



# **Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction**

*Simon Critchley*

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## **Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction** Simon Critchley

In this enlightening new Very Short Introduction, Simon Critchley shows us that Continental philosophy encompasses a distinct set of philosophical traditions and practices, with a compelling range of problems all too often ignored by the analytic tradition. He discusses the ideas and approaches of philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Habermas, Foucault, and Derrida. He also introduces key concepts such as existentialism, nihilism, and phenomenology, by explaining their place in the Continental tradition.

The perfect guide for anyone interested in the great philosophers, this volume explains in lucid, straightforward language the split between Continental and Anglo-American philosophy and the importance of acknowledging Continental philosophy.

About the Series: Combining authority with wit, accessibility, and style, Very Short Introductions offer an introduction to some of life's most interesting topics. Written by experts for the newcomer, they demonstrate the finest contemporary thinking about the central problems and issues in hundreds of key topics, from philosophy to Freud, quantum theory to Islam.

## **Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction Details**

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# From Reader Review Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction for online ebook

## Tyler says

The running theme of *logic vs. humanity* also contrasts analytic and Continental philosophy. Critchley's purpose here is to introduce us to an eclectic trend that asks what wisdom is, and which stresses the human purposes of philosophy. From Kant to the 20th century French thinkers, the book covers the major trends of the past 200 years. Included in this period are many distinct ideas:

- The difference between knowledge and wisdom
- Kant and German Idealism
- Critique, praxis, emancipation
- Nihilism and the response to it
- Heidegger and Carnap
- Scientism and obscurantism

In covering such broad areas, the author gives us a book that, page per page, packs more interesting information between its covers than most philosophy books dealing with more particular questions. One of a series, the book is suitable to general readers wanting to find out more about philosophy, but people with some knowledge in this area will also gain an excellent overview and new insights. The text reads clearly and the topics are organized lucidly. I recommend this book for its combination of readability and scope.

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## Szplug says

Just as I expected, it all starts with Kant.

Critchley faced a damned difficult task, but, as with so many of the authors of these marvelous Oxford Press *A Very Short Introduction* series, he has managed to turn his 127 page allotment into a reasonable exposition upon what the murkily-etched *Continental Philosophy* is all about. While ever at pains to point out how unsound both geographically and methodologically the allusions to a European-based system of thinking are (and as opposed to a similarly ill-configured Anglo-American Analytic competition), Critchley does manage to bifurcate this modern philosophical split into competing strains of thought derived from the Critical Philosophy of Kant and its unforeseen removal of all ballasts from the foundations of meaning. Basically, there is a chain that runs something like *Benthamite*→*Knowledge*→*Critically Destructive*→*Reformist* that comprises the Analytical side, and another that plays out along the lines of *Coleridgean*→*Meaning*→*Hermeneutically Reconstructive*→*Traditional* that can suitably be applied to the Continental opposite. Whereas the first-named has determined to discard metaphysics completely, aligning its stars with burgeoning modern science and using logic and language as its boundary determiners, the titular branch, obsessed by the idea of *nihilism* that is attendant to the removal of meaningful surety and

infused by an alienating technology, seeks ways of combing the traditions and methods of the past that they might be deconstructed, reconfigured, and reintroduced as potentials for stabilizing and empowering mankind in an emancipatory manner. Whether it be Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, Foucault or Derrida, each, in their own way, has that end in mind. And in the outlining and historical tracing of these connected *Continental* philosopher threads, Critchley has put together a suitably readable and thoughtful presentation of the Continental evolution through idealism, phenomenology, critical theory, and structuralism.

I've noticed that a few reviewers have objected to what they determine as an authorial preference for the Analytics even whilst professing an impartiality—particularly prevalent in his final chapter cautions to the two divergent sides, and in which these doubters have detected an unequal weight of seriousness. While not sufficiently knowledgeable to be able to counter these critiques, I will offer up an opinion to the effect that I found Critchley's bias to have been appreciably neutralized throughout; indeed, in the seminal chapter regarding the meeting-of-differing-minds between the Viennese Logical Positivist Carnap and the Phenomenological wunderkind Heidegger, my estimation is that the author did an exemplary job of positioning the latter's (much ridiculed) metaphysics-*contra*-metaphysics within the framework of the competing arguments and taking care to point out the nourishing qualities and potentiality within a thought that seeks to harness, in this case through *Being*, the stabilizing effect of a *meaning* attuned to a nature that, even then, many felt was slipping away from our understanding. YMMV, of course, but the lean towards Anglo-American modes of thinking was subtle enough that I rarely took note of it.

The author laments that philosophy has come to be so configured into these twin pillars emphasizing *Knowledge* via epistemology, and *Meaning* via hermeneutics, driven primarily by their respective doctrinal engines of logical analysis and phenomenology. That knowledge and meaning were once combined as a whole in the philosophical search for truth and man's modes of living in such upon this world, from the dimmest days of the Greeks through to the Enlightenment, is the fuel for Critchley's push for a near-future reconciliation between the estranged pathways. Finding hope in those who have been trying to reach across the aisle—Rorty, Cavell, et al—a recombinatory effort strikes him as a fruitful and desirable goal for modern philosophy to attain to: curbing the *scientistic* proclivities of the Analytics, and the *obscurantist* tendencies of the Continentals, that we might be able to realize that human life needs as much wisdom as intelligence if it is to be lived in a manner copacetic to our oftentimes unfathomable emplacement within the natural world.

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## Duygu says

A great introduction book. Actually, I can say that the book is more than an introduction. It is a helpful source to make a reading schedule thanks to Critchley's detailed and well-planned work. In addition, the writer separated chapters with regard to the discussions throughout the history of philosophy, not regard to the names of famous guys. So, this is a preferable way up to me 'cause it gives the idea, philosophy consists of problems not the names, to the reader.

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## Daniel Wright says

Chapter 1: The Gap between Knowledge and Wisdom

Chapter 2: Origins of Continental Philosophy: How to get from Kant to German Idealism

Chapter 3: Spectacles and Eyes to See With: Two cultures in philosophy

Chapter 4: Can Philosophy Change the World? Critique, praxis, emancipation

Chapter 5: What is to be done? How to respond to nihilism

Chapter 6: A Case Study in Misunderstanding: Heidegger and Carnap

Chapter 7: Scientism versus Obscurantism: Avoiding the traditional predicament in philosophy

Chapter 8: *Sapere aude*: The exhaustion of theory and the promise of philosophy

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## Ahmad Sharabiani says

Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions #43), Simon Critchley

In this enlightening new Very Short Introduction, Simon Critchley shows us that Continental philosophy encompasses a distinct set of philosophical traditions and practices, with a compelling range of problems all too often ignored by the analytic tradition. He discusses the ideas and approaches of philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Habermas, Foucault, and Derrida. He also introduces key concepts such as existentialism, nihilism, and phenomenology, by explaining their place in the Continental tradition.

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## Johan Radzi says

Sebuah pengenalan yang bagus kepada Falsafah Kebenuaan (Continental Philosophy).

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## Ferda Nihat Koksoy says

-?ngilizce konu?ulan ?lkelerde egemen olan Analitik felsefe b?y?k ?l?de MANTIK ve B?LG? kuram?na indirgenmi? ve felsefeyi bu anlamda s?n?rland?rma ve genel AHLÂKÎ ve ENTELEKTÜEL dizgelerle olan ili?kisini bir HATA olarak de?erlendirme e?ilimindedir (Raymond Williams).

-Bilim devrimi do?an?n b?y?s?n? bozmu?tur; do?a ise insan ama?lar?na tamamen duyars?z, yal?n, ki?iliksiz, nesnel bir "?ey"dir (Max Weber).

Analitik felsefenin izledi?i B?L?MSEL gerçe?in felsefi kar??l??? bilimciliktir ve bizleri HAYVANLAR haline indirger.

- K?ta (Avrupa) felsefesi ise modern d?nyan?n TOPLUMSAL uygulamalar?n? toplum ve B?REY a?lar?ndan ?ZG?RLE?T?R?C? ELE?T?R?YE tabi tutar.  
?NSAN MUTLULU?U ve ANLAM ARAYI?I ile yak?ndan ilgilidir.

-Benim önerim, analitik felsefenin kat? bilimcili?inin hayvanili?e kaymas?ndan ve k?ta felsefesinin bilimden uzakla?arak gericili?e d?mesinden uzak durmaya ?al??arak, Kant'?n SAPERE AUDE (bilmeye cesaret et) ilkesine sahip ??kmakt?r.

-Felsefe yeti?kinlerin e?itimidir (Sokrates).

[illegible]



## Rachel says

I found this an extremely useful introduction to the history and major ideas within "continental" philosophy. Some ideas I found helpful:

- that continental philosophy is best seen as a network of texts in dialogue with one another, rather than addressing a set of problems directly
- the idea of revolutionary tradition, or forcing a crisis, based on re-activating a heritage which has hardened and become habitual
- that Nietzsche saw nihilism as generated by a contradiction **within** Christian/Platonic metaphysics, rather than an external challenge (I was reminded of Gödel)

The downside was that I found the author's attitude towards scientists almost ludicrously patronizing. If I understand his view he sees science (which he conflates with mathematics and technology) as operating under a fixed set of principles, namely the logical positivism of the early 20th century. He does not grant science, or by extension scientists, the capacity for methodological self-awareness or multiplicity of approaches that are assumed to be the exclusive domain of philosophy. This is disappointing, as I think there is an interesting discussion to be had - but the treatment here is very superficial.

Besides that irritation, it's a concise and thought-provoking survey. Overall, highly recommended.

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## Jacob Aitken says

What is Continental Philosophy? While we all grant it is a misleading question, it is a recognizable one. It is a tradition that reflects upon the solutions and problems of post-Kantian idealism through and up to Heidegger.

Thesis: Contemporary philosophy faces the problem of the gap between wisdom and knowledge. Continental philosophy at its best tries to integrate theory and praxis. Indeed, at the heart of the book is Critchley's argument that philosophy post-Kant worked around "praxis, critique, and emancipation."

Continental philosophers approach problems textually and contextually (56). These texts are characterized by strong historical self-consciousness. These texts are also embedded and distanced (59).

The historicity of philosophy implies radical finitude of the human subject and contingent character of human experience (62). The createdness means that re-creation is possible, so philosophers try to emancipate themselves from situations that are not conducive to human experience. Critique is a critique of existing praxis in order to be emancipatory.

The book ends with some possible suggestions for doing Continental Philosophy in a way that doesn't fall into the standard Conty vs. Analytic debates. Philosophers like Charles Taylor (and I would add, Alexander Dugin and Alain de Benoist) are doing Continental Philosophy but not necessarily in the same patterns.

## Some Criticisms

While most of the photographs in the book were well-placed, illuminating, and contributed to the narrative,



some were just vulgar, and that's not so bad but it wasn't clear how they contributed to the text (like Muhl).

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## Carl says

Finally finished-- you can see my initial review below, which probably still stands fairly well. I probably should have given it one more star, but I thought he short-changed Continental philosophy at the end with a dismissive mention of concepts such as the Real in Lacan which he apparently thinks are obscurantist causal explanations-- but then again I think this is a big part of the criticism of many of these schools of thought, so I'll withhold judgement for now. The book as a whole was a tad weird to me, as I was more in need of an intro to Analytic philosophy, so it felt a bit like an Intro to myself-- except I'm still a beginner in Continental philosophy, and a bit of the periphery as a literary-critic/philologist (if I'm allowed to use those two terms in the same sentence). I still prefer my side, but I appreciate the call for improved communication and respect between the two sides.

Decided to finally start reading this. Looks interesting so far. Being at Berkeley and in literary studies, I'm very much on the side of what is here called "continental philosophy". The book is primarily a contrast between analytic philosophy and the more phenomenological/hermeneutic (and now poststructuralist) continental trends of philosophy. The author is intent on healing the gap to some degree and creating a mutual respect between the two traditions, identifying them not just with national differences but with differences within the academic cultures of the English speaking world. On the analytic side of things there is science (and scientism), a concern with epistemology, and a focus on meaning. On the "Continental" side of things there is hermeneutics, a concern with ontology, phenomenology, and a focus on meaning. He even refers to the latter as "romantic-hermeneutics"-- a side which I fall very strongly on the side of. Unfortunately my closest friends tend to fall on the other side (or rather, on the side of science, engineering, etc), which has led to a growing cognitive dissonance in my interactions with them, even during friendly exchanges (this despite the fact that I think science and technology are pretty cool, and I think I do a good enough job at not making snide comments or assumptions about their fields). Frustrating! The "other side" always seems so cocky, hard-headed, and condescending to me-- but everynow and then I think I see that attitude coming out of an insecurity and a belief that "my side" is exactly the same way-- and a lot of us are. There are some real jerks in the world of critical theory. Plus, while the "sciency" side of things is ostensibly that concerned with truth, the foundation of truth, what truth is, how we know truth, is certainly tied to a significant degree to ontology, human meaning, etc, which is the realm of the humanities (and cognitive science, psych, etc, but they straddle the border and see themselves as belonging more to the science side of things)-- so you get these "softies" from the humanities often commenting on the hard(er) sciences, using lingo refined by decades or even centuries of discussion, much of which is totally outside the experience of the "scientists", and of course this is going to sound both condescending and confused to the other party. I do think that the humanities have something particularly important to tell us in this world of the technologization, commodification, etc, of human ontology/culture, whatever, but in terms of my personal relationships I don't see this gap being bridged any time soon-- much of what there is to explain is admittedly pretty esoteric, and I'm still learning so much myself. In any case, I've strayed from the topic of two types of philosophy in opposition to two cultural trends in opposition, which I suppose is what the book is about anyway. Can you tell that this has been bugging me more and more lately?

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## **D.S. Mattison says**

There came a point last summer when after reading *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* I decided that I wanted to go to back to school (in search for an academic community and a Masters or a Phd). I knew that I did not want to continue studying early Christianity in a religious studies department because I do not want to be put into the theologian pigeonhole. I remembered that one of my favorite professors, Dr. Luca D'Isanto, received his MA in Continental Philosophy from UVA. Dr. D'Isanto's classes focused on mysticism and aesthetics. We read Rilke, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Florensky, Freud, Hume, Bataille, the list of really cool shit goes on. So I start looking at philosophy grad departments and notice that a majority of schools around the country aren't necessarily focused on these authors. Rather, they are looking into a more "scientific" philosophical approach, emphasizing theory of mind, and utilizing findings in the fields of cognitive science and astrophysics. I began to see a certain divide. Once having noticed this, I desired to have a better grasp on the history of philosophy in general. After a reading session at Ritual Roasters I walked over to Modern Times Books and found this appropriately titled little gem in the philosophy section. Critchley succinctly sets up the history and current situation of contemporary philosophy, illustrating the Continental/Analytical divide with flexible bold lines. I am a sucker for small books chock full of great writing and important opinions and facts. This book has caused me to question the professional distinctions between "Continental" and "Analytic" philosophy from a number of standpoints. Critchley proposes a move towards a middle ground, a problematizing of the two terms, and a call for those inclined to study philosophy to do so with a keen sense of responsibility. We should be aware that thoughts and actions are inextricably linked by history and context. Where to go to learn these things? Especially since this book is so short? A little internet search led me to The New School for Social Research where Dr. Critchley works. This is the institution where such forward and historically responsible thinking is taking place. And now, almost a year later, I have been accepted to study at this institution (and plan to begin in the Fall of 09). Basically this little book has acted as a catalyst in my life. I am sure it is not the most comprehensive study, but it doesn't claim to be. For that matter none of the Oxford Very Short Introductions claim this. In fact I highly recommend any OVSI in any field you happen to be interested. Continental Philosophy might not be your bag, in which case you don't need to read this essay, but Tudor England might be, in which case you'd be pleased to read 80-120 fascinating pages full of information with which you might not be acquainted or which you glossed over in the past.

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