

## A CONVERSATION WITH LESLIE ARMOUR

Ian Angus (Simon Fraser University)

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*ANGUS: Perhaps I could begin, Leslie, by asking how you first became interested in philosophy and why you decided to study it at an advanced level.*

I first found some of Plato's Socratic dialogues in the New Westminster Public Library when I was about 11. I was much impressed that seemingly quite young people were allowed to talk back to Socrates, even though they seemed to lose the argument without knowing it. I could see that Plato was clearly one of the few adults worth listening to, though I surely did not get his entire message. When we moved to Edmonton [Alberta] during the Second World War, I wanted to follow my new interest, but the library there didn't let children into the adult section. I found a copy of the old Rationalist Press edition of some of Hume's works in a second-hand bookshop. Even at twelve, it was within my meagre means, earned by selling the unpopular *Edmonton Bulletin* on street corners (my first encounter with journalism, which was to become my profession).

I was delighted. I had already been asked to leave the United Church Sunday school for asking heretical questions and I was surprised that Hume had not been jailed. He certainly demolished the know-it-alls, but I did not see him as a dogmatic sceptic. Indeed, he attacked people

who thought that friendship is usually fakery and that benevolence is mere hypocrisy. A bit later, at 14, I was deemed uneducable in British Columbia, but was rescued by the Sisters of St. Anne and hustled on to university at 16. Along the way, one of the sisters, Mary Eileen, introduced me to Thomas Aquinas, who, she noticed, collected all known objections to his theories and tried to answer them. She saw his work as a continuing enterprise, and so, while the girls (I was the only boy in the school) received religious instruction, she and I—often in the bicycle shed as I recall—thought up and answered new objections to the Five Ways.

At the University of British Columbia, I did not start off in philosophy because I thought it must be reserved for superior beings, but by my second year, the truth that philosophy students were quite ordinary had been revealed. It was then that I met Barnett Savery, the chairman of the philosophy department. In a fit of faith, he accepted a suggestion Bob Harwood and I made. Could we spend the year writing our own philosophy text instead of cramming for exams? Harwood was much older (which was normal in those post-war years of returning veterans), and he was already married. Savery said yes. His most important work was a little essay in *The Journal of Philosophy* in 1941, “Relativity Versus Absolutism in Value-Theory,” a careful exploration of the problems that set us on our way, and set me on a lifelong quest for some form of non-relativist pluralism. We wanted some theory that would accommodate social pluralism, and the fact that there must be many opinions about most subjects. (Even elementary arithmetic, after all, leads to theoretical disputes.) But we did not want all of our claims to knowledge to dissolve into mere chaos. I had already grasped the importance of this problem from my small encounters with the intellectual world, and with the world I began to meet at 15 when I took a job as night clerk with the *Vancouver Province* in order to pay the meagre fees that the sisters needed to run their school. I became addicted to philosophy. Years later, after he had been an executive with Shell Oil and had turned to running one of Canada’s largest appliance manufacturers, Harwood reported that he, too, had not lost interest, nor had he changed his basic outlook either.

*ANGUS: What is it that attracted you to British Idealism and the Hegelian legacy?*

It seemed to me that the business of a philosopher was to put things together and develop worldviews that would help people make sense of their lives. So what I was looking for was some way of assembling what we know about the world and ourselves that would account for a plurality of reasonable views, and also account for the fact that there must be some common way of looking at things that allows us to make rational contact with one another. Hegel had imagined a world that had to be understood dialectically, as a set of opposing views that, in some intelligible process, led to a series of syntheses, each of which in turn opened up new vistas. Hegel's own view often seemed rather mechanical, and proceeded by steps which were intuitive to him but difficult to justify. Barnett Savery feared that such things would lead me to emulate Giovanni Gentile, or at least might ossify my mind in conservatism. Some of the British idealists—in a line from T. H. Green to R. G. Collingwood—seemed to be aware of such difficulties, though others, especially F. H. Bradley, lapsed rather too easily into a kind of reductionist argument that led to a truly mysterious Absolute. J. M. E. McTaggart, not mentioned in any philosophy course, but sitting there on the library shelf, attracted me, even as an undergraduate, because he insisted on an irreducible pluralism. He tried to explain how individual selves might be tied together in a community based on love, not force. I was sure reality was a process and McTaggart, of course, was tagged with the thesis that time is unreal. Eventually, I figured out that what he meant, though few noticed it, was that our *ordinary concept of time* is self-contradictory. There is another order which is the reality behind what we call time. He called it the C series, and he believed that through it we could understand our lives. In the United States, George Holmes Howison pursued idealistic pluralism and gave it an ethical foundation. In Canada, John Watson had looked at Idealism in the context of a society that he understood to be irreducibly pluralistic. All of their arguments were open to question, but they seemed to provide the basis for an investigation that might lead me toward a solution to my central problems.

*ANGUS: You have written on rather technical, or esoteric, philosophical issues, as well as public issues. Has there often been a relation between these in your mind?*

Canadian society has been pluralistic from the beginning. It has gone on becoming more so, and we have often been poorly equipped to deal with its problems. But generally, if, as I thought, the business of philosophers is to examine and create world views which enable people to make sense of their lives, philosophy can never be divorced from public life, and it has to be tested constantly to see if it is helping to clarify the issues of the day. When I started at university, I was planning to be a newspaper writer, and I became first the campus correspondent. Then I became a night reporter for the *Vancouver Province* (not then the tabloid it is today, but one of the great “newspapers of record”). (I also became the editor of the student newspaper, then a daily.) I went on from there to Reuters News Agency in London, U.K., and from there to London Express News and Feature Services, where I worked as a feature writer and columnist. My philosophical studies at London University and my daily work blended seamlessly.

*ANGUS: Your neo-Hegelian view of philosophy is what we might call non-exclusivist. It roots philosophy firmly in history, society and culture. What is the relation of philosophy to culture, understood more generally? What is the specific contribution that philosophy makes to culture?*

A “culture” is the set of meanings that people ascribe to human acts and natural events. So one says that people belong to different cultures when the same act or event is given different meanings by them. We sometimes talk of living in a “scientific culture,” which means that we understand natural events in a way that is influenced by the sciences, and we are coming to understand human actions in terms of chemistry and neurophysiology. But our culture also bears the stamp of our inherited religions, and of all the complex community understandings that we have built up over the years, understandings that underlie parliamentary government, and notions of fairness and social responsibility that underlie our social order, notions that come to mind when we are puzzled by the fact that Americans find our health-care system alien and even frightening. Putting these things together—asking whether the scientific culture has limits, trying to match our beliefs about people with our moral theories, reflecting on what is left of religion as culture changes—these are all things philosophers do, or should do. When philosophers reflect on these questions, they are influenced by the culture in which they grew up,

or by other cultures that influence them. But it takes self-reflection and care to identify one's culture and one's responses. One's culture is not a static thing. A Canadian who goes to Oxford or Harvard because he admires the culture represented by those institutions will come back changed. Paris has left its mark on many Americans. Teaching in California is bound to leave its mark. Everyone who reads and writes is likely to be influenced by many cultures. One's philosophy will show the effects of all this, and the effects of one's reflections on what happens to one. So one must make some effort to understand one's own culture and that of others. I argued in *The Idea of Canada* and in *The Faces of Reason* (the book I wrote with Elizabeth Trott) that, because of our history, Canadian culture suggests ideas that can help to solve the problems that confront anyone in search of a non-relativistic pluralism. One should not make too much—or too little—of this. I think more about this will unfold as our conversation goes on.

*ANGUS: Philosophy is essentially connected to the thinking of totality in the Hegelian view. It seems that it is this thread that fundamentally ties your work to the Hegelian tradition.*

I argued in the last chapter of *Logic and Reality*, and in many other places (*Being and Idea*, for instance), that the world cannot be “totalised” except in the sense that it is an infinity that has indefinitely many legitimate expressions. (In *this* respect, there is a lot in common between my view and that of Emmanuel Levinas, whose *Totalité et infini* was published in the same year by the same publisher as my *Rational and the Real*.) Everything does, though, have some common properties, just as all the integers have something in common, even though there are infinitely many of them. It is in the light of this that I have tried to address the problem of the fragmentation of knowledge. The tendency, from the seventeenth-century onwards, to fragment knowledge has left us with a “cultural lag.” We have enormous scientific and technical knowledge and very little knowledge worth having about the social order. Most of my historical work has been aimed at trying to explain this dangerous fragmentation and to dig into the history of philosophy and call attention to many philosophers—James Cameron, Guillaume Gibieuf, Simon Foucher, Ralph Cudworth, William Sherlock and others in the seventeenth century—who saw alternatives. *Being and Idea* is an attempt to

address the problem directly. The thesis that to accept some central elements of the post-Hegelian idealist tradition is to become a ratio-maniac and to try to lump everything together in an authoritarian order is a myth, though, of course, Gentile did some of that and did end up as Mussolini's minister of education. But something about Gentile's character, the Italian culture of that moment, and the very special slant that Gentile had on Hegel, all entered into the picture.

*ANGUS: One of the most explicitly Hegelian themes in your work is that, for something to be knowable, it must be able to be experienced, for something to be experienced, it must be experienced by a self, and the self has an organised, rational structure. Therefore, the self and the world are held together in a rational form.*

Yes, but one must be careful about what "rational" means. Reason leads us to the infinite, as Descartes noticed and the mathematicians keep reminding us. Pascal's phrase "*Infini, rien*" expresses, as I said in my book with that title, the central human paradox.

*ANGUS: The Idealist thesis is thus that the totality has a structure like that of mind, indeed, that the totality is an evolution of mind.*

There are many sorts of "idealism." Mentalism is one, stoutly and well defended recently by the late, much-lamented Timothy Sprigge. Ideationalism, the thesis that the real consists of what some Platonists (but likely not Plato) called ideas, is another. But what I have been arguing is that reality is more like a book to be read than it is like a collection of inert objects. Contemporary physics tends, as Quine suggested, to dissolve into mathematical formulae, and what we call "our world" is made of interpretations of presentations that function like symbols. There must be someone to read the book. If you mean by "mind" what I suggested in *The Rational and the Real*—"a tendency to have experiences"—and if you take "having experiences" as being aware of something that has an immediate or potential meaning, then, yes reality consists of minds and what they read, *together* with a logical substructure that appears to us, for instance, in the mathematical formulae of physics. (The number two is not just an object in someone's mind. You may not like it, but you can't get rid of it or do without it.) So I think my view is different from "men-

talism.” Berkeley’s suggestion that the world is the “natural language of God” gives one a clue. But that phrase, which occurs in the *Principles* and comes to life in *Alciphron*, suggests that the world does not consist of the simple sensations emphasised in the *Three Dialogues*, either.

*ANGUS: One of the criticisms of the Hegelian view of history is that it cannot incorporate any deep notion of tragedy since everything important (except mere “lazy existence”) is taken up into the direction of history. How do you respond to this criticism?*

This question makes me think of Whitehead’s remark at the end of *Process and Reality* that, in the Consequent Nature of God, “nothing important is lost.” When I argued that this implies immortality, his student and admirer Charles Hartshorne said: “When he says ‘nothing important,’ he does not mean to include you and me.” It is hard to know what such claims really mean. The ideas about the transformation of evil that some people have found in, or read into, Hegel are equally opaque. Surely, if God exists and does not permit evil, the world story must somehow obliterate the apparent evils. I have suggested (T. S. Eliot hints at this in *Four Quartets*) that God would somehow have to unwind time to achieve this effect. But I don’t think it’s very obvious that history works in the way that Eliot’s God needs. If there is such a God, he will have to try something else. “Progress” was once very popular. Every *arondissement* in Paris, at least until very recently, had an “Hôtel du Progrès,” but they were often a little down at heel. Hegel did think history revealed the coming of “spirit” and its evolution toward the Absolute. If I am right, history, like all of “our world,” is an unfolding story. Part of it is created by the unfolding of the symbolic structures that comprise an ever-growing human experience. Part is what we add to history as free human actors. Understanding history can help us, but, as I said, there is a “cultural lag.” We have a lot of scientific knowledge and not enough knowledge of other kinds. So we have been reading history and missing vital bits. History, as we know it, does not make sense. But we grasp the tragedies. I don’t think better understanding will simply erase the tragedies. They are real enough.

*ANGUS: A conception of the whole such as this obviously runs very much against the empiricist tendency that dominated during most of your*

*career. Is this why you emphasise developing an adequate reply to Russell's paradox, which claims that a conception of the whole cannot be generated from its parts? What is your solution to this problem?*

To put it mildly, the idealist tradition was not very popular when I went to study at the University of London. But people were interested in the fact that I was interested in it, and in my use of it, in the search for a non-relativistic pluralism. C. E. M. Joad, my first thesis supervisor, had an enormous grasp of the whole of twentieth-century philosophy. When he died, Ruth Saw, best known for her works on Spinoza and Leibniz, took over as my supervisor, and she grasped what I was looking for. Freddy Ayer (not yet dignified as Sir Alfred) came down the street from University College to sit in on some seminars when I was speaking. He, of course, was the author of some of the objections I had to face, but he always said, "Well, if you want to say *that*, this is how you should say it." I learned a lot from him. Between us, we had a pretty good sense of the difficulties involved in what I was trying to do. Quite a bit of the idealist tradition could not be salvaged but, luckily for me, we usually didn't worry about who won the arguments. The point was to come out of the discussion understanding more. *The Conceptualization of the Inner Life*, a book I wrote with Ted Bartlett, shows some of what I learned from my "opponents." (I have since learned that philosophers are not always so helpful to people who disagree with them. I was very lucky.)

We all agreed that Russell's paradox was important. (I had some dealings with Russell in my journalistic work, but he had moved on to other issues.) Russell's paradox was important because it seemed to make impossible the generation of any totally rational system that did not exclude what needed to be included. Quine, for instance, had sidestepped this with a kind of logical pragmatism. You put it as a part-whole problem, and my solution to that issue is that one must start from some concept of the whole and proceed to generate a notion of the system of parts. Once again, the concept of infinity is central to that. The justification for the "wholes first" thesis, to put it simply, is just that one cannot grasp that the parts *are* parts unless one knows what whole they belong to. So, there is always an implied whole in the description of a part. The technicalities are complex. For now, I stand by the version in *Being and Idea*. Anyone who sets out to attack it seriously is bound to reveal some of the basic as-

sumptions and incomplete concepts that lie behind the problem, and that, I would hope, will help me to see further.

*ANGUS: You have, in various ways, kept coming back to the question of whether the evolving historical mind can, or should, be called God. Being and Idea, for example, deals extensively with the question of whether God is transcendent to nature-history or whether God should be understood immanently and pantheistically.*

My thesis is that the foundation of reality is an infinity, which, as it is expressed in the world through our experience of nature and history, reveals aspects of being as it would be in its completeness, an infinity that cannot be summed. That completeness would involve infinite mind. The infinity that is revealed in our minds is the same infinity. My friend William Mander thinks this should be understood pantheistically, but my own view is that completeness involves a plurality of points of view and, hence, an irreducible plurality of individual minds. The problem of individuation is serious here. Counting minds is not always easy. I have worked closely with John Leslie, too, and one might notice the plural in his recent book *Infinite Minds*, but Mander is not to be taken lightly.

*ANGUS: What is the relationship of a philosophical concept of God such as this to a theological, or scriptural, understanding of God?*

In the end, religion has mostly to do with orientation, with ordering one's life. Finding food, staying warm, keeping a mate, staying alive and healthy, coping with one's children, sustaining one's communities (large and small), doing one's daily job, seeking entertainment, all fill one's day. But somehow, these activities need to be coordinated and priorities set. If there is no overall orientation, life becomes full of frustrations and one seems to drift with the tide. It seems unlikely that anyone has ever gone for long without attempting some broader orientation. Whatever this determining structure turns out to be, it is likely to be something that has some of the properties of a religion. We hear it said that some people turn moneymaking into a religion, and this is not quite a joke. Others seem dominated by the search for some bearable state of mind. We do not know how many people who are "addicted" to drugs, gambling and

sex are, in fact, searching for a state of mind in which things will fall into place.

What does emerge, however, is that most kinds of overall orientation would have a tendency toward self-destruction if they were pursued widely. One needs possessions to live, but the unobstructed pursuit of possessions must, if successful, lead to social division. The capitalist who tries to master the whole world would, if he succeeded, possess all the wealth and everyone else would be bereft. At some point, he must tame his possessiveness in order to maintain his customers. The search for special states of mind—whether by drug-taking or whatever—leads to an inward focus that eventually cuts one off from the community while leaving one dependent on it. As a mainly mental exercise, lonely reflection has been recommended for saints, but it is absurd for everyone. Solitary sainthood, as much as drug-induced states of mind, tend eventually to separate one from the commonly perceived reality. Solitary saints may seek this deliberately, but such solitude has never been pursued widely. Much of what we know we have found out together. The solitary saint hopes to find God, but he may be fooled. The widespread pursuit of drug-induced states of mind leads communities to call for more policemen.

Of course, there are more promising projects. The modest programme traditionally offered by hedonists is one, and the pursuit of general wisdom is another. But the minimisation of pain and maximisation of pleasure turns out, as F. H. Bradley noticed, to be logically absurd. Pleasures cannot be aggregated like piles of coal, for one tends to crowd out another. Nor does the maximisation of pleasure amount to anything. Just as there is no largest possible pile of coal, so there is no maximum of pleasure.

The pursuit of a generalised wisdom sounds much better. But it merely begs the question. The wisdom would be, after all, an understanding of the universe. But that is a statement of a necessary condition for genuine orientation, not an account of orientation.

At any rate, every functioning and functional orientation is both objective and tied to decision-making states of mind, even if these change from time to time and even if their objective is something pedestrian such as balancing pleasure and pain. Such an orientation is tied to the mind that it directs, and it does not hold sway over other minds unless others make the same choice.

Grasping the way in which orientation bears upon, indeed shades into and becomes central for religion may show us the essential point of religious tolerance. It may also help us to understand why our religious discourse needs to be shaped so that we can try to share our grounds of conviction with others—and yet, equally, why it is that organised religions tend to be fissiparous. Where orthodoxy is demanded, there is always a struggle to maintain it.

This suggests a deeper enquiry into the idea of an ultimate orientation. An obvious example of an orienting notion is the concept of God. I argue that this, understood in a certain way, has a good deal in common with *any* ultimate orientation that is likely to succeed. It is, that is, connected to successful orientation if the notion of God is taken to include the idea of an infinite mind, capable of infinite goodness, capable of entering into a direct relation with finite minds such as ours and capable of facilitating, through a shared experience, the optimisation of goodness in any actually possible world.

It is instructive to notice what sometimes happens when one abandons this view. Marx, in *The German Ideology*, envisaged a new ideal, a new goal, facilitating the emergence of the genuinely free human being, no longer tied to the limitations of a single occupation in a world dominated by capitalist economics. The free being would be much like a god. When Marx's followers in the Soviet Union found they could not bring this about quickly, they unconsciously, I think, decided on freedom for a few for whom it might be achieved. These did become surrogate gods. They turned out to be Stalin, his avatars in the other communist states, and some of the party bureaucracy. Anything less than an infinite being, expressed as an infinite plurality, turns out to be corrupt if it is used as a substitute for God because it narrows the vision. When, in a body of journalists in London, I was able to ask questions of Nikita Khrushchev in the late 1950s, I think we all sensed that he grasped that the Soviet game would have to change. He made wry jokes about how East and West traded positions on arms control. Later, he made clear his revulsion at Stalinism. When Mikhail Gorbachev proclaimed that the old game was over, the system quickly collapsed. It had lost its driving force. But many people still seem confused. In Western terms, the Soviet economy was not a success. But it produced splendid rockets, supported space exploration, built good tanks (and the Soviet Union was attacked twice from the west), sustained what was, by world standards, good

health care, ran a publishing house which made many world classics available to everyone, promoted great theatres and ballet companies, and offered some excellent education. In some fields, Moscow State University was the best. The Soviet economy did very poorly at providing consumer goods. It had lost its way. When the politburo compelled the worship of its own gods, people lost a wide number of the human rights included in the United Nations Declaration. The fact that the Soviet Union did better in social, educational and economic rights than much of “the West” did not make up for that. It was a failure of orientation that doomed it. Its gods could not be resurrected. Is Russia now a better place to live? I wish I could be sure.

Our actual religions are tied to doctrines which often make them exclusive and thus at loggerheads with one another. The “religions of the book” declare that revelation is over—that, oddly, an infinite God can reveal no more than the finite shreds he has bestowed on past generations—and so they become, too often, forces of darkness. Education breeds demands to overcome these limitations, and so we have Reform Judaism, liberal Christianity (which keeps turning up in Catholic religious orders as well as in Protestant sects) and liberal Islam, which has roots in Ibn Sina and comes to fruition in the work of recent Islamic scholars such as M. M. Sharif. One would like to think that there is an historical drift to Ralph Cudworth’s God, who “sweetly governs” and abhors hellfire and predestination. Many people have thought so—Arnold Toynbee, Teilhard de Chardin, John Elov Boodin and Alfred North Whitehead among them. And one must not forget John Henry Newman’s view of the development of Christian doctrine, even though he never accepted the liberal views of his brother Francis. But when times are troubled and people feel uncertain, they retreat to the old certainties and especially to doctrines that single them out as “special people” with a god who can confound their enemies. I have often written about these things and I can only hope I have not added to the confusion. For religion remains a major cause of death.

*ANGUS: Let me now turn the conversation in a different direction by asking you when and why you became interested in Canadian philosophy?*

When I was an undergraduate, I realised that there were Canadian idealists, especially John Watson, who could help me understand my problems. But I did not explore Canadian philosophy very deeply while I was in London or while I was teaching in Montana and California. But when I returned to Canada to teach at the University of Waterloo, I was beginning the work that would lead to *Logic and Reality*. Hegel seemed profoundly important, but I was convinced that one did not need to end with an Absolute that manifested itself in a glorified Prussian State. McTaggart provided metaphysical reasons for pluralism, but I needed to explore idealist ideas of community. John Watson came to seem very important. Something else was going on, however. The philosophy department was expanding rapidly. I didn't at first worry about the pattern of hiring because I was sure that, over time, Canadians would turn up in the department. But soon there were nearly twenty of us and only two Canadians. It began to occur to me that Canadian culture was not getting a fair hearing and that it made a difference. We turned down several Toronto PhDs in order to hire Americans who had significantly fewer attainments. Once, we hired a man who had spent years at a large (but not quite Ivy League) American university without getting his doctorate. Once, we turned down a distinguished Canadian philosopher. It was said that the Americans were better educated. I became disturbed. Culture was showing itself in unfortunate ways. In interviews, Canadians behaved differently from their American rivals. Those we interviewed most often came from the University of Toronto, which was still a very traditionalist institution: In philosophy, it was strongly devoted to historical studies, but quite capable of fostering contemporary investigations. Its graduates were often not very combative; they paused to try to see how they could come to understand and learn from their interlocutors. In those days, a "B" was an honourable grade in Toronto and a failing grade in most American graduate schools, so all of the Americans came with "A" grades. (Toronto has since caught up. The "B" grade is no longer honourable for graduate students.) I thought that if the culture was different, it ought to show itself in philosophy, and this would help me to understand what was going on and also to persuade my colleagues to rethink some of their decisions. The Canadians seemed "slow," "not sharp," "not quick on the uptake." There are always "political" issues in academic hiring—"so-and-so studied under my supervisor," someone's "power in the department will be increased if we hire *that* person," and

so on. But I think people were mostly making honest decisions coloured by their cultural responses. My concern, as I explained to Americans in an article I was asked to write for *The Nation*, was not some kind of narrow nationalism, but simply, in the first place, justice—seeing that the most qualified candidate got the job. I did think that we should try to see that the culture that seemed to have produced a rather tolerable society got a hearing. And so we should hire some Canadians, but a close study of the record did not suggest that we needed to give preference to them, only that we had to be sure that the most qualified candidate got the job. If we did so, the department would have Canadians in the future. I don't know if the *Nation* article convinced anyone, but it was reprinted many times and made a little money for a magazine I still much admire. I realised, though, that to make my case, I needed to find out all I could about Canadian philosophy and its relations to Canadian culture. I had a grant from the Canada Council (that was before philosophy fell into the hands of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council), but I needed calm to examine the mass of work I was faced with. I gladly accepted an offer to chair the Philosophy Department at Cleveland State University (and to start a new journal). My American colleagues proved very kind, sharing in my administrative chores then and later, when, for a while, I was Dean of Arts and Sciences. A couple of books about Canadian culture and philosophy (one written with Betty Trott) eventually emerged. I ought to add that American culture is much less intrusive at home than it tends to be when Americans go abroad. In the American universities in which I have taught, people are well aware of all the games sanctioned by the culture and simply make allowances for them. Abroad, the foreign culture tends to seem threatening, and people are apt to band together.

*ANGUS: The research that went into writing Faces of Reason: An Essay on Philosophy and Culture in English Canada 1850-1950 (co-written with Elizabeth Trott) was very extensive. What was it that made you think that such an investment of time and effort was worthwhile? Did this research advance your conception of philosophy and propose solutions to philosophical problems, or was it simply research into the social situation in which philosophy develops?*

The research convinced me that, since culture has to do with the meanings we assign to human acts and natural events, different cultures involve different starting points. I found that cultural currents run very deep in philosophy because they are involved with the concept of reason itself. Canadian philosophers had tended to see reason not as a device for demolishing one's opponents, but as a device for exploring their opponents' views and trying to see how debates can be adjudicated in a way that accommodates all of the original insights. Betty Trott and I called this "philosophical federalism." But that means that the history of philosophy cannot be separated from the study of culture anywhere. Of course, I don't think this view of reason is unique to Canada. It was the view of reason I found in London, too, because the university had remained, for historical reasons, very pluralistic. But fashion had swept Oxford and Cambridge. Demolishing one's enemies was an essential goal, at least at Oxford, whose philosophers were often surprised when they came to visit us in London. Things have softened somewhat at Oxford and Cambridge now. But professional cultures tend to be subject to quite rapid change, while national cultures are somewhat more stable.

*ANGUS: One of your theses about Canadian philosophy is that there are similar themes in English-speaking and French-speaking philosophy, even though there has been very little interaction between them. What are these similarities? How do you explain them?*

There was a myth back in those years—the beginning of the 1960s—that Québec philosophers were mired in a kind of textbook Thomism. Of course, they never were, although textbook Thomism did dominate the *collèges classiques*. I went digging in the archives and discovered the earliest French-speaking philosophers, who were Jesuits, some of whom came from La Flèche and were inspired by Descartes, and others, later, who were Malebranchistes. This tradition extended into the 19th century. Great debates were sparked by Jacques Odelin, a Cartesian priest whose faith had been lost, but was then restored by reading Descartes. They filled the front pages of *L'Echo du pays*. Thomism was a rather late arrival, and when it came, it came with conservative churchmen who disdained the French Revolution, but the Québec philosophers soon learned that St. Thomas drew on a rich background in which there were always Platonic, neo-Platonic and Aristotelian strands, and that many questions

remained open. After about 1850, Québec thinkers tended to band together (*perhaps, sometimes*, in order to form a common front against the English), and they carried on their old disputes using different elements of Thomist and other scholastic thought. Arthur Robert's famous history of philosophy, used at Laval through to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, remarked that, when all the exaggerations on both sides of the debate about Hegel are allowed for, "Hegel saw further than any other philosopher." (At the beginning and end of his book, he recommended scholastic thought. Nosy bishops, perhaps, did not read the middle or, more likely, did not worry much so long as all seemed to end well.) The same need to accommodate a plurality of views while maintaining a unified core was felt in English Canada, and some of the Québec philosophers read and admired John Watson. The history of Canadian philosophy is not widely regarded as a very promising research area in Québec, but I was invited to Paris to talk about it and a French thinker, Jean François de Raymond, who had been a diplomat stationed in Québec, has since written a book about Cartesianism in Québec. What troubles me is that there is not enough interest in English or in French Canada in discovering how the history of philosophy reflects our *joint* culture as opposed to the special cultures on each side. That lack I can only explain as the result of childish politics set in motion by people who either don't care about or who are afraid of the idea that we have important cultural elements in common. It's not fair to say there's *no* interest. I came back to Canada in the year René Lévesque was elected because I wanted to see if I could make contact across the lines. I had help from people at Laval, especially Thomas De Koninck and Henri-Paul Cunningham, and I was invited to join the editorial board of *Laval Théologique et Philosophique*. I made lasting friends in the separatist camp, too, but probably no converts.

*ANGUS: Your book The Idea of Canada and the Crisis of Community seems to have come out of this same research into the history of Canadian philosophy. However, in it you speak more directly in your own voice, analysing social problems and proposing solutions. It is also aimed at a more general, non-specialist audience. Given the over-specialised nature of much university research nowadays, it is quite rare. How do you understand the process of writing more popularly? Does it reflect a philosophical necessity?*

If one does not think philosophy can be separated from culture, one is committed to a study of history and of the social sciences that has much to say about culture. But there is more. The business of philosophy is to provide critical frameworks that help give people a sense of their lives and the world they live in. It is only, of course, a help. McTaggart used to say that philosophy in that sense is something one must do for oneself, and I encourage my students to look at it that way. But, to be a help, one's professional writings must make sense in the environment in which people find themselves. If what I am saying is right, then philosophy has implications that run into other fields and one must keep looking for them. If one's philosophy leads to nonsensical ways of conceiving economics, or absurd views of history, one had better think again.

*ANGUS: The Idea of Canada, and also perhaps some of your essays that deal with concrete Canadian issues, incorporate ideas from Marx and Proudhon, as well as Hegel. How does your social philosophy depart from a Hegelian model to include such sources? How would you characterise your more recent work in social philosophy as editor and frequent contributor to the International Journal of Social Economics?*

Hegel's idea of community was derived from his notion of a long march toward a finally unified Absolute, which led him to think of the state as the "march of God in history" and to the notion that one should find one's end and well-being in the state. Suzie Johnston and I did a lot of research on the paradox that Hegel meant to be a democrat and seemingly ended as something very different. We decided that Hegel had tripped over his own dialectic. When I worked on a set of rules for a dialectical logic (published in *Logic and Reality*), I found that they lead to an end result which is an infinite plurality. The central notion in metaphysics since Descartes has been infinity. I hope I have cast a little light on it, but there is always more to be said. I have been working on a book on infinity for about ten years now, and this autumn again it will be a map for my graduate seminar. I wouldn't want to claim too much for it, but thinking about infinity makes one see that one needs different ideas of community and of social processes. Marx realised, too, that Hegel's dialectic had jumped the track. (I think it does so at the point in the two "Logics" at which becoming comes to be a category that is then trans-

cended so that the dialectic is then frozen. “Becoming” has to be a property of the system, not a category.) Transcending “becoming” also tips the dialectic into abstraction, and Marx understood this. Marxist “materialism” is not a kind of Hobbesian scientism, but an insistence on the concrete. Proudhon understood the importance of community as something constantly under construction.

My work on economics came about because I needed a way to see how my views of community and historical development meshed with reality. When the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *The Wealth of Nations* came 'round, the American economists planned a conference to celebrate it. They asked me to write a paper. I argued that economists had often ignored most of the book, including Smith's unease with bankers, his limits on interest rates, his insistence on state-built infrastructures and, of course, his remarks at the end on the importance of philosophy. To my surprise, the editor of *The Review of Social Economy* wrote and asked if he could publish it. Then John O'Brien, the long-time editor of the *International Journal of Social Economics*, invited me to write another paper, and the rest mostly came out of conferences he organised. I did not expect to succeed him as editor, but, again to my surprise, I was pressed into service. I am very grateful because it has given me many opportunities to test my philosophical theses, to expose them to the critical eye of established economists, and to see at close quarters how economists work. Not many philosophers are so lucky. I am not sure I deserved it, but I certainly needed to do this work.

*ANGUS: Several writers have suggested that there is a particular attraction for Hegel in Canadian intellectual life. Do you think that this is so? How would you explain it?*

It tends to be exaggerated, but there is truth in this claim. People are surprised to find a long history of Hegelianism in Québec, long before the current wave of French philosophy gave it another and different life. But the old strand did not end with Arthur Robert's *History*. Charles De Koninck, usually regarded as the leading Thomist in the province (though he said “to call me a Thomist is to insult me”), was no Hegelian, but his son Thomas, a philosopher much fêted in France, has always had an interest in Hegel and in Hegel's links to Aristotle, a philosopher central in Québec philosophy. Hegel inevitably figures in attempts at grand

philosophical syntheses of the kind that pluralistic societies need. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, philosophers in English Canada felt the same need, and they rebelled against the dry Scottish philosophy of “common sense.” The exaggeration becomes clear when one realises that all of the philosophers were also highly critical of Hegel and added much to his philosophy. “Hegelian” has sometimes been an epithet to hurl at one’s enemies. Sometimes, too, it is used to support the claim that Canadian philosophers did nothing original. (A reviewer of one of my grant applications wrote: “All the philosophers studied by Professor Armour are derivative and of no importance.”) Derivative or not, they were only Hegelians in the sense that everyone looking to solve the problems that were central to Canadian life needed to look at Hegel. But Hegel, after all, had been dead a long time before they started writing.

One should remember that most of the English-speaking philosophers (George Blewett is a marked exception) had British backgrounds. They were nearly all much more concerned to respond to Canadian culture than philosophers are now, for they were fairly isolated and went “home” only at intervals. There is, however, a non-Hegelian idealist tradition in British philosophy, too. Everybody knows about Berkeley and about the Cambridge Platonists, especially Ralph Cudworth. But little attention has been paid to the thinkers who came between Cudworth and Berkeley, especially William Sherlock, Edward Fowler and Edward Stillingfleet. My recent research suggests that they prefigured the nineteenth-century idealists in interesting ways, and developed theories that may well be superior in some respects to later “post-Hegelian” idealism. Idealism has continued to interest political theorists and I will speak about some of this research at the political theory workshops in Manchester this autumn.

*ANGUS: You have argued that the Hegelian Absolute became understood pluralistically in English Canadian philosophy. Can this be understood as a consequence of the particularities of Canadian history?*

Yes, I think it can. People such as like John Watson and George Blewett were not primarily concerned with the logical problems of an all-encompassing Absolute, but with the moral problems that it posed and with their political implications. Watson reflected constantly on the pluralistic nature of our society. He understood this pluralism in terms of

competing philosophies. Mgr. Louis-Adolphe Pâquet, the sternest and most scholarly of the Québec Thomists, praised Watson for his understanding of St. Thomas. Blewett had similar interests. Canada had never had a single culture (though it did have a culture with common elements), and from the beginning it was, of course, not just a French-English community. The earliest Jesuits tried to integrate the religious ideas of the indigenous peoples into their worldviews and, like Jesuits everywhere, they had to face the problems that caused. (Not long ago, a United Church clergyman got into trouble for incorporating “native” ideas into his services.) In our own time, Charles De Koninck warned that “*le grand état*” might creep up on us as bureaucratic power grew, but he insisted that federalism was an important answer—protecting the French from themselves and the English from *themselves*. So, when it was projected into politics, the all-absorbing Absolute was never likely to be accepted. If Hegelianism was to be taken seriously, a way to escape from it had to be found.

*ANGUS: Is it possible to have a conception of the Absolute as the reconciliation of all differences and yet claim that the Absolute will be understood in different ways, in different languages, we might say? If so, doesn't the Absolute become simply a place-holding term, as it were, just a way of saying that reconciliation is desirable? Isn't this a more Kantian than Hegelian conception of totality?*

Thinkers such as Watson and Howison would certainly have agreed that this is a more Kantian than Hegelian view. Watson was a widely recognised Kant scholar, and his Kant commentaries are still in print in the United States. Howison's metaphysic goes beyond what Kant thought possible, but Kant is at the centre of all of his thought. In my view, the best model of what one might call “moral reality” is Kant's Kingdom of Ends, a unity in which each individual is an end in himself or herself. This is the central conclusion of *The Metaphysics of Community*, the book on which I have been working hardest during the last ten years. It has been pointed out to me, of course, that in turning the Kingdom of Ends into a political model and urging it as a metaphysical reality, I am going beyond anything Kant said and moving toward what I think were Hegel's original democratic intentions. Is my alternative to Hegel's Ab-

solute just a “place-holder”? I think not, but one must show how it works out.

*ANGUS: Did you find that your work on Canadian philosophy was productive in allowing you to formulate, or resolve, problems that you had already encountered in the history of philosophy?*

The work in Canadian philosophy brought home to me the importance of seeing philosophy in its cultural context—the impossibility of understanding it in isolation. It also reinforced my conviction that philosophy has to be seen as a whole, that one cannot separate ethics, epistemology, metaphysics and logic from one another. All of this poses serious problems for the philosopher. It goes against the contemporary temper, as I think you suggested. I taught the philosophy of history with an historian, Tim Runyan, in Cleveland, and I learned a lot about how historians go about their business. I have continued to work with historians in the philosophy of history seminar at the Institute of Historical Studies at the University of London throughout the past decade. The economists, as I said, have been kind to me and, as editor of the *International Journal of Social Economics*, I get to read some economics just about every day. More than that, by reading the reports of the reviewers to whom we send papers, I have learned quite a lot about how economists and others go about their affairs. (The journal cuts across the social sciences, history and philosophy.) The work we did for the *Idea of Canada* brought me into contact with anthropologists. My research assistant, Roselyne Revel, went to the Queen Charlotte Islands (where the local aboriginal band had recently voted to ban anthropologists), and we afterwards met with anthropologists at the University of British Columbia. We did not work the way they did, and the meetings were enlightening. (Anthropology, of course, has, like many other disciplines, become increasingly fragmented.) To reflect on this is to underline the problems posed by the fragmentation of knowledge. It also suggests the hazards a philosopher who takes my view of philosophy must face.

I should add a final note: John Kenneth Galbraith once said that the instructors at his original college—now the University of Guelph—made up for their lack of knowledge by their very great certainty. That was true of some of my instructors at the University of British Columbia, too, es-

pecially those I met in economics and biology. At least one English professor could have given anyone at the then-Ontario Agricultural College a good run for his money. Only one philosopher was a major example of this phenomenon. Finally, C. W. Topping, who taught sociology, gave me a hopeful vision of the social sciences that has never left me. He was always willing to change his mind. I promised myself that I would not announce great certainties. The human mind is rarely entitled to them. But it is hard, when asked why one said or did something, and then giving one's reasons, not to make it sound as if one is implying "and I was right, too." Certainly, one should give the best argument for one's case, but my conclusion, after all, is that no philosophical argument is ever finally closed. I have been working on a book about scepticism for thirty years now. The manuscript has been used in half a dozen graduate seminars and it improves each time from student reflections on it. But I have not published it. I don't know enough.

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