

# NORMATIVE PLURALISM IN ANALYTIC AND CONTINENTAL ETHICS: AN ENCOUNTER SHEDDING LIGHT UPON THE SHADOWS OF THE GODS

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## Abstract

Given the famous schism, within philosophy, between continental and analytic ethics, on what ground can we compare the two and/or bridge the gap that separate them? Is the divide only a matter of method and terminology or is there a deeper reason for it?

This paper sketches an answer to these questions while proposing that a rapprochement may be possible, between analytic and continental ethics, through normative pluralism. After a short presentation of Russ Shafer-Landau's characterization of the central positions in normative analytic ethics, a historical perspective on the analytic/continental divide will be put forth by way of Friedrich Nietzsche's and Simone de Beauvoir's philosophical insights. I will hence suggest that a *de facto* dismissal of the very cogwheel of ethics used by the majority of analytic ethicists occurred, after the Second World War, in what we now call 'continental philosophy' – a *normative* dismissal that had a *foundational* impact for philosophy as a whole. Finally, I will show how a broadly conceived normative pluralism can today offer a common ground for discussion, for some philosophers at least, in both philosophical traditions.

**Keywords:** continental ethics, analytic ethics, pluralism, Friedrich Nietzsche, Simone de Beauvoir.

What are we saying exactly when we speak of an implicit difference that would permit us to distinguish, in ethics, between the so-called 'continental' and 'analytic' philosophical traditions? Indeed, both seem to share most of the same basic philosophical questions – what is the status of our ethical statements? what should one do with one's life, or how should one act in certain difficult circumstances? what kind of rational, emotional or perceptual ground can we expect to find for our moral evaluations? Likewise, analytic and continental philosophy share, as a historical and argumentative ground, most of the works that philosophers wrote before the twentieth century – Plato, Aristotle, Hume and Kant, only to name a few.

From this, one could argue that this distinction relies mainly on some methodological differences, which is perhaps the most

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commonly accepted conception of the divide. According to this, continental ethics depends on genealogical, deconstructivist or phenomenological accounts of ethical matters rather than formal logical grounds enhanced by actual case studies (often taking the form of ‘thought experiments’). Besides, in continental ethics, style is of the essence. Consequently, the clarity of continental texts is often believed to suffer from the very variety of methods and wordings it uses. As for philosophers in analytic ethics, they would rather, on the one hand, benefit from the clarity of their method(s) (for whoever would know their terminology, at least) even if this means suffering, on the other hand, from a lack of creative choices and originality in understanding, interpreting and/or providing answers to ethical problems. All of this has the dubious upshot that continental ethics is often depicted as a refuge for activists, (rather unsuccessful) literary artists or historians of philosophy, whereas analytic philosophy is arguably seen as the fieldwork of logical positivists and arrogant truth-seekers imposing their views on reality by way of soulless syllogisms. Consequently, a coherent dialogue between them appears either improbable or even impossible.

Such an account of the two philosophical traditions clearly exaggerates their respective inherent characteristics to the point of truly being false. Yet it seems many philosophers on both sides of the spectrum assign great credibility to some or all of these claims.

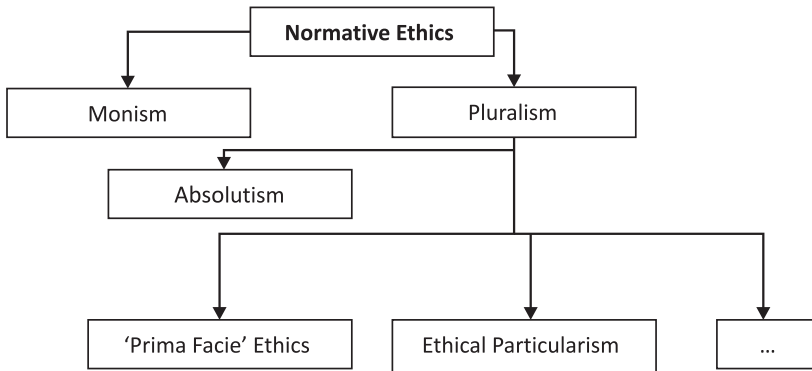
Hence, leaving aside obvious distinctions in terminology and publishing habits of the two trends I will present in this paper what I believe to be a slightly different understanding of the recent and prominent division of philosophy. I hope this position will strike the reader as novel to a certain extent, even if many of the ideas used to support it are certainly not entirely new. Nevertheless, I believe it has the capacity to explain in part why it is that analytic and continental ethicists have trouble comparing their positions or discussing with one another even when the ever too present veil of academic prejudices is lifted. I will hereafter argue that it is not only possible but useful to understand the great philosophical schism of the last century as one that pertains to a *de facto* postwar dismissal of two predominant branches of normative analytic ethics by the continental tradition: that of monism and absolutism – a dismissal that ensues from two primary existential facts. From there, two foundational differences for ethics will also be set forth, thus exposing the metaphysical layer of this philosophical issue. But first, let us begin by a short presentation of normative ethics in the analytic trend.

## I. The Cogwheel of Ethics

In a fascinating presentation at the University of Tartu<sup>2</sup>, analytic ethicist Russ Shafer-Landau (University of Wisconsin – Madison) exposed the structure of normative ethics in the following way:

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<sup>2</sup> Organized by the Baltic Philosophy Network, this NordForsk Research Training Course was entitled *Analytic and Continental Ethics*. It gathered Professor Shafer-Landau, Hans Ruin (Södertörn University, Sweden) and



According to this picture, normative ethics in the analytic tradition has to be understood as a debate between philosophers who advocate either that (1) there is a single ground rule for morality (normative monism), that (2) there is a set of rules that should never be broken (normative absolutism), or that (3) there are various (non-absolute) grounds upon which normative morality stands (normative pluralism): e. g., *prima facie* duties. These duties are somehow absolute in their form (as they should always be considered as referring to ‘morally significant’ facts), but tentative in their content and – especially – flexible in their ordering of an ‘architectonic of duties’ as regards specific situations. They are not absolute moral obligations *per se*, because their normative power *can always* be overridden by other *prima facie* duties even if all duties *should* be taken into account by all proper moral agents in all ethical deliberations. In other words, *prima facie* duties are conditional axiological duties instead of hardnosed deontological duties; for W.D. Ross, they rely on several features to be taken as the primary ‘relevant facts’ of any moral case, or again as the «circumstances which cannot seriously be held to be without moral significance»<sup>3</sup> from the viewpoint of all proper moral agents that find themselves in moral dilemmas, and that, even if different moral agents might end up weighing these duties in a variety of ways.

Now, one has to keep in mind that *foundational* monism, absolutism and pluralism are different from their *normative* counterparts. Monism can be considered as the analytic normative framework under which classical ethical theories fall, but mostly in the *foundational* sense. For example, Kantian deontology is monist since for Kant, «there is one overarching principle [i.e., the good intention], and all other principles are derived from it»<sup>4</sup>. Act-consequentialism can also be described as monist

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Kristian Klockars (University of Helsinki, Finland) as well as doctoral students from seven Nordic countries at the University of Tartu, Estonia, from May 24 to 30, 2009. Heartfelt thanks to all three of them as well as the organisers.

<sup>3</sup> Ross, W.D. What Makes an Act Right? // R. Shafer-Landau (ed.) *The Right and the Good*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007. P. 754.

<sup>4</sup> Mason E. Value Pluralism // *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* 2006. [Electronic resource] Mode of access: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/value-pluralism/#PluRatCho>.

because it takes the pain/pleasure tension as the single evaluative feature from which the utility maximisation procedure can be elaborated.

But Kantian deontology and rule-consequentialism (Peter Singer's ethics, for example) are absolutist theories nonetheless – *normatively*, that is – as they require that one should never infringe upon moral principles established on their respective foundational monist grounds (viz., versions of the categorical imperatives and rules relying on consequentialist grounds). So one has to be careful in understanding the meaning of these categories with regards to the host of theories they regroup. Again, even if Ross is said to be a deontologist, he remains pluralist in his approach to normativity (unlike Kant), thanks to his *prima facie* duties, which is another example showing that traditional categories of normative theories in ethics (deontology, consequentialism and virtue ethics) do not automatically fall under any of these meta-categories as regards their normative conceptions.

However, to get an overall picture out of such a complex, yet already oversimplified theoretical structure, one should acknowledge that normative monists necessarily have to argue that putative values (knowledge, love, etc.) are reducible to a single metavalue, such as utilitarian happiness, for example.<sup>5</sup> The continuous debate surrounding the possibility of performing such reductions concerning values or duties is one of the reasons why these categories of monism, absolutism and pluralism remain operative in all of the ethical discussions in analytic philosophy, alongside other distinctions of the like in metaethics, normative ethics and value theory. They are what I hitherto called a 'cogwheel' for the whole ethical endeavour formulated in analytical terms since these conceptual cogs altogether provide a definite terminology and structure to the analytic discussions in ethics.

## II. The Two Normative Existential Facts of Continental Ethics

When speaking of continental ethics here, I roughly refer to the ethical and proto-ethical traditions that have grown out of the Nietzschean, Kierkegaardian, Husserlian and late-Cohenian<sup>6</sup> writings, mainly in the first half of the twentieth century. At that point in time the role of ethics

<sup>5</sup> Mason, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> The name of Hermann Cohen (1842–1918) in this list of influential thinkers may surprise the reader. However, the Jewish philosophical lineage going from him to Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas as well as Gershom Sholem (as a critique of Cohen) and, to a lesser extent, Jacques Derrida is paramount for twentieth century philosophy. These thinkers were all clearly indebted to his late philosophy of religion exposed in *Der Begriff der Religion im System der Philosophie* (1915) and *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums* (1918; posthumously published). For a presentation of this often neglected Cohenian influence on twentieth century philosophy, see: Zac S. *La philosophie religieuse de Hermann Cohen*, Paris: Vrin, 1984; Malenfant G. Pourquoi l'existentialisme est-il né de penseurs religieux? Religion et éthique chez Hermann Cohen // *Horizons philosophiques: Héritage et réception de la pensée existentialiste*. 2006. № 16/2. P. 9–16.

began to be transformed quite radically by several philosophers at once: they moved ethics from being a discipline that provided justifications or rules for moral actions to one that researched explanations for the ways in which a reflection on morality could still be relevant (if even possible) in the wake of two excruciating world wars. As a result, normativity itself was modified: the very nature of what could thereafter be reasonably expected of ethical theories was changed. Normativity, from then on, could not simply be intention-, rule-, consequence- or duty-oriented; it had to find a new path if it were to be useful for humanity that lost its certainties and encountered horror twice within thirty years' time.

Evidently, the transformation started before the twentieth century with Nietzsche's famous 'death of God'<sup>7</sup>: the painful loss of the sole safeguard of values humanity possessed hitherto; a loss which came as the result of man's own will. But this was only the prequel of an intricate knot that was going to unravel throughout the centuries to come:

«After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave – a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the ways of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown».<sup>8</sup>

As Nietzsche predicted, humanity will have to fight this shadow for a long time: the temptation of resuscitating the ultimate safeguard of morality has not failed to haunt us. Unmistakably, however, the *Archè* was murdered by its own kin, which brought about the possibility of establishing various systems – insofar as minimally coherent – upon the very indentation now present where God's former stronghold on all moral and most theoretical affairs unshakably stood. Many disciplinary crossings became possible; many narratives became available to each other, and that, to whoever would want to build his or her value system from the ground up. But the very availability of these various and valid moral constructions came as a contradiction to what monist and absolutist moral systems were destined in the first place. With no meta-discourse to uphold any particular moral system, or system of belief more generally, how could man choose how to act? How could he be assured of his own condition as an agent? By attributing to ourselves the attributes of the gods, answered Nietzsche.

Remaining unclear, however, was the method allowing us to do so, as well as the outcome of such a barehanded endeavour towards this deification of humanity. To many, the Nietzschean response to God's death, through the Will to Power, was itself worse than the deicide; the

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<sup>7</sup> It could be argued that a few years before Nietzsche, Schopenhauer initiated this change in the nature of moral inquiry. However, Schopenhauer was still hopeful of finding a strong normative and motivational ground for morality, as can be seen in *On the Basis of Morality* and *Prize Essay on the Freedom of the Will* (both from 1839).

<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche F. *The Gay Science*, Walter Kaufman (trans.). New York: Random House, 1974, aph. 108.

cure worse than the disease (a feeling still shared by many philosophers, in all probability).

Nevertheless, as mentioned above, after two wars and their horrible tolls in human misery, some truthful normative aspect of this Nietzschean statement did become clear to many thinkers: the birth of a new artificial moral autonomy was the only option left for humankind. This time around, however, philosophy had to start its reflection on morality from a radically novel perspective since such a project could no more stand incontrovertibly on pre-Nietzschean meta-discourses and metaphysics, as these had obviously been unable to account for, and much less prevent, the distress that shattered Europe and its colonies.<sup>9</sup> As the former rationalistic *and* empiricist grounds were failing to provide humanity with satisfactory moral motivation for action as well as proper moral content, religious authorities were losing their metaphysical stranglehold on everything morally related. Equally important is the fact that available instances of determinism seemed furthermore intolerable for many intellectuals, as the very suffering of the many could no longer remain so easily legitimized – Leibnizian, Hegelian and Marxian philosophies of necessity became too painful and thorny to be supported blindly, for some at least, inasmuch as these eschatological constructions were crushed by the toilsome weight of the instrumental justifications provided for warlike misery.

In short, the only possible autonomy had to come from existence itself.

As such, the realization of the hitherto failure of ethics did not only purport the affirmation of a new humanistic autonomy and power, it also provoked the rejection, as I mentioned earlier, of what came to be considered as too high expectations for rationality. The limitation of the power of reason could no more be understood solely as an epistemological frontier, as Kant developed it in his antinomies of pure reason<sup>10</sup>, but rather as the impossibility of finding a practical *archè* as well.<sup>11</sup> Where

<sup>9</sup> Not to mention the inner foundational and theoretical problems of these metaphysics and meta-discourses; Nietzsche did not fail to point these out repeatedly. For example, see: Nietzsche, F. *Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, R. J. Hollingdale (trans.), New York: Penguin Books, 1990, see especially the aphorisms regrouped under the chapter «The Four Great Errors», p. 58–65.

<sup>10</sup> See: Kant I. *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1956. P. 437–465.

<sup>11</sup> «A secret path to the old ideal stood revealed, the concept ‘real world’, the concept of morality as the *essence* of the world (– these two most vicious errors in existence!) were once more, thanks to a crafty-sly scepticism, if not demonstrable yet no longer *refutable*... Reason, the *right* reason does not extend so far... Nothing works more profound ruin than any impersonal duty, any sacrifice to the Moloch of abstraction... Kant, in his ‘German’ innocence, tried to give this form of corruption, this lack of intellectual conscience, a scientific colouring with the concept of ‘practical reason’: he designed a reason specifically for the case in which one was supposed not to have to bother about reason, namely when morality, when the sublime demand ‘thou shalt’ makes itself heard» (Nietzsche F. *The Anti-Christ*,



Kant rationally presented different versions of his categorical imperative as that which can always guarantee the righteousness of an action beforehand; and where Mill propounded the consequential 'happiness' or 'utility' factor of an action as the sole voucher of its goodness, the existentialist saw a *void*. If one starts philosophising from an embodied perspective, existence is neither 'empirical', 'rational' nor 'emotional': it is all of these things and much more. Therefore, isolating consciousness, goodness, ipseity or agency through some occurrence of rationality or sensibility is tantamount to contriving an invalid option<sup>12</sup>, because this gesture amounts to the negation of what existence is in the first place – that is, profound *ambiguity*.

As a result, no categorical or structural cogwheel can be found for normative ethics as far as an existentialist ethics is concerned. This does not mean one should renounce inquiring into ethical matters, on the contrary, since philosophising from the point of view of existence means accounting for one's relationships with others as a primary concern. It rather means that for such 'postmodern' thinkers, one has to take the following claim seriously: existence itself has denied the validity of monist or absolutist ethical theories, which are now left to be reckoned as 'complex simplifications,' one could say. Each of them is incommensurable to its competing theoretical counterpart, and none of them can be considered more or less true than the other since any overarching category allowing for their meta-evaluation would be supervenient. In analytic terms, normative pluralism (which, let us remember, does not necessarily lead to or rest upon foundational pluralism) is no more a position one can support or reject: for the postwar existentialist, normative pluralism became an indubitable existential *fact* echoing much of the way Nietzsche had worked his own perspectivalism decades before. In contrast to Nietzsche, however, the existentialist project now has to live up to the task not only of resisting (1) the shadows of the gods – since one has to abandon the false hope of finding an absolutist or monist truth<sup>13</sup> – but also (2) the sway of a nihilism, which denies (to various extents, depending on the version one adopts) the importance of ethical reflection either through some variant of relativism or bad faith.<sup>14</sup>

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R.J. Hollingdale (trans.). New York: Penguin Books, 1990, excerpts from aph. 10 to 12).

<sup>12</sup> «One had made of reality an 'appearance'; one had made a completely *fabricated* world, that of being, into reality: German integrity was far from firm and Kant, like Luther, like Leibniz, was one more constraint upon it» (Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, op. cit., aph. 10).

<sup>13</sup> «The attitude of the sub-man passes logically into that of the serious man; he forces himself to submerge his freedom in the content which the latter accepts from society. He loses himself in the object in order to annihilate his subjectivity... The serious is not defined by the nature of the ends pursued. A frivolous lady of fashion can have this mentality of the serious as well as an engineer. There is the serious from the moment that freedom denies itself to the advantage of ends which one claims to be absolute» (Beauvoir S. de. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. New York: Citadel Press, 1976. P. 45).

<sup>14</sup> «[I]f he dishonestly refuses to recognize that this subjectivity necessarily transcends itself toward others, he will enclose himself in a false

Therefore, a (i) ‘first normative existential fact’ came to form the basic assumption of what we now recognize as ‘continental ethics’: where analytic ethics still accounts for plenty of versions of normative monism and absolutism – which remain crucial positions of its philosophical cogwheel – continental ethics has congealed the refusal of such orientations into the core of its conception of normativity (were these orientations to be perfectly grounded on rationality or sensibility). In other words, continental ethics considers these normative positions to be indefensible not on account of their being wrong or unsound, but on the contrary, on account of their being all too right(eous) even when they allow for moral madness to happen from an existential viewpoint. Thus, for continental thinkers, the problem with normative ethical theories does not so much lie in that monist and absolutist theories are incapable of providing us with ‘the good course of action.’ Rather, it does lie in the fact that *whether they do so or not is indifferent to them as they invariably rationalize, and thus justify all actions decided in accordance with their procedures, giving them an instant lustre of moral legitimacy.*

Indeed, if one reflects from the existentialist standpoint, applying a classical consequentialist or deontological moral evaluative procedure to concrete embodied situations amounts to begging the question of knowing whether or not there *is* a ground for choosing between two positions taken both to be rationally defensible. It also amounts to begging the question of knowing whether the isolated ‘good intention’ or ‘pain/pleasure tension’ – the foundational features of these theories – can serve as the central ethical property allowing us to choose how to act *in a world where these features are never isolated.* Even if these *were* truly intrinsically good (a question still debated in those terms mainly in analytic philosophy), existence does not provide us with quarantined happiness or intention. This (ii) ‘second normative existential fact’ – the very fact that features central to analytic normative ethical theories are always entangled with others from the existential perspective – is the reason why ethics *should* remain ambiguous for Simone de Beauvoir: ethics should not provide evil-doers with the possibility of hiding behind principles or features that in and by themselves would supply them with an imperative or a justification for their actions.<sup>15</sup>

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independence which will indeed be servitude ... His fault is believing that one can do something for oneself without others and even against them» (Beauvoir, op. cit., p. 63); de Beauvoir refers here to ‘the adventurer’, one of the many types of nihilists that she points out.

<sup>15</sup> This is also one of the most important philosophical points that can be traced back, in its original form, to Kierkegaard. However, one could ask if these two claims I make do identify ‘normative facts’ proper, but I believe we are permitted to say so, first because an existentialist ethics calls for (i) the rejection of monist or absolutist principles as normative justifications of individual actions, and second because it also calls for (ii) the acknowledgment that no definite isolated subjective feature can fully provide an agent with a normative reason or motivation to act. Notwithstanding the obvious negative aspects of these statements, their goal, as seen by the existentialist, is to reaffirm the central place both of



If the normative obscurity of continental ethics is precisely what tenants of the analytic trend tend to criticize, it is, on the contrary, what the existentialist considers as an enviable normative aspect of his or her own method. Accounting for the good here means rejecting the adolescent dream of practical omniscience as well as the easy comfort one gains from being confident that one can always enact 'the good'. It is to grant the individual with *all* possible choices – even the bad ones – while giving him or her valuable reasons *not* to refuse his or her own responsibility toward others:

«We object to inquisitors who want to create faith and virtue from without; we object to all forms of fascism which seek to fashion the happiness of man from without; and also the paternalism which thinks that it has done something for man by prohibiting him from certain possibilities of temptation, whereas what is necessary is to give him reason for resisting it».<sup>16</sup>

### III. Continental Philosophy as a Foundational Critique of Normative Ethics

So far, I have argued that during the course of the twentieth century and perhaps for the first time since the Greeks, the aftermath of the covered-up abyss that remained present between rationalistic ethical theories and existence proper became urgently significant both from an existential and ethical viewpoint. Many exceptions to this statement could be found throughout the history of philosophy; William of Ockham, for example, first pinpointed problems having to do with Scottist and Thomist self-indulgent onto-ethico-theological architectonics. But despite the true importance of such punctual philosophical exceptions, both the Husserlian reinvention of phenomenology and the Kierkegaardian incipience of existentialism brought about the most important reversal of essentialist metaphysics and ethics in history. Truly enough, the concept of 'phenomenology' had been used before Husserl (first by Lambert<sup>17</sup>, then by Kant, Fichte and of course Hegel). Yet in following Bernard Bolzano's logic of science (1835) and Franz Brentano's empirical psychology (1874), Husserl was able to capture, in an original and systematic fashion, the idea according to which both subjective and (somewhat) objective representations were possible, whereas before him, representations had mostly been conceived as purely subjective (by Kant, notably). This is usually understood as an important shift in the theory of knowledge or epistemology, and it is indeed the case: Husserl's theory allowed for the noetico-noematically two-sided coin of in-

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personal freedom and responsibility before moral choices, which is why I venture they should be understood as *normative*.

<sup>16</sup> Beauvoir, op. cit., p. 137.

<sup>17</sup> See: Lambert J.-H. *Neuer Organon*, last book entitled *Phenomenologie* (out of print except in a French version of this last book at Vrin, first published in 1764).

tentionality to fit into a single theory of subjectivity and consciousness. But there is more to this.

Husserl's eidetic phenomenology opened the door for thinkers that did not want to fall back on (1) relativism and/or nihilism while having been forced (2) to reject the rigidity of an objective monist or absolutist position either in epistemology or in ethics. Of the four pillars of 'continental ethics' that were mentioned before, two (Kierkegaard and Nietzsche) based their work on individual perspectives – on the singular instead of the universal – while the two others (Husserl and the late-Cohen) also founded their work on a conception of subjectivity, but more importantly, on a *tension* taking place between the individual and his or her incessant constitutive relationships with the world and others.<sup>18</sup> For all of them as well as for later continental philosophers, even if some foundational grounds for philosophy could be established still (ontologically, metaphysically or otherwise), these grounds now had to be devoid of any kind of objectivity in a normative sense – it was rather something they either combated or avoided – only to replace this long-established quest for monist and/or absolutist truth by descriptive mundane metaphysics (e. g. Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenologies), metaphorical inquiries (e. g., Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*; de Beauvoir's, Sartre's and Camus' works as novelists) and/or descriptive intersubjective insights (e. g., Cohen's philosophy of religion as well as Husserl's and Levinas' phenomenologies).

From there one can appreciate how a *foundational* transformation in epistemology indirectly discarded monism and absolutism as viable normative options, in addition to the direct Kierkegaardian and Nietzschean normative criticisms. Monist and absolutist normative theories were discredited from above, but also from below, as continental philosophers pointed out deficiencies both in the normative conclusions *and* foundational narratives of these theories: in the latter case, it happened mostly because their foundational features were tainted by the normative goals already selected for them by way of their isolation from other existential features (i. e., good intention, pain/pleasure tension). A *de facto* pluralism thus entered philosophy; pluralism so radical at times that thinkers, mostly interested in the philosophy of science and logic, were unable to accept it. Undoubtedly, a philosophical undertaking accepting not only (a) the normative necessity of ambiguity, but also (b) the impossibility of reducing difference to sameness in a traditional ontological sense deliberately does away with foundational attempts of

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<sup>18</sup> I have no intention of suggesting that there is a clash between the two groups of continental philosophers I am using here as 'pillars' of continental ethics. On the contrary, it is very clear that all four of their thoughts are very much related in many ways, and especially in their influence over later philosophers such as Heidegger for instance, who like so many others used Husserl's philosophy as well as Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's. However, for the purpose of this essay, I believe it is useful to understand them as representing different facets of the refusal of monism and absolutism by continental philosophy.

conceptual unification through logical perfection (at least from a realist perspective).

Now, (a) and (b) represent two sides of the same existential and ethical coin, since (a) refers to the ambiguities of the *normative* aspect of ethics which were exposed in the previous section of this essay via the presentation of the two existential assumptions of continental ethics that were concealed by essentialist ethical theories (de Beauvoir being a paradigmatic thinkers of these ambiguities); whereas (b) refers to the important *foundational* aspect of ethics with regards to how it was understood before Cohen, Buber, Levinas and Derrida (but also Lévi-Strauss, from a different approach). Their studies of 'relationality' qua 'metaphysical foundation' came as generators of a trend of philosophy that could be characterised as a 'metaphysics of the void': instead of hoping for the possibility of reducing concepts to others (such as is the case for putative values in monist normative ethics, for instance), these thinkers saw relationality itself as prior to the ontological differentiation of terms. In other words, their metaphysical thoughts do not depend on any specific ontological conceptions, but rather attempt to go under such established conceptions in various ways. Through their manifold theoretical instantiations – Cohen's and Buber's *Ich-Du* narratives, Levinas' encounter with the Other, Derrida's concepts of *différance*, *espacement* or *trace* – these philosophies struggle to find some grounds for ethics while refusing to rest on the logical isolation of an agent, or of an agent's rational or perceptual features. Their common goal, if one can speak in such terms, is to account for heterogeneity as a proper metaphysics that would allow for ontological differences to happen, and thus, for ethics to become a crucial existential phenomenon (Derrida's *hospitalité*, for instance) rather than a normative cogwheel.

In contrast, it is no coincidence if A.J. Ayer refused ethics as a proper discipline on the basis that there could be no «ethical science», since he is right – even from the continental point of view – that «ethical concepts are unanalyzable [by formal logic], inasmuch as there is no criterion by which one can test the validity of the judgments in which they occur»<sup>19</sup>. For most analytic philosophers in the fifties, ethical judgments were either logically valid or meaningless. Since then, metaethics has tried to identify the status of ethical propositions with regards to their actual denotations (via realism) or to emotivism (via non-realism), for instance. But even at a meta-ethical level, this is precisely the type of dichotomies that twentieth century continental philosophy has hoped to surpass or undermine: the universal truths of formal logic cannot give a proper account of what it means to make an ethical judgment because it cannot give a proper account of what is an ethical *experience*. If it is understood merely through logical validity, universalism thus becomes a kind of reductionism unfit to discuss ethical questions; and it is precisely to escape such reductionism that continental philosophers developed other methods of philosophical inquiry.

<sup>19</sup> Ayer A.J. A Critique of Ethics // R. Shafer-Landau (ed.) *Language, Truth and Logic*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007. P. 20.

#### IV. Existentialism is (also) a Pluralism – Against ‘Sacred Games’

What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must not we ourselves become gods simply to appear worthy of it?<sup>20</sup>

But some analytic philosophers also refused to go along with such normative or foundational reductionisms. Ross’ pluralist ethics of *prima facie* duties is a good example showing that certain rapprochements can be made between continental and analytic ethicists inasmuch as pluralism is taken as a common ground:

«When I ask what it is that makes me in certain cases sure that I have a *prima facie* duty to do so and so, I find that it lies in the fact that I have made a promise; when I ask the same question in another case, I find the answer lies in the fact that I have done a wrong. And if on reflection I find (as I think I do) that neither of these reasons is reducible to the other, I must not on any *a priori* ground assume that such reduction is possible».<sup>21</sup>

«Which action is good? Which is bad? To ask such a question is also to fall into a naïve abstraction. We don’t ask the physicist, ‘Which hypotheses are true?’ Nor the artist, ‘By what procedures does one produce a work whose beauty is guaranteed?’ Ethics does not furnish recipes any more than do science and art<sup>22</sup>. One can merely propose methods».<sup>23</sup>

For both Ross and de Beauvoir, the abstract universalism which, in ethics, refers to monism and absolutism *can only be seen* as an attempt to reach some reductive ready-made normative truths one can easily apply to any morally difficult situation. Yet this is precisely the kind of truths Nietzsche predicted was going to be enacted as ‘festivals of atonement’ or ‘invented sacred games.’ Again, however, one can ask: «What are we saying when we speak of such ‘sacred games’? Are logic and sound arguments not the only paths towards truth with regards to ethical statements, however one conceives it?» Let us see an example of the ways in which the use of logic can be practiced as a sacred game.

Jacques Derrida has sometimes been depicted as an unreadable writer (by John Searle, namely) or even as a sort of charlatan by certain analytic philosophers because, notably, he said impossible things such as: «*Oui je n’ai qu’une langue, or ce n’est pas la mienne*» [«Yes, I have only one language, yet it is not mine»]. By way of this expression, Derrida developed his thought on the ‘ruling’ dimension of language as it is received from an other, as a form of law; in this sense, a language is something I am ‘possessed by,’ through my own utterances, rather than

<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche F. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, R.J. Hollingdale (trans.). New York: Penguin Books, 1961.

<sup>21</sup> Ross, op. cit., p. 755.

<sup>22</sup> It is noteworthy that Ross also makes a similar comparison with art. See Ross, op. cit., p. 757.

<sup>23</sup> de Beauvoir, op. cit., p. 134.

something I fully possess and use like a tool – a fact which allows for connotations which are not primarily intended by speakers, for instance. To this sentence, however, an opponent of his replied at once that it was a «*contradiction performative*» [«pragmatic contradiction»], an attack to which Derrida answers at length:

«Who do we often blame for doing a “pragmatic contradiction,” today, hastily? Those who marvel at things, wonder, and ask themselves questions, those who take on the responsibility of embarrassing themselves with such questions. Some German or Anglo-American theorists thought they have found, with this, an unanswerable strategy; they even developed a specialty out of this puerile weapon. Regularly, one witnesses them as they are using the same criticism against this or that opponent, preferably a French-speaking philosopher... Its mechanism, by and large, goes as follows: “Ah! You ask questions about truth, oh well, to this very extent, you do not even believe in truth, you contest the possibility of truth. How could we, then, take your claims seriously when their aim is to be somehow truthful ...? The things you say are not true insofar as you call truth into question... Come on, you are a sceptic, a relativist, a nihilist; you are not a serious philosopher! If you go on, we will put you in a department of rhetoric or literature [or sophistic, he goes on saying!]»<sup>24</sup>

This rant at Anglo-American philosophy may be seen as harsh, but it clearly presents what type of formal argument is refused by most continental philosophers: what appears, on the part of continental philosophy, to be a kind of argumentative fetishism is believed, on the part of analytic philosophy, to be the only way through which proper meaningfulness can come through. That is to say that ‘logical rules’ – which form the camshaft allowing for the cogwheel of ethics to turn, in analytic philosophy – do not have a decisive impact on continental argumentations if they are used merely in formal terms. Such an assertion does not mean that sophisms or unsound arguments are welcome in continental philosophy; it rather means that from the standpoint of continental philosophy, one cannot ( $\alpha$ ) invalidate a proposition simply on the basis of some formal or practical ambiguity, and that one cannot ( $\beta$ ) reduce symbols, words or propositions to a system of signification which would be either true or false exclusively. As a mark of coherence, one can notice that these two statements on the relation of continental philosophy to logic mirror the normative and foundational shifts that existentialists and phenomenologists performed against monism and absolutism. This is definitely no coincidence: to ground ethics on the possibility of this sort of universal truth-value and reductionism (i. e., against ambiguity and heterogeneity) amounts to partake in a ceremonial of compensation for a god that died. However, such an enclosed sacred game has been rejected by continental philosophers a while ago, but also by pluralist accounts in analytic philosophy:

<sup>24</sup> Derrida, J. *Le monolinguisme de l'autre ou la prothèse d'origine*, Paris: Galilée 1996. P. 18 (my translation).

«The essential defect of the “ideal utilitarian” theory is that it ignores, or at least does not do justice to, the highly personal character of duty. If the only duty is to produce the maximum of good, the question who is to have the good – whether it is myself, or my benefactor, or a person to whom I have made a promise to confer that good on him, or a mere fellow man to whom I stand in no such special relation – should make no difference to my having a duty to produce that good. But we are all in fact sure that it makes a vast difference».<sup>25</sup>

«The uniqueness of the Self [*Moi*] is the fact that nobody else can answer for him or her [*à sa place*]. The appraisal [*mise en question*] of the Self by the Other is not initially an act of reflection through which the Self reappears therein, glorious and serene. But neither is it the advent [*l'entrée*] of the Self within a coherent and universal supra-rational discourse».<sup>26</sup>

Ross and Levinas both argue that ethicists should acknowledge their rational systematisations of ethical dilemmas as incapable of corresponding with actual ethical experiences that take place at an existential level, for an actual human being who cannot be replaced by another. They both argue against the disincarnating aspect of ethical theories that reduces persons to anonymous ‘agents’ or ‘tokens’. And here again, on both sides, pluralism is the key to shedding light upon the shadows of the gods.

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<sup>25</sup> Ross, op. cit., p. 755.

<sup>26</sup> Levinas E. *Transcendance et hauteur* // C. Chalier, M. Abensour (eds.) *Cahier de l'Herne. Emmanuel Lévinas*. Paris: Éditions de l'Herne, 1991. P. 57 (my translation).