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1. Why were you initially drawn to metaphysics (and what keeps you interested)?

It was metaphysics that made me a philosopher. I grew up in a remote place where no philosophy ever penetrated, and went away to university wanting to become a scientist. (I had at least some inkling of what science was.) As it happened, every first-year student at Reed took a year-long “Humanities” course, and near the end of the first semester of this course we were assigned Plato’s Apology. The Apology left me cool, but I skipped ahead and had a look at the Phaedo, where Plato argues for the immortality of the soul. Here I suddenly found myself gripped. Having had a religious upbringing, I already believed in something like the immortality of the soul. In spite of this, I found Plato’s arguments completely unconvincing. But the very idea of giving a rational argument for immortality, or for that matter against it, was the most fascinating intellectual project I had ever come across.

The next item on the syllabus was the Republic, and here too it was the metaphysical claims that excited me. With the naive audacity of youth, I wrote an essay arguing that Plato’s doctrine of the Forms couldn’t possibly be right. (My teacher, as I recall, was unconvinced; but she was not a philosopher, and was unable to defend the doctrine against my objections.) The subject I had stumbled across was so much more fun than chemistry and mathematics that before the year was out I had given up the career plans I had nursed since my adolescence and changed the focus of my studies to philosophy.

Reed’s metaphysician in those days was George Bealer. His lectures on Spinoza and Leibniz were spellbinding, and it was clear to everyone that we were in the presence of a great mind. I was unable to understand the subtleties of his own research, however. (I wish I could say that now, 25 years later, I have grown equal to the task. But Bealer’s writing still makes me feel like an undergraduate.)

My philosophical interests later became more catholic, and I started graduate study at Syracuse without any clear idea of what sort of philosophy I wanted to go in for. It was Peter van Inwagen who reawakened my love of metaphysics. At some point I took a seminar he was teaching on a draft of Material Beings. The book is now a favourite of mine, and I never tire of rereading it; but on first exposure it was so unfamiliar that I didn’t know what to make of it. Here was a stark landscape, set out with enormous clarity and care, but whose features and lighting were completely alien.

It was only later that I began to find van Inwagen's views attractive. At first I was simply fascinated with his style of doing philosophy. Just as a great mathematician can tell you something extraordinary about any given number, he had the ability to tell you something extraordinary about any given philosophical claim. He would take some plausible conjecture--the sort of thing that philosophers commonly appeal to as a premise--and draw out consequences from it that would make you choke on your coffee. These consequences were not always things that seemed obviously false, but they were usually far too momentous to accept casually. Students of van Inwagen's learned that metaphysics was an arena of great danger, where almost anything you wanted to rely on was certain to lead to any number of unsettling commitments. Ever since then I have wanted to do philosophy like that.

2. What do you consider to be your most important contributions to metaphysics?

When I started thinking about the metaphysics of personal identity in the early 1990s, most of the debate was about what sort of psychological continuity our persistence consists in: what mental properties you could lose and still exist, and how much of your psychology a future being had to inherit in order to be you. A central question was whether your persistence required only the preservation of some of your mental contents--beliefs and memories, say--or whether it was the preservation of your psychological capacities that counted, such as the capacity for thought and consciousness. Elaborate thought experiments were devised to isolate the various proposed conditions and "test our intuitions" about their role in our survival. Peter Unger's book Identity, Consciousness, and Value, which I read at an impressionable age (in one of van Inwagen's seminars), is the most sustained and ingenious example of this project. That our identity over time had something to do with psychology, and that the way to find out what it takes for us to persist was to note our reactions to science-fiction stories, were never questioned in the mainstream literature.

At some point it became clear to me that any account of personal identity over time that had a psychological component--that is, all the accounts seriously discussed by the likes of Unger--were incompatible with our being biological organisms. It was easy to see that no sort of psychological continuity, whether of contents, capacities, or what have you, was either necessary or sufficient for a human organism to persist. I started wondering what we might be if we were not organisms. This line of thought convinced me that psychology was completely irrelevant to personal identity.

The total dominance of psychological-continuity accounts is now a thing of the past, and I would like to think that this is due partly to my book The Human Animal and related papers. The thesis of the book was that we are animals, and that our identity through time therefore had nothing to do with psychology. The main

argument for this was that the human animals we see in the mirror are psychologically just like ourselves: just as conscious, just as intelligent, and so on. Those who deny that we are those animals have two choices. They can accept that there are in fact two beings thinking your thoughts--you and the animal--and try to explain how you can know that you are the one that isn't the animal. Or they can deny that human animals think as we do, and try to explain why not. Psychological-continuity theorists hadn't done either of these things. Although I was not the first to give this sort of argument, I think I put it more forcefully than others had.

By temperament I am a critical philosopher rather than a creative one: a troublemaker. I am better at casting doubts on philosophical claims than at thinking up new ones. (With some people it's the other way round. It's a useful division of labour.) In fact I find it hard to endorse any positive philosophical claim in more than a tentative way. Often the best one can say about a view is that the alternatives look even worse.

3. What do you think is the proper role of metaphysics in relation to other areas of philosophy and other academic disciplines, including the natural sciences?

I don't think metaphysics has any privileged role, either within philosophy or more broadly. It's at best one source of knowledge among many.

I suppose there are two main questions about the role of metaphysics in relation to other areas and disciplines: What should we do when metaphysics conflicts with claims from elsewhere? And what can metaphysics and other areas or disciplines learn from each other?

Suppose our best metaphysics throws up a result that conflicts with the best thinking in some other area of philosophy. For instance, we might seem to have strong metaphysical grounds for a claim that our best epistemology says we couldn't possibly have grounds for. Then either the metaphysics is wrong or the epistemology is (or both). But I know of no general reason to think that one side or the other is more likely to be wrong, or that one discipline ought to bow down before the other. If there is a conflict, both parties ought to worry. Whether one ought to worry more than the other will depend on the particulars of the case.

What if a metaphysical claim that we fancy is inconsistent with a well-confirmed result in some stunningly successful discipline--physics or mathematics, say? It's easy to think that the metaphysicians are more likely to be wrong than the physicists or mathematicians. But real cases are rarely as simple as that. There is room for honest disagreement about what the well-confirmed results of physics or mathematics actually are--that is, what propositions the rigorous methods of those disciplines endorse. Quantum mechanics is the most notorious example of this. What the experimental data confirm is an austere formal theory expressed mostly in mathematical terms. The interpretation of this formalism is controversial, even

among physicists. When the physicists try to explain what the formalism means--how it says the world is--they bring in metaphysical assumptions. (And because few physicists are trained in metaphysics, they often do this badly.) It is fiendishly difficult for anyone, especially an outsider, to tell what part of a successful science is well confirmed and what part is interpretation (even supposing that there is a definite boundary between them). So clashes between metaphysics and physics are often not so different from clashes between metaphysics and epistemology.

Still, metaphysicians ought to worry if they find themselves saying things that their colleagues in the sciences take themselves to have strong grounds for denying, just as they should if their views clash with the best epistemology. It's better not to set oneself against the considered views of large numbers of eminent authorities if one can help it. They know things that we don't.

So much for conflict. What about cooperation? Metaphysics impinges on many other areas of philosophy. Debates in practical ethics, for instance, frequently turn on premises about "the metaphysics of human persons" (to use the ugly phrase current in the literature). Those engaged in these debates often brandish metaphysical claims with the reckless abandon of small children playing with sharp knives. More often than not these claims are highly dubious, or opaque, or suffer from a combination of both defects. A bit of metaphysical competence would improve the quality of the debates to no end. And there are cases where metaphysics turns up a problem best solved not with more metaphysics, but by turning to the philosophy of language or some other area of philosophy.

Clearly the sciences tell us things of great metaphysical interest. For example, the physics of colour and the physiology of colour vision have revolutionary implications for the metaphysics of colour: Larry Hardin's book Color for Philosophers is a wonderful example of how philosophy can learn from science. The philosophy of time, to take another example, has suffered from metaphysicians' ignorance of special relativity. And of course quantum mechanics is an endlessly fertile source of metaphysical problems. It would be foolish to spurn the fruits of humanity's most brilliant success just because those responsible for it work in another building.

The sciences can learn from metaphysics too. Again, you can't make any sense of quantum mechanics without engaging in metaphysics: you face metaphysical questions the moment you try to interpret the equations. The more metaphysics quantum physicists know (those who worry about what the equations mean, anyway), the better they will be at their job. If it were up to me, I would require anyone getting a PhD in physics to learn some metaphysics and epistemology, and anyone getting a PhD in philosophy to learn biology and physics.

4. What do you consider to be the proper method for metaphysics?

I don't think metaphysics has its own special method, distinct from those of other areas of philosophy. So what is the proper method for philosophy in general? This is such a large question that I would have to think about it for twenty or thirty years, free from teaching or administrative duties, before venturing even a preliminary answer. I don't think the funding bodies would support this project, and in any case the editor of this volume needs my contribution by next week. So I will say something about how I try to do philosophy, and what I try to teach my students to do, without claiming that it's the right method. It is notoriously hard to describe how to do something, and what I'm about to say may be pedantic or useless or even dangerous. That's something I'll have to risk.

I suppose philosophers (qua philosophers) do three things: they ask questions; they try to understand those questions; and they try to answer them. I will say nothing about what questions philosophers ought to ask, or at least what questions they ought to start with. That amounts to asking what the proper subject matter of philosophy is, and that's too hard for me.

Let me say something about understanding philosophical questions. Students almost invariably neglect this step, and professionals sometimes do too. The temptation is almost irresistible. It is all too common to start philosophizing without first making clear what question one is talking about. The result is always disappointing: if you put muddle in, you get muddle out. Understanding a philosophical question is often more difficult than answering it (likewise, understanding a philosophical claim can be more difficult than working out whether it's true). I remember as a student reading a paper by Chisholm in which he spent many pages setting out in precise and seemingly tedious detail what a certain question meant, until suddenly, as if by magic, the answer became obvious. It made a big impression on me. I have never been able to do the trick myself, but it remains an ideal.

How do you get a clear understanding of a philosophical question or claim? Well, state it as clearly and precisely as you can. Your understanding of a question or claim is no better than your best statement of it: if you can't state it, you don't understand it, and you need to do more thinking. It's important to put it in the simplest terms possible. Avoid technical jargon as much as you can. Stating a claim in technical language has a tendency to insulate it from critical inquiry. Jargon is comforting to those familiar with it and baffling to those who aren't, making it a hazard for both. It's much easier to see what something means when it's put plainly. If you can't put it in plain language, then again you don't fully understand it. (I don't mean that philosophers should never use jargon. But jargon gets its meaning from ordinary language. It is an abbreviation, and it's important not to forget what it is an abbreviation of.) Think of how you would explain the question to someone who knew nothing about it: a child, say. I don't know whether the central question of the Critique of Pure Reason could be stated so plainly that a child could understand it--certainly Kant's own writing falls short of this ideal. But

that's what we ought to aspire to.

Some questions resist this treatment: we can't make them clear. The reason may be that they have no clear content. Or it may be that we just haven't been clever or persistent enough. Either way, there is little point in trying to answer such questions.

Suppose we've got our question tolerably clear, and our best statement of it has failed to make the answer obvious. Then we need to think about what answers are available. (Think of the claim that the question has more than one answer, or no answer, as answers in themselves.) These answers should be stated with as much care as the question itself. It then remains to work out which one is true.

My best suggestion about how to work out whether a philosophical claim is true is to think about what follows from it, and from its negation. (Unless it's an empirical claim, in which case you need to get out of the armchair and look at the empirical evidence.) Think about what it would mean if it were true: think of states of affairs, the simpler and more concrete the better, that follow from it. Think likewise about what it would mean, in concrete terms, if the claim were false. Try to forget what your teachers and peers say about the claim and approach it afresh. (Much of the conventional wisdom about philosophical claims consists of muddled half-truths.) The better we understand the claim, the easier this task will be. Even if you have no idea what to make of it at first, if you think hard enough you will often find that it has implications for issues that you do know something about: something that will lead you to conclude that the claim is doubtful, if not false.

In practice, these three steps--understanding the question, listing possible answers, and working through their consequences--are interconnected. Part of understanding a question is knowing what would count as an answer to it, and what sort of thing follows from it.

Of course, philosophers notoriously disagree about whether a given implication is acceptable. Two philosophers may agree completely about the implications of a claim, and understand them perfectly; yet one may find them absurd while the other finds them tolerable or even attractive. At least that's how it seems to be. There is probably little that such philosophers can do to reach agreement. The sort of thing one finds attractive or repugnant depends on deep convictions formed early in life, often before acquiring any formal education in philosophy. (Many undergraduates have a distinctive philosophical temperament from the outset of their studies.) Because these convictions are the standard by which philosophical claims are judged, they themselves are extremely resistant to rational persuasion. Nor is this problem unique to philosophy: scientists also disagree about the foundations of their disciplines in ways that are resistant to rational persuasion.

In this case, I think, we ought to be cautious. If I find a view incredible, while others no less able than I, who have thought about it just as carefully, are untroubled, it would be epistemically irresponsible for me to be confident that I'm right and they're wrong. However powerful my convictions may be, I have to accept

that they are fallible. We ought to be more confident about what follows from what than about which premises are true.

5. What do you consider to be the most neglected topics in contemporary metaphysics, and what direction would you like metaphysics to take in the future?

Some topics in metaphysics are neglected because there has never been anything of much interest to say about them: solipsism, for example. Then there are topics whose time has come and gone: idealism, mind-body dualism, arguments for the existence of God, free will and determinism, and many of the other topics we teach our first-year undergraduates. At one time or another, debates on these issues were among the best things going. But nowadays the positions are entrenched and the arguments on all sides are well known and there's not much happening. There may, of course, be great insights lurking within those tired old debates, just waiting for some brilliant 21st-century mind to uncover. Who knows? But it looks pretty unlikely.

Just as some topics are well neglected, others that ought to be neglected remain popular. The mere fact that there is nothing interesting to say about a topic does nothing to discourage people from writing about it. I hesitate to give examples for fear of antagonizing worthy colleagues, but property dualism in the philosophy of mind strikes me a paradigm case of an unjustly unneglected topic: the arguments for it rely on "intuitions" that we have no reason to think are reliable, and the claim itself is notoriously unclear.

(Then there are topics--some neglected and some not--that are so poorly understood that it's hard to see what's going on. I myself don't understand the questions these debates take themselves to be addressing, and I don't think it's entirely my fault. Discussions under the heading 'particulars and universals' almost invariably have this effect on me.)

I suppose what this fifth question is angling for is a list of unjustly neglected topics, areas where important work needs doing--some hot tips for up-and-coming metaphysicians casting about for a place to make their mark. Reliable information of this sort, I'm afraid, is as hard to come by as reliable information about undervalued stocks or horses. But I will venture a few vague remarks.

Physics is a treasure chest of facts and problems of metaphysical interest, with riches enough to keep philosophers going indefinitely, especially as the supply is always being replenished. It seems a safe bet that the philosophy of physics will continue to be a growth industry. Naturally, the better our grasp of physics, the more of this treasure we'll be able to get our fingers on. The unfortunate fact is, however, that few metaphysicians know much physics (I include myself here). This is not due merely to laziness: it takes huge sacrifices to become expert in two different academic disciplines, and the bureaucracy of higher education

discourages it. (In Britain, our political masters like to promote interdisciplinary research, but they do nothing to make it possible for someone to acquire real interdisciplinary competence.)

Another rich and underexploited area for metaphysics, I suspect, is non-Western philosophy. Indian and Tibetan philosophy in particular have a great deal of what looks like metaphysics. There is bound to be wisdom there that we Westerners can learn from. The trouble is, it's even harder to become expert in non-Western philosophy than it is to become expert in physics. More seriously, there are vast problems of communication. When I try to read books about Asian metaphysics written by eminent authorities for Western audiences, I usually find that I can't make head nor tail of them. The impression I get is that the material is simply impossible to explain in terms that someone trained only in the Western tradition can understand. If they're talking about any of the things that we're talking about, it's hard to get even a vague notion of what they're saying about them. In order to learn non-Western philosophy, it seems, you have to travel to the relevant place and study with the local experts. But those who have done this seem unable to communicate to the rest of us what they have learned. (The same is true, to a lesser extent, of ancient Greek philosophy. If anyone alive today understands Aristotle's metaphysics, no one is able to put much of it in a way that the rest of us can grasp.) We can only hope that someday someone will break down this barrier.