section 2.1.4.

2.1.1 *Faith and Knowledge*

In *Faith and Knowledge*, Hegel argues that Reason has been used to destroy religion, but that the religion it destroyed was not religion, and that Reason itself has now suffered a similar fate; in the philosophy of Kant, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743–1819) and Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814) it has become ‘mere intellect’, subservient to ‘a *faith outside and above* itself, as a *beyond* [to be believed in]’ (Hegel, 1977a [1802]: 56). For Hegel, the culture of his time had established a situation in which ‘philosophy cannot aim at the cognition of God, but only at what is called the cognition of man’ (65), which is limited to knowledge which can be gained by means of the senses. Once it has clarified the nature of its limitations, philosophy is then ‘supposed to prettify itself with the surface colour of the supersensuous by pointing, in faith, to something higher’ (65). But, Hegel suggests, truth ‘cannot be deceived by this sort of hallowing of a finitude that remains what it was’ (65). Hegel argues, instead, that the infinite contains the finite, which means that the finite and the infinite are inseparable (66); there is no separate realm, knowable only by means of faith, in which the infinite resides.

Although Nietzsche is probably best known for announcing ‘the death of God’, the idea appears rather earlier at the end of Hegel’s *Faith and Knowledge*, where he draws on a version of the idea derived from the *Pensées* of Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) (Pascal, 1670: 441; quoted in Hegel, 1977a [1802]: 190). Hegel suggests that infinity, ‘the abyss of nothingness in which all being is engulfed’ (190), signifies the ‘infinite grief’ which had previously existed as ‘the feeling that “God Himself is dead,” upon which the religion of more recent times rests’ (190). Walter Jaeschke suggests that at least five different meanings of this claim may be found in Hegel’s texts (Jaeschke, 1992: 1), but here Hegel appears to mean that the God of religion as it had previously been understood is dead, and that a more plausible understanding of religion has replaced it. He suggests that the feeling which was previously associated with remembrance of the historic Good Friday (the death of Jesus of Nazareth) should now be associated with the idea of the ‘speculative Good Friday’, the suffering of humankind in the world (Harris, 1977: 43), and that it is from this consciousness of all-encompassing loss that a form of resurrection may be achieved (Hegel, 1977a [1802]: 190).

2.1.2 *Religion in the Phenomenology of Spirit*

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel describes a common type of religious belief which he terms ‘picture-thinking’. The form of consciousness which

thinks in pictures sees the universal divine Being as an individual in human form, the world as evil, and reconciliation with the absolute Being as a real event. Picture-thinking also introduces into the realm of consciousness the relationships of father and son (1977b [1807]: paragraph 771: pages 465–466, henceforth 771: 465–466).

It is the death of this picture-thought which may be experienced by the ‘Unhappy Consciousness’ as ‘the painful feeling . . . *that God Himself is dead*’ (785: 476). For the Unhappy Consciousness, ‘[t]rust in the eternal laws of the gods has vanished, and the Oracles, which pronounced on particular questions, are dumb. The statues are now only stones from which the living soul has flown, just as the hymns are words from which belief has gone. The tables of the gods provide no spiritual food and drink, and in his games and festivals man no longer recovers the joyful consciousness of his unity with the divine’ (753: 455).

This ‘death of God’ is, however, merely the death of ‘*the abstraction of the divine Being*’ (785: 476). This death leads to a ‘spiritual resurrection’ (784: 475), the transformation of God’s individual self-consciousness in the form of a human person into ‘a universal self-consciousness, or as the religious community’ (784: 475).

For Hegel, all the individual gods and attributes of the divine which have been found in the world’s religions hitherto are gathered together into a single pantheon, and stand ‘impatiently expectant round the birthplace of Spirit as it becomes self-conscious [i.e., round the manger at Bethlehem]’ (753–754: 456). That the absolute Spirit has given itself self-consciousness ‘appears as the *belief of the world* that Spirit is *immediately present* as a self-conscious Being – i.e., as an *actual man*, that the believer is immediately certain of Spirit, *sees, feels, and hears* this divinity. Thus this self-consciousness is not imagination, but is *actual* in the believer’ (758: 458). We do not, therefore, come to believe in the existence of God by combining the thought of God with the existence of God in our minds; rather, we begin from an experience of the existence of something which is immediately present to us, in which we recognise God; ‘God is sensuously and directly beheld as a Self, as an actual individual man; only so *is* this God self-consciousness’ (758: 459). The incarnate divine Being, or the fact that it possesses self-consciousness, is ‘the simple content of absolute religion’ (759: 459), in which ‘the divine Being is known as Spirit, or this religion is the consciousness of the divine Being that is Spirit’ (758: 459). Spirit may be described as ‘The Good, the Righteous, the Holy, Creator of Heaven and Earth’ (759: 459–460), although these forms exist only in thought, and are not Spirit itself.

In our consciousness of the self-conscious Spirit, ‘God is *revealed* as He is *in Himself*, i.e. He is immediately present as Spirit’ (761: 461). God may be

attained only in speculative knowledge of that revelation; God, as Spirit, is that knowledge, and may only be found in it. For Hegel, the history of the world until this point had been a history of anticipation of this revelation, enabling it to encounter absolute Being and to see itself in absolute Being. The joy which this causes ‘enters self-consciousness and seizes the whole world: for it is Spirit’ (761: 461).

In picture-thinking, when the eternal or abstract Spirit comes into existence, it ‘creates’ a world (774: 467). It would, however, be a mistake to regard the divine Being as ‘Nature in its whole extent’ (780: 472), or Nature separated from the divine Being as nothing, or Good and Evil as the same. But, in each case, both terms are present in the unity which is Spirit; the apparent differences are ‘present only as moments or as suspended’ (780: 473).

The divine Being in human form sacrifices his human existence and is reconciled to the divine Being (780: 472), but, for Hegel, self-consciousness no longer thinks in pictures (780: 473). Self-consciousness understands that, by causing its own incarnation and death in history, ‘the divine Being has been reconciled with its [natural] existence’ (784: 475). To understand this is to understand what Hegel has previously referred to as the spiritual resurrection – in other words, ‘the coming into existence of God’s individual self-consciousness as a universal self-consciousness, or as the religious community . . . death becomes transfigured from its immediate meaning, viz. the non-being of this *particular* individual, into the *universality* of the Spirit who dwells in His community, dies in it every day, and is daily resurrected’ (784: 475). So picture-thinking’s concept of absolute Spirit as an individual is transformed such that Spirit is self-consciousness which does not die; the individual dies, but it loses its particularity in universality.

The community does not yet possess perfect self-consciousness, however; for the most part, its understanding remains at the level of picture-thinking and it retains the picture-thought of future reconciliation with the essential Being: ‘Just as the *individual* divine Man has a father *in principle* and only an *actual* mother, so too the universal divine Man, the community, has for its father its own doing and knowing, but for its mother, eternal love which it only *feels*, but does not behold in its consciousness as an actual, immediate *object*.’ (787: 478). The world is implicitly reconciled with the divine Being and the divine Being recognizes that the world is not alienated from it but, in its love, is identical with it. Self-consciousness does not yet recognise this as Spirit, however; so there is implicit, but not yet realised, unity between the world and Being which together constitute Spirit (787: 478).