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An Interview with Gerard Casey

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In general, how does one’s view of human nature influence one’s philosophical stance?

It depends whether one thinks there is such a thing as human nature or not. There are those who hold that there is no such thing or, that if there is, that it is fundamentally indeterminate or indeterminable. If this is one’s belief then the concept of human nature obviously can have no positive effect on one’s philosophical work. If, however, you think, as I do that everything that exists has a specific nature, that everything that exists is a certain kind of thing, then, since human beings manifestly exist, it becomes part of a scientific enquiry to find out what kind of thing a human being is. The commitment to the discovery of the nature of things seems to me to be a fundamental philosophical impulse that we can discern in the work of the earliest philosophers and which is a basic component of all rational thought, both philosophical and scientific. People sometimes resist the idea of human nature because they think that believing there is such a thing commits one to holding that coming to apprehend such a nature is a simple matter that terminates enquiry. That, of course, is not the case.

To believe that there is a nature to investigate is to respond to an invitation to inquire; it is the beginning, not the end, of inquiry. Such inquiry requires some combination of
investigation, empirical research, conceptual analysis, theory formation and testing. It’s not as if you can simply sit in your chair, scrunch up your eyes, think really hard, and that’s the end of the work!

To discover the nature of anything requires investigation, more often than not, empirical investigation. My overall view would be that things are what they are and have the nature that they have. We don’t know what that nature before we start our inquiry. How do we find out? Well, there’s only one way to find out. You look, and you try to discover the characteristic activities or reactivities of whatever it is you’re dealing with. Copper, for example, doesn’t do much by itself, so you’re not going to get very far by studying its activities, but it has characteristic reactivities. So, typically, if you want to know what kind of thing copper is, you do things to it: heat it, measure it, hammer it, stretch it and so on. If you do this consistently and pay attention to what you are doing you will discover copper’s coefficient of expansion, its ductility, and so on. If you then assume that the characteristic reactivities of the pieces of copper you’ve looked at are not just peculiar to those pieces of copper but belong to copper just as such, then you’ve made a start on identifying the nature of copper. It is the same with human beings except that here we have to take into account human activities as well as reactivities. It seems to me to be bizarrely naïve for philosophers to pretend that we don’t know, broadly speaking, what kinds of things we’re dealing with when dealing with human beings, a point made elegantly in many of her works by Mary Midgley.

If there’s something we’ve had experience with, more than copper or any other part of the world of nature, it is the world of human beings; all our literature our stories, in fact, the whole of our culture is imbued through and through with what we take human beings
to be. We have a very fair idea of what kind of animal we’re dealing with—the range of characters that they are—but we don’t know the full story. There’s always something new, and there’s always another angle; that’s why there’s always room for a new movie, a new play, a new symphony; there’s always room for more. You can always look for another angle; there’s always another story to tell about jealousy or rage or hatred or envy or truth.

Just recently I saw the film King Rat for the first time. King Rat (George Segal) is a POW in the Japanese war camp in Singapore. Most of the prisoners are Brits and he’s one of the few Americans in there with them. On one level, the film is about a clash of cultures—British vs. American, West vs. East but, more fundamentally, it is a clash between the ethics of commerce and the ethics of honor. The King is presented, initially, as a kind of wheeler-dealer, a sort of huckster, buying and selling, trading—in effect, running a black market. In the eyes of the British, this marks him as not being a man of honor. The curious thing, however, is that the King is basically honest in his operations; he doesn’t cheat; he doesn’t steal, but he makes a buck. And in making a living for himself he supplies services to others so if they need, let us say, eggs or rats as the case might be, he makes sure everybody wins. In contrast to the King’s fundamental honesty, the imprisoned military officers responsible for running the camp display a fundamental dishonesty, cloaked in the language of honor. The senior officers, including the Colonel in charge, are involved in systematic cheating to ensure that they get more food than anybody else. This movie is a modern take on some very old themes. In one of our oldest pieces of literature we find Achilles sulking in his tent because he can’t get his way while his comrades are being killed. Then there’s here’s Paris basically saying, “I don’t care if
my city collapses and my comrades die, I want this woman, right here, right now”.

Literature, then, and film, and plays, all elaborate, extend, explore and exercise our endless fascination with what it means to be human. Philosophy, psychology, anthropology, all these disciplines try to do more or less the same thing as literature in a more systematic, if possibly less entertaining, way

**Why do you think the notion of human nature is important?**

There’s a Latin phrase, *operatio sequitur esse*, which means that the way a thing works follows from the kind of being that it is. Normally we start our inquiries by seeing how things work, then we postulate a set of faculties or powers or capacities that we think are likely to explain why they’re able to do what they do. That allows us to further understand what it is that they are doing, and so we go back and forth developing an ever deeper, an ever more refined, understanding of the nature of what it is we are dealing with. If you think about things that we take for granted, say our understanding or our intelligence, it is immediately evident that, these things aren’t accessible to us directly—you can’t open up a man’s head and see his capacity for understanding or his intelligence. None of these things is sensorily manifest. They can only be arrived at by a process of inference from an activity to a capacity for performing that activity.

How do we judge that one person is more intelligent than another? Again, there is no direct way to measure this. What we actually do is to get people to perform a set of tasks, compare their performances and then argue inferentially from those performances to the possession of different levels of capacity. If you’re in the teaching business you’ll know that teachers routinely make similar inferences to native intelligence by noting the speed
with which different students master material. Aquinas noted a long time ago that one way to tell the difference between the bright students and the not-so-bright ones is that you need to give more examples to the not-so-bright ones. We need to distinguish between two orders here—the ontological and the epistemological. Ontologically, it is the possession of a capacity (in this context, an *esse*) that allows to perform an activity (*operatio*); epistemologically, however, the only way we can know we have such a capacity is by inference from our characteristic activities.

**This question may be worthy of a book, but is human nature relevant to ethics and philosophy?**

The short and easy answer to this question is “Yes.” A longer and more difficult answer is required to the question “How and to what extent is human nature relevant to ethics and philosophy?” Thinkers are divided on this. Some focus on the notion of the right; others on the notion of the good. For me, the central question is “What is good for man?” Human beings are like everything else in the universe in having a specific nature. This being so, one should be able to figure out, at least in broad outline what kinds of things contribute to the flourishing of human beings and what kinds of things do not. If it is sometimes not completely obvious, neither is it always a complete mystery. Within the broad set of factors that can obviously contribute to the human good there is room and plenty for subjective variation. What could be an example of such a factor? Well, friendship. I believe most of us would agree that a life lived without friends is a diminished life. Everyone needs friends. Some people will need more, some people will need less, some people need deep friendships, others can be content will relatively
shallow relationships. There’s no prescription on it. You may have only one friend for all your life but a life lived without friends is either superhuman or, more than likely, subhuman. That people needs friends in order to flourish seems to me to be as close to a universal truth as you’re going to get in regard to human nature. More generally, human flourishing seems to require social and physical environments in which one can exercise a variety of related capacities. We need to love and to be loved. And again, if you’re systematically, prevented from loving or from being loved that invariably will be destructive of your human fulfillment. (See Books VIII and IX of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*.)

We also need to know: as Aristotle says in the beginning of *Metaphysics* “every man by nature desires to know”. We’re incredibly curious creatures—unless we’ve had curiosity beaten out of us at school! We like to know; we like to discover, we like the experience of insight, so much so that we may set up the relatively trivial test of crossword puzzle We read newspapers and books, we take courses, we talk and gossip. We even pretend to know when we really don’t! If you’re systematically frustrated in your desire to know, you’re not going to be happy, you’re not going to flourish.Literature is a way of us telling ourselves, telling us what kind of things generally do promote or frustrate human fulfillment. We see people destroying themselves for a love that is self-destructive because it is jealous. In *Othello*, for example, the tragic hero ends up destroying the very thing that he loves. These seminal works of literature are very revealing, testifying again and again to the basic facts about the nature of human beings. The human search for understanding moves us relentlessly towards ever towards greater synoptic and overarching viewpoints. Our knowledge is always transitional, always
partial. Often when we think we have reached a point beyond which it is impossible to go and that now we have attained final knowledge, our presumptions receive a rude shock. At the end of the nineteenth century, for example, if you were studying physics, the general impression you would have received was that, apart from a few minor problems with black body radiation, there was little or nothing new or startling left to do. But it turned out that the physics was on the brink of a theoretical explosion, the effects of which we haven’t fully absorbed even today.

Science, then, broadly understood, is the organization of our knowledge and its reduction to principles. It’s not just the assembly of isolated facts such as one finds in an encyclopedia. People can have encyclopedic information and still be idiots. To know, rather than simply to remember, to attain a measure of scientific knowledge, is to have the ability to organize all of this information and to understand how it relates to principles in an explanatory structure.

Given that when we study human nature, we are studying ourselves, it is difficult, given the reflexivity of the task and our finitude and limitations as knowers, to reach even a partial knowledge which is fixed and unalterable in every detail, still less to reach a comprehensive and final theory. Yet, paradoxically, the desire to attain such architectonic knowledge is really deeply rooted in our nature as human beings. We do really want an overall synoptic understanding. Now, the trouble with that is that, in attempting to attain such knowledge, we sometimes take shortcuts. We pretend we have such knowledge when really, we don’t. Mythmaking is an example of the point I’m trying to make. Take the ancient Babylonians or the Egyptians. They find themselves in a strange and frightening world. Almost everything is in need of explanation “How did that mountain
get over there?” “Well there was a fight between some giants and one of them picked up a stone and threw it at the other and that’s why the mountain is there.” The problem with this way of explaining things is that, whatever about the immediate satisfaction it provides, a reflective mind cannot but appreciate that it is ad hoc, disconnected from other attempts at explanation. This is fundamentally unsatisfactory. What we need is not just a story which explains this particular thing or a story which explains that but a story which explains a whole range of data; we want our theories to be comprehensive and well-organized and as coherent and as fecund as we can make them. This is the basic scientific and philosophical impulse, to move towards ever more synoptic and comprehensive explanatory schemes, an impulse that I think is deeply rooted in the nature of human beings as knowers.

The Grand Theory.

We can distinguish two basic methodological tendencies. The first, let us call it the Platonic, is that there is one grand overarching theory (the Form of the Good in Plato’s Republic) that explains everything. Whatever about its status as a methodological ideal, I believe such a theory of everything is functionally unattainable by human beings, given the limitations of our nature. It is a goal that we can aspire to with no hope that we can ever reach it. The other methodological tendency, the Aristotelian, is content to keep the overarching theory as a kind of regulative ideal but to accept that the appropriate methodological structures of individual areas of inquiry are best educed from, rather than imposed on, each particular area. In the Nicomachean Ethics he remarks “…a well-schooled man is one who searches for that degree of precision in each kind of study.
which the nature of the subject at hand admits: it is obviously just as foolish to accept arguments of probability from a mathematician as to demand strict demonstrations from an orator.” (Nicomachean Ethics, Book I, Chapter. 3 c. 1094b25) In the subject areas of human conduct you cannot make certainty a condition of knowledge; to do so is foolish and, paradoxically, since such certainty is unattainable, the inevitable failure to discover it can lead to skepticism. One shouldn’t go to one’s area of inquiry with a pre-determined method which, in a Draconian fashion, it has to be made to fit. One should approach one’s subject matter and one should elicit from it the kind of criteria that are appropriate to it and which it will sustain. Of course Aristotle would now be astonished to find that probability is a division of mathematics but that serves only to indicate that the lines of division may shift, not that the Aristotelian methodological tendency is at fault.

The subject of my research at the moment is the question whether in the realm of human action (which seems, according to the Aristotelian method, to be precisely that area where one cannot expect certainty) you can get any measure of universality or certainty, that is, whether there is any a priori element in human action such that that which is so not only is so but has to be so and cannot be otherwise.

Let me give you an example of how this might be. Take human history, for example. Some people attempted in the twentieth century (Carl Hempel, for one) tried to treat history as if it were a kind of natural science, subject to, and to be evaluated by, the methods of science. I think it fair to say that this project was more or less a complete failure. In Lakatosian terms, you would have to term it a degenerating research program. The reason for this is not hard to find. It’s simply inappropriate to its subject matter. History is not a science, at least not a science like physics or chemistry. What is
significant about history is narrative—an attempt to provide the coherence and unity of a meaningful story to the actions of men in time. History tells a story, and the task of this story is to take seemingly randomly disconnected facts and make them ‘hang together’ in a meaningful way. It should be obvious that there is no single predetermined way of presenting historical tales. One can always tell the stories slightly differently, there are always other angles, always more facts, more documents. And above all this, there is no predetermined impersonal way to weigh and assess the significance of one’s data. This should not be taken to mean that an historian can tell just any tale—there are constraints but their application is a matter of discussion, evaluation and argument.

As an historian one must deal with the data to hand; the historian is not at liberty to ignore relevant documents but, on the other hand, the weight and significance to be attached to such documents is not a simple positive matter. In the end, there is no substitute for experience and judgement. Suppose one is attempting to elucidate the causes of the First World War, of course one will have statements at a certain level of generality, such as that, if two power blocks develop a competitive relationship, it can generate conflict.

None of those general statements will actually explain the singularity that is the war because, in the end, there is no necessity; the war didn’t have to happen. Other things could have been done than were done; maybe the assassination could have been prevented wouldn’t have taken place, or the particular set of alliances would have broken down before the war began (let us suppose King Edward had his suspicions of the warlike intentions of the Kaiser lulled and so failed to lend his prestige to the promotion of the, the *entente cordiale* between England and France.. So much for history. What of
sociology or economics? Is sociology a science, or is it just a form of history?’ Does it have a basic narrative structure, like history, or is it in a position to elaborate some universal and necessary laws that govern human behavior in society?

What about economics? Since the 1950s, economics has, it is said, suffered from physics envy! As commonly accepted by economists, economics works methodologically by hypothesis formation and testing, just as, it is thought, the hard sciences work. The test of success here is prediction; the question of whether or not the model employed applies to the real world is not considered relevant. So much for contemporary economics. However, if you examine the way economics was done for most of its history (and not just the last fifty years) most economists have claimed, in various different ways, to detect necessary and universal elements in their theories that are not susceptible to refutation by empirical testing.

Let me give you an example. If two people exchange—and we’re talking about voluntary exchange now, not about exchange under threats, violence, force or coercion—what are the conditions that have to obtain in order for an exchange to take place? Let us suppose that I have one slightly-used ballpoint pen and you too happen to have another such pen. I propose a trade—your pen for mine. Unless we take into account the fact that my pen has been used by me and yours by you, there is no discernible difference between the two items. Such being the case, the exchange is manifestly pointless. No one gains anything from such an exchange and, indeed, given the (minimal) transaction costs, both in fact lose sometime, even if it is only a small quantum of time and energy.

It is commonly believed that for an exchange to take place, there has to be a kind of equality between what is exchanged. This plausible assumption is actually false if
understood objectively; and if understood subjectively, it is true only formally speaking, that is to say, in a free uncoerced exchange, I get what I want and you get what you want—that that extent there is equality but, materially, given that I am prepared to surrender what I have, I must value it less than you do; and given that you are prepared to surrender what you have, you must value it less than I do.

Exchange takes place, to make a long story short, only if each party to the exchange believes that he is gaining something from the exchange, in other words, that he is exchanging something of lesser value to him for something of greater value to him. The values are subjective but nonetheless real. Of course, people may have mysterious preferences and prefer, say, feathers to gold, but that does not undermine the basic conceptual truth underlying exchange, namely, that it is not zero-sum but rather positive sum. Of course, one may decide, retrospectively, that one has made an unwise decision (that’s why you have expensive car advertisements in glossy magazines—it’s not to persuade middle-aged men to buy expensive cars—it’s to provide them with post-sales reassurance that they’ve made a wise decision) but that does not detract from the fact that, at the moment of choice, one exchanged because one judge (whether correctly or by another’s standards is irrelevant) that what one was obtaining was worth more to one than what one was giving up. Now, the first time I encountered this fact I was impressed, even shocked, by its simultaneous nonintuitiveness and, on reflection, its obviousness. It was like I being hit on the head by a hammer because I’d been assuming, although I didn’t realize it, that exchange was necessarily zero-sum, that one man’s gain was another’s loss.
In areas of inquiry like economics, I believe that there are *a priori* elements which are necessary and universal. The point I have just made about the positive-sum character of exchange is universal in that it is not a fact limited to Western industrialized societies. It doesn’t matter whether you are in Borneo, Beijing or Birmingham, whether you are exchanging beads, bamboo or bonds. And the positive-sum character of exchange is not an empirical discovery that is susceptible to empirical refutation. It makes as much sense to call into question the necessity of this truth as it does to question the necessity, in classical geometry, of the interior angles of a triangle measuring jointly 180 degrees. So to do is to show that you haven’t grasped the basic geometric facts. When one reflects on free exchanges one realizes that every such exchange has to be positive-sum.

There is a basic axiom underlying all our reflections in the area of human conduct and that is, that human beings act. Now such a proposition—man acts—may seem completely facile and uninformative, but when one start teasing out what it means, it quickly becomes apparent how rich a notion human action. To act is to choose, it is to distinguish between means and ends, it is to value, it is to realise our preference for the present over the future, and so on.

Now these ideas, which I have purloined from Ludwig von Mises and Murray Rothbard, connects up with older philosophical traditions. Aquinas held that all action takes place *sub ratione boni* (under the aspect of the good). What he means by this is at the moment of choice, when one chooses subjectively, whatever one choose has presented itself to one and is grasped by one as a good that is, at that moment, more valuable to one than whatever it is one is prepared to exchange for it. This is not an empirical discovery; it is a conceptual necessity. Of course, one may change one’s mind.
within five seconds and judge that what one chose was not, on reflection, objectively good. One may look back in amazement at one’s life and say of choices that one has made –“I can’t believe I did that!” All that is true. Imagine you’re walking the pier at the seaside on a sunny day. Being forty pounds overweight you’re on a diet and you’ve told yourself “no more ice cream, no more bread until that weight comes off”. After a brisk 2 miles out to the end of the pier and back you come upon an ice-cream truck. The ice cream calls out to “Come, eat me!” . It presents itself to you as a good but you’re simultaneously aware of other competing (if longer term) goods with which the satisfaction of your desire for ice-cream conflicts. If you entertain the thought of the ice cream for more than five seconds you’ve given in and that ice-cream is on its way to your stomach and your hips. A few seconds of undiluted pleasure and than you think “oh, gosh, I shouldn’t have done that!” But you did. Despite the excuses you make to yourself and other in such situations, you didn’t make a mistake. You knew what you were doing. The ice-cream wasn’t forced it on you. You chose it. None of this psychological dithering and post-choice regret that we all experience takes away from the fact that at the moment of choice we choose sub ratione boni There’s a fundamental logic of human action which governs all we do, and economics, and perhaps other sciences, attempt to grasp and express this logic.

You were talking about Aristotle and his ethics. How are they relevant to today’s philosophical questions and human nature?

Aristotle’s reflections on human nature are contained in his Nicomachean Ethics and his De Anima (concerning the soul). Whereas the term ‘soul’ has specifically religious
connotations in English, for Aristotle the term ‘psyche’ simply connotes the life-principle; it refers whatever makes a difference between a living thing and a dead thing. There’s your cat running across the road, full of the joie de vivre, and then—smack—it’s hit by a truck. As it lies there in the road, all squashed, all the same physical constituents are there that were there before but now disgustingly redistributed. The real difference, however is that where before you had a happy cat, now you just have a mass of decomposing tissue. What’s the difference? Aristotle would say that before its encounter with the truck the cat had psyche whereas now it doesn’t. Psyche, therefore, is the organizational element that makes something to be living and vital.

Reflecting on his biological experience, Aristotle wonders if it is possible to discover features characteristics of all living thing. He notices that some things, such as your plants and grasses are just alive; they don’t do much. All these have psyche for Aristotle; in that sense that they’re all alive. Other living things have more exciting lives, with the capacity for locomotion, with cognitive and affective capacities—such was our cat before it had a fatal encounter with the truck. Whereas its food has to come to a plant, the animal has the ability to go in search of its food. When they see something that they desire animals recognize it, move towards it and secure it. Human beings live, as plants do, and have the powers of locomotion and affective capacities as do animals but there are capacities that Aristotle believes are unique to human beings—these are the capacities to know intellectually and to desire.

How did Aristotle view human nature?
For Aristotle, human beings are distinct from the rest of the biological realm in their possession of the ability to know intellectually and to love intellectually. The intellect and the will are specifically human characteristics not possessed, so far as we can tell, by any other animal on this planet. It can be difficult to grasp the difference between, say, sensory knowledge, which human beings and other animals are capable of, and purely intellectual knowledge, which is peculiar to man, particularly for English speakers for whom the work ‘think’ covers a multitude. I sometimes use a thought experiment with my students to help them to understand this difference. I ask my students to imagine a triangle. (Actually, making use of the ambiguity of the work ‘think’ I ask them to “think of a triangle”.) They do. I ask them to imagine a square. They do. I ask them if they can tell the difference between the two imaginings. And they can. Then I ask them to imagine a chiliagon, which is a thousand-sided figure. They attempt to do this but I know from experience that what they come up with imaginatively is a kind of rough-edged circle. Then I ask them to imagine a chiliagon+1 and again, I know from experience that once again they will generate the image of a rough-edged circle. Now, whereas there is a clear imaginative difference between a triangle and a square, there is no discernible difference between a chiliagon and a chiliagon+1. This is what my students tell me when I ask them to point out the relevant differences. But, conceptually, there is as clear a distinction between a chiliagon and a chiliagon+1 as there is between a triangle and a square. While imaginatively, that is, through the medium of a kind of sensory knowledge, we can distinguish a triangle from a square we can’t distinguish a chiliagon from a chiliagon+1. Conception, an operation of the intellect, is utterly different from any form of sensation. In his *De Anima*, Aristotle attempts to respect the fundamental continuity of all life as
exemplifying psyche, while being forced, from his analysis of the evidence, to conclude that there may be aspects of human functioning that are explicable only if man is capable of transcending the sensory nexus. I should point out that precisely what Aristotle thought he was doing in the 3rd Book of the De Anima is highly controversial and scholars have been debating the issue for over two thousand years.

We can similarly distinguish sensory and intellectual aspects within our affective capacities. We desire food and drink and sex and all of the other things that any other living animal has to have, but we can also be moved by abstract entities like justice. One can be upset by a particular instance of perceived injustice but justice and injustice, though physically manifest, are not themselves physical entities. Love, too, has a sensory and an intellectual dimension. We can be moved by a passion for others—literature is replete with examples—or, on a slightly less elevated level, by a passion for food, but we can also be moved by a passion for truth or for knowledge. One can be so driven by a passion for truth that one would be willing to risk one’s career, even one’s life, rather than to betray what one takes to be true as, in a religious context we have John the Baptist and, in the cause of philosophy, Socrates. In such an instance, truth for you is a greater good than any material good that you can possess. So, for Aristotle, our ability to know and love intellectually are indicative of our nature. That we behave in the way that we do, have the characteristics that we have, all this is such as to reveal what it is that we are.

As I indicated above, when it comes to ethics, the nature of what it is to be human is of the first importance. If the ethical is what contributes to genuine human flourishing, then we can have broadly objective criteria of what is and what is not ethically defensible. We have to be careful, as Aristotle is, to allow for genuine diversity within the broad
objective criteria in order to reflect the deep-rooted and ineliminable subjectivity of human existence. Some people have a taste for solitude; others are happy only in the midst of a crowd. Nonetheless, despite subjective differences, we know, broadly speaking the kinds of things that contribute to human flourishing, such as the opportunity to be able to acquire and exercise knowledge, the opportunity to love and be loved, to have friends and a modicum of material goods that will allow you to live in a measure of comfort. Again, the way in which these broad factors enter into the lives of individuals will vary from one person to another just as some people can live on next to nothing; others are, as it were, high-maintenance

**Precision, specificity, exactness, preciseness** seem to be Aristotle’s hallmarks—robust thinking—yet the world out there seems to be in a quagmire of fake global nebulous.

Is this true of the academy as a whole, I wonder? Of some, yes—of all, no. Some academics, teachers and students alike, seem to have little or no ability to rise to a level of theoretical understanding; other clearly do. So we cannot make a judgement that all are stuck in the quagmire of what you have called “the fake globally nebulous.”

**Not all?**

No. As a philosopher, most of my students are in the humanities and I would have to say that the general level of theoretical ability in this area is very variable, but I do have experience of students in other disciplines. My oldest son is an electronic engineer. My second son is a mathematician. My third son is a student of mechanical engineering, and
my fourth son is in his final year in High School and—surprise—is going into engineering, and engineers and scientists are all disciplined in skills that involve precision, calculation, in setting out specifically what it is that you are required to do, in working out the means for doing it, in creatively coming up with solutions, and implementing them.

You might say, “well that’s just on the technical side” but the thing is, when they, and their friends, come to talk about other non-technical matters, say ethics and politics they’re not, or so it seems to me, prey to the kind of endemic, low-level, low-grade relativism that is characteristic of much of our society, and which afflicts the humanities in particular. Engineering students, science students, medical students know that the world that which they have to deal has a structure, and that their job is to discern and work with this structure. Their world has sharp edges and hard surfaces; if you do the thing wrong, the bridge falls down, the theory fails to check out and the laboratory explodes, the patient dies. In these disciplines, there’s a built-in reality check. What I find in many humanities students, however, and it is especially irritating, is a kind of low-grade, knee-jerk, culturally-conformed, relativism.

I usually start my first-year lectures by saying, “Welcome to Philosophy 10010; I’d like to begin by saying that I don’t care what you think; keep your opinions to yourself.” You can hear a sharp intake of breath as the students experience shock and horror at being told this. Then I continue: “However, I am very interested in hearing your considered judgments.” And now they’re wondering, “What does that mean?” Then I explain the difference between opinion and judgement. It is mere opinion if you’re not prepared to justify what you believe, if you’re not prepared to give an argument, not
prepared to listen to reason, or to discuss. Linguistically, opinion and judgement can often be confused. You go to a movie with a friend, and you say, “That was a terrible movie,” and your friend, thinking you’ve expressed a judgement, says, “Really? Why do you think that?” and you say, “Oh, I don’t know; it’s just a terrible movie.” You’re apparent judgement is merely an opinion disguised as judgment. Suppose, however, you say, “I hated that movie,” and your friend asks, “Why?” And you reply “Well, some of the acting was really poor, the direction was lame, the story was too long and too complicated, the director got his genres mixed up; the movie started off as a spy thing and then it ended up as a kind of romantic comedy.” What looked like mere opinion was actually an implicit judgement. What I find it very difficult to get over to my students is to get them to grasp the vital difference between opinion and judgement. They will say, “I’m entitled to my opinion.” “Yes,” I reply, “and your opinion, as opinion, is practically worthless.” They ask, “Why?” “Because you have no reason for holding it; give me reasons, if you have them, for what you hold and I will treat what you have to say with respect.” In the end, if I get them to an appreciation of the difference between opinion and judgement I have done my job. Pedagogically, I don’t care whether their views agree with mine or not—that’s not my job as a teacher. I do, however, want them to understand that they have an intellectual responsibility to work out the ramifications and justification of the views they adopt. I want them to understand that they are not entitled to wander through the world as though it were a garden, carelessly picking an opinion here and another opinion there. The task of education is to force them to accept their responsibility to the truth. The exciting thing about this is, that once one accepts this responsibility, the world of knowledge becomes an infinitely more exciting place.
Relativism leads to a boring cognitive indifference; a belief in the possibility of attaining truth (however revisable that might be) through rational inquiry leads to excitement and commitment. The world of knowledge is full of possibilities. There are all sorts of interesting and open questions; there are all sorts of areas where people can agree or disagree—but you can’t even begin to do anything interesting unless you realize that there is a cost and that cost is rational defensibility. So, what I want from students at the end of three or four years is not just the ability to say “Plato said….” Or “Kant said…” but rather, “I say……, and here’s why.” I want to know what they think, but I want to know what they think when they’ve read Plato and Aristotle and Wittgenstein and Newton and Darwin, and many many more. If they have read and even partially understood what these great minds have thought, and have absorbed it and fought with it and wrestled with it and complained about it and agreed and disagreed with it, then they have begun to live the intellectual life. Apart from the classics, I believe students can benefit from reading a critically skeptical author such as John Gray. His *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Human and Other Animals* is worth reading, and he has a new book just about to come out: *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*.

You’ve discussed the progressive peripheralization of philosophy, and I had that twenty-five years ago. I heard the same thing. Do you think this has contributed to the decline of high-order thinking?

Yes, I think so. The way in which philosophy becomes peripheralized results from the very nature of fundamental inquiry. There’s a direction in any discipline—you start with the big questions, so, for example, there is almost nobody who gets into philosophy, even
though they would be ashamed to admit it now, who wasn’t motivated initially by the big questions such as: What on earth am I doing here? Is this all there is to life? Is anything real? Does it really make any difference what I do? These are the big, naïve, embarrassing questions, that few professional philosophers will own up to addressing. There’s an old joke about philosophers that illustrates the point I am trying to make. A potential student comes up the Philosophy Information Stand at the University’s Open Day and asks the dreaded question—what is philosophy? The hideously embarrassed philosopher manning the stand says, “Well, it answers the eternal and perennial questions—Who am I? Where are we going? What is the meaning of life?” The potential student remarks: “Philosophy? It sounds more like amnesia to me!” Like it or not, all philosophy starts with these simple yet impossible questions. The dynamism of inquiry is such that you find that, in order to answer the big question, there are some slightly smaller questions that must be answered first. So, you try these. These questions, however, are still too big to handle and so we move to yet smaller questions. The process continues and, in the end, you can find yourself a long long way away from your original point of departure. Eventually, you find yourself doing minute, technical work and publishing articles that will be read by two people—you yourself and, if you’re lucky, the editor—and nobody else. The problem is not so much the journey to the periphery; it’s the failure to return to the center. What started as a means to an end has now become an end in itself.

The work being done at this extreme has little or no appeal for the general intelligent reader. Someone other than a professional philosophy who picks up an article in *Mind* and looks at it and will wonder “What is all this about? I don’t understand anything that’s
being said here. I’m not stupid. What’s going on here? I’ve lost track completely. This
means nothing to me. It doesn’t speak to any of my concerns. It doesn’t answer my
questions.” So one of the tasks facing all thinkers—no matter what field of inquiry they
inhabit, whether they are physicists, ecologists, philosophers, or whatever, is to remember
to reconnect with their points of departure. Of course one must do one’s professional
work, publish one’s results, earn the respect of one’s peers. That’s a given. But one
shouldn’t forget where one started from and why one started. Don’t forget that the other
people you’re should be talking to are not just the other two or three people in the world
who are interested in your topic in the professional mode in which it is cast but the rest of
the human race who might be interested in it if you reconnected with your point of
departure

What in your mind is intellectually immature or slovenly about skepticism?

I am not necessarily opposed to skepticism in all its forms. There are forms of skepticism
I’m only too happy to encourage. By and large, the intellectual life should be about
inducing a certain kind of methodological skepticism. People on the whole are much too
credulous, much too ready to believe anything they hear or read without subjecting it to
critical scrutiny. The books I mentioned earlier by John Gray are good examples of the
application of a healthy dose of skepticism to commonly-accepted beliefs.

We come to maturity having inherited a whole bunch of ideas, most of them
unreflectively undigested. Some of them may be fine, some of them may not, but
Socrates was right about the unexamined life’s not being worth living. One’s task as a
rational epistemic agent is to examine these inherited ideas and subject them to scrutiny,
not with the presupposition that they’re necessarily all wrong—that’s foolish—but one needs to subject them to testing. Those that pass the test stay; those that don’t should be ejected. When one begins to do this, one has begun to engage in the life of reason.

Confucius remarked that “He who learns but does not think is lost; he who thinks but does not learn is in danger.” (*Analects*, 2:15) In this passage, he’s contrasting the pure traditionalist who has says something like “That’s the way my dad did it and his dad, and so on, so that’s good enough for me” without ever taking into account that perhaps things need to be done differently in different times or in different circumstances. On the other hand, the person who says “Because this is how it has been done until now, I am going to do it differently” is equally, if not more, foolish. Adopting an unthinking acceptance or rejection of tradition is bound to lead to trouble. And not just intellectual trouble. In the 20th century we saw political manifestations of these errors, for example, in the killing fields of Cambodia. Bad ideas don’t just lead to confusion and ignorance; sometimes, people die. So a kind of healthy skepticism I’m happy to promote.

But the kind of skepticism that your question concerned was the kind that I think Confucius was talking about in the second part of the citation: the unthinking and uncritical and petulant rejection of what is taken to be the *status quo*. In fact, such apparent skepticism is really a form of unreflective conformism. Such skeptics are usually in thrall to other ideas that they have failed to subject to critical scrutiny. Furthermore, this kind of skepticism tends to be lazily selective. In general, it tends to be directed towards the rejection of truths or facts that might inconvenience or upset the would-be skeptic but towards the acceptance of things that pander to the skeptic’s prejudices.
Life as a whole is a risky business and the life of the intellect is no less risky than any other aspect. We should be prepared to listen to what people have to say, take it seriously without immediately dismissing it because the speaker is a man, a woman, black or white, Muslim or Christian, a capitalist or socialist. Such unthinking rejection is too facile. That kind of skepticism and the lazy relativism which it embodies irritates me. “One account is as good as another.” What’s the evidence for that claim? What competence have you or your source developed? What arguments can you marshal? If you disagree with me give me a reason for your disagreement. Engage with reason! Once you’re rationally engaged, you have given hostages to fortune and you cannot tell where you will end up. Some students refuse to engage but those students that do suddenly come alive, right before your eyes. Those who take control of their intellectual lives enjoy the cut and thrust of rational debate. The burden of responsibility is lighter the more willingly it is assumed.

Who has influenced you?

Aristotle, perhaps most of all, certainly more than Plato. Then, the calm and luminous rationality of Aquinas. Descartes too, even though I think he’s probably wrong in most of what he does but if so he’s brilliantly wrong. Locke’s political writings have had a lasting effect on me. I could go on and on. I don’t believe that there is any writer of note I’ve read who hasn’t had some effect on me—sometimes positive, sometimes negative.

You cited Victor Frankl in some of your writings.
I first read Frankl when I was an undergraduate and I was tremendously impressed. Since then, I’ve read many other thinkers who have influenced me in many ways, but recently I discovered economics, in particular what’s called Austrian Economics, and this has brought about a paradigm shift in my thinking and affected me like being given a shot of intellectual adrenalin. This discovery has reawakened my interest in the notion of the a priori, in ethics, in politics, and obviously in economics. Ludwig von Mises’s Human Action, which came out in 1949, I find tremendously exciting, even exhilarating. The first 130 pages of this book are the kind of thing that drive most human readers mad, but I can only read it for twenty pages without getting up and walking around the room because it’s so exciting. Following on from Mises there are many others, in particular Murray Rothbard, a student of Mises, who wrote the monumental Man, Economy and State and a 2-volume history of economic thought. His The Ethics of Liberty is one of the most stimulating and challenging books I have ever read. Reflecting on the thinking of these authors has given me a whole new way of thinking about economics and politics, the role and function of the state, human freedom, and so on. In particular, the notion of freedom, and its correlative responsibility, has become central for me.

If you take the notion of freedom seriously, then you have to take seriously the idea that, except when responding to coercion, deception or fraud, people should be left alone to get on with their lives, without interference from others and, in particular, without interference from the state. When you’re dealing with responsible adults you can persuade, you can cajole, but, in the end, you may not force them to do things or to refrain from doing things even if, or perhaps especially if, it’s for their own good. In the end, people must be allowed to exercise their freedom even if it is to do things that you
think are foolish or morally wrong. Consistency demands this of us for we claim the right to be treated in this way ourselves. This simple principle has implications across the board, not just for ethics but for politics—the role and function of the state, what people can do, the whole nature of law and how it is developed and enforced in society. A recent paper I gave at a conference in Alabama tried to show how law doesn’t originate from the state originally, that it originates by people organizing their lives together; emerging from the ground up, not from the top down, and that state-imposed law and statute law is a late historical arrival and indeed a generally harmful and ineffective.

**It’s really opposite to Rousseau’s social contract.**

We appear to be back where we started, talking about human nature! Rousseau’s theories are fundamentally flawed in their anthropology—his view of human nature is fundamentally unsound. To assume, as Rousseau does, that human beings are good by nature and that evil derives from the distorting effect of socialization, is mistaken. Human beings aren’t naturally good or naturally bad. We are constituted with an orientation towards the good and the true: how we give effect to that orientation is the story of our lives. My philosophical anthropological views aren’t predicated on human beings being naturally good or bad. Human beings are what they are. The theories I espouse don’t assume that if we remove all social controls that people will naturally flourish. On the contrary, people being what they are, some will get on with their lives peacefully and productively, and others will steal, kill and cheat. But conduct this thought-experiment: take a piece of paper, draw a line down the middle of the page, and on the left side calculate the number of people killed in the twentieth century by normal criminality—
murders, muggings, etc. On the right side of the page, put down the number of people killed in the twentieth century in state-sponsored conflicts. The number here, at a conservative estimate, is about 175 million. The number on the left will be nowhere near 175 million. I doubt if it’s even a million. I doubt if it’s even a half-a-million. The story you commonly get, of course is that we need the state in order to provide us with necessary services. What necessary services? With security. Security against what or whom? Against other states!

**What question have we neglected to ask you?**

I can’t think of anything at the moment. I’m sure there are plenty of lose ends, plenty of challengeable assertions that I have made in the course of this interview but I welcome considered critical responses.