Philosophers' Détente

"Words and Things" by Hans-Johann Glock, in *Prospect* (Apr. 1999), 4 Bedford Sq., London, England WC1B 3RA.

For nearly a century, Western philosophy has been deeply divided between two antagonistic traditions: the analytic, which prevails in the English-speaking world, and the continental, which prevails in Europe and Latin America. Now Glock, a lecturer at the University of Reading, England, sees signs of "a limited thaw in philosophy's cold war."

Continental philosophy—which purports to be carrying on the great tradition of the past, taking on such profound questions as the meaning of life—has been enthusiastically embraced in the literature and language departments of both British and American universities. Meanwhile, analytic philosophy, which emphasizes logic and the aims and methods of natural science, "has become increasingly popular on the continent, even in France"—a development that may be due in part, Glock notes, to "the demise of Marxism and the general disillusionment with big systems of thought."

The lines between the two philosophical armies have blurred, Glock writes. "These days, hardly any analytic philosophers maintain that metaphysical theories are literally senseless simply because they can neither be verified nor falsified. Analytic philosophy's dismissal of moral questions has also waned, mainly because of the rise of 'applied ethics' . . . which tries to address concrete moral issues such as war, abortion, euthanasia, and eugenics."

The philosophical gulf between the two camps still exists, however. Continental philosophy "is basically Germanophone philosophy," Glock notes. "The dialectical, existentialist, phenomenological and hermeneutical traditions were inaugurated almost exclusively by German speakers (Hegel and Marx, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, Brentano and Husserl, Dilthey and Heidegger). . . . Although analytic philosophers have saved most of their bile for 20th century French philosophy, the latter is largely derived from Germanophone thinkers: Sartre from Husserl, Althusser from Marx, Foucault from Nietzsche, Lacan from Freud, Derrida from Heidegger."

While analytic philosophy also owes much to Ludwig Wittgenstein and other German-speakers (as well as to English thinkers Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore, and American pragmatists), its conflict with continental philosophy has historical roots. "In 1873, long before the rise of analytic philosophy, John Stuart Mill complained in his *Autobiography* about the baleful influence of German philosophy. . . . At roughly the same time, Marx and Nietzsche lampooned the ahistorical and superficial nature of Anglo-Saxon empiricism, utilitarianism and pragmatism."

Today, Glock writes, analytic philosophers are still inclined to think there is no knowledge outside natural science, while continental philosophers "draw on historical, social and cultural resources" outside it. Polymathic scholar Ernest Gellner (1925–95), notes Glock, once suggested that while most intellectuals, including continental philosophers, "pretend to understand things they don't really understand, analytic philosophers pretend not to understand things they understand perfectly well." Despite the apparent thaw, the difference persists.

SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & ENVIRONMENT

How PCs Replicate Inequality

"Home Computers and School Performance" by Paul Attewell and Juan Battle, in *The Information Society* (Jan.–Mar. 1999), Center for Social Informatics, School of Library and Information Science, 10th & Jordan, Indiana Univ., Bloomington, Ind. 47405–1801.

Does having a computer at home boost the academic performance of children? Analyzing data on some 18,000 eighth graders in 1988 (the latest year for which comparable data are available), Attewell and Battle, sociologists at the City

University of New York's Graduate School and University Center, find that a home computer does help—but it doesn't aid all children equally.

More than 5,000 of the eighth graders had computers at home, and, on average, their test scores were 10 to 12 percent higher in reading and math than those of their computerless peers. However, the kids with home computers, not surprisingly, tended to come from wealthier, better-educated families. Taking such factors into account, the average computer "edge" shrinks to about three to five percent—roughly the same advantage conferred by, say, making extracurricular visits to museums.

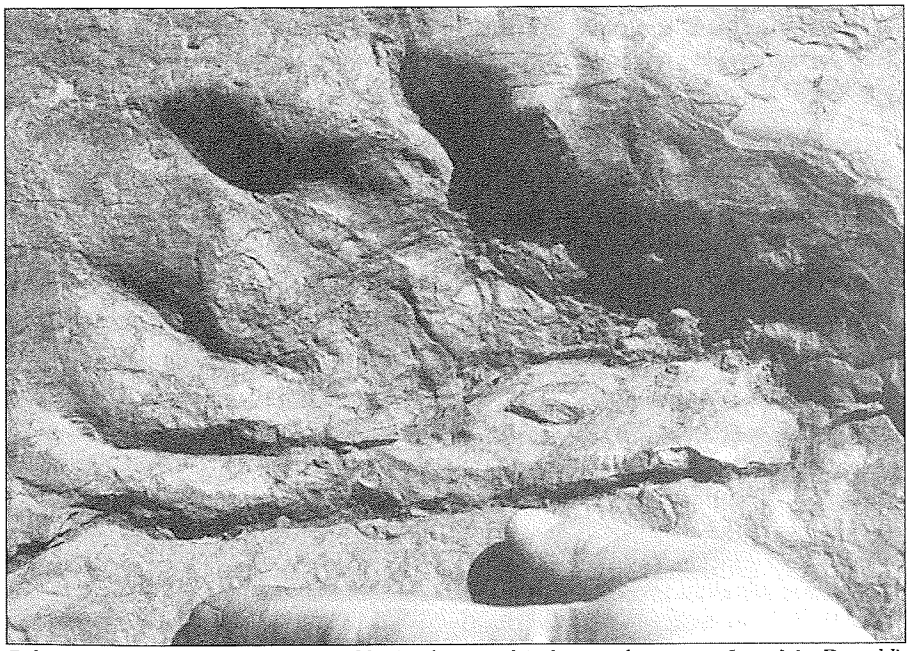
To the disappointment of the authors and others hoping that this peculiar home appliance would promote social equality, computers also seem to confer unequal advantages on those who use them. Children whose parents ranked high in socioeconomic status got a bigger academic boost from having a PC at home than did other computer-equipped kids whose parents lived in more humble circumstances. Boys derived more benefit than girls, and white children gained more than black and Hispanic ones. "Technology does not educate by itself," Attewell and Battle conclude. "Only if there is a conducive social environment does learning occur."

Small Science

"Amateur Science—Strong Tradition, Bright Future" by Forrest M. Mims III, in *Science* (Apr. 2, 1999), American Assn. for the Advancement of Science, 1200 New York Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

"Modern science," an editorial in *Science* proclaimed a few years ago, "can no longer be done by gifted amateurs with a magnifying glass, copper wires, and jars filled with alcohol." On the contrary, it *can* be and *is* being done, retorts Mims, a writer, teacher, and amateur scientist.

"Without remuneration or reward," he points out, "enthusiastic amateurs survey birds, tag butterflies, measure sunlight, and study transient solar eclipse phenomena. Others count sunspots, discover comets, monitor variable stars, and invent instruments." Most amateurs pursue their passion for science in their spare time, without getting much recognition. "Although some are



Paleontologists in New Mexico quickly (and unwisely) dismissed amateur Jerry MacDonald's claim to have discovered hundreds of well-preserved tracks of prehistoric animals like the one above.