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The University of Sheffield

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Interviewed by Michael Chilton

When did you first come across Philosophy and why did you then take it further to a research level?

My first encounter with Philosophy was during high-school in Jerusalem. We had a charismatic young teacher who was writing his MA at the Hebrew University. We started with Parmenides. He thought that there can be no negative properties and therefore worried that the world must be a uniform undifferentiated ball. I still cannot figure out what is wrong with his argument. And I still think that teaching philosophy in high-school is one of the better things you can do.

Having studied Philosophy for over a decade at a research level what do you find to be the most enjoyable and conversely challenging aspects of philosophical enquiry?

Philosophy is like wine making. Starting to figure out a problem is easy. But it takes years to really make sense of a debate. The rare moments when you think you finally get it are immensely enjoyable. What is frustrating is that you soon realise the problem has slipped through your fingers again.

How does teaching and researching Philosophy compare between the UK and the rest of the world?

My experience is limited to only a few institutions here and abroad. What I say may not be representative. Nevertheless and based on this limited experience:

There is a much greater emphasis on writing essays in the UK which is good since writing is such an important skill and it forces you to develop your own ideas. On the other hand there is less emphasis on a broad knowledge of the subject. Additionally, UG degrees in the UK are focused on only one or two disciplines. This focus limits students' intellectual horizons.

You are currently researching issues around practical disagreement and whether its existence between people is a descriptive or normative fact. So far do you have a strong view either way on the issue or are you still undecided?

This is a project I am doing with Graham Bex-Priestley, a graduate student of ours. We have been tackling the issue in stages. First we are trying to show that non-cognitivists will do best to understand disagreement as normative. Our long term plan is to see if this conclusion is true for other types of theorists as well. If that is right then to say that two people disagree is not only to describe the relation between their attitudes but also to make a judgment about how they ought to think or what

they ought to intend. It is to judge that they are engaged in some common project and that given that project at least one of them has a reason to change his or her attitude. Imagine, for example, that Tom and Huck want to use different colors to paint the fence. Do they disagree? On our view that depends. If each one of them plans to paint a different fence then they don't disagree. But if they decide that they want to paint the fence around Aunt Polly's house, and they decide to paint it all one color, in other words, if they have a common project, and they each want to paint it a different color, then it makes sense to say that they disagree, because under these circumstances we judge that at least one of them has a reason to change his desires.

For the Sheffield Undergraduate Conference you gave a talk (past tense as this will be published after the conference) on your paper concerning the nature of trust, particularly in a more vague and open ended way such as a general trust in a person. Are there any norms we can implement to ensure that a general trust in a person is upheld? If not what is the alternative?

When we trust a person, we don't only expect them to do what we have asked them to do, rather we count on them to figure out what to do when the situation is not exactly as we anticipated it would be. For example, if we trust a friend to stand by our side in a sensitive social situation, we don't give her a script and expect her to say exactly what's written. Rather we expect her to judge what to say as the conversation develops. The crucial question is what standard (or norm) we are expecting her to use in deciding what to say. Some people think that to leave the decision about how to behave to someone else means not expecting them to follow any standards. But that view would entail that we would accept any arbitrary decision they make. I reject this view. I think that to trust someone is to expect her to think about what we would want her to do.

Figuring out what standard we expect someone to follow doesn't mean that we have a way to ensure that they in fact follow this standard. Trust, as Karen Jones rightly says, involves a certain optimism that things will go well in an unpredictable environment. It is nevertheless important to determine the standards of trust. As trusters, being sure of the standards helps us know whether our trust was betrayed and whether to put trust in the same person again; as trustees, knowing these standards helps us uphold the trust put in us.

If you could host a Philosophy conference and invite three philosophers alive or dead who would they be? And which one would you make your keynote speaker?

Parmenides, Plato and Hume.

Parmenides discovered that we cannot understand multiplicity if we don't understand negation.

Plato defined existence.

And Hume taught us to look for the psychological explanations of our philosophical superstitions.

Plato will give the keynote presentation. No one has ever written philosophy better than Plato.