3am: Magazine Interview

1. What made you become a philosopher?

I was first attracted to philosophy by my secondary school work. In those days philosophy was not formally taught at most schools, certainly not at mine. But I studied French and mathematics, and both of these subjects, indirectly, served as an introduction to philosophy for me. In the case of French it was because one of our set texts was Voltaire's *Philosophical Letters*. I found this exciting enough, but what really got me hooked was some of the background reading that we were asked to do in connection with this text. In particular I remember reading some Descartes. I can't now remember whether it was part of his *Discourse on The Method* or part of his *Meditations*. Either way, I was thrilled by it—not least, by the reassurance that all those doubts that I had been secretly harbouring about things that everyone else took for granted weren't something to be ashamed of! As far as mathematics was concerned, my teacher was someone who had himself studied philosophy at university, and he introduced me to some issues in the philosophy of mathematics as well as to some basics of formal logic and the mathematics of the infinite, both of which lie at the intersection of mathematics and philosophy.

This all made me convinced that I should study philosophy at university. But it was not until I was doing postgraduate work, and coming to regard philosophy as a passion that I couldn't imagine living without, that I began to harbour ambitions of pursuing it as a career.

2. In your book on modern metaphysics you break down the subject into historical periods: the early modern goes from Descartes to Hegel via Spinoza, Leibniz, Hume, Kant, and Fichte; the late modern analytic goes from Frege to Dummett via early and late Wittgenstein, Carnap, Quine, and Lewis; the late modern non-analytic from Nietzsche to Deleuze via Bergson, Heidegger, Collingwood, and Derrida. So, taking each period separately at first, what are the issues that the early moderns were wrestling with? Was it all about foundations of science at first, and the

start of a naturalistic metaphysics?—and, if it was, why do so many contemporary scientists think metaphysics is pointless?

No, it wasn't *all* about foundations of science, although that was of concern to many early modern philosophers, notably Descartes. Descartes wanted to vindicate the methods and results of the natural sciences. But this was part of a larger project: to make integrated sense of man and nature. (I apologize for the sexist terminology! But that, of course, is how the early moderns themselves would have put it.) Descartes' interest in the natural sciences was partly due to the fact that it was through these that we made sense of *nature*, and partly due to the rôle that they themselves played in our lives, which meant that properly understanding them was a vital component of making sense of *ourselves* and of our own place in nature.

This ambition to make integrated sense of man and nature was common to all the great early modern philosophers, though it took different forms. Leibniz, for instance, was preoccupied with the question of how the world could at the same time be the best possible, which his belief in God convinced him it must be, and yet also seem, given all our own afflictions, to admit so clearly of improvement.

As for why so many contemporary scientists think that metaphysics is pointless, there are all sorts of reasons. Some contemporary scientists think that the only meaningful questions are the ones that the natural sciences themselves can answer, so any non-scientific enquiry is pointless because it's meaningless. I won't say any more about that extreme view here. I shall assume for these purposes that there is scope for making sense of things at the highest level of generality (which is all I mean by "metaphysics" incidentally) in a meaningful yet non-scientific way. But even if there is, many contemporary scientists would still need persuading that it was anything other than a pointless exercise—perhaps because they would still regard any worthwhile enquiry as ultimately answerable to the natural sciences, which, given the spectacular success that these have enjoyed since the time of Descartes, no longer seem to stand in need of vindication from elsewhere, or even to stand in need of any assistance from elsewhere. What these scientists

perhaps forget is that there are still metaphysical questions to be raised about the nature of scientific discovery and about the sort of truth that the natural sciences are capable of delivering, even if the aim is no longer to vindicate them.

3. With Frege we seem to be moving into a very different world of metaphysics than that of Hegel and Fichte—is there a fundamental shift happening in this second period or are there important continuities?

Both. There is undoubtedly a fundamental shift. Frege's world is, as you say, very different from that of Fichte and Hegel. What we find in the late modern analytic tradition is a preoccupation, within the basic attempt to make sense of things, with sense itself. However, such self-consciousness was not *itself* new. It was already prominent in Hume, for example. It was also there in Fichte and Hegel for that matter. So that's an extremely important continuity. What was special about the analytic tradition, at least in its inauguration, was the form that this self-consciousness took. In particular, *linguistic* sense assumed a new prominence, as did various distinctive techniques that were used in the analysis of it.

4. Whereas Quine and Lewis still seem to be important to contemporary metaphysicians, Dummett seems less so. Can you sketch what is distinctive about the late modern period contrasted with the earlier—and am I wrong to think that Dummett has less traction at the moment than Quine and especially Lewis by under-estimating his anti-realism?

No, you're not wrong. I think it's largely a question of self-consciousness again. As analytic philosophy has developed, and as it has become more and more assured, it has also become, in certain respects, less and less self-conscious. The concern with sense has never diminished. But there is less and less concern with what it is for us to *make* sense. For the most part, contemporary metaphysicians are more interested in just getting on with the business of making it than agonizing about what it takes for us to do so! Dummett, in that respect, can appear alien. He *does* agonize about what it takes for us to do so. In a way, he's trying to reclaim some much older

territory, indulging in the sort of self-consciousness that we found in the early modern period. In particular—you mentioned his anti-realism—he asks to what extent there is even a reality out there independently of whatever sense we are able to make of it. (This illustrates the familiar way in which self-consciousness can militate against self-confidence.)

5. Your inclusion of the non-analytics into the late modern period is interesting as it's kind of rare to have them in the same space with the analytics. But you make the case for doing so by showing how they do speak across the analytic/continental divide—which makes the divide less a philosophical one than a sociological one I guess. Anyhow, can you say how Nietzsche's metaphysics is pro Spinoza and contra Hegel?

First of all, I'm very pleased to hear that you think I make the case for talking about non-analytic traditions alongside the analytic tradition. I wonder how many other readers would agree with you? But I won't dwell on that, because it's such a vast topic.

As far as Nietzsche, Spinoza, and Hegel are concerned—that too is a vast topic, but here are what seem to me to be some key points. Nietzsche himself, in a famous postcard to Franz Overbeck, summarized what he took to be five principal points of contact between himself and Spinoza as follows: they both denied freedom of the will, teleology, the moral world order, the unegoistic, and evil. Nietzsche listed these five points of contact after having signalled what he took to be a convergence in their basic overall tendency, namely to view knowledge as the thing that did most to empower us. It's a delicate and tendentious issue how much of what Nietzsche (rightly) took to unite the two of them also set them apart from Hegel. For instance, which of those five things that he and Spinoza denied did Hegel accept? Certainly *some* of them. Hegel was certainly committed to a kind of teleology for example. And, as far as knowledge was concerned, there was a sense, for Hegel, in which true knowledge was not even ours to be had, but was only available at the level of the infinite whole. This signals what I take to be the main division between him, on the one hand, and Spinoza and Nietzsche, on the other. The infinite whole, for Hegel, made its own sense. And this sense involved elements of

negation and opposition between finite aspects of the whole which were resolved over time, as it came to make such sense. All of this left room in Hegel for a thought that I take to be radically non-Spinozist and radically non-Nietzschean: namely, that suffering and adversity are a finite price to be paid for something of infinite value.

6. Why is Husserl unlike Descartes but not unlike Wittgenstein (and is not unlike the same as like? Or are you being subtle?)?

I'm not being subtle! "Not unlike" in the context from which you're quoting—it's a section title from my metaphysics book—just means "like". The reason I put it that way was purely rhetorical, to emphasize the contrast.

What I was principally trying to do in that section was to emphasize how Husserl's project of "bracketing" all our normal beliefs, and focusing not on their truth but on their significance for us, was very different from Descartes' project of calling into question all our normal beliefs and then trying to reconstruct them by building up from what *couldn't* be called into question. In particular, Husserl wasn't committed to Descartes' dualism between our minds, the main arena for what couldn't be called into question, and the material world, the main arena for what could.

As far as Wittgenstein is concerned, my main point was that trying to be clear about the *significance* of our normal beliefs, rather than trying to consolidate them or trying to acquire more of them, was crucial for him too; and that he, like Husserl, would have seen this as a defining characteristic of philosophy, as distinct from the natural sciences.

7. Can we understand Heidegger's metaphysics in relation to any of the analytic metaphysicians—or is he best understood in reaction to Husserl?

I believe that there are deep connections between Heidegger's metaphysics and the concerns of analytic metaphysicians. One of the things that I try to do in my book is to show that Heidegger's metaphysics involved him in a kind of battle with language that was reminiscent of Wittgenstein's early work. But

that is just one example of very many. And it illustrates the point we touched on earlier: how profitable it can be to set non-analytic traditions alongside the analytic tradition.

That said, I also believe that it is crucial to understand Heidegger in relation to Husserl, and in particular to understand him as pursuing Husserl's phenomenological project of "bracketing" our normal beliefs and focusing on their significance for us. There were important differences between them, to be sure, but I think that the differences—which were more a matter of doctrine than of basic methodology—were on the whole far less important than the similarities. I have a section in my book entitled "Heidegger as Phenomenologist, *Pro* Husserl and *Contra* Husserl". One of my aims in that section is to combat a tendency among commentators to emphasize the "*contra*" at the expense of the "*pro*".

8. How does Collingwood's metaphysics as history fit in with this landscape you've provided us with?

Collingwood is an unusual case. He doesn't belong to the analytic tradition, but neither does he belong to any of the other main traditions represented in the third part of my book, the part on the late modern period outside analytic philosophy. He was in many ways an isolated figure. And this in turn was because he adopted the view—as you have indicated—that metaphysics was to be understood as a branch of history. For Collingwood, metaphysics was the investigation of the most basic presuppositions that people have made in the past. It was an empirical human science. This view is idiosyncratic, but it's not wild, and it wasn't totally unprecedented.

We can see that it's not wild when we take into account Collingwood's conception of *history*. On that conception, the historical investigation of people's most basic presuppositions must involve entering into the spirit of those presuppositions, which isn't so very different from what would traditionally count as metaphysics. And we can see that the view wasn't totally unprecedented when we reflect that Hume too saw metaphysics (or at least, what Collingwood and I would call metaphysics, if not what Hume himself

would give that label) as an empirical human science, a study of the workings of our minds.

My main complaint about Collingwood has nothing to do with the idiosyncrasy of his view. It's rather that his view is unduly conservative. Collingwood's view makes it the business of metaphysicians to study the ways in which sense has actually been made of things. It gives them no license to do what I think it is their business to do: create radically new alternatives.

9. You discuss Derrida vis à vis phenomenology—pro Heidegger and contra Husserl. Can you sketch out how best to grasp Derrida's metaphysical position—and does it link with any of the analytic metaphysicians of the late modern period? I guess part of the question is whether analytic metaphysicians should be reading him?

In many ways I see Derrida as following Heidegger. But he was more pessimistic than Heidegger about the prospects for good metaphysics. And he paid a kind of attention to language that Heidegger never did. One of the main things that he did was to distinguish between what he called "speech" and what he called "writing". He meant these terms in a more or less technical way. By "speech" he meant, very roughly, the use of signs whose meanings were intrinsic to them, so that they couldn't be misinterpreted. By "writing" he meant, again roughly, the use of signs whose meanings were extrinsic to them—that is to say, whose meanings depended on the signs' association with other signs—so that they *could* be misinterpreted. And he rejected the idea there was any such thing as "speech", so understood: there was only "writing". This was significant, because he *also* argued that much traditional philosophy, including most traditional metaphysics, tacitly presupposed that there *was* such a thing as "speech". This was part of the reason why he was more pessimistic than Heidegger about the prospects for good metaphysics: he was sceptical about how far metaphysics could thrive once it had unshackled itself from the traditional forms that it had taken. And this is all relevant to analytic metaphysicians too, because his arguments about the unacceptability of traditional metaphysics carry over to what they're doing.

So yes, there is something to be said for analytic metaphysicians reading Derrida and confronting the challenge that he poses to their various enterprises. But his style and approach to philosophy are *so* different from theirs that it would be silly to pretend that they are liable to find his work anything other than alien. Of course I *hope* that my book may help in that respect, by casting some of his principal ideas in ways that analytic philosophers will find more familiar and more accessible.

10. Deleuze goes back to Spinoza as well as Nietzsche and Bergson—so what does Deleuze offer to metaphysics?

You're right. Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Bergson are Deleuze's three great heroes, and he makes extensive use of their ideas. So it is a very good question what contribution of his own he makes to metaphysics. Why should we read Deleuze himself, and not just go back to the philosophers he champions? Part of the answer is that Deleuze is an absolutely superb exegete. I think this is especially clear in his book on Spinoza, *Expressionism in Philosophy*. And to say that he is an absolutely superb exegete is not just to say that he brings us to a much deeper understanding of the philosophers that he is writing about, although he certainly does do that. It is also to say that he breathes new life into them. He appropriates their ideas, and shows how they still have something to offer us. He does exegesis in a way that is *creative*, without being unfaithful.

There is a very striking and memorable passage in which Deleuze himself, towards the end of his life, puts it as follows: "[I saw] the history of philosophy as a sort of buggery… I saw myself as taking an author from behind and giving him a child that would be his own offspring, yet monstrous. It was really important for it to be his own child, because the author had to actually say all I had him saying. But the child was bound to be monstrous too, because it resulted from all sorts of shifting, slipping, dislocations, and hidden emissions that I really enjoyed," ("Letter to a Harsh Critic", in his *Negotiations*, trans, Martin Joughin, Columbia University Press, page 6). A very different analogy—and in many ways (though I say so myself) a better analogy!—is that

he practises the history of philosophy like a musician writing variations on other musicians' original themes.

This is all related to something else that is crucial about Deleuze's treatment of Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Bergson, namely the fact that he treats them *together*. Part of his creativity involves making connections and discerning trends in the history of philosophy that he is then able to propagate in exciting new ways.

11. If we turn to ethics, does Kant help us answer the perennial question: can our thinking about ethical issues hope to be objective?' Isn't an ethical dispute like deciding between the merits of different flavoured ice-cream? And as a corollary to this, is then ethics part of metaphysics if one is an objectivist about ethics?

My third book was about these issues, and I find myself struggling to summarize it in a way that's helpful. But yes, Kant *helps* us to answer the question whether our thinking about ethical issues can hope to be objective. Moreover, he helps us to answer the question affirmatively. But "helps" is the operative word, because there are many facets of his own answer that we can't any longer take seriously, or at least not in the way in which Kant himself did. Kant thought that we could determine answers to ethical questions through an exercise of pure reason, and one of the things that we can't any longer take seriously is the very idea of "pure" reason. But once we have thought some more about what might be called "impure" reason, that is to say reason that is culturally and historically grounded, then we can see ways of creatively appropriating Kant's ideas and putting them to new work.

In a way, then, when I wrote that book, I was trying to practise the history of philosophy in the way in which, in my previous answer, I said that Deleuze practises it. Indeed I gave my book a subtitle that picks up on the analogy of themes and variations. I subtitled it *Themes and Variations in Kant's Moral and Religious Philosophy*.

Does any of this lead to the view that ethics is part of metaphysics? Well, yes, there are deep connections between them. But that's partly just a reflection of the very wide conception of metaphysics that I have already indicated I adopt, as the most general attempt to make sense of things.

12. Are absolute representations possible?

That is the question that I posed at the very beginning of my second book, *Points of View*. By an "absolute representation" I meant a thought or claim or theory about the world that is completely objective, that is to say free of any element of personal, social, or historical bias or perspective. And despite the reservations that I voiced in my previous answer about the very idea of "pure" reason, I went on to argue that the answer is yes, in other words that absolute representations, so understood, are possible—and that producing them is one of the aims of the natural sciences, an aim that *can* be achieved, whether or not, as a matter of fact, it ever has been. (The reservations about "pure" reason don't touch this issue, because this is an issue about what sorts of representations we can produce whereas those reservations are reservations about a certain view of how we might arrive at them.)

13. How does your response to this have a bearing on the limits to objectivity, science, relativism, thoughts about reality, ineffability and our aspirations to transcend finitude?

My book was in eleven chapters. The argument for the possibility of absolute representations came at a comparatively early stage in the book, in Chapter Four. Everything thereafter was concerned with spelling out how this answer related to various other issues of the sort that you have just identified. Thus I have already said a little bit about how my answer relates to the limits of objectivity and to science (there are no limits to objectivity, inasmuch as complete objectivity is possible, and attaining complete objectivity should be an aspiration of scientists, or at least of natural scientists).

In Chapters Five and Six I considered various compelling arguments for answering my question in the opposite way, that is for denying that

absoluteness in our representations *is* ever possible. Although I wanted to resist these counterarguments, and thought I could show how to do so, I also wanted to understand their appeal. And in the rest of the book I argued that, in the most interesting cases, they were the result of (necessarily unsuccessful) attempts on our part to put ineffable knowledge that we have into words. I took this to have a much broader significance, a significance that I tried to illustrate with a range of examples. For I believe that the history of philosophy is littered with attempts by philosophers to put ineffable knowledge into words.

The source of these attempts—this is the final thing that you mentioned in your question—is an aspiration that we have to transcend our own finitude. For the fact that we have knowledge that we *can't* put into words is a mark of our finitude. None of which, incidentally, is meant to decry the attempts. Sometimes there is something important to be gained from self-consciously trying to do the impossible and seeing what results. (For example, someone whose arm has been paralyzed may try to move it in an experiment to gauge the corresponding activity in his or her brain.) What results from our self-conscious attempts to put inexpressible knowledge into words may be instructive and edifying in all sorts of ways. That too is something that I tried to argue in my book.

14. Infinity is one of those things that brings to mind the idea of transcending our finitude. What is it and does it exist? And if it doesn't, yet we still want to acknowledge the actual infinite, is this an example of our wish to express the inexpressible knowledge we have? (And does that make whatever we say, in terms of the (truly) infinite, nonsense?)

Yes, transcending our own finitude means trying to reckon with infinitude. What, you ask, *is* infinitude and does it exist? Those were the main questions that I tried to address in my very first book, *The Infinite*.

My book was largely historical, because I didn't want to address these questions without first considering the best attempts by other philosophers to address them. I argued that there isn't in fact one single conception of the infinite that all such attempts have been concerned with. The history of

thought about the infinite has revolved around various different conceptions. These in turn fall into two broad categories. On the one hand there are mathematical conceptions that have to do with ideas such as boundlessness, endlessness, unlimitedness, immeasurability, and eternity. On the other hand there are metaphysical conceptions that have to with ideas such as completeness, wholeness, unity, universality, absoluteness, perfection, self-sufficiency, and autonomy. I tried to understand how these two clusters of ideas relate to each other, and how they can both be said to bear on any single core idea—given what appears to be some tension between them. In the course of doing so I came to the conclusion that there is an important sense in which infinitude does *not* exist.

But yes, our urge to say that it does exist, or even to talk in terms of infinitude at all, is another example of our urge to transcend our own finitude by putting ineffable knowledge that we have into words. And yes, by the strictest criteria, what results is nonsense. But ah, such resonant nonsense!

15. And finally are there five books other than your own that you can recommend to us to take us further into your philosophical world?

Gosh. You have saved your hardest question to last. This is a really tough one. Many of the books that have done the most to shape my philosophical world are really difficult. For instance, the book that I take to be the greatest philosophical work of all time, namely Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason,* is truly forbidding, and if anyone is coming to philosophy fresh then it is not a good place to start.

But perhaps one good place to start is where I myself started, namely, as I have already indicated, with Descartes. So I'll list as my first book Descartes' *Meditations,* which is a classic but also very readable and a wonderful introduction to philosophy in general.

Then there's Kant's own attempt to make the ideas in his *Critique* more accessible, namely his *Prolegomena*: this is still a challenging read, but it does give a good insight into his own extraordinary philosophical world.

I should also mention something by Wittgenstein. People often distinguish between the early Wittgenstein and the later Wittgenstein, as if these were two different philosophers. This is because he produced two great masterpieces, one in his youth—his *Tractatus*—and one towards the end of his life—his *Philosophical Investigations*—and these are strikingly different from each other, in style, in approach, and even to a large extent in doctrine. But again, they are not the best point of entry. The *Tractatus* is extraordinarily difficult, to the point of almost complete impenetrability for anyone lacking suitable background knowledge. And the *Philosophical Investigations* is extraordinarily difficult in a different kind of way, partly indeed by giving the utterly misleading impression of being rather easy! I would recommend his *Blue and Brown Books*, which belongs to his later period (its subtitle is *Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigations"*) and which I think is Wittgenstein at his most accessible.

For my fourth and fifth books I'll mention two things that will seem somewhat "left-field" in the light of everything that I have said up to this point. The first of these, my fourth book overall, is Nagel and Newman's book *Gödel's Proof*. This is a lively and very clear introduction to one of the greatest and most fascinating technical results of the twentieth century: Gödel's theorem. I read this as an undergraduate and it had a huge impact in me. It did a lot to inspire my love of formal work in philosophy and my interest in the infinite. (There is a chapter in my book *The Infinite* on Gödel's theorem.)

Finally, my fifth book is Bernard Williams' *Morality*. This is a beautiful compendium of all of Williams' main ideas in moral philosophy. It greatly influenced my book on Kant's moral and religious philosophy. In fact Bernard Williams has greatly influenced me in all sorts of ways. I was enormously flattered when, shortly before he died, he asked me if I would be willing to act as one of his literary executors. This is a task that I have undertaken with precisely the mixture of pain and pleasure that you might expect.