

Michael Smith

(MS: Michael Smith, FL: Fiona Leigh)

FL: Let's start at the beginning: How did you come to be a philosopher? What attracted you to philosophy?

MS: The dumb answer is that I needed a fourth subject when I enrolled in the BA [Bachelor of Arts degree] at Monash. I had had a high school English teacher, Mrs Hunter, who used to say to me 'You really should do philosophy!' so I chose philosophy to be that subject. I started university planning to be a French and math major, but I very quickly switched to doing an honours degree in philosophy. Like many people who make that switch, I found that philosophy was the only subject that I really loved — I just took to it immediately. Looking back, it now seems obvious that what I'd really enjoyed when I was studying French were the plays written by the existentialists, and that I had always been interested in the sorts of questions that those plays dealt with — questions about freedom and choice, and more generally questions about the meaning of life — though I hadn't really thought of myself as someone who could spend his time thinking hard about those sorts of questions. My mum used to classify people as shallow or deep, where the deep people were the ones who were really troubled by questions about what it all means. From what I could tell, given the people that she classified in the one way rather than the other, if you were deep, this meant that you were moody and inarticulate, from which it seemed to follow that I was shallow! It wasn't until I did philosophy that I realised that there was something going on in those existentialist plays — something specifically about freedom and choice — that you could articulate in reasonably clear terms. I found that completely exhilarating.

FL: Did you study existentialism in your early years?

MS: When I started studying philosophy, I immediately learnt that I valued clarity most of all, so the answer is 'No.' I didn't much care for the way existentialism was taught when I was an undergraduate. It wasn't until much later that I returned to think more explicitly about the way in which those existentialist plays bear on questions about the meaning of life.

FL: When you first came to take philosophy seriously — maybe a little later on in your undergraduate degree — what did you think was most important about philosophy? By the time you came to love it, what did you think was most important about it? Was it clarity?

MS: The people who made an impact on me when I was an undergraduate at Monash included Len Grant, with whom I did a subject called 'Theory of Knowledge', and A. C. 'Camo' Jackson, Frank Jackson's father, who was one of the two professors in the department. In fact, I'm pretty sure that I was in the very last fourth-year class that Camo ever taught, along with Bruin Christensen, who now teaches at ANU [the Australian National University]. From memory there were just the two of us in that class. We studied Strawson's *Individuals* in the first half and Quine's *Word and Object* in the second half, so we were being taught about The Big Divide in the way in which you might do contemporary philosophy: neo-Kantianism and scientific naturalism. Both Len and Camo had been deeply influenced by Wittgenstein. They showed me that you could take a problem that looked utterly mundane at first glance and very quickly discover that there was nothing mundane about it. I learned a lot from both of them.

In my third year I had also been a student in Aubrey Townsend's philosophy of mind class. Aubrey made it clear that you could do philosophy in a way that was completely systematic. Looking back I think that that's what first completely grabbed me. One of the things that had amazed me, when I was an undergraduate, was that the moral philosophy subjects were taught by certain people and the metaphysics subjects were taught by other people, and that these two subjects were taught as though what you learned in the one had nothing to do with what you learned in the other. So, for example, in the metaphysics course there'd be questions about responsibility and free will, but they'd be treated as metaphysical puzzles. And then in the moral philosophy course we would also talk about moral responsibility, but in a way that seemed to ignore the metaphysical puzzles. I thought that that couldn't

be right. Surely these two topics would have to have something to do with each other. But at least when and where I was being taught, no-one seemed to be putting those topics together — no-one with the exception of Aubrey, that is. He gave you the sense that all of these views you were developing could be put together if you really thought hard about them. This is all a long time ago, of course. Aubrey was working on Donald Davidson's program, so the question he was mainly concerned with was: 'How do questions in the philosophy of mind and action fit together with questions in the philosophy of language?' But even so, you got the definite sense that your perspective on problems could be expanded and that you could develop a much more systematic view of things. So that's what grabbed me: the idea that you could have a comprehensive view.

FL: Also, during your formative years, Frank Jackson arrived just before you left Monash. What influence would you say that Frank Jackson had on you?

MS: A very great influence, and I'm sure that some of the most important lessons that Frank taught me will sound very mundane. For example, one thing Frank said to me early on was: 'A paper is twenty double-spaced pages long. It has your argument first, it has your opponents' arguments second, and then it ends with you explaining why your arguments are better than your opponents.' Concrete advice like that, when you're just starting to develop as a writer, is extremely important, as it tells you how to write papers so as to make it clear that you stand for something; how to write so as to be both noticed and persuasive. And over the years Frank's more general approach to doing philosophy has also had a profound influence on me. I don't mean the more formal approach he describes in *From Metaphysics to Ethics*, but rather the more practical idea that if you look at a philosophical problem and discover that you can't solve it, then you should immediately divide it and ask yourself whether you can solve any of the sub-problems. If you find that you can't, then you should divide them again and ask whether you can solve any of the sub-sub-problems. Eventually, you'll find at least some problems that you can solve, and then your task is to reassemble what you say in response to all of these as a partial solution to the original problem, a partial solution that makes it clear what the residual problems left to solve are. That's how you make progress.

FL: How would you say you reacted, if you did react at all, to the consequentialist ethics of Peter Singer who was at Monash at the time?

MS: Like nearly all of the graduate students who were in the Philosophy Department at Monash at that time, when Peter came I was completely persuaded by his arguments and became a vegetarian. It didn't last a lifetime in my own case — my being a vegetarian lasted about five years, I think — but for a long while I was completely won over by the power of those arguments. It was surprising to discover that things you were thinking about in a philosophy classroom could have an impact on the way you conducted yourself in the most humdrum aspects of your everyday life. I eventually came to reject not just the utilitarianism that was driving Peter's arguments, but also the welfarism. But for a long while, I was a total convert.

FL: Do you want to elaborate on that?

MS: For a long while I thought that utilitarianism was a plausible account of at least one kind of reason to do things, but that there are lots of other reasons to do things as well, so that even if you satisfied yourself that the reason the utilitarians were talking about counted in favour of acting in a certain way — becoming a vegetarian, say, or dedicating your life to relieving world hunger — you still had to weigh that reason against all of the other reasons that you had so far left out of the equation. The main question you have to answer, I came to think, is what you have most reason to do, once you've taken all of the different reasons into account. This isn't novel. It is a bit like Henry Sidgwick's view. Sidgwick thought there were two fundamental principles of practical reason — utilitarianism and egoism — and that the really difficult questions arose when you tried to put these two reasons together, given that they could plainly come into conflict with each other. Similarly, I came to think there are many different reasons to do things, and that the utilitarian's exclusive focus on impartial reasons, and welfarist reasons too for that matter, is too limited. There are many reasons for doing things, but it turns out that utilitarianism isn't the correct account of any of them, or so I came to think.

The utilitarians — or the consequentialists, I should say — whose views I find most challenging these days are those like my colleague, Philip Pettit. Philip thinks that there's just one reason to do things, an impartial reason, and he further thinks that everything that we have reason to do has to be somehow shown to be required by that impartial reason. Moreover, he argues that that's so by arguing that candidate reasons that aren't impartial lack normative force altogether. So when Philip tells you what consequentialism requires, he really does think that he's answering the question, 'What do we have most reason to

do?', whereas I don't think that, and I think that perhaps Peter didn't ever think that either. Peter was telling us what morality requires of us. If you read interviews with Peter when he talks about his relationship with his mother when she became severely ill with Alzheimer's disease, it seems clear that he thought that there were very profound partial reasons to care for his mother, reasons that simply conflicted with the impartial moral reasons in play. That seems to leave it open that, by his lights, he was behaving immorally in doing so much to care for his mother, but doing what he had most reason to do nonetheless.

FL: Let's talk about your postgraduate studies, and who influenced your development at that time.

MS: After my BA at Monash, I completed a Master's degree also at Monash — a long thesis on the nature of action and intention supervised by Aubrey Townsend and Frank Jackson — and then I left philosophy altogether to do a Diploma of Education (or Dip Ed) and teach at Melbourne Boys High School. As it happens, John Tasioulas, who went on to teach philosophy at Corpus Christi College in Oxford, and who is now Quain Professor of Jurisprudence at University College London, was a student at Melbourne Boys High School at that time. Small world.

FL: What did you teach?

MS: English and Politics. My wife, Monica, was a really gifted high school teacher. When we'd come home from work she'd ask how my day had gone, and I'd tell her that it was terrible. It always seemed to me that I had serious problems with classroom control, so I would describe some incident that occurred and how I wasn't able to get on top of it. She would then say: 'Why didn't you do such and such?' something that would never have occurred to me to do. But I'd try it next time and it would work. Unfortunately, though, no matter how much advice she gave me, I didn't ever develop the knack of working out novel strategies for dealing with those problems of classroom control myself. I didn't enjoy being a high school teacher, as I didn't think that I was doing a good job of it. There were lots of interesting ideas that you could discuss, as part of the curriculum, but it seemed to me that I couldn't get the kids to want to talk about them. When I was a graduate student, I had already taught at university where that sort of thing isn't a problem. If students aren't interested at university, they simply don't turn up to your classes. I loved that about teaching at university. If people want to listen to me and talk about ideas that we're both interested in, then that's great, but I don't want to have to cajole anybody,

or go to great lengths to persuade anybody to take an interest in what I happen to find interesting. Anyway, the upshot of all of this is that I decided that I couldn't continue being a high school teacher. This was back in the days of Education Department studentships. The Victorian Department of Education had paid me a living allowance while I was doing my BA and Dip Ed, in return for which I was bonded to teach for them for three years. But after talking about it with Monica, we decided that if I could get a scholarship to do a PhD at Oxford, or perhaps somewhere in Canada, then I'd break the bond, we'd pay back the substantial amount of money I owed the Education Department, and I'd try to get a doctorate so that I could get a job teaching philosophy at a university.

FL: For how many years did you work as a high school teacher?

MS: Eighteen months: half of my bond. So I applied for a scholarship and eventually got one after applying in two successive years. The first year I didn't come within a bull's roar, but the second year I got one. By then, though, I'd been out of philosophy for about three years, so it was a daunting prospect to return to doing graduate work, especially given that Monica had given up her career to allow me to do so.

When I arrived in Oxford to do the BPhil, all of the new students were assigned to one of the professors. Since I had decided I was going to focus on moral philosophy in the first term, I was assigned to R. M. Hare, or 'Dick' as he liked to be called, who was then White's Professor of Moral Philosophy. Dick was completely passionate about his views. He thought that if you weren't a utilitarian, you weren't just wrong, but you were also immoral. Since I wasn't a utilitarian of any kind by that stage, most of the essays I wrote for him — you had to write an essay every week or ten days — were critical of the sorts of views he held. Sometimes after our supervision sessions Dick would literally chase me down Merton Street saying, 'There's one more thing I forgot to say to you . . .', and then he'd try yet again to get me to see the errors I'd made. It was tremendously engaging, in a way, but also very heated and somehow personal too. I think that Dick thought I was salvable, but not sufficiently willing to talk things through. What was really going on, though, was that I was scared to death. I'd come back to our flat in the evenings and say to Monica: 'I think I've forgotten how to do philosophy.' The beginning of that period in Oxford was utterly terrifying. I remember thinking over and over about how we owed lots of money to the Education Department, about the fact that Monica had resigned, about the fact that we'd moved countries, and yet how difficult I was

finding it to write the essays I had to write. I just had to swim as hard as I could to keep my head above water and try to get back into it.

The next semester I had Jennifer Hornsby as my supervisor for philosophy of mind and action. She really was the best teacher I'd ever had, up until that point. And then I went to Ralph Walker who taught me Kant for a semester. And after that I had Simon Blackburn as my BPhil and then DPhil thesis supervisor. I guess the really influential people at Oxford were Jen and Simon.

FL: When did it get easier for you at Oxford?

MS: I think I got my confidence back when I was working with Jen. Maybe it's an undergraduate thing, but I had been totally in awe of my teachers at Monash: Camo, Len, Aubrey, and others too. I admired them immensely, but they all seemed very distant, and they frightened me. When we'd go to parties at their places, I'd just want to be able to leave without having said anything stupid, which usually meant trying hard not to say anything at all. I was in awe of Dick when I was working with him too. But I learned a very important thing when I was working with Jen — and I think this was crucial for getting my confidence back — namely, that people who are extraordinarily talented at philosophy are also real people who are interested in more ordinary things as well. I'd talk with Jen about movies we'd seen; about how things were going with Monica's work — by this time she was a substitute teacher in Kidlington — and then about how she was enjoying her pregnancy, as halfway through that first year she became pregnant with our first child; about what we saw as differences between living in Australia and England; she'd tell me about what it was like raising a small child, as she had a young son: lots of ordinary things like these. I realised that you didn't have to talk about philosophy with people who were extraordinarily gifted at doing philosophy. You could also let your guard down and talk about your more everyday concerns as well. And having let your guard down, you found you could talk much more freely about philosophy, which meant that you ended up doing philosophy much better as well. Jen was just wonderful to work with. She also gave me great advice about writing. I remember once thinking it was really important to settle some matter or other — this was something that I'd said in an essay — until Jen pointed out to me that the conclusion I was trying to argue for didn't depend on whether that thing was true: 'So why are you talking about this in your essay?' Great question.

FL: There's also the confidence that comes from doing well, though. Was that happening at the same time for you as you progressed, through writing papers?

MS: When you do the BPhil you don't get any formal feedback at all on your work until the very end. But there was a brilliant Canadian and more senior graduate student at Oxford at that time, Bob Myers, who in our first year invited Jay Wallace, myself, and some other first-year graduate students to join a reading group that he and some more senior students were running. That was a great confidence booster. The truth is that I have been extremely lucky in having had a whole slew of people be very kind to me over the years, people who have gone out of their way to give me opportunities. Up until this stage I'd certainly include Len, Aubrey, Frank, Dick, and Jen in that category, and I'd also include Bob Myers as well. Even though life at Oxford tended to be a bit standoffish, neither Jen nor Bob were standoffish at all. Later on, I was very lucky to have David Charles invite me to join his reading group at Oriel College, and that led to my getting to know several other Oxford faculty members, and some other more senior graduate students as well. Jen was a member of David's reading group, but so too were Paul Snowdon and David Owen, and the graduate students who went to his group included people like Anita Avramides, John Campbell, Liz Fricker, Gavin Lawrence, and Tim Williamson. So although there wasn't a lot of feedback formally, I felt like I was doing okay.

FL: What did you do after the BPhil?

MS: After the BPhil I stayed on at Oxford and began the DPhil with Simon [Blackburn]. The debate over moral realism had just begun to grip people. It had certainly gripped me, as I chose that to be the topic of both my BPhil and DPhil theses. Simon was a central figure in that debate. Though he and I agreed about many things, especially in our admiration for Hume, we disagreed about which side you should come down on in that debate. He turned out to be a wonderful supervisor: supportive, very much interested in helping you to do your own thing, not his thing. A paper that was ultimately going to have a huge influence on that debate was 'Two Notions of Necessity', written by Martin Davies and Lloyd Humberstone. Martin was a former Monash student too, a few years older than me, who was by this time teaching at Birkbeck College London, and Lloyd had joined the faculty at Monash just before I left. I had read 'Two Notions of Necessity', so one of the early contributions I made was to help make sure that some of that material got into

that debate. I was one of those people who pointed out that there was a really nifty idea in the philosophy of language, *rigidification*, that might well solve some of the problems people were debating over moral realism. But that wasn't an original idea of mine; it was Martin and Lloyd's idea.

I only had three years of funding at Oxford. By the beginning of the third year Jeremy was a toddler, so I was beginning to wonder what we were going to do next. How exactly was I going to support this family? Frank Jackson happened to be passing through Oxford. He and his wife Morag stayed with us and he told me that Monash was going to have a one-year job the next year and that I should put in for it. I did put in for it, and I got it, so after I'd finished the third year at Oxford working on my DPhil, I went back to Monash for a one-year lectureship. I had more or less worked out my own view on the moral realism debate by this time, so I was giving talks and Honours seminars in Australia on that topic. Everyone seemed very interested because it was the first time, to my knowledge, that problems in moral philosophy had been picked up by people like Simon and John McDowell, people who were also well-versed in philosophy of mind and language and metaphysics. The hope seemed to be that lessons we'd learned in these areas could cast some light on problems in moral philosophy. At one of the papers I was giving at Monash, Mark Johnson was in the audience. At that time, Mark was already an assistant professor at Princeton. David Lewis was in the audience at one of these papers as well. Princeton was about to advertise an assistant professorship to start the next year, so Mark suggested that I put in for it, and, luckily for me, I got it. So after I'd been at Monash for a year, we moved to Princeton.

FL: I want to ask about the effect you think being at Princeton at that time had on you. David Lewis was really flourishing, and did his functionalism have an effect on your work at that time, at what was still a fairly early stage in your career?

MS: Yes, absolutely. The very first graduate seminar that I gave at Princeton, when I was in my first year, was on the moral realism debate. David Lewis, Mark Johnson, and Crispin Wright were all in the audience.

FL: They came to your seminar?

MS: Yes they did, and in addition to them, there were graduate students like Gideon Rosen, Jay Wallace, Jamie Dreier, and Jamie Tappenden, to name just a few. It was an extraordinary group of people to have

sitting in front of you for three hours while you got up to talk through your views. I really learnt how to do philosophy in those first couple of years at Princeton. David was certainly the backbone of that because he had such a comprehensive view of how you could put conceptual analysis to work in constructing an overall metaphysical view. But Mark was also very influential, and so too was Crispin. In fact, I think that I kind of blur these three people together, as they all made such a big impression on me. And again, I also discovered that these people were also real human beings with very ordinary concerns in addition to their philosophical interests. We often found ourselves around at David's and Stephanie's place for dinner; David invited us around especially to show Jeremy the train set in his basement; we used to watch the Aussie Rules grand final at some ungodly hour of the morning at their place too; they would call by our place shortly before Christmas to see the children; we'd lend our car to Mark so that he could drive down to Atlantic City to go gambling; Crispin's wife Catherine ran the childbirth classes we took when Monica was pregnant with our second child; their kids babysat ours. And on top of all this there were those intense philosophy graduate seminars. It was a small, but very real, community of philosophers who were all thinking about something new and exciting: a novel way of locating normative facts in an otherwise non-normative world. It was a great experience.

L: An exciting time.

AS: A very exciting time, yes.

L: You said that you've been lucky and grateful for having people who were kind to you. You've also been lucky to have been in departments that are very collegiate, at least it seems so from the outside. Would you agree with that? Has that benefited your professional life?

AS: The answer to that has to be 'Yes.' At some point I discovered that you could do philosophy without feeling scared all the time. If I had to say when I first realised this, it was when I was taught by Jen; but it was underscored when I was taught by Simon; and it was underscored again when I was invited to be a part of David Charles' reading group. And then when I went to Princeton, I thought it was wonderful — though also astonishing — that David Lewis would want to come along to my graduate seminar; or Crispin Wright, or that they would want to talk to me about what went on afterwards. But they did, and that made me feel very comfortable about talking to people no matter what their standing in the profession.

FL: These people felt that you had something to offer.

MS: I guess that's right. Of course I was *this* big [makes hand gesture of something small] and they were *that* big [hand gesture of something quite large]. Nonetheless, we all wanted to learn something and we all thought, sensibly enough, that the best way to do that was to engage in a bit of give and take. I'm sure that people would find this astonishing to hear, at least in some of these people's cases, but I found them all to have an amazing lack of ego — which isn't to say that they would never get overexcited and go on and on, because of course they would, like anyone else — and I have to say as well that I thought that that was just wonderful. Whenever I went to a new job, I always hoped to do what I could to replicate that ego-less atmosphere, because it was just so productive for everybody when people really listened to each other.

FL: Changing the subject now from your development and your personal history, when you're asked the question nowadays 'What is philosophy?' what do you say, if you have an answer?

MS: Ah, the dreaded question you get asked when you sit next to someone on an airplane who doesn't know you! This goes back to what I said right at the beginning about my interest in the problems that come up in the existentialist plays. I tell people that there are lots of things in everyone's ordinary experience, which, if you were really to think about them hard, would require you to do some philosophy. So I generally try to get people to think about some problem that they've thought about before: whether we have free will, for example, or why we should be moral, or what it is to know something. And then I try, in the way that you do with first-year undergraduates, to get them to see that there are some distinctions you could make that would help them better understand these ideas. So, in a nutshell, I guess my answer is I tell them that philosophy is just organised commonsense.

FL: That's a good answer. You do 'a Socrates' to people on planes?

MS: I try. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. I've had people take this as permission to tell me all about their religion. That's always difficult, as when they ask me whether I believe, I have to say that I don't, and that's either the beginning of a really interesting conversation, or a really awkward one.

FL: Focussing now on Australia and New Zealand, what are the main changes in Australian philosophy and philosophy in New Zealand that you have observed during your career?

MS: There are so many. I think that the explosion in the number of universities and the different funding arrangements for universities are the two main changes: in other words, the Dawkins' changes and all that happened thereafter. Every institution of higher learning seemed to become a university, so all of a sudden resources were very thinly spread. The government clawed back the research money and the Australian Research Council (ARC) was created so that individuals within universities could compete to get that research money back. I see lots of distortions in the system consequent upon those changes.

When I was a student at university, I disapproved of the way in which departments protected staff members who were unproductive. One of the things that motivated a lot of the changes that have been made since Dawkins, at least as I understand it, was the desire to have some sort of accountability in the system. If there is a competitive system of research grants across the entire system, then there then is an objective measure of research performance. So, though I'm not saying that things were perfect beforehand, I have to say that I do not think that success in getting ARC grants is a good measure of research performance, and moreover I think that it has been the pre-Dawkins universities that have re-emerged as the high-powered research universities all these years later on. So in short I think that we have gone through a lot of change for what good effect I don't really know.

FL: The idea of accountability academically is a really interesting one. How do you think that could be achieved in Australia or New Zealand? It's a hard question perhaps.

MS: It is a hard question. I think you certainly need to begin by having well worked out and agreed upon measures of evaluation. But within disciplines it seems to me that we already have such measures in Australia. When you talk to people at the top of their discipline, as I used to do when I was acting as Director of RSSS [the Research School of Social Sciences] at ANU, you would very quickly learn that there is a good deal of agreement about what good work is and what bad work is, and you would also find that there's competition among departments for people who produce good work and not for people who don't produce good work. I'm not saying this is so in every discipline at every university, as there are always going to be problems at the margins, but I don't think that we should focus on what's happening at the margins when we talk about matters of policy. We should talk about what's happening in the vast majority of cases, and in the vast majority of cases my

impression is that there's a lot of agreement about who the people are who produce good work and not so good work, and that people tend to get rewarded in proportion to the quality of their work. Universities — or the academic side of universities, anyway! — really are, by and large, meritocracies. So I think that government should put much more trust in the high-powered research universities to run themselves.

FL: So if a particular university terminated someone's contract after a sustained period of not producing good work but another university might not choose to do that, that would, perhaps, be a question for each university or department rather than the government?

MS: The tenure system in the US means that it's often the case that when a decision is made at one institution not to grant someone tenure, another institution immediately says 'Great, we'll have that person.' This is just what you'd expect, given that no particular university department is going to be the font of all wisdom. So if you've got enough institutions and there's enough mobility, these decisions need not turn out to be career-threatening. We can all name several people who've had stellar careers, but who were denied jobs, or denied tenure, somewhere or other at some point in their career. So yes, as long as you've got a sufficient number of diverse institutions, and there is mobility in the system, I think it is better to let the decisions be made at the level of the universities themselves. The overall outcome is that the good people get picked up and the not-so-good people move on to careers elsewhere. The evidence in the US is that that system works well — provided, as I said, that you have a sufficient number of diverse institutions and there is mobility in the system.

FL: Which we don't in Australia.

MS: Which we don't here. Yes, that's true. So, though that works in the US, maybe something slightly different is required in Australia. Perhaps something like an RAE needs to be introduced to measure research performance, but then leave it up to universities to decide who they want to hire and keep as their researchers. The effect of that in the UK has been to promote diversity and mobility.

FL: That's a research excellence measurement?

MS: The Research Assessment Exercise (or RAE), where each department's research performance is evaluated by a committee of their disciplinary peers.

: As happens in the UK?

S: Yes, though it's very expensive to do what they do in the UK, but some sort of pared down version of that is perhaps what should be introduced in Australia. There was a suggestion some years ago about how you could do a cheaper version of the RAE in Australia.

: I believe that's what the Australian government is looking into at the moment. How do you see your engagement with the changing issues in Australian and New Zealand philosophy?

S: I said earlier that I'm sceptical about the division between the different parts of philosophy. People do of course work in different areas, but the arguments that are drawn upon in one area are very much like those that are drawn upon in other areas, and the ultimate test of the plausibility of the views that people come up with in their own favourite area is whether those views can be integrated with plausible views in other areas. One thing I've hoped to do wherever I work is to promote that view of philosophy: an emphasis on a kind of generalist approach.

One of the things that I really liked about taking up the appointment at the Research School of Social Sciences at ANU was that Frank Jackson and Philip Pettit were both of the same mind. For example, they too thought that problems in moral and political philosophy had to be tackled in much the same way that you might tackle problems in metaphysics and philosophy of mind and action, and that the solutions that were proposed to problems in moral and political philosophy would have to be built on a foundation of sound views in metaphysics and philosophy of mind and action as well. Over the ten-year period that we were at RSSS together, I saw moral philosophy being done in that same way elsewhere in Australia. I'm not saying that we caused people to do that kind of work in moral philosophy, but I do think that we helped provide an environment in which that kind of work was showcased and appreciated. We used to run regular conferences and workshops so that people who do that sort of work in moral philosophy could come to RSSS on a fairly regular basis and learn from each other — people like Garrett Cullity, Robert Dunn, Philip Gerrans, Karen Jones, Norva Lo, Jeanette Kennett, Neil Levy, Catriona Mackenzie, Justin Oakley, Denis Robinson, Francois Schroeter, Natalie Stoljar, Caroline West, and others too. Australia started to become a destination for moral philosophers who do that sort of more generalist work from the US and the UK, something which hadn't been true in the past.

I thought at that time that there was a real possibility that problems in moral philosophy of that kind could become central to the concerns of philosophers working in Australia and New Zealand, much as they're central to the concerns of philosophers in the US and UK, so I thought that that was one good influence that we had on philosophy in Australia and New Zealand. But in recent times, since Frank, Philip and I left RSSS, I have to say that I don't see so much showcasing of that kind of work in Australia. Philosophy in Australia and New Zealand seems to be dominated once again by people who work on problems in metaphysics and epistemology, or by people who work on problems in applied ethics. That's pretty much the way philosophy in Australia and New Zealand looked in the 1970s when I was an undergraduate. As I said, it doesn't look much like that in the US or the UK these days, so I think that that is a pity.

FL: So you think the division has come back a bit?

MS: Yes, I think it has come back a bit, and I think that that's too bad.

FL: The work you did while you were in Canberra could fall under the rubric, if you like, of 'the Canberra plan'. Many people are aware of the Canberra plan, and lots of people have views about it, although sometimes the views conflict. So I want to know how you would describe the Canberra plan.

MS: The first thing to say is that that term, which was coined by Huw Price and John Hawthorne, is a pejorative term. Price and Hawthorne's idea was that just as Canberra is a planned city in which you can't find much of the richness that you find in cities that grow up organically, so the philosophers in Canberra approach philosophical topics in a way that ensures that they won't capture much of the richness that's there to be found in those topics. What's indisputable in this is that many people who worked in Canberra when Frank and Philip and I were there did indeed approach philosophical topics in the same way, namely, the way that Frank had come to approach philosophical problems under David Lewis' influence, and the way that I had come to approach philosophical problems after teaching at Princeton. That approach obviously owes a great deal to Lewis' view that there is a large *a priori* component to solving philosophical problems. You begin by analysing the key terms that purport to pick out the things that you're interested in in some domain, and then you see whether anything in your general metaphysical picture of the world is in fact picked out by the terms so analysed.

I have to say that that way of approaching philosophical problems still seems to me to be essentially on the right track.

FL: What I do when working, for example, through the problems that interested Plato would involve conceptual analysis and *a priori* reasoning. But people wouldn't describe that as doing what people in Canberra were doing around that time, so I'm after the more distinctive elements.

MS: If you were to ask the people who were working in Canberra at that time whether you are implicitly using the method they employ, then I think that they would say that you are. In fact, if you're doing traditional philosophy at all, then they'd say that you're doing that because that's what the method of doing traditional philosophy is. The people who say that they're not doing traditional philosophy in this way seem to divide into two camps.

In one camp you find the straight down the line empirical types. They're opposed in principle to the idea that there is *a priori* knowledge, or perhaps *a priori* knowledge of anything other than trivialities, so they try to find empirical ways to approach the sorts of questions that philosophers have approached by more traditional means. I'm not opposed to people doing that sort of work, and I think that it's an interesting question whether a more empirical way of approaching these questions is going to prove to be more productive and fruitful than the traditional approach at the end of the day. We should just wait and see how things turn out.

The other camp comprises those people who are doing speculative metaphysics. They reject the idea that they're doing conceptual analysis on the grounds that they're talking about the things themselves: they're trying to figure out what you can say *a priori* about the nature of value itself (say), not the *concept* of value. But I think that this distinction between talking about things and doing conceptual analysis involves a misunderstanding. If there is such a thing as value, then there is no difference between what you're doing when you're trying to analyse the concept of value and what you're doing when you're trying to figure out what you can say *a priori* about the nature of value itself. The difference would only emerge if you were to you find, using Lewis' method, that there is nothing in your general metaphysical picture of the world that instantiates the concept of value, as you'd then have the premises for an error theory of value, much as John Mackie supposes. So I think that this is really a distinction without a difference.

FL: Functionalism is also often associated with the Canberra plan, and that was what I expected you to be talking about when I asked, so I'm surprised you didn't mention functionalism. Is it for you, then, more about the method and the overall view?

MS: Do you mean functionalism in philosophy of mind?

FL: In philosophy of action and philosophy of mind. The David Lewis sort of functionalism.

MS: If you had asked how applying the method I just described works out in the areas of philosophy in which I am interested, then of course I would talk about that kind of functionalism. But that's because of the subject matter I'm interested in. The concepts that define that subject matter are the concepts of belief, desire, rationality and action, all of which are to be given a functional analysis in much the way that Lewis, and David Armstrong before him, have suggested. But the method of doing philosophy that I was trying to describe is completely general. You can use it to come up with a philosophical understanding of any subject matter at all, not just problems in the philosophy of mind and action.

Suppose you're interested in some subject matter. How would you try to make sense of that subject matter? Applying the method, you would begin by trying to articulate some of the core claims that seem to you to be constitutive of that subject matter. You would then try to systematize all of these core claims into a unified whole: that is, you'd try to make them consistent with each other so that they together give you a complete and coherent picture of that subject matter. When you do this you might notice that certain of the claims that you thought were constitutive of the subject matter in question are inconsistent with others, so you would have to try to resolve these inconsistencies. Maybe you were wrong to suppose that certain claims were constitutive of the subject matter in question, something you might realise if you were to think more carefully about how you could achieve the best fit among the core claims you've identified. And then, when you've finished that task, you could see whether you can treat the terms that pick out that subject matter as theoretical terms, implicitly defined by their relations to each other and to other things you've had to posit in stating your core claims. This is where you would have to construct the Ramsey sentences that Lewis famously mentions, as these Ramsey sentences enable you to make those definitions explicit. They allow you to simultaneously define all of the terms that make up a subject matter, even terms within that subject matter that are interdefined, and so many of the standard

circularity objections to attempts to analyse concepts simply go by the board at this point. This is what we learned when functionalism in the philosophy of mind was brought in to replace behaviourism, as behaviourism had been rejected precisely on the grounds that you couldn't define the mental without referring to something mental.

When you employ this method you not only get clear about how to understand whatever subject matter happens to interest you, but you also potentially come to understand how it is that one subject matter fits with another. So, for example, in the philosophy of mind, employing the method will tell you how the mental fits within the physical if, when you make explicit the implicit definitions by constructing Ramsey sentences, you find that the other things that you needed to posit in order to state your core claims, the things in relation to which you get your understanding of the mental, weren't themselves mental but were rather physical. This would be to vindicate a reduction of the mental to the physical. Or in the case of evaluative features, it will tell you how the evaluative features of things fit within a world of objects with non-evaluative features if, when you make explicit the implicit definitions by constructing Ramsey sentences, you find that the other things that you needed to posit in stating your core claims, the things in relation to which get your understanding of evaluative features, weren't themselves evaluative features but were rather non-evaluative features. This would be to vindicate a reduction of the evaluative to the non-evaluative. This sort of understanding of how one subject matter relates to another is a paradigm of the sort of understanding that we're after when we do philosophy in the traditional way.

FL: Moving now to the relation between the academy and the wider community: Philosophy is almost solely practised nowadays by professional philosophers, that is, people producing philosophical works and who are paid to be philosophers. That raises the question of the connection between the academy and the wider community. What do you think is or should be the contribution of philosophy to public affairs and human life generally?

MS: That is such a hard question. My own view is that typical philosophers are not particularly good at offering advice on matters of public policy and the like, as we lack crucial empirical expertise. I'm always pleased to see people who do have that kind of expertise giving advice, of course, and some of these people do turn out to be philosophers. For

example, Philip Pettit's book on republicanism, which is essentially a book in political theory, became the manifesto of the Spanish government under Zapatero, and for a long while Philip became an important figure in Spanish politics. But what's special about Philip is that he isn't just a good philosopher, but that he's also well-versed in empirical economics and sociology. He knows what the real-world limitations are on the implementation of an ideal. Many philosophers seem to me to lack that kind of real-world knowledge, and I think that disqualifies them from giving advice.

One thing that does surprise me, though, is how much interest there is in purely philosophical ideas among the general population. The idea that philosophers have to do anything other than just be themselves in order to have resonance with the general public therefore strikes me as simply untrue. At Princeton, for example, there's a ceiling on the number of auditors that can attend undergraduate lecture courses, and courses always reach their target of auditors. The auditors are among the most loyal and engaged of those who attend. They seem to just love thinking hard about really difficult philosophical topics. I make a point of trying to get to know the auditors in my classes, and I am told over and over again that their philosophy classes are a high point of their week. Again, when you look in bookshops, I've never before seen so many philosophical issues being part of the mainstream conversation: from questions about consciousness, to the existence of God, to whether or not you can justify torture if the consequences of torturing are good enough. People really want to know what they should think about these topics. Another example: there is a wonderful show on the radio in California called 'Philosophy Talk' hosted by Ken Taylor and John Perry, both of whom are philosophers at Stanford University. Ken and John pick a regular philosophical topic each week, they discuss it with a professional philosopher, and then they invite people to ring in and join in a discussion about that topic. The show is immensely popular. In fact, I've noticed that David Braddon-Mitchell and Caroline West occasionally appear on a radio show in Sydney doing something not unlike what Ken and John do on 'Philosophy Talk'. And of course there is also 'The Philosopher's Zone' on the ABC, hosted by Alan Saunders, himself a philosopher. If philosophers want to get involved with people outside the academy, then I think that these are the sorts of things that they should do.

FL: What are your views on the popularisation of philosophical ideas, and in particular making these ideas more accessible to a broader audience?

Very technical jargon exists in a lot of philosophy writing for reasons that are solid at pragmatic levels, for it abbreviates a whole literature sometimes, but this would have to be restricted or removed if you wish to make your work accessible to a wider population.

MS: To be honest, I'm not crazy about people trying to figure out how to make their work accessible to a wider audience. If the marginal value of someone's work lies in the technical detail, then what's the point of trying to make it accessible? Of course, there are lots of questions you can address in a non-technical way, and whenever that is so it is much better when philosophers express themselves in plain English, whether they're talking to a philosophical audience or a non-philosophical audience. Just to give one example of this, Harry Frankfurt, now an Emeritus Professor at Princeton, wrote many years ago a wonderful little essay entitled, 'On Bullshit'. The essay addresses the questions: What is bullshit and what is a bullshitter? Is bullshit a lie and a bullshitter a liar? Is bullshit deception and a bullshitter a deceiver? It is essentially a bit of conceptual analysis — and, I might add, a very amusing bit of conceptual analysis at that — but it's all written in plain English: easy to follow, but rigorous. In the end, Harry's claim is that being a bullshitter has to do with the way in which someone orients himself towards the truth: bullshitters don't care whether what they say is true or false. An editor at Princeton University Press loved Harry's article, so he decided to publish it as a little book. The book sold like wildfire, hundreds of thousands of copies, and all of a sudden Harry became a media personality. He was even on *The Daily Show* with John Stewart. Importantly, though, when he went on TV or gave a talk at a corporate event, he didn't dumb anything down. He just did some more rigorous philosophy for them in the same plain English. So though his article was written for an academic journal, it just so happened that its subject matter was accessible to an extremely wide audience, and I think that that audience appreciated being made to think.

In much the same spirit, someone recently brought up an interesting point at a Princeton faculty meeting. 'Isn't it funny,' they said, 'that the sort of moral philosophy that philosophers do is something that 99 per cent of the population thinks is irrelevant to issues of morality, because 99 per cent of the population thinks that moral issues are all about what God commands.' The figure of '99 per cent' was an intentional overstatement, of course, but the point remains. At Princeton we have a sizable minority of students who are fundamentalist Christians of one

sort or another for whom that first moral philosophy course comes as something of a surprise. So something I've been doing myself, in recent times, is giving public lectures about the relationship between God and morality. But when I give these lectures, I just say what I'd say to an audience of philosophers, as it so happens that the philosophical points that you need to make don't require a lot of expertise to grasp. The distinctions you need to make are all easily stated and understood, and once you understand them you see that the view held by the 99 per cent is unsustainable. So it seems to me there are all sorts of ways in which at least some philosophers can make their work accessible to a more general audience without having to try in some special way to make it accessible.

FL: Another question I'd like to ask you concerns the differences between the American system and the Australian system of higher education. In particular, I'm interested in graduate training because it seems very different between the US and Australia, and I wondered what thoughts you had on those differences. Do these differences make a big difference, in your view, to the training of graduate students to become professional philosophers?

MS: One difference is that graduate training programs in the US make it possible for graduates to have a comprehensive knowledge of their discipline through the compulsory coursework. Australian students aren't given that sort of training because we don't have that coursework component in the graduate degree. What's also true, of course, is that Australian students go into their graduate degrees with much more knowledge of their discipline to begin with, as they spend the whole of their fourth year just studying subjects within their discipline. A typical US student would only spend half of their fourth year studying subjects in their discipline. So the coursework that students do when they begin their graduate degrees in the US plays the role of catching them up, to a certain extent, relative to Australian students. But even so, I think that the coursework component of the PhD in the US is a huge benefit to the students, as it does give them a much broader perspective. And I think that it is great for teachers as well. I love talking to graduate students in the context of a graduate seminar. When I was first at Princeton, as a beginning assistant professor in the 1980s, I couldn't really tell the difference between the feedback I got from other faculty members and the feedback I got from the graduate students. The graduate students were in many respects just like my colleagues, and that's still true today. It's

much harder to have that sort of working relationship with graduate students when you're not working through material systematically with them, trying to nut it out together on a week-by-week basis. Philosophical exchanges with graduate students in Australia mainly take place during supervision sessions, which tend to be much more structured encounters.

FL: Of necessity?

MS: Yes, I think of necessity. Supervision sessions in the US are much more structured encounters too. I think it is too bad that graduate students and faculty in Australia don't have more interactions like those that we have with our students in the US in graduate seminars. On the other hand, I'm a big believer in the 'if it ain't broke then don't fix it' policy when you consider bringing about changes to any system, and if you have a look at the students who have come out of Australia by doing their PhDs in philosophy here, the bottom line is that they seem to be doing pretty well for themselves. Lots of students with Australian PhDs go on to get great jobs at universities, not just in Australia but in the US, the UK and elsewhere. They don't seem to have been held back at all by not having had the graduate seminar experience. So, much as you might lament this lack of coursework for graduates in Australia to some extent for the sake of the graduate students themselves, it doesn't seem to have had a really significant impact on them. Perhaps the people who really miss out are the faculty.

FL: So they're different systems, but neither one is necessarily a better one?

MS: I guess that's right. If you were to ask which system I'd prefer to work in, the answer would have to be that I much prefer working in the US system. I find that I benefit a great deal from giving graduate seminars. Could you introduce a system of graduate seminars in Australia as an option, within the current system, without changing the system of graduate education as a whole so as to require coursework? Maybe, but it seems unlikely. You'd have to ask yourself whether people would teach graduate seminars voluntarily, if they weren't required to do so, and whether you could realistically expect graduate students to invest the time it takes to prepare for and attend graduate seminars, if they weren't required to do so for credit, and the answer to both of these questions is 'Probably not.'

Let me add one more thing about the differences between the two systems of graduate education. When I was at Monash, there were many graduate students who you knew would not get a job in the

academy. That was inevitable, given the reality of where the graduate students were likely to look for jobs and the ratio of jobs to graduate students. Many of the students who were doing PhDs in philosophy, though they perhaps would have loved to get a job teaching philosophy, had to realistically believe that they probably wouldn't. A major difference in the US is that students like them, doing PhDs in a department in the US with the same sort of standing as Monash, would be very likely to get jobs teaching philosophy somewhere or other. Again, that's just a function of the ratio of jobs at tertiary institutions — and you have to remember that there are many tertiary institutions in the US where philosophy is taught, from big research universities to tiny community colleges — to PhD students at serious research universities.

This means that when you teach your graduate students in the US, you're teaching people with whom you know you're going to interact professionally for the rest of your career. You have a responsibility to train them as professionals that you simply don't have, to the same extent anyway, in Australia. If you are teaching philosophy to people who have to conceive of themselves as probably doing philosophy just for the love of it, it is really important to focus on what it is that they love about it. But when you teach graduate students philosophy at a serious research university in the US, you really have to do other things as well. You have to give them a sense of how they should conduct themselves as a responsible academic and make them understand what it takes to have an ongoing research program: that they'll have to put themselves out there and give papers at conferences, that they'll have to write and send papers off to journals on a regular basis, that they'll have to deal with rejection, that they'll have to teach courses in areas that may not be of much interest to them, that they'd therefore better start straight away collecting reading lists and course plans, that they'll have to learn how to get along with their colleagues, and so on and so forth. It makes a huge difference, I think, once you've got these sorts of professional goals in mind when you teach your students.

FL: Being a professor at Princeton, you now live for most of the year in the United States (although you had spent quite a bit of time there in the past). How would you compare intellectual life in the US as you know it with that in Australia?

MS: I think the US thinks of itself as an anti-intellectual culture, but I always tell people in the US that they don't know what an anti-intellectual culture is really like. I think that Australia has an incredibly anti-intellectual culture. If you tell someone on an airplane in the US that you

teach philosophy at a university, then they will plainly have a kind of respect for what you do, or for the achievement that they believe that that represents. But my experience in Australia is that if you tell people you teach at a university, then they'll assume that you're a bludger of some sort, that you don't really work for a living.

That difference creates lots of other differences as well. In the US, for example, there is the *New York Review of Books* and *The Boston Review* where you regularly find academics with the standing of Ronald Dworkin, or Tom Nagel, or Jeremy Waldron writing about this, that and the other. Paul Krugman has a regular column in the *New York Times*. Many of the extraordinary articles in *The New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair* are written by academics, as are the articles in many of the more obscure magazines you find in the US: as proof of this, just check out the authors of the wonderful articles that are selected for inclusion each day on the *Arts and Letters Daily* website, and then look at where those articles were originally published. And then of course there is *National Public Radio*. So what you find in the US is that there are many different outlets for serious thinkers to engage with big ideas in ways that make their engagement available to everybody. I think that that is a very good thing. Perhaps there's no market for this sort of thing in Australia because Australia is so small, but my experience is that that's not the only reason that you don't see as much of this sort of thing in Australia. People who are interested in big ideas in Australia have to be much more defensive about that interest. It always seems like they've got to justify themselves in a way that they simply wouldn't in the US.

FL: How long do you think you'll stay in the States?

MS: That's a good question. When I took up the position at Princeton, I resigned from my job at ANU, as I wanted to commit myself to the idea of working somewhere else. A lot of people who move from a job that they love arrange to keep that job open for a few years just in case they change their mind, but I didn't even try to do that. I knew that if I was able to return, I would have come back at the first hint that it wasn't all working out exactly as I had hoped it would. Given that I resigned, I think there is no possibility of my coming back to work in Australia, as there aren't really any jobs that I could plausibly get. So my assumption is that I will work in the US until I retire. For all that, though, I have to say that I love coming back to Australia, as I think of myself as very much an Australian philosopher who happens to be working in the US. I'd hate to lose touch with Australian philosophy — or with Australia more generally, obviously.

FL: What do you think are the exciting things happening in Australian philosophy at the moment?

MS: I've always thought that if you want to see where the forward momentum is, you have to look at the best of the younger people in the profession, and see what they're working on. So I have to say that I think that David Chalmers' Centre for Consciousness at the ANU is clearly an exciting and invigorating development for Australian philosophy. Though the Centre's official brief is to study consciousness, David is a general metaphysician and epistemologist of the very first rank, so his presence in Australia will ensure that those more general problems receive serious attention. In that same area, I think that David Braddon-Mitchell at Sydney is doing great work. Alan Hajek's appointment at ANU also seemed to me to be a tremendous thing for Australian philosophy. I anticipate that exciting things will happen in probability and decision theory in this country under his influence, and under the influence of people like Mark Colyvan at Sydney as well. I have to say that I very much admire the work that is being done at the interface of psychology and philosophy, work by the likes of Jeanette Kennett in moral philosophy, and Philip Gerrans in philosophy of mind. I know that people overseas pay attention to their work. And then, of course, there is the excellent work in logic that's being done by Greg Restall. I'm sure that Greg will see to it that Australia remains a significant centre for logic. I could go on, but these examples should suffice to make the point. The future of philosophy in Australia looks to be in very safe hands.

The Antipodean Philosopher

Volume 2

Interviews with
Australian and New Zealand
Philosophers

Editors
Graham Oppy and N. N. Trakakis

Associate Editors
Lynda Burns, Steve Gardner,
Fiona Leigh, and Michelle Irving

LEXINGTON BOOKS
Lanham • Boulder • New York • Toronto • Plymouth, UK

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
Jack Copeland	1
Susan Dodds	25
Brian Ellis	43
Moira Gatens	53
Frank Jackson	69
Rae Langton	85
Jeff Malpas	105
Alan Musgrave	131
Philip Pettit	139
Huw Price	165
Graham Priest	183
Peter Singer	199
Michael Smith	217
Janna Thompson	243
<i>The Philosophers</i>	253
<i>Index</i>	259

Published by Lexington Books
A wholly owned subsidiary of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
www.lexingtonbooks.com

Estover Road, Plymouth PL6 7PY, United Kingdom

Copyright © 2012 by Lexington Books


All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote passages in a review.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data Available

ISBN 978-0-7391-6655-0 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-7391-6656-7 (electronic)

™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America