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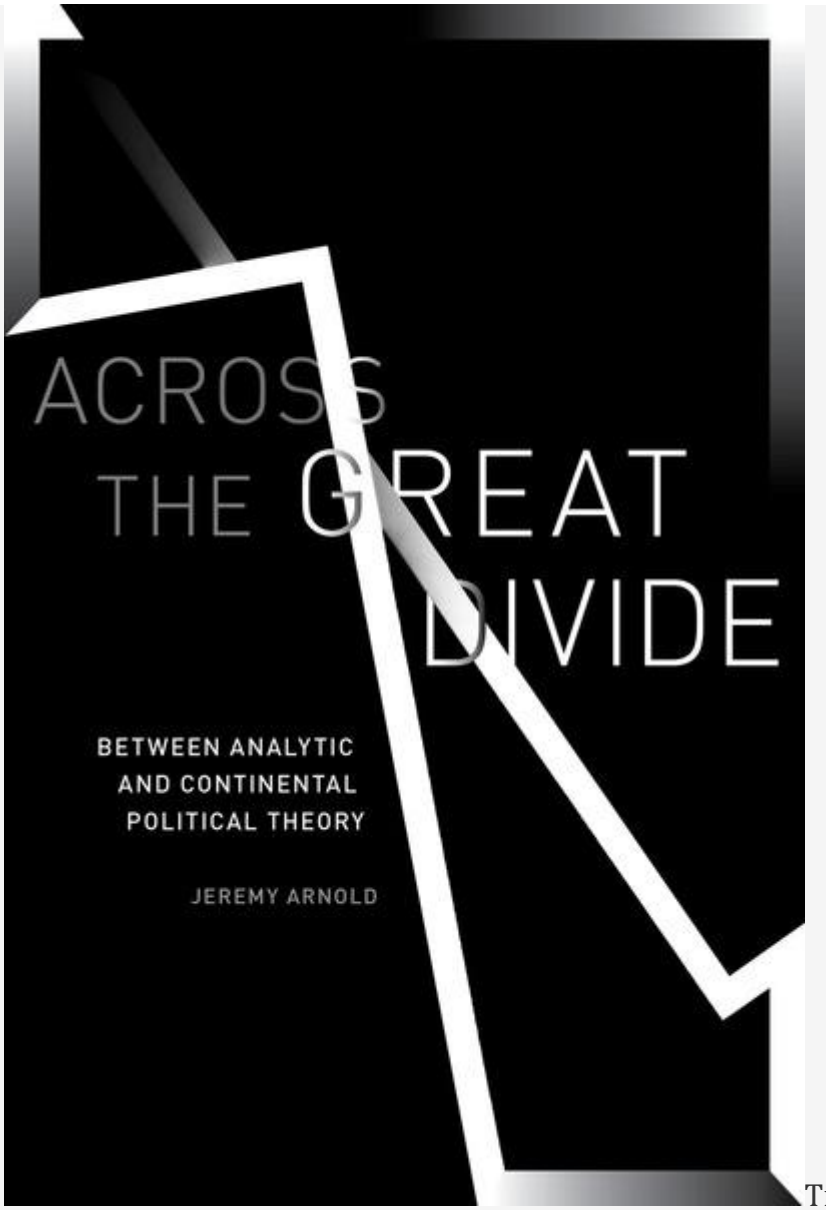
Jeremy Arnold: Across the Great Divide: Between Analytic and Continental Political Theory

Ben Turner



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Disagreements over the nature of the divide between continental and analytical philosophy are perhaps as common as disputes between these two parts of the discipline. A consequence of the heterogeneity of understandings of this division is that attempts to cross it are often isolated cases rather than widespread philosophical practices. Jeremy Arnold's *Across the Great Divide: Between Analytic and Continental Political Theory* represents one such attempt to construct a bridge between the two traditions within political philosophy rather than philosophy as such. In doing so he makes two claims: that 'political theorists and philosophers ought to engage in…*cross-tradition theorizing*' and that what he calls '*aporetic cross-tradition theorizing* is a viable and attractive mode of cross-tradition theorizing' (14). In contrast to what Arnold calls the synthetic mode, which seeks to unify the two traditions within a single theory, the aporetic mode highlights the incompatibilities between the two traditions and shows how *neither* can give exhaustive accounts of political concepts. Arnold's claim that the aporetic mode is a desirable mode of thinking across traditions is compelling due to the strength it lends to arguments in favour of theoretical and methodological pluralism in political theory. However, one might question the extent to which the aporetic mode is truly as agnostic with respect to method as it is intended to be.

Before moving to an overview and evaluation of the argument that Arnold makes in favour of the aporetic mode, it is worth highlighting the complexity that is added to the task of defining the divide between continental and analytic schools when it is examined within political philosophy. Within philosophy, one can begin from clear historical examples, as Arnold does (1-3), in which divisions between Husserl and Heidegger, on the one hand, and thinkers such as Ryle, Russel, Carnap and Frege, on the other, were established in the early to mid 20th century. It is a more complex task to identify the manner in which this division was transferred to political philosophy because of what Arnold acknowledges as the discipline's 'capacious' character (5). Oscillation between the terminology of 'political theory' and 'political philosophy' indicates nominal differences which unfold in a variety of ways, such as the distinction between those based in philosophy departments and those in political science departments or the way political *science* and political *philosophy* are differentiated. In addition to the continental/analytical axis, political philosophy or theory is also divided along another axis which distinguishes it from political science or philosophy more broadly.

Arnold's argument is situated within this definitional quagmire and is admirable for the clarity of the position which it articulates. Political *theory*, for Arnold, emerges in the context of the influence of European emigres to America upon normative debates regarding the crisis of liberalism and methodological debates regarding behaviourism in political science (4-5). Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, and Eric Voegelin are pivotal in the constitution of political theory insofar as they carried with them a set of continental influences that were critical of both liberalism and positivism, such as Heidegger, Nietzsche and Weber. Political *philosophy,* in contrast, has a simpler genealogy. It 'has its institutional home primarily in philosophy departments, which in the Anglophone world are largely analytic' (4). Normative political philosophy owes as much to its proximity to analytic moral philosophy as it does to debates about the nature of the political (6-7). Consequently, two different approaches to liberalism arise from these historical circumstances (7-8). Politically, liberalism is criticised by political theorists and endorsed by political philosophers of continental and analytic dispositions respectively. Methodologically, analytic political philosophers put great stock in the content of intuitions, particularly those of a liberal variety, whereas continental political theorists are more likely to scrutinise the ideological basis of these intuitions due to their scepticism of dominant liberal values.

That political philosophy is largely analytic and political theory is largely continental is cemented by Arnold's articulation of three key differences within the contemporary unfolding of these historical trajectories. First, analytical political philosophers engage in justifying resolutions to problems found within political concepts, whereas continental political philosophers are more concerned with highlighting the impossibility of this enterprise (9). Second, this leads to differences in 'style, interdisciplinarity and canon' (11). An eclectic canon of references in the case of continental political philosophy–such as psychoanalysis, literature, film studies and neuroscience–leads to a wider diversity of argumentative styles, whereas a more tightly honed argumentative style is characteristic of analytic philosophy's lesser use of interdisciplinary materials (11-13). Third, where analytical political philosophers work within a framework that is at the very least sympathetic to modernity and seeks to correct its wrongs, continental political theory is largely critical of the consequences of modernity (13-14).

Arnold's overview of these differences is striking because it shows how *Beyond the Great Divide* is as much about bridging the divide between political *theory* and political *philosophy* as much as it is about the division between continental and analytic thinkers. To establish aporetic cross-tradition theorizing as the most desirable way of bridging this gap, Arnold argues that both traditions offer something to the study of political phenomena. Political phenomena are *dense*: a single concept, such as freedom, is not only defined by historical complexities and a range of practical interpretations; theorists which try to explain them bring their own normative and explanatory baggage to these problems (14-15). For Arnold, these dense concepts cannot be exhausted by a single theory. Consequently, each tradition responds to different elements of political problems–analytic political philosophers engage in the conceptual justification of reasons for the legitimacy or acceptability of particular political practices or expressions of power, whereas continental political philosophy highlights the historical, cultural or social contingency of those concepts and often the impossibility of any 'final' justification for them. More often than not these are incompatible philosophical trajectories. Aporetic cross-tradition theorising is justified with reference to the intellectual payoff of utilising both traditions to investigate dense phenomena.

Arnold gives three reasons for this. First, if political phenomena are dense and if the methods and approaches within the two traditions that approach them are irreconcilable, then no single approach can exhaust the complexity of the concepts studied within political theory. Synthetic cross-tradition theorising can only fail in the face of the fact that 'dense phenomena contain irreconcilable elements, elements we cannot eliminate and cannot unify' (17). The aporetic mode, in contrast, recognises that we cannot resolve these tensions. Second, the aporetic mode turns this irresolvability into a virtue. Different phenomena and conceptual approaches have a range of intellectual needs. By navigating across these approaches, the aporetic mode seeks to 'discover the limits of our intellect' insofar as a single account will never be exhaustive of political phenomena (19). Third, Arnold argues that the aporetic mode has 'at its ethical core the demanded of the singular, embodied, all-too-real coerced individual, the simple demand for justification, for an answer to "why?"' (20). If analytic political philosophy is often abstract and ignores concrete individuals in its justification of particular concepts and if continental philosophy focuses on the contingencies of concepts and eschews justification, then neither, for Arnold, can truly live up the simple fact that political practices involve individuals who need to be

addressed with a justification for the exercise of power. If these approaches are translated into the aporetic mode, this can lead to 'a powerful expression of the unrealizable but valuable ethical and political ideal of answering to *this* person's subjection to power with reasons *this* person can accept' (21). With this third claim Arnold switches from a methodological to an ethico-political register that addresses what he perceives as a deficiency common to both traditions: their abstraction from justifications that are acceptable to everyday individuals.

This argument is established over two main sections. The first consists of an overview and critique of two approaches to synthetic cross-tradition theorizing, realist political philosophy and the work of Stanley Cavell, whilst the second consists of two examples of aporetic cross-tradition theorizing, comparing Philip Pettit and Arendt, and John Rawls and Jacques Derrida. The first section discusses the difficulty of finding a justification for state violence in both realism and Cavell, whereas the second discusses freedom as found in Pettit and Arendt, and justice as found in Rawls and Derrida. Arnold's aim across these chapters is to move from the deficiencies of the synthetic mode of cross-tradition theorizing to an advocation of the aporetic mode, whilst also producing meaningful insights into the thinkers and topics covered.

The first substantive chapter of the book deals with realism. According to Arnold, the realist critique of moralism in political philosophy represents an example of synthetic cross-tradition theorizing. The goal of this synthetic enterprise is the production of claims to legitimacy based on terms that would be acceptable to those individuals rather than on pre-political moralistic arguments of the kind articulated by figures like Rawls, Cohen or Nozick. Realists seek to provide *political* rather than *pre-political* accounts of justification and of legitimacy. Ultimately, Arnold argues, the synthetic mode is not up to this task. This claim is based on the argument that realists do not adequately distinguish between state legitimacy and the legitimacy of state violence. This difficulty arises as much from realism's synthetic method as it does from the intellectual problem of legitimacy.

Realism is synthetic insofar as it combines the need for justification and legitimacy characteristic of the analytic tradition with an attention to context, history and conflicting interpretations of political events characteristic of continental thought. One might lose a particular political battle over the interpretation of, say, whether the state is

legitimate in imposing a particular form of taxation, but those who disagree with such an account may still find its terms acceptable (39). In the case of state violence, however, Arnold argues that interpretation does not provide a strong enough case for legitimating that violence in terms that an individual could accept–for it is likely that there are multiple competing interpretations within which state violence is not legitimate. Moreover, if in these interpretations state violence is not agreeable to the individual who is subject to it, then it can only be justified in pre-political terms which realists reject (41). By synthesising the analytic justificatory impulse with the continental emphasis on interpretation and conflict, realists end up satisfying *neither* demand in the case of state violence (47). Rather than trying to *synthesise* these two demands, Arnold argues that instead the aporia represented by the tension between the need for justification and its impossibility should be embraced as a core element of realist theorising about legitimacy.

Violence is also the political issue at stake in Arnold's critique of Cavell. In Cavell's reading of the social contract tradition, our participation in community implies complicity with the exclusions that are a necessary part of social life (49-50). Cavell diverges from the classical aim of the contract, to justify state violence through consent, in order to explore how we are morally compromised by our participation in unjust societies. Arnolds's reading of Cavell makes two claims. First, he argues that Cavell's focus on social violence is too general to make sense of the specificity of *political* issues relating to consent. Second, the focus on consent as membership of a community rather than the authorisation and legitimation of state action and violence means that Cavellian consent cannot account for this integral part of the '"grammar" of political consent' (52). Arnold makes this case by emphasising the role that the community plays in underpinning the search for reasons in Cavell. Claims to reason find their transcendental conditions in community and draw on the distinct grammar of those communities (58). However, for Arnold Cavell does not provide sufficient detail for articulating the grammar of a specifically political community because consent is primarily an issue of complicity with social violence that arises from one's participation in community *as such* (62-3). Consent merely implicates one in social violence within a particular community but does not expressly authorise the legitimate use of violence by the state.

This reading of Cavell continues the line of argument found in the previous chapter on realism, however, the link between synthetic cross-tradition theorising and the criticism of Cavell's work is less clear. When

considered as a form of cross-tradition theorising, realism falls short of providing a convincing justification of state violence because its synthetic method fails to reconcile the justificatory project of analytic political philosophy with continental political theory's emphasis on interpretation. Within Arnold's critique of Cavell, however, method is at a distance from the problem of legitimacy. Cavell utilises a synthetic method which treats philosophical texts *as texts* and not simply as examples of political argumentation: a continental method is synthesised with analytical texts. Arnold argues that this method falls short insofar as by reading texts 'as texts we will often fail to take them seriously, on their own terms' (75). Cavell's method fails to treat analytical texts on their own terms precisely because he treats them as *texts* and not as pieces of philosophical argumentation. There is no disputing that this is a salient issue in an account of why cross-tradition theorising in the aporetic mode is superior to the synthetic mode. However, the criticism of the substance of Cavell's account of violence and consent is at a remove from this methodological complaint: one might criticise the category of social violence *without* recourse to a critique of synthetic cross-tradition theorising. Thus, while *both* of these points stand it does not appear that the account of legitimacy in Cavell is essential to pursuing the project of advocating for aporetic cross-tradition theorising, and the point *against* the synthetic mode is somewhat weakened as a result (an issue that we will return to).

Following this critique of Cavell, *The Great Divide* shifts gear into advocating openly for aporetic cross-tradition theorising. In contrast to the first two chapters, where realism and the work of Cavell were taken as examples of synthetic cross-tradition theorizing, in the remaining chapters Arnold seeks to engage in aporetic cross-tradition theorizing himself. It is here that Arnold turns to the work of Arendt and Pettit on freedom and Rawls and Derrida on justice. Each of these chapters represents an attempt to demonstrate the viability of the aporetic mode by showing 'that a crucial feature of the concept theorized by a representative of one tradition cannot be harmonized with another crucial feature of that concept when theorized from the other tradition' (76). The account of Arendt and Pettit spans two chapters which deal with freedom as such and political freedom respectively. At issue in both is the problem of control: whether it concerns freedom in general or political freedom, Pettit and Arendt's respective approaches to control do not fully explain the density of the concept of freedom. As such, an aporetic approach is necessary to do justice to the complexity of freedom as a dense concept.

For Pettit freedom in general is understood in terms of responsibility. Responsibility gives a richer understanding of freedom than accounts which focus on the rational control of one's actions or the ability to align one's actions with second-order desires (volitional control) because, in Pettit's account, freedom as responsibility requires the agent to exert 'discursive' control over the connections between their actions (81). Responsibility arises from the ability to give an account for the links between actions, for which rational and volitional control are necessary but not sufficient conditions. For Arnold, this leaves three common questions about freedom unanswered: what is its value, can freedom be spontaneous, and to what extent can we distinguish between acts that are considered as free because we exercise them consciously and those that arise from 'virtual' control or habit (84-9). These criticisms are introduced to facilitate the transition to Arendt's concept of freedom, wherein freedom has a clear value: the capacity to create something new. Moreover, free acts must not be guided or dictated by others or by the self. They must be spontaneous (92-5). Free acts create something new under conditions of spontaneity while *also* maintaining that this act is intelligible to others. Arendt's account of freedom shows, in contrast to liberal theories of non-interference, that a lack of control of the sovereign self is valuable for free action. While Arnold is more critical of Pettit than Arendt he is not dismissive of the former: the purpose of this comparison is to highlight that freedom as control and freedom as a lack of control represent irreconcilable accounts of freedom that nevertheless *both* have something valuable to say about freedom as a dense concept.

This insight is pursued further in Arnold's account of specifically political forms of freedom in Pettit and Arendt. Both accounts fail to exhaust the permutations of political freedom as a dense concept. Pettit elaborates upon the conditions of freedom as non-domination, where republican institutions are intended to ensure that political decisions and forms of interference are non-dominating insofar as they track the interests of citizens (106-7). Freedom is conditioned as citizens can be subject to interference so long as their interests are tracked, and thus enhanced, by government action (106-8). In contrast, Arendt is concerned with institutions that support isonomy, or the ability to participate in unconditioned 'disclosive' action that reveals something about the world and that makes it meaningful to others (124-5). Isonomy is Arendt's response to the conditions of modernity in which the ability of all to participate in political action is negated by conditions of alienation from both oneself and the world (125-7). Arnold's account is intended to

bring out the difference between Pettit and Arendt in sharp relief. Arendtian political freedom is incompatible with the kind of interference Pettit describes, no matter how non-dominating it intends to be, and the republican theory of non-domination would require a degree of self-control and control by the state for actions to be classed as free that would be unacceptable for Arendt.

As we already know, the aim of this account of Pettit and Arendt is not simply to state that they have different accounts of freedom. Instead, Arnold aims to show how they each run into difficulties that provide meaningful insights about the nature of freedom as a dense concept. While he seeks to distance himself from the difficulties associated with positive liberty that also plague forms of republicanism, Pettit fails to eliminate them. The classic critique of positive liberty is that aligning the state with the interests of citizens in a way that shapes the liberty of those citizens requires interference which, in Rousseau's famous words, forces those citizens to be free (109-11). Pettit's version of political freedom is intended to avoid the problems of republicanism in the Rousseauian and Kantian traditions, but for Arnold the state fostering of discursive control ends up repeating the problems of positive liberty. Arendt is faced with the opposing problem. A political entity based on the ideal of isonomy might have as its aim the defence of the right to unconditioned action, but it is difficult to conceive of an institution which could both create and maintain a political space while also refraining from controlling actors within those spaces (132-45). A synthetic account of freedom in Pettit and Arendt would attempt to iron out these issues by combining their opposed approaches into a single system. Arnold's case, however, is that there is more value in treating them as distinct and irreconcilable approaches that are plagued by their own problems. If political concepts are dense, then a single, synthetic account would still fall short of the *impossible* goal of unifying several perspectives in a way that exhausts the complexity of political concepts.
The same approach is applied in Arnold's reading of Rawls and Derrida, where he focuses on their attempts to provide non-metaphysical accounts of justice. Arnold gives an account of the changes that Rawls' makes to his system between *Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism*, focusing on the stability of the principles of justice chosen from behind the veil of ignorance. In *Theory of Justice* they are chosen according to rational principles shared by all individuals, whereas in *Political Liberalism* the definition of society used to guide deliberation within the

original position represents the fundamental ideas of constitutional democracies (143-144). For Arnold, this non-metaphysical justification made with reference to historical conditions fails as it invests the historical trajectory towards liberalism with metaphysical significance for considerations of justice (154-5). Derrida's account of justice suffers from the opposite problem. Here the question posed by Arnold is how one can move from a quasi-metaphysical account of justice to a historical account of its permutations? Arnold does an admirable job of simplifying the aporias within Derrida's understanding of justice: justice requires the absolute singularity of the decision, as it is 'owed to a singular other', but it must occur through the application of rules which are not singular (163). Justice, therefore, is irreducible to history but must be realized within it. The issue that Derrida runs into here, according to Arnold, is the necessity of law in this process. Why must justice take place through legal institutions? This is clarified with respect to Derrida's account of forgiveness: even though no act of forgiveness can live up to the forgiving of the unforgivable, we would nevertheless still recognise an act of forgiveness as participating in this unreachable ideal form. This is not true of justice: it is manifestly clear that legal institutions do not just live up to the ideal of justice because it requires an unconditioned decision on behalf of the other, but also because some legal institutions would not be considered to be just in *any* manner. Bridging the gap between justice and history is difficult for Derrida, insofar as it is unclear why justice as a quasi-metaphysical idea must be realised in the factual institution of law (169).

In Arnold's account, both Rawls and Derrida fail to produce non-metaphysical conceptualisations of justice. The former turns to history but by doing so transforms its contingencies into metaphysical justifications, whereas the latter fails to provide a convincing reason for the link between a quasi-metaphysical form of justice and the historical fact of law. Again, a synthetic account of justice would eradicate this complexity. The density of the relationship between metaphysics and politics can only be fully appreciated in an aporetic mode where the need to dispense with metaphysics must co-exist with the necessity of metaphysical grounding (170). This problem cannot be overcome, and therefore a synthetic approach to it will necessarily fail in its attempt to do so.

Arnold concludes with three reasons why the model of aporetic cross-tradition theorizing demonstrated across the accounts of freedom and

justice in Pettit, Arendt, Rawls and Derrida is a desirable one. First, the aporetic mode is more viable than the synthetic because it refuses to treat political problems as 'solved,' whereas the synthetic mode attempts to resolve political problems despite the impossibility of this task in the face of dense concepts (172-5). A brief example is given here of how calls for reparations from the accumulation of American wealth through slavery are characterised by complex and contradictory elements of historical and metaphysical justifications which an aporetic form of theorising might make sense of. Second, aporetic theorising challenges the cloistering of intra-tradition debates and opens political theory to new discussions and the discovery of new problems (178-179). Third, and similarly, it fosters an ethic of openness and responsiveness to the differences between approaches to political theory as a discipline and a recognition of how what is common within one part of the discipline may, in fact, pose a serious intellectual problem in another.

Arnold's case for the aporetic mode is a compelling one, particularly in the context of methodological developments in political theory that call for comparative methods that refuse the possibility of exhaustive, synthetic theoretical enterprises. However, we might consider the extent to which aporetic theorising, while appealing, is truly agnostic with respect to the traditions that it attempts to treat equally. If we take Arnold's own definition of analytic political philosophy, it would appear that the aporetic method is something that most analytical thinkers would view as defeatist obfuscation. Contrastingly, this method fits very neatly into the continental perspective which seeks to press problems in order to uncover aporias rather than resolve them.[1] Aporetic cross-tradition theorising may draw on both traditions, but it could be said to do so from a broadly *continental* perspective that focuses on the value of intellectual aporias. Of course, Arnold's perspective is an account of the intellectual characteristics of analytic political philosophy as a tradition. Justification may be an aim of this tradition as a whole, but individual thinkers would most likely accept the point that no single account will exhaust a particular political problem or phenomena. Understood in this way Arnold is brought back to the agnostic ground between continental and analytical perspectives, as the eponymous aporia of the aporetic approach could be seen to represent a claim about intellectual inquiry rather than the nature of political problems.

However, Arnold *does* hold to the stronger version of this claim which stresses that dense political concepts cannot be fully explained. This is

noteworthy because density does not *necessarily* have as its consequence a total failure of explanation. While analytical thinkers may indeed accept that no single account exhausts the density of concepts, this tradition as a whole would be more receptive to the gradual unpacking and explication of dense concepts across multiple, competing accounts of the phenomena they represent. Here complexity is not insurmountable. In contrast, continental thinkers would be more likely to hold to a thicker understanding of complexity in which both the phenomena and the explanation are equally complex, and which must be integrated into the very nature of political inquiry. Density in the analytic tradition is a concern for the political philosopher, whereas in the continental it is the political *itself* which is dense and thus complexity is a concern for both the theorist and the political agent. We might also note here that Arnold's account of the problem of the return of metaphysics faced by the post-metaphysical political theories of both Rawls and Derrida is a quintessentially a continental way of thinking about these problems. Indeed, it is one that is explored within Derrida's own work. While Arnold might be seen to be agnostic with respect to the two traditions, insofar as he characterises political problems themselves as aporetic he could be seen to be a 'continental' thinker.

Leaning to one side or the other of the divide is not necessarily a problem for Arnold's position. Analytic or continental thinkers engaging in cross-tradition theorising have to start from somewhere. However, this unacknowledged propensity towards one side rather than the other belies challenges that face the argument made in *The Great Divide*. While political phenomena are treated as dense, one might also note that the divide between analytic and continental thinkers is itself a dense and complex concept. Arnold does not give the impression that he is of the opinion that his account of the difference between the two traditions is the only one. However, the multiplicity of ways of distinguishing between the two traditions is a problem that is not dealt with in the course of the defence of aporetic cross-tradition theorizing. Moreover, if the division between the two traditions is contested, one might also contest the division between synthetic and aporetic modes of cross-tradition theorising. The aporetic and synthetic modes are not necessarily opposed or mutually exclusive: one might engage in aporetic inquiry and recognise elements of two thinkers that can be synthesised, or one might engage in a synthetic inquiry that highlights incompatible aspects of two systems of thought.

Arnold's conclusions are pre-empted with the claim that while cross-tradition theorising is taking place between political theory and other

disciplines, there is a lack of cross-tradition theorising that 'moves between' analytic and continental political theory (171). This advocation of the aporetic mode takes the above points for granted: the difference between the two traditions is simple rather than complex, that the complexity of political phenomena is by necessity irreducible to explanation, and that synthetic and aporetic methods represent mutually exclusive methodological alternatives. The case for taking the aporetic path is a convincing one insofar as it presents methodological pluralism as a worthwhile goal. However, if disciplinary pluralism is our aim, then the most fruitful approach may be to commit more fully to the methodological agnosticism that Arnold sets out. While synthetic theorising may fail in the particular case of realist accounts of legitimacy, it is not clear that this rules out in advance the impossibility of situations where synthetic theorising is more beneficial than aporetic theorising. As noted above, the gap between the critique of Cavell's claims about violence and his textual method indicates that such an approach may be fruitful insofar as Arnold does not present a convincing argument as to why Cavell's failure to account for state violence is *necessarily* a result of his synthetic method, instead of a result of a disagreement about legitimacy itself.

Understood in this way, political theory might be best served by an understanding of synthetic and aporetic modes of cross-tradition theorising that sees them as tools to be used as appropriate for the political and conceptual challenges facing the theorist. Such an approach would go some way to alleviating the way that Arnold leans towards a more continental approach in his advocation of an aporetic method and would further the ethos of disciplinary pluralism that implicitly underpins his argument. I do not wish to suggest that any of these objections invalidate Arnold's argument–far from it. The value of *The Great Divide* is that it makes space for further discussion about how political theory navigates its own disciplinary divides, and for this it is a laudable intervention.

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[1] Here I refer to the work of Thomas J. Donahue and Paulina Ochoa Espejo, to which Arnold also refers. See: 'The analytical–Continental divide: Styles of dealing with problems,' *European Journal of Political Theory*, 15:2 (2016): 138–154