

# Graham Priest

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(GP: Graham Priest, MI: Michelle Irving)

MI: What did your parents and friends think about you taking up philosophical studies?

GP: I was a post-war kid, growing up in post-war London. My family and early friends were working-class and had no contact with a university whatsoever. After the war, big changes to the public (i.e., state) education system had been made by the Labour government. Kids took an exam at the age of 11. Those who passed it were creamed off and sent to grammar schools, and that's what happened to me. After that, most of my friends came from the grammar school culture, and there was a natural assumption that people in that culture would go on to university. The fact that I got into university was entirely natural as far as my school friends were concerned.

My parents themselves had no understanding of university. My mother was rapt because I was an only child and I got into Cambridge, which was unheard of for a working-class kid in her generation. My father was different: he couldn't really understand why I wanted to go to university, and he thought I should go and take a nice, safe, job at a bank. He couldn't understand why I wanted to do anything else. I think he probably changed his mind later in life, after I got a secure job.

MI: His priority was secure employment?

GP: Yes. His vision was formed by his class and by the hard times that his generation had been through; understandably, it extended only so far. But in those days, university graduates didn't worry about getting jobs – this was the post-war boom, so unemployment was really low.

In addition, not many people went to university, unlike the mass education system there is now. So if you had a degree, especially if you had a degree from Oxford or Cambridge, you were assured of getting a job. Once my father realised that, he didn't worry about me getting a job.

MI: Did you have any concerns about following that path?

GP: No. When I went to university I read mathematics, and people don't generally have problems with employment after studying mathematics because the subject has so many applications. Philosophy is more esoteric, but by the time I knew I wanted to be a philosopher, I really didn't care, and there was nothing to care about because I knew I was going to get a job somewhere or other. It wasn't that I knew I was going to get a job as a philosopher, but I did, and that was great.

MI: It seems that, with philosophy, by the time you get interested in it, you don't care what happens after that point. The ideas and the pleasure of it capture you.

GP: Yes, I think that's true. My sense is that people are captured by philosophy in a way, because it speaks to something, and answers some kind of deep need to be engaged.

MI: I wonder whether there are some kindred qualities amongst people who are interested in the same questions, even if they don't share the same answers?

GP: Yes, but that's equally true of history and literature. One of the distinctive things about philosophy is that there aren't any answers, in the sense that there is nothing authoritative, no one authoritative, to appeal to. And so you are forced back on trying to figure out these really important questions for yourself, and for some of us that is what we love doing.

MI: Mathematics, logic and philosophy are three areas you have worked extensively in. Can you say something about how you see the relationship between these fields?

GP: In modern academia, or modern philosophy, logic means essentially one kind of thing: figuring out what follows from what, and why. So if I give you certain assumptions, what follows from those assumptions? Or if you have some claims, what might justify these?

That doesn't sound terribly exciting, until you remember how much of what we do consists in exploring the consequences of various ideas. So, having an idea may be great, but it is always just a start. You then want to know what follows from that idea, to see whether the idea is any

good, or what interesting consequences it has. Then you have to figure out what follows from what, and the trouble is that that's not easy. As soon as you start to worry about this question, all kinds of hard issues get thrown up – and this is the study of logic.

Where does mathematics come in? There is a revolutionary jump in logic at the turn of the twentieth century when people started to apply mathematical techniques to questions of validity (to questions of what follows from what) in a way they had never done before. The study of formal logic in the West goes all the way back to Aristotle, but the mathematics of his time had not developed to the point of being able to adequately treat these questions. The time just wasn't right to apply mathematics to logic. It wasn't until the development of abstract algebra in the nineteenth century that the kind of tools became available where you could treat the questions logicians were interested in from a mathematical perspective.

Nowadays, the study of logic is highly mathematical, but for a philosopher, the ground of logic is always in philosophical issues. That is, the interest/relevance of logic is always connected to philosophical issues. Many logicians are interested in the question of validity for its own sake. But those with philosophical interests are concerned with what follows from what precisely because that bears on a number of big philosophical problems. Just think of all the questions that philosophers have considered over the centuries: the existence of God, the duties of the State, the nature of works of art, and so on. Once you have figured out what follows from what, then you can bring this to bear on the big issues.

- MI: Has logic answered any of these questions yet?
- GP: It depends on what you mean by 'answer'. As I said earlier, there are no answers in the sense that there are authoritative pronouncements that you can simply look up. Can you find answers that satisfy you? Yes, indeed you can, provisionally. You might revise your ideas as you think further. You can find temporary answers, but these can always be destabilized by further thoughts. This is one of the challenges of doing philosophy.
- MI: Why did logic appeal to you?
- GP: Logic interested me because I had mathematical skills, but I always had philosophical interests from an early age although I didn't know what to call them. When I became interested in academic philosophy, it was natural to move into an area of philosophy where mathematics and philosophy intermingled, and that was logic.

When I began studying logic, I had philosophical interests, but I actually knew very little about philosophy. My whole professional life has been spent learning philosophy, and it's been a great joy. I used logic as a springboard for going into other areas.

MI: Has being logical helped in life?

GP: What helps you in life? Philosophy can certainly help you in life, although there are many things in life that philosophy will not do for you – e.g., it won't give you the next meal, and it won't stop you being ill. However, if you don't have a coherent sense of the world, I think this can breed a lot of uncertainty and maybe unhappiness. So having a coherent picture of the world, as far as you can, is a good thing. But logic doesn't help in that, except in as much as it helps you think through various philosophical issues and get them straight. But it has nothing to do with ordering your life logically.

A lot of philosophy has nothing to do with logic. Philosophy involves not only thinking about ideas but also having them in the first place. There's nothing logical about the creative side of philosophy, about thinking up new ideas. Even when you've got new ideas and you're trying to think about them, I don't think most philosophers are as logical as they would like to claim. You have ideas that you are attracted to and then you run with them to see where they go. You might still hang on to them despite contrary evidence, just because you're interested in developing them and seeing where they go. Sometimes you don't believe things because you've got reasons for them; rather, you believe something or you have a gut feeling, and then you look for the arguments. Despite what they might say, most philosophers work in this fashion.

MI: It seems to me that creativity is indispensable in philosophy, and yet it is rarely discussed.

GP: I agree. This is because no-one really knows what to say about it. It's difficult to teach creativity. I'm not saying it can't be taught, but we certainly don't do anything to teach it in a classroom, other than prompting students by asking, 'Why do you think that?'

MI: Two areas in which you have made a significant and somewhat controversial contribution are 'paraconsistency' and 'dialetheism'. Can you say something about each of these?

GP: Paraconsistent logic has to do with validity. Let's assume, for example, that it were the case that it is raining and not raining here. Would it then follow that the moon is made of blue cheese? This sounds completely

unintuitive; but in fact, the standard answer in the received logic of our time – which everyone learns in their first logic class – is: yes, it would follow. The principle in question is sometimes called *ex falso quodlibet*, or the principle of explosion: everything follows from a contradiction. Paraconsistent logics are those logics where this apparently strange principle does not hold. Now, how does this affect theorising? It affects theorising because, if you endorse this principle, and if you ever reach a contradiction in your thinking or in your theory, then your theory ‘explodes’. This puts any inconsistent theory entirely off-limits, whereas if you employ a paraconsistent logic you can tolerate a limited amount of inconsistency because the inconsistencies can be quarantined – they don’t blow up and ruin everything.

MI: So paraconsistent logic is something like an instrumental tool?

GP: It’s a tool and it’s also an account of validity. There are different accounts of validity, and what renders an account of validity paraconsistent is that it rejects the principle of explosion. Paraconsistency should be clearly distinguished from ‘dialetheism’, which is the view that some contradictions are true. That is a further step. Dialetheism is heresy in most places. Aristotle wrote a classical tract where he defended the law of non-contradiction, which rules out contradictions, and has been high orthodoxy in the West for about 2,500 years. There are a few great philosophers who fly in the face of it, and who reject it, the obvious example being Hegel. However, generally speaking, the thought that some contradictions can be accepted as true has been high heresy for a long time.

MI: Why exactly has it been resisted? Did it unravel everything?

GP: The idea that no contradiction can be true has been so much an unquestioned assumption that people have only recently started to question what goes on when it fails. What are the consequences of rejecting it? One of the surprises is that a lot of things don’t unravel. People had assumed that rejecting contradictions is a cornerstone of truth, validity, rationality, and the ability to revise your beliefs. Once you start to see how these things operate, this assumption just isn’t true. One thing that’s starting to come out now is the fact that the possibility of accepting some contradictions isn’t quite as radical as people had thought.

MI: It seems to me that in our individual lives we hold lots of contradictions. I don’t know whether we think they are true, but we’re certainly not fully consistent human beings.

- GP: I think that's entirely true. One application of paraconsistent logic concerns people's cognitive processes, how they handle their beliefs, and revise their beliefs. This is an area of paraconsistent logic that tends to be pursued in Computer Science departments where people worry about things like managing sets of data and beliefs, and revising them. But you're right: we all have inconsistent beliefs – but it's quite another step to say that we think those inconsistencies are true.
- MI: When did you become interested in this and why?
- GP: My interest goes back to when I was a research student. I was in the Maths Department writing on mathematical logic and I was worrying about Gödel's incompleteness theorem. This comes in various forms. In certain theories which have a consistent bunch of axioms, there are, it would seem, always going to be things which you can prove to be true but which you can't prove within the system itself. So it appears that we have the ability to transcend any axiom system and work outside it. When we do mathematics, we think of ourselves as doing something unitary, as pursuing a singular enquiry, and so the thought that something forces you to transcend things appears unnatural. How is it even possible if we have a sufficiently general system? If things are inconsistent, this transcendence is not forced on you. I started to play with the idea that things were actually inconsistent, and so you didn't need this transcending move. So I started to think about what things would have to be like if you weren't forced into that transcendence but could operate on an inconsistent basis. Obviously this leads to paraconsistent logic, and the rest flowed from that.
- MI: What gave you the confidence to pursue something that wasn't well accepted and well regarded?
- GP: At the time I was working in the UK, but I soon moved to Australia, and Australian philosophy is much less conservative than the UK and US. The logicians in Australia are very open-minded. I met Richard Sylvan (Richard Routley, as he was known then), who was also working on paraconsistency, and he introduced me to the ideas of other people who had worked, or were working, in this area, such as da Costa in Brazil and Jaskowski in Poland. I found an open-minded community here where people were already starting to think in these terms. It gave me the kind of support I needed, and after that I never worried about what was going on in the UK or US. Had I not moved here, then I have absolutely no idea what would have happened.

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