

**REMARKS AND REMINISCENCES ON THE OCCASION OF THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY
OF THE PHILOSOPHY DEPARTMENT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH**

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If you will forgive the cliché, it seems like only yesterday I was a student at Guelph. It was actually more than 40 years ago, yet the time I spend here is vivid in my memory. I'm feeling more than a little sentimental about the 50th anniversary as I fondly recollect many teachers (Toby Chapman, Ken Dorter, Hugh Lehman, Alex Michalos, Mike Ruse, John McMurtry, Ken Montague, John Leslie, Tom Settle, Helier Robinson) and others who were never my teachers but with whom I happily passed the time (Bernie Hodgson, Bill Hughes, Jay Newman, Carol Stewart, Don Stewart, Doug Odegard, and others). I also recall many fellow students (Jim Armstrong, Jim Taylor, Bill Theirs, and others). We taught each other and, alas, reinforced the odd mistake and misunderstanding. And I have particularly fond memories of playing basket ball with faculty and fellow students alike. I'm grateful to Andrew Bailey, Mark McCullagh and the other organizers for inviting me to the party.

It's surprising how much influence one's first introduction to philosophy can have for the rest of one's life. In my own case, like most, my first philosophy course included a bit of Plato, Descartes, and Hume. Unlike most, I fell head over heels in love with the rationalists. Nevertheless, I was sadly persuaded that empiricism must be the truth about our knowledge. It was during my second or third semester that I took a philosophy of science course from Tom Settle. He preached Popper, which I was able to resist, but I could not resist the most wonderful argument I have ever heard in my life. And I shall be forever grateful to Tom for telling me about it. This was Galileo's thought experiment showing that all bodies fall at the same rate. It's very simple, so that those who don't

know it should spend a moment on what will surely be an intellectual delight. Let's start with Aristotle and with common sense and make the assumption that heavy bodies fall faster than light ones. Now imagine ourselves at the top of the leaning Tower of Pisa, where we will drop a cannonball and the light musket ball. According to our assumption, the heavy cannonball will fall faster. Now imagine and we could attach the late musket ball to the heavy cannonball. This compound object is heavier than the cannonball alone, so it would fall faster. However, the light musket ball component of the compound object will act as a kind of drag on the heavier cannon ball, thus slowing its rate of fall. Now have a contradiction: the composition object will fall faster than the cannonball alone and also fall slower. This is the end of Aristotle and common sense. What is the right answer? It is obvious: all objects fall at the same rate.

When I learned this, I almost followed my seat. It was and perhaps it remains the greatest intellectual pleasure I have ever had. I've been mesmerized by thought experiments ever since. The first thing I realize was that I did not have to be an empiricist after all and that my heroes Plato and Descartes were on the right track. Of course there are tons of things to be done. The central issue about thought experiments is this: how is it possible just by thinking learn new things about the world? I have my answer to this and there're lots of other answers, too. There are lots of wonderful questions in this area and plenty of room for others to stick in their ore.

Of course, one shakes things off, too. Many of my teachers preached Wittgenstein and ordinary language philosophy. I cheerfully signed on, in spite of the tension with my rationalist sympathies. Undergraduate often want to make their mission in life the reconciliation of analytic and continental philosophy. Not I. My goal was to unify Wittgenstein with traditional rationalism. I still remember the day this hope fell apart. I was reading Feynman on the positron; he claimed they are electrons going backwards in time. What would Wittgenstein or an ordinary language philosopher say about this? We'd get a mini lecture on the meaning and the use of "time" and of how Feynman had fallen into confusion. I took a deep breath and admitted to myself that this is rubbish. I'm sure Feynman is wrong, but for reasons that come from physics, not from linguistic

analysis. The world is a very weird place and philosophy is part of the process in figuring out how things work. Linguistic analysis at best reflects how terms were used in the mid-20th century; it was a force for common sense conservatism that stood in the way of philosophical and scientific progress. Be grateful we're rid of it.

When I first came to Guelph as an undergraduate I was thinking mainly of political philosophy. I was a very left-wing and still am. But of course, a regular philosophy and education includes logic, metaphysics, and so on. Most of the came as a wonderful revelation to me. I got caught up in these topics and put my politics on the back burner. Or perhaps a more accurate way to put this, is to say that I internalized the fact-value distinction, and kept my political life separate from my philosophy life. Mathematics and later the sciences became the focus of my philosophical interests. They still are. A few years ago I decided to branch out and look at medicine, especially pharmaceutical research and the effect that increasing commercialization might have on it.

It turns out to be a cesspool. There is a growing amount of empirical work connecting to the source of funding two results clinical trials. Some of this is the right corruption. It requires no sophistication in either ethics or philosophy of science to pass judgment. On the other hand, some of the problems are recognized through the lens of sophisticated flossing science. This is where well-trained philosophers, especially philosophers of science, can make a great contribution. There are several things to watch for. Aside from highly biased clinical trials, there is also the problem of skewed research. If we consider a health problem such as high blood pressure or depression, there are potentially many ways of treating them. One of these is drug solutions, another his exercise, another is possibly environmental, another his diet. But as you might well imagine, if you are running a business, there is only one kind of solution that would interest you—one that yields intellectual property rights. If jogging or eating broccoli reduces depression that would be a great discovery, but nobody would make a penny in royalties. When government policy encourages universities to enter joint public-private projects, they actually end up determining the course of research. And very often these are far from the best results we could obtain.

My own solution to this medical research problem is to socialize medical research. That is, I would eliminate the possibility of patents when it comes to pharmaceutical products. All medical research should be publicly funded and should be conceived as part of the national health care plan. In short, socialized research is simply part of socialized medicine. The products will be better and in the long run there will be considerably cheaper, since so much research money is currently spent on duplicating so called Blockbuster drugs. When Prozac hit the market and pulled in billions of dollars every year other drug companies produce their own versions of this antidepressant. A rational research policy could do so very much.

I like this example for several reasons. Mainly, it reinforces my admiration for my favourite philosopher, Plato. He was the purest of the pure, and at the same time the most practical. He wanted to know about the form of the good, but he also went to Syracuse in hopes of improving the actual running of society. There're lots of philosophical issues that belong to us and nobody else gives a damn. They're fun, they're interesting, we have every right to enjoy them as others enjoy poems in hockey. We should never forget that we can also be supremely useful. There are conceptual problems that we could help with in all of his sciences and there are public policy issues where we should get in and fuss surround. With a bit of skill in the art of living we can do both. This I learned at Guelph and am forever grateful.

I met my wife here (Kathleen Okruhlik, now in the Philosophy Department at Western); we have a daughter who is currently in the vet school. Four former Toronto students who took a class with me: Mark McCullagh, Don Dedrick, and Andrew Wayne, and another, Karyn Freedman, whom I am very proud to have supervised, are now highly successful young professors here. And I have overlapping interests with Maya Goldenberg, Peter Loftson. So, my attachment to Guelph is not only long-standing but quite immediate, too.

For those with interests similar to mine, I hate to miss a chance to flog a few books. *The Laboratory of the Mind* is about thought experiments, *Philosophy of Mathematics* is

about visual reasoning and mathematical platonism, and *Who Rules in Science* is about the philosophy, sociology, and politics of science. If you would like to read more about the problems with drug research, try: “Community of Science®” in Carrier, Howard, and Kourany (eds) *The Challenge of the Social and the Pressure of Practice: Science and Values Revisited*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press. This article should be available in university libraries; if not, contact me at: jrbrown@chass.utoronto.ca. As for the books, they are available through Amazon and other such places. They make lovely gifts for weddings, divorces, and other festive occasions. Happy reading.