

# 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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MI: Do you think the Australian philosophical community tends to be more open than other philosophical communities?

GP: Australia has always been on the fringes of Western culture. If you look at places that regard themselves as the centre of culture, you will see how much orthodoxy dominates. People there think that essentially they've got it right, or they are on the right lines, and so they are less prepared to consider unorthodox views. If you're on the fringes, everything is much more uncertain. It is notable, for example, that paraconsistent logic has not developed in the centres of power, such as Oxford and Harvard, but in places like Brazil and Australia.

There is also something very distinctive about Australian culture, and its attitude of 'the fair go'. Let's see what this guy has to say and let's think about it. This is balanced by the 'tall poppy' syndrome, but that's actually good philosophically because it's saying: 'If you've got an idea then let's hear it, let's think about it, let's criticise it, let's throw it away if it's no good, and let's develop it if it looks like it might have some promise.' I like to think that that remains something fairly distinctive about Australian philosophy.

MI: It's interesting the way you describe this because most social movements start at the fringe and then move to the centre.

GP: Some famous philosophers work in centres of power. For example, Wittgenstein spent his academic life in Cambridge, David Lewis was at Princeton, and so on. But lots of philosophers have not come from a centre of power, and lots of ideas have evolved in the periphery, and then they get taken to the centres of power where they become more orthodox.

MI: What, then, is the philosophical centre of power and how does that work in a context where ideas are up for grabs? What is this notion of power?

GP: Where you think the centre of power resides will depend very much on the culture in which you were brought up. In English-speaking philosophy, the centre of power – at least in the nineteenth and early twentieth century – has been Oxford and Cambridge. Then it shifted across the Atlantic in the second-half of the twentieth century and was taken over by either the old, established, American universities (such as Yale, Harvard, and Princeton) or the ones prepared to pay to build a reputation in philosophy, like Pittsburgh and New York University. Thus, the centre of power also has something to do with wealth.

If you come from a European country, matters are quite different. For example, if you're French, the centre of gravity is the Sorbonne in Paris, while in nineteenth century Germany it was Berlin (although there were always good philosophers working in other places). Once you go East, the centre of power changes again. Today, amidst globalisation, the centres of power tend to change very fast.

MI: What does all this mean for philosophy?

GP: Philosophers are now starting to think of themselves as a sort of global culture, I think. Philosophers will go anywhere in the world for a conference. Twenty years ago, there were very few conferences that would have been attended by a European or American philosopher in China or India. Even more slowly, philosophers are starting to become engaged with ideas from all over the world. There has been a kind of tiff between Analytical philosophers and Continental philosophers, but this looks like an in-house debate from the perspective of Buddhist philosophy or Chinese philosophy.

MI: So as more people engage, things gets narrowed down to some degree?

GP: Well, in some sense. Things that appeared significant, can come to be seen as insignificant. On the other hand, globalisation can produce a cross-fertilisation that opens up a lot of new things. To the extent that there is a global centre of power in philosophy, it is currently in the US, but it's moving eastwards. I would think that in thirty years it will probably be in Beijing or Delhi.

MI: Why do you think that? It's hard for a Western person to imagine on some level, because we see ourselves as very much Western-centric.

GP: True. However, it was very hard for people growing up in Britain in the 1920s to imagine the US as anything but a sort of maverick intellectual culture. It changed very fast as it became a very rich country. Very rich countries have lots of resources to throw into apparently useless things like philosophy, and they can buy good philosophers. Often, where the philosophical centre of power is tracks the wealth, and the wealth is gradually moving east. China already has a GDP almost the size of that of the US and so will India in the near future, simply because of the size of their populations. In 20 or 30 years, the universities in East Asia or South-East Asia are going to be able to afford big investments in education, and they'll buy good philosophers from all over the world.

- MI: Much of philosophy is concerned about the good life. Have you been concerned with this question?
- GP: Yes, it's one of the core questions of Greek philosophy – and Asian philosophy, for that matter. It has got sidelined a bit in contemporary philosophy as people have focused on minutiae, but it's lurking there in the background. A question that always interests students is: What the hell should I be doing in my life? – which is a good, old-fashioned philosophical question.
- MI: Tell me about your interest in Buddhism.
- GP: I don't call myself a Buddhist, though there are many things in Buddhism which strike me as very sensible. Buddhism is not normally focussed on the question, 'How do I live the good life?' because that sounds a bit too hedonistic. Rather, Buddhism concerns itself with the question of why people are unhappy and how to avoid unhappiness. I think that avoiding unhappiness is a good thing.
- MI: Buddhism shows us how to avoid unhappiness. However, its starting point is that there is unhappiness. The capacity to be happy with unhappiness is different from avoiding it, and the key is craving and aversion.
- GP: These are certainly important Buddhist ideas, but how to articulate them is not an easy question: Indian and Chinese Buddhisms have somewhat different takes on the matter. Certainly, all Buddhists would agree that there is unhappiness and that you should minimise it in some sense. Maybe this involves uncovering the happiness which is underneath, or maybe it involves getting rid of whatever the causes of unhappiness are. What is canonical in Buddhism are the Four Noble Truths: life is suffering; suffering is caused by attachment; there is a way to get rid of attachment; and this consists in following the Eightfold Path.
- MI: When did you become interested in Buddhism?
- GP: I read some Buddhist texts when I was younger, and Zen Buddhism has always fascinated me. It wasn't on the agenda in my professional life because Asian philosophy was not part of the Western intellectual tradition. I became interested in Asian philosophy when I met Jay Garfield, who was Professor of Philosophy in Tasmania at the time. We started talking about things, and we discovered that some of the work I had done on the limits of thought were similar to some of the things that he was thinking about in Buddhism. He opened my eyes to the fact that

there are rich philosophical traditions that I knew nothing about, and I wanted to know more.

I have spent a lot of my philosophical life teaching myself philosophy, and so it was natural to try to understand the various strands of Asian philosophy as well. I've been doing that for 10 or 15 years now, and of all the various Asian philosophies, it is Buddhist philosophy that intrigues me most. I'm not a Buddhist, but a lot of the ideas are very plausible. Also the metaphysics, especially in later Buddhism, is very subtle.

MI: The metaphysical questions are very interesting. Within Western philosophy, these are questions about God and the universe. Yet Buddhism starts with the premise of emptiness.

GP: Right. Metaphysics concerns the nature of reality. Many people have thought about the nature of reality and, if you're a Christian theist, this has profound implications for your views about the nature of reality. If you think of God as the divine creator and sustainer of the rest of reality, then everything has to be grounded in God, so you have a very distinctive view of the nature of reality. Most Western philosophers tend to hold the view that reality grounds out in something, maybe not a unique thing like God, but at least some kind of substance. This is a very common view in Western metaphysics.

Mahayana Buddhism endorses the notion of Emptiness. This really means there are no grounds of this kind. There is a joke about turtles, originating from a public lecture Bertrand Russell once gave, in the second decade of the twentieth century, on ancient cosmology. He said, 'The Ancients wondered about what stops the world from falling down. Well, it must rest on something. But what could it rest on? It rested on an elephant, some thought. And they were happy with that answer for a while. Then they started to wonder, "Why doesn't the elephant fall down?" It must rest on something, they thought. But what does it rest on? It must rest on a tortoise, they answered. And they were happy with that for a while. But then they started to realise this really wasn't going anywhere.' Russell then remarked that at that point they decided to move on to something else in philosophy. At the end of this lecture, a little old lady rushed excitedly up to Russell from the back of the audience and said: 'Mr Russell, Mr Russell, I know the answer: It's tortoises, tortoises, all the way down!' That sounds absurd, and we think it's funny: if one tortoise won't do the job, then a whole infinite regress of tortoises won't do it either. But Buddhism says: 'Yes, it really is tortoises all the way down.' It's a metaphysical picture that's

very different from any standard Western perspective, and it's hard to articulate it because it veers into paradox very fast.

MI: There are two areas which highlight interesting differences between the East and the West: one is the notion of the self and the other relates to the nature of mind. Buddhism holds that you cannot know the nature of mind – it is something that is experienced. You can't get there through thinking and therefore to be philosophically interested in it is almost redundant.

GP: The mind is theorised in different ways in different Eastern traditions, as it is in different Western traditions. One of the general differences between Eastern approaches and Western approaches is that the mind tends to be taken for granted in Western philosophy: it is sort of transparent, so that consciousness is immediately evident to you. In Eastern traditions – or at least in Indian traditions – the mind is conceived of as deceptive in some sense. This might be understood in many ways, but a common thought is that the real way to come to grips with it is through the practice of meditation. There is no discussion of this in the West. That's not to say that there aren't philosophers in the West who speak about direct experience of this kind. The great Christian mystics, like Meister Eckhart, are very much like this, so it's not that the emphasis on direct experience is solely Eastern.

The thought that the mind is not what it appears to be is, of course, a view that has been problematised in the West in the twentieth century, because of people like Freud, the notion of the fragmented self, and modern developments in cognitive science. Nevertheless, in traditional Western philosophy, the self has been a kind of transparent thing which is often taken to be the foundation for the rest of our metaphysics.

MI: Which theory are you drawn to? In Western philosophy, the Analytic/Continental division has been about the nature of self in many ways.

GP: That is one of the areas they disagree on, simply because Freud has had a much bigger impact on French and German philosophy than he had on Anglo-American analytic philosophy. I'm still trying to figure out what I think about these things. The standard Indian Buddhist line is that there is no self, there is no 'me', though things tend to change a bit in later, and especially Chinese, Buddhism.

The early Buddhist picture is that there is stuff in the world with substance, but that the self is not such a thing. The self is, rather, a kind of intellectual construction. But this gets problematised in later Buddhism, when people come to apply what they thought before about the

self to everything. Ironically, there can then be a self of sorts, but just like everything else, it is empty of substance.

MI: What, in your view, is good philosophy and what is bad philosophy? How do I as a reader or student of philosophy assess a work of philosophy as either good or bad?

GP: There are several things which constitute good philosophy. One is interesting ideas. Great philosophy is often kick-started by people having really interesting ideas. Most of them, it must be said, are fruitcake ideas. Plato is a nut case, Heidegger is bizarre, Kant is a wacko. Yet, although their ideas are apparently very strange, they have a kind of beauty which is intriguing. One of the marks of a great philosophical idea is that it has legs, even though it appears whacky in the first instance. It also has a depth which allows succeeding generations to come back to it and find new aspects of it, again and again. For example, Plato has resurfaced in the history of Western philosophy many times in different guises, often unexpected guises. So, these are profound ideas which are capable of delivering new insights, again and again. One thing that makes great philosophy is just strange ideas with great power and great depth.

MI: These are ideas, then, that capture the imagination – they serve wonder.

GP: That's exactly right: there is something which captures the imagination. Having a great idea is only part of it, though, because after that you have to figure out whether it's got legs, what its potential is, whether it's just apparently crazy or really crazy. In all the great philosophical traditions you've got the analytic aspect by which you examine the ideas and try to consider their consequences and plausibility. You're never going to get good philosophy if you just throw out ideas and think, 'I'm now a great philosopher.' You've got to examine the ideas, and this is true of Analytic philosophy, Continental philosophy, Buddhist philosophy, Chinese philosophy. The enemy of good philosophy is obfuscation, a refusal to enquire, and being small-minded.

MI: What does it mean to be 'small-minded'? Most of us think we are open-minded, but how are we to be constantly open to new ideas? To be constantly open is a life filled with uncertainty. Philosophers tend to bash ideas together and take pleasure in watching the new ideas fall out. But in practice are people doing that, or are they defending their turf?

GP: People do defend their turf in philosophy. The philosopher Thomas Kuhn actually defended this kind of thing. If you have a new idea, it is never going to be obvious how good it is or what its consequences are. You need to explore these ideas, and this means that you need people to stick with them and pursue them, and some may do this dogmatically. Philosophers are humans and have their failings like everybody else.

However, professionally rather than individually, philosophy is such that no ideas are held dogmatically – at least not in the long term. So the profession of philosophy is open-minded, regardless of what individuals might do.

MI: Is there anything that you are philosophically sure about, having followed this track for thirty or forty years?

GP: I feel happy with a number of my philosophical views, but that doesn't mean I think they couldn't be destabilised and changed. Once you stop thinking about these things and you are not prepared to evaluate them, then you stop thinking, which is . . . a bad idea.

MI: Is there anything that you believed for, say, 10 years that you now think someone else has debunked?

GP: I was brought up a Christian and I ceased to be a Christian when I went to university and became an atheist. Since then, I've always been an atheist. Also, in my early years as a philosopher, I was very much inclined to logical positivism. It had already passed out of fashion by then, but I was interested in the philosophy of logic. A lot of logicians of that period were positivists or neo-positivists, such as Quine. But that's all completely gone now – I don't subscribe to it. When I was younger, I also subscribed to the principle of non-contradiction, but that went very fast!

Something else I subscribed to for a long time was the Quinean view that there can't be any non-existing entities. I had that view until quite recently, but I changed my mind on that.

MI: Why did you change your view on the question of non-existing entities?

GP: It was absolutely prime orthodoxy in the second half of the twentieth century that the notion of non-existing objects is absurd or incoherent. But historically it hasn't been seen that way. This is very much a twentieth-century invention. When I came to Australia, I met Richard Sylvan, who was then a Meinongian. Alexius Meinong was an Austrian philosopher who is often ridiculed for endorsing non-existent object.

Richard followed Meinong in this, although Richard always changed things to his own liking, so he called it 'noneism'. Noneism is simply the view that some things don't exist. When I met Richard, we agreed on the paraconsistency side of things straight away, but we differed over noneism, a position which struck me as completely crazy and outrageous. Richard and I were friends for a long time, and for many years I argued with him about this. Eventually, I had to admit that all the supposedly knock-down arguments I had taken as orthodoxy were just wrong.

MI: How difficult is that, to have held something for a long period of time and then release it?

GP: It's hard. We're all attached to our views. I had to admit that the position I had thought was crazy was not in fact so. I came to see that noneism had many virtues, but it also had problems, though perhaps not knock-down problems. Then I started to see my way through some of these problems to what I thought was the most crucial problem, and to a way that might be answered. So, I thought: 'Here is a view which has legs and does a lot of things for you, and perhaps all the problems you might have thought it has can be answered. So, maybe it's right after all.'

MI: This seems to be a way of taking an idea very seriously, even if you have an aversion to it.

GP: This brings us back to being open-minded: even though you may think someone is wrong, or even though you may think they're badly wrong, you may well learn by engaging with them.

MI: What is it to be a mature philosopher? When one talks about philosophers, one might think, for example, of Plato's development from his earlier work inspired by Socrates to his later and more independent reflections. If you track a philosopher over their lifetime, where their thinking has ended seems to be a long way from where it started.

GP: Certainly, the ideas of a philosopher develop – how can they not, if you think about them for 20, 30 or 40 years? Some philosophers perhaps don't change their views radically – maybe Hume, for example – but some philosophers change enormously in their outlook. Russell, for example, had a new theory every week. And some have very definite early and later phases, like Heidegger and Wittgenstein. Maturity can be seeing a depth in questions that you haven't thought about before. Philosophical questions are hard: you are not going to sit down in an



afternoon and see the labyrinth. For example, you give a student a philosophical problem at the start of the semester and by the end of the semester they're just starting to get to grips with it. It's not a subject where you can master one thing simply, and then move on; it takes time to think about things, and so you need a lot more than a single semester – or even a single lifetime! Professional philosophers spend their lives thinking about matters, and they come to see depths, subtleties and issues, possibilities and counter-possibilities, objections and counter-objections. Often, what will mark the later work of a philosopher is that it evolves as a result of such a developing awareness. This is not *necessarily* to say that it gets better; sometimes it can get worse because people see all the complexities, and the big picture just sort of frays, and one can get paralysed in the details.

Philosophy books by young people have a kind of boldness: the central idea may be very problematic, but it is presented with a youthful zest. For example, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is a bold work of genius. Compare that with his *Philosophical Investigations*, which is tangled, to say the least: there is something which drives it and holds it together, but in it Wittgenstein is becoming interested in all kinds of byways and pathways. It's not an obviously unitary work in the same way the *Tractatus* is. Often older philosophers can lose the boldness of their earlier years, as they realise how complicated everything is, and so they're scared to say anything without a thousand qualifications. Youth and maturity have their own distinct virtues.

MI: Wisdom doesn't get discussed a lot in modern philosophy. What does the word 'wisdom' mean to you? To me it seems to have something to do with living a good life – to be wise is the capacity to make choices that are of benefit.

GP: A wise person is someone I can go to for advice if I'm having problems: they have a sufficient understanding of the depth of life. You would hardly ever describe a young person as wise; they haven't seen enough of life to recognise enough of the interconnections and complexities in each problem. You also want someone who is prepared to be compassionate and to help you along, without telling you what to do. Wisdom in this sense is certainly not high on the agenda of contemporary philosophy, where people tend to focus on the details. However, I don't know that you can read Plato, Aquinas, or the Buddhist thinkers without engaging in this kind of consideration.

MI: Why is philosophy important, in your view?

GP: In the twenty-first century, people tend to think about life as earning a salary and maybe having kids, but if you just do that in life I think it's a sadly depleted life. If you are only concerned with earning enough money to keep yourself and your family going, you are missing a lot of important things in life. It's important that there is great art, great music, and great philosophy, because these are things which can enrich anyone's life, and these things are never going to stop and finish. There is more great music to be made, there is more great poetry to be written, and there is more great philosophy to be done. So it's important that there are people who are able to do these things, and will.