

In this interview, Graham Priest, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the CUNY Graduate Center, discusses growing up in London after the war, the swinging 60's, appearing in the Magical Mystery Tour, punting, becoming an atheist, Buddhism, socioeconomics and college, studying math with John Bell and Moshé Machover, being a parent going to graduate school, considering taking a job in the gas industry, karate, training the mind and spirit, delving into non-classical logic with Richard Sylvan and Bob Meyer in Australia, antipodean philosophical styles, the tension between academic and capitalist values, defending dialetheism, moving to New York, Hegel, Heidegger, tai chi, theater and philosophy, Nāgārjuna, Dōgen, the decline of risk taking in professional philosophy, Madame Butterfly, Cream, Miles Davis, and his last meal...

[6/8/2017]

Where did you grow up?

I grew up in post WW2 London. The 1950s was a rather grim decade, with **bomb sites** and **rationing**. By contrast, **the 1960s was an exciting decade of youth rebellion**, with rock music, **the pill**, and the rejection of "old fashioned" values.

What was your family like?

My family was an ordinary working-class family. My father was a manual laborer, whom I rarely saw because he had to work so much overtime to keep us afloat financially. My mother was a home-maker, though she worked part time jobs for financial reasons. I was an only child. My parents were not well educated. In my family life, there was no "high" art, music, literature; but my mother was an exceptionally loving person. She made sure that I could read before I went to school, and was always concerned for my education.

As a kid, what did you do for fun?

As a young kid I played in the street—cricket, or cowboys and indians. The neighbourhood kids also explored bomb sites, or the building sites they were then becoming. As an older kid, I started to go to pubs, took up the drums, played in a "pop group"—and took up ballroom dancing.

Oh man, what was the name of the pop group?

Grac. You would never have heard of it. We just did a few local gigs. When I went to university, I moved from rock to jazz, and played in a jazz trio.

How did you get into ballroom dancing?

I just liked dancing. I like feeling my body move. And of course, it was a good chance to meet girls... I suppose the highlight of that particular career was when I was one of the dancers in the ballroom scene of the Beatles' film **Magical Mystery Tour**.

Any sign you'd grow up to be a philosopher?

Not really. No one in my family had had a tertiary education. In my daily life there were never really discussions of issues that you might call philosophical. Indeed, I had no idea of what philosophy was. A sort of exception, though: I was brought up as a Christian, and I do remember thinking about issues which I would now call philosophical. For example, I remember being puzzled for a long time by the simple syllogism: God created everything that exists. Evil exists. So God created evil.

As a teen, did you start thinking about what you wanted to do for a living?

Not really. I'd decided that I wanted to go to university, but I hadn't thought much beyond that.

Was it assumed you'd go to college?

The postwar Labour Government instituted a new class of state schools: **grammar schools**. There was an exam to get into these at age 11 (**the 11 Plus Exam**). I was lucky enough to pass the exam, and get into a grammar school. Grammar schools were academically oriented, and kids who did well at such schools usually went to university. I was such a kid. So, yes, my school expected me to go to university. University was quite out of my parents' world, however. My mother was very supportive of my going to university (and when I was offered a place at Cambridge, she was thrilled). My father couldn't see much point in going to university. He said that he thought I should just "get a nice safe job in a bank".

Where did you go?

St John's College, Cambridge.

Inspirational classes or teachers? Why did you go for math?

At school I fell in love with mathematics. It was just so beautiful. In British universities you study just one subject (sometimes with one other minor subject). So there was never any question for me about what to read (as the British say) at university: mathematics. I didn't do particularly well at this. I wasn't

a very good student. There were so many other interesting things to do than study! No doubt my limitations as a mathematician were showing. But also, the teaching was pretty bad. At high school I had had an inspirational mathematics teacher. The Cambridge lecturers were a pretty uninspiring lot. They would just come in, write on the blackboard, and students would copy down what they wrote. I remember one lecturer who, every lecture, spent the whole time facing the blackboard.

What was your social life like?

Coming from a working class background, Cambridge opened up a whole new world for me: music, drama, literature, art, restaurants, squash, punting—and of course, drugs (though I never did hard drugs). At first, I was a bit dazzled by it all, but these things soon grew to be part of my world. Then, of course, there were women. At university there were my first serious (and sexual) relationships. At Cambridge I met Annie, who eventually became my wife.

How did you meet Annie? What does she do?

I met Annie in Cambridge. She was studying at Cambridge Tech. When we moved down to London, she went to Queen Mary College (a college of London University) where she studied French and Spanish. In Australia she became a teacher, at first teaching languages in high schools, and then moving to teach English as a Second Language at a TAFE (Technical and Further Education) College.

How did your world view change in college?

Well, for one thing, I started to think very seriously about my religion. Nagging doubts turned into skepticism, and eventually I decided that there were no rational grounds for Christianity. I became an atheist, which I am to this day.

You've written a bit about Buddhism, though.

Yes, **I have written about Buddhism**, but I am not a Buddhist: I have no religion—except perhaps philosophy! I am, however, much more sympathetic to the ethics of Buddhism and the metaphysics of some of its branches than of any other religion that I know. This is because I find them much more defensible rationally.

In Buddhism, there is no god. There is therefore no such thing as divine revelation. The only ground one has for accepting something is that it stands up to reason, all things considered. That strikes me as

eminently sensible. People who don't use their reason are regularly conned in life. Sadly, I don't think I need to give examples.

Did this bother your parents?

I have no idea what my father thought about my ceasing to be a Christian. We never spoke about this—or anything else much. I doubt that he cared much. To this day, I honestly don't know what his religious views were. It was my mother who was the practicing Christian. I'm sure she would have preferred me to remain a Christian, but she knew that one's children have to go their own way. And for her, I think, the main importance of religion was always about one's relationship with other people. And that can be the same whether or not one is a Christian.

Politics?

Oxford and Cambridge are bastions of the British class system. Lots of the kids who go there are from the upper social echelons. Many have been to private schools (which the British call 'public'). Many go on to influential positions in politics, the judiciary, the military, the BBC, etc. So I became very conscious of my class roots, something I had never really thought about before. Because of changes made to the university funding system by the postwar Labour government, there were more state-school kids at Cambridge than in previous generations, and I mixed very much with my own kind (as did the private school kids). I came to see that the place was a bastion of elitism, privilege, and class power. I hated that. I suppose that in some ways, I sold out, though. Being a philosopher is hardly a working class activity, and my own kids are very middle class. However, politically, my working class background has never left me. I have always been, and still am, a long way to the "left" in politics.

Did philosophy start to enter the picture at this point?

A little. I discovered logic. That was the bit of mathematics that I found most interesting. Because of its connections with philosophy, I started to read some, attend philosophy lectures, etc. The philosophy lectures and lecturers were so much more stimulating than mathematics. There was a sense of excitement and intellectual engagement that I had rarely seen in the maths classes. Despite this, I did not become a philosopher. When I finished my undergraduate degree I moved to London with my wife and newly born son, and did an MSc, and then a PhD, in Mathematics (mathematical logic) at **London University**. In fact, there were some terrific maths lectures there, especially **John Bell** and **Moshé Machover**. They were enthusiastic, great communicators, terrific lecturers. This quite rekindled my love of mathematics.

Stressful going to grad school with a child?

Absolutely—for several reasons. First, we didn't have much money: we were living off two student grants. So we lived in a very rough part of London, and had to be very frugal with our money. Both being students helped a bit though. It meant that most of the time one of us could look after our son, so we didn't need to use child-care very heavily. Secondly, we were very young parents. So all our peers were off living a very active social life. Having a baby meant that we could not. At the time, I guess we felt a bit sorry for ourselves. Though there was an upside to that: less distraction from our studies!

haha...right! So, how did you get a job in a philosophy department, the University of St. Andrews, with a degree in mathematics? What drew you away from mathematics? Did you develop a distaste for mathematics, or was there something tantalizing about philosophy?

By the time I finished my doctorate I knew two things. First, that philosophy was so much more fun than mathematics; secondly, that I would only ever be a mediocre mathematician. In my last year as a grad student I applied for a lot of university jobs (52: I kept count) and got absolutely nowhere. I had more or less given up the idea of being an academic, and was about to accept a job with the **British Gas Board**, working as a mathematician modeling gas-flow. But then, a couple of jobs then came up at the very last moment. These were temporary jobs covering for people who were unexpectedly going to be away. One was in the maths department of **City University in London**; the other was in the philosophy department of the University of St Andrews. I was offered both; and for me it was a no-brainer. I knew that I wanted to be a philosopher. Why St Andrews offered me the job, to this day I have no idea. What made it even more bizarre was that they wanted me to teach not logic, but the philosophy of science. Anyway, I'm exceptionally grateful that they did!

What was your approach to teaching back then, and how has it changed?

Well, given my background I knew virtually no philosophy. So I have taught myself most of the philosophy I know by teaching it. If I wanted to learn about something, I would teach a course on it (keeping a couple of weeks ahead of the students). I have learned a lot of philosophy this way, and it's been a blast. That's not really what your question means, though. I guess most of us start to teach in the way that we ourselves were taught. To the extent that I had learned philosophy it had been by arguing with people (not in the pejorative sense of the word). So I guess that's the way I taught: explain philosophical problems, and then argue about the solutions. I don't teach that way much anymore. For many years I taught **karate**; and what I learned about teaching there, I came to apply that to the way I

taught philosophy. First of all, you see where someone is at in their development. Then you figure out what the next stage is they have to get to. Then you do what you can to try to get them there. In philosophy, that means, of course, that sometimes you will be arguing about philosophical issues. That is, after all, what philosophers do a lot of the time, but this is just one thing in the sharpening of people's philosophical skills (knowledge, focus, analytical ability, creativity).

Side note: Have you ever had to use karate to defend yourself?

No, not in the sense you mean. I don't go to the sorts of place where there is likely to be a fight; and in any case I'm well over six feet tall, so I'm not the kind of person that people tend to pick a fight with (and if I they did, I'd walk away: that's one of the most important lesson that karatedo teaches you).

Most people think that karatedo is simply training in violence. It is that, but this is not the most important thing about it. It is a training of the mind and spirit, and of how to relate to other people. And these go way beyond the dojo. In that sense, I use my karate training all the time.

Interesting! What do you mean by spirit?

The word is multiply ambiguous. I mean something entirely naturalistic. Two of the definitions given by the **OED** are:

Those qualities regarded as forming the definitive or typical elements in the character of a person, nation, or group or in the thought and attitudes of a particular period.

The quality of courage, energy, and determination or assertiveness.

They'll do.

How did you find yourself in Australia? Good colleagues? It seems like you hit your stride there, philosophically, that is, you started publishing lots of stuff in great journals. What happened?

The job in St Andrews was a temporary one, and lasted two years. In that time I applied for many more jobs. The only permanent position I was offered was at the **University of Western Australia** in Perth, so I took it, and we moved to Australia. We thought that we would be back in the UK in a few years, but we never returned to live. It turned out that we had emigrated. The UWA philosophy department was small (8 faculty). But my colleagues were (for the most part) a congenial bunch, and I certainly learnt a

lot in my years there, both by talking to my colleagues about their interests, and teaching courses in areas I knew little about.

In retrospect, it turned out that moving to Australia was a serendipitous move for me, not so much because of UWA, but because of two other factors. First, there was a very strong group of logicians, mainly centered around **Richard Sylvan** and **Bob Meyer** at the **ANU in Canberra**. We all worked closely as a group for many years. We were all interested in **non-classical logic—relevant logic** and **paraconsistent logic** especially. So that was a great working group. I could never have found such a group in the UK. Secondly, that group of logicians, and in fact Australian philosophers in general, had two notable qualities. First, they were open minded. They didn't mind how unorthodox a view was, they were prepared to consider it and see where it went. Secondly, they were tough minded. Weaknesses of ideas were soon exposed. This is a very fruitful atmosphere for the development of novel philosophical ideas: new ideas can flourish, but the bad ones wither quite fast. If I started to have a good output of papers in those years, it was partly, I guess, because of the stimulation of all the philosophy I was learning, but certainly because of the Australian logic/philosophy community.

Sounds absolutely lovely, intellectually. What did you do in your free time?

Just before we left the UK, our second child was born. So in the early years in Australia, we had a very young family. So, much of my non-academic time was devoted to family life. Work and family didn't leave much time for anything else, but I played squash, started to run regularly, and even started playing baseball with the University club (in the lowest grade!). As a kid, I was never very sporty. But physical activity has always been an important part of my adult life, though of different kinds at different times.

Why did you leave UWA?

That's easy. The **career structure in Australia and the UK** is very different from that in North America—though it is changing somewhat now. Traditionally, every department had only one professor, who held the "chair" of the department. The other people in the department were "lecturers" of various grades. I was ambitious. The chair of philosophy at the **University of Queensland** (in Brisbane) came up. I applied for it, was offered it, and accepted. It was as fairly rapid climb up the academic ladder, even for Australia, which was no stranger to appointing professors who were still young.

Does raising kids change your philosophical outlook?

Well, I guess it could. It didn't change mine.

So, you say you're ambitious. What motivates you? Is it curiosity or the pursuit of the truth? Altering the course of the conversation or changing the minds of others? Pride or glory?

I just want to be the best philosopher I can be, and I'd be very happy if I can contribute something worthwhile to the history of philosophy.

How and when did you get into dialetheism? When did you fully buy into it?

I wrote my doctoral thesis on logic in the Maths Department at the LSE. Any mathematical logician knows the **Goedel incompleteness theorem** and his proofs of them. And it is clear that they use a paradoxical self-referential argument of the same kind as **the liar** (this sentence is not provable [in the system in question]). Applying this does not show that the system is inconsistent, but it seems to avoid inconsistency only by good luck! I became convinced that the only honest response to the paradox was to accept the conclusion. Hence, dialetheism. It was not a big move from this to the whole family of paradoxes of self-reference. I think that many people think that dialetheism is simply about a solution to the paradoxes of self-reference. It's not. That's just one of its applications, possibly not the most interesting one.

I wrote '**Logic of Paradox**', the first paper in which I advocated dialetheism, before I left St Andrews, and I read it at the first meeting of the Australasian Association of Logic I ever attended, in 1976. So I guess I was committed to it by then. But with the stimulation of the Australian logicians, and especially Richard Sylvan, I explored many of its aspects in the next few years. Those explorations were published in **In Contradiction**, which became something of the manifesto of dialetheism. This appeared in 1987. It was finished, though, in 1983. The delay in publication was due to the fact that the manuscript was rejected by so many publishers. In those early years of dialetheism I often gave talks on the subject to conferences and philosophy departments. It did seem to me that there must be something obviously wrong with the idea, which I was missing. And in every talk I expected someone to put up their hand and point this out. It never happened. So after that I felt a lot more comfortable with the idea. One thing we have learned from the last 30 years of debate is that if dialetheism is wrong, it seems that this is not going to be shown by any very simple argument.

You spent over a decade at University of Queensland. If you had to pick two or three things you wrote during that period you are most proud of, what would they be?

Well, I guess I'd have to say that it was the book **Beyond the Limits of Thought**. That was written when I had a year's leave in Cambridge in 1990. I think that's my favorite book (of the ones I have written!). I

also had to learn a lot about the history of Western philosophy to write it. That was a lot of fun. If I had to pick one other thing from that period, it would be '**Sylvan's Box**', partly because of my relationship to Richard, and partly because it's useful to debunk so many myths, such as that one cannot imagine the impossible.

Actually, if I had to choose another early paper that I really like, it would be from my Perth years, and nothing to do with paraconsistency, '**Hume's Final Argument**', which came out of teaching a course on Hume's **Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion**. It's an explanation of Hume's apparent **volte face** at the end of the Dialogues. The paper never attracted any interest, as far as I can see, but I think it hits the nail on the head.

You must have made some good friends, built a life in Brisbane, was the move to St. Andrews and the University of Melbourne difficult?

By the end of my Brisbane years, I was ready to get out of the University of Queensland: it had lost the plot. The place had turned into a line-managerial system, and the managers cared very little about academic values: simply about maximizing money (and sometimes about just climbing the managerial ladder). In the process, the collegiality of the university had been completely destroyed. I care very much about collegiality and the importance of collective decision-making. I'm afraid that the whole university system in Australia has now gone down that path.

Anyway, I was applying for jobs elsewhere. I was offered the **Boyce Gibson Chair** at Melbourne University (the oldest Chair of Philosophy in Australia) and a Chair at the University of St Andrews. I agonized for a month. I tried to apply **formal decision theory**, and found it to be completely useless. In the end I voted with my heart, which was to stay in Australia. The decision was made easier, however, by the fact that just before that I had been made a Visiting Professor in the **Arche Research Centre** in St. Andrews. This meant that I would be there two months a year anyway.

How did the joint appointment at St. Andrews and the University of Melbourne work?

So for all the years I was in Melbourne, I spent a couple of months in St Andrews. I negotiated this as part of accepting the Melbourne job. They agreed to let me do this as long as it did not interfere with my Melbourne duties. So, in particular, I had to go outside teaching time. Since the academic years in the northern and southern hemispheres are 180 degrees out of phase, this was quite possible. Then, I took the job at **the CUNY Graduate Center in 2009**, but I negotiated with Melbourne and the Grad Center for a transition period, where I would spend half the time at each place. So for about three years, I spent half

the year in Melbourne, half the year in NY, and the other half of the year in Scotland...Things were pretty hectic. Half way through my term in Brisbane, my marriage broke up and my kids left home to go to university. So my family life effectively ended. All the traveling would have been impossible otherwise. The appointment at St Andrews came to an end in 2013.

Is New York the end of the line? Why'd you accept the CUNY gig?

Well, I hope it's not the end! I expect this to be my last academic job, but when I've had enough of it I'll go back to Australia. Still, how did I get here? The Graduate Center contacted me and asked if I was interested in a job. I'd been at Melbourne about 12 years, so it was about time to move on—especially since Melbourne University had by then gone down the path that the University of Queensland had gone down fifteen years earlier—and there was nowhere better in Australia to go. So I ended up being offered and taking the job here. The US is indeed a whole new challenge, and I really like living in New York—for the time being anyway. As the Buddha said: everything is impermanent.

How would you describe New York to a person who has never been?

Well, Manhattan is the quintessence of cityness crammed into 12 miles. Everything you expect to find in a city (and more) is within a walk or brief subway ride. I don't think there is another city like it anywhere in the world. It's **highly diverse racially**; full of tourists of every nationality; there are **extremes of richness and poverty**, and of friendliness and **unfriendliness**.

Your output is prolific. What are your writing habits?

I get interested in an idea, think about it, and then write it up, steeling the material with talks and conference presentations. I don't often write long papers, and I'm not a perfectionist. If I figure out that I was wrong, I just get another paper out of it! Sometimes a bunch of ideas all come together, and provide the material for a book. That's the way that most of my books have happened.

How have your interests changed in general?

Well, I've never really lost an interest. I've just gained more and more of them. In the early years, most of my interests were in logic and related areas. But they gradually spread out into many other areas: metaphysics, the history of philosophy, Buddhist philosophy, ethics. One often thinks of philosophy as having many different and rather isolated areas. But that's not the case: in the end, all these things link

up into one big connected picture. Though I think it takes years and years to see this. At least, it took me years and years.

I totally agree. Is there anything you believe now a younger version of yourself would be shocked that you believe now?

Believe? Perhaps not. Do, certainly. When I was a young philosopher it would have been incredible to me that I would be reading philosophers such as **Hegel and Heidegger**. These were *personae non gratae* in the Anglo world I was in. Yet I've got a lot out of both of these philosophers over the years. As for the Asian philosophical traditions, these were so far off my radar, that I would never even have thought of the possibility of reading them.

Do you feel like dialetheism is taken more seriously nowadays?

Certainly. There was a time when you could count the number of dialetheists (at least in the Anglo world) on the fingers of one hand. And they were all in Australia. For the most part, Anglo philosophers regarded the idea as to be so outrageous as not worthy of serious consideration. (Continental Europe was always a bit different, because the influence of Hegel had never ceased to be felt there.) Now, dialetheism is still very much a heterodox view. But at least it has established itself as a well-recognized position in philosophical space, and it is certainly treated more respect by many people.

Sometimes, I think people see the study of logic as the examination of a static, unchanging thing. Is this your view?

Absolutely not. Logic is about validity—what follows from what, and why. Logicians have been proposing theories concerning this for two and a half thousand years, with considerable disagreement—even about which inferences are valid. Debates about what the right account is are informed by developments in many other areas: science, metaphysics, mathematics, the philosophy of language. There are many exciting debates going on at the moment. Many of these fall in the general domain of so called non-classical logic—better, non-Frege/Russell logic. We are not going to get to the end of matters anytime soon—if ever.

How has philosophy shaped your perception of science and vice versa?

Well I guess that teaching the history and philosophy of science has given me a sober view of science. First, it is fallible. Old theories turn out to be wrong, get replaced by better ones. Secondly, this

notwithstanding, science gives us the best way to form beliefs about the empirical world (*pace* creationists and climate-change deniers). So it is fallible but highly authoritative.

The influence the other way is a bit more diffuse. As **Wilfred Sellars** said, philosophy is about how things, in the most general sense of that term, hang together, in the most general sense of that term. So our philosophical theories, be they in the philosophy of language, the philosophy of mind, or whatever, had better be compatible with our best scientific theories.

In the past two decades, you've had a lot of amazing visiting appointments. Which was the most difficult to leave?

Visiting appointments are never hard to leave. You know that they are going to end, and when. So you just pack your bags and leave. Permanent appointments which you choose to leave are a quite different matter. Leaving a place is always accompanied by a certain sadness. But it is easy to go stale, and there comes a time when it is good to move on. Most of the permanent positions I have had lasted about a dozen years. And by the end of that time I was about ready to move on. I have always been lucky that I had something new and exciting to move to: a new challenge, a new phase of life.

You mentioned Australian philosophical styles. Generally speaking, what other regional differences have you noticed in philosophical styles, if any?

Well, philosophy is philosophy, wherever it is practiced. Having said that, one thing that doing philosophy in different parts of the world shows you is that what is going on in philosophy changes from place to place (and, of course, time to time). It's different in the US, Germany, Japan, and so on. Different topics are hot. Different things are taken for granted. Different philosophers are regarded as the most important. This cures one of a certain myopia that I often see in institutions that regard themselves as the centre of the philosophical world: if we don't do it, it's not worth doing.

As for style, you don't have to know much about the history of philosophy to see that great philosophy can be written in many different styles. Merely consider the styles of Plato, **Nāgārjuna**, Aquinas, **Dōgen**, Nietzsche, Marx, Wittgenstein (two kinds), Kripke. No two of them are alike. The important thing, whatever the style, is that exciting new ideas are formed, examined, debated.

You edited a Stoppard play? Explain.

Well, for several years when I was at the University of Western Australia, we had "open days" for the public. Doing something philosophical for the general public is a bit of a challenge. So we turned to drama, using professional actors. One year I rewrote Plato's **Euthyphro** to update it (complete hubris), and we did that. Another year we did Plato's **Crito**, but I wrote another short play. The Patriot, set during the **Troubles of Northern Ireland**, to go with it. This put the counter-arguments to Plato. Then in the third year, I found a short Stoppard play called **Doggs's Hamlet**. This is inspired by some passages in Wittgenstein's Investigations. So I extended the play, bringing out some of the more philosophical issues. I actually acted in that one (if that what one could call it).

Any interesting projects coming down the pike?

Well, I've always got a number of papers on the go. People often write to me and ask me to write on such and such. Being a bit of a sucker, I usually agree. (No, that's not fair. This is often very stimulating, and I've written many things I would never have thought to in this way.) The current book, **The Fifth Corner of Four**, is currently in press with OUP. The next book I want to write is a melding of Buddhist ethical theory and left-wing Western political philosophy. Writing about political philosophy is something of a new development of me, so this is going to take a while.

Cool. Low point in your career? If you could go back in time and give yourself advice back then, what would it be?

Well, it took me four years to find a publisher for *In Contradiction*. A dozen presses rejected it. I was getting pretty despondent about that. Other than that, I suppose there have been a few jobs I applied for, and didn't get. I was pretty pissed off about some of those. Advice? What I always tell my students. One of the most important character traits that anyone can have is determination and persistence.

High point?

It's still coming...

Does anything worry you about the future of philosophy?

About philosophy, no. We've been going strong through two and a half thousand years, though the institutional matrix comes and goes. People will always think about philosophical issues, and there will be many great philosophers in the future.

I do worry a bit about the professionalisation of philosophy, especially in the US. Most graduate students want a philosophy job. So, understandably, they play safe. They tend to take something well established, and just tweak it a bit. There is little incentive to take a risk and be really original. That attitude to philosophy can so easily stick.

Any recent developments you find exciting?

What do I find most exiting about philosophy at the moment? The fact that old barriers are coming down. The barrier between so called analytic philosophy and so called continental philosophy is now being breached by both anglo and continental writers. Good philosophy (and bad philosophy) is not the prerogative of any one tradition. And the biggest barrier of all is that between Eastern philosophical traditions and Western philosophical traditions. That will probably take longer to fade. Few Western philosophers can teach the Eastern traditions; so few Western philosophers know much about it; so few Western philosophers can teach it; etc. However, things are slowly changing now; and within the space of a few generations, I expect to see the Eastern traditions being integral to Western philosophy departments. I think that we are at the start of truly global philosophy. Where it will lead, no one has a clue. That's really exciting.

Do you think any philosophical problems are silly or unsolvable?

Well philosophical problems vary from the profound to the arcane. The profound ones are things like: How should I live? Is there a god? What is the nature of reality? How should the state be run? How do I get to know the answers to any of these things? At the arcane end are esoterica, such as 'Is existence a perfection?', 'Is to deny something the same as asserting its negation?'—though, it's worth noting that historically we often got to the more esoteric questions by thinking through possible answers to the big questions. Some of these questions only philosophers worry about. But some of them are questions that all people ask themselves sometimes.

I wouldn't call any of these questions silly; some one might call exotic, but no more exotic than whether every even number greater than 2 is the sum of two primes (**Goldbach's Conjecture**), or whether the universe will expand forever, or, at some stage start to contract.

Unsolvable? It depends what you mean. One is unlikely to find answers to, especially, the profound questions that settle matters once and for all—or for that matter, which are likely to convince every (rational) person. But that doesn't mean that one cannot come to provisional and fallible answers on

these matters, given the state of our investigations. Can people disagree about these answers as well? Certainly. Welcome to adult life.

Favorite works of fiction? Art? Favorite music? What are you listening to nowadays?

I don't read much fiction. So not much to say there. In terms of visual art, my favourite kind is **East Asian, painting and calligraphy**. I listen to a lot of music, much of it opera, but also classic rock and jazz. So lots of lots of **Verdi**, Wagner, Mozart, Bach, and when I'm in the mood, 60s rock: Beatles, **Cream**, Led Zeppelin. If I had to pick just a few favourite works, they'd be Wagner's **Tristan and Isolde**, Puccini's **Madame Butterfly**, the Beatles' **Sergeant Pepper**, and Miles Davis' **Kind of Blue**.

Explain tai chi to me. I know nothing about it. What do you get out of it?

Well, originally it was a Chinese martial art, with fighting techniques for real time. But the sequences of moves have now been slowed down, so there is nothing very practical about it. It is good for muscle control and balance, and it has a certain meditative aspect, though I always found **karate kata** much more so, just because the concentration required is so much more focused. There is really no time for the mind to drift. What do I get out of it? Muscle control and balance, I guess.

Karate, tai chi...any connection to philosophy in your mind?

Perhaps not much. What connection there is, is with Buddhist philosophy. Karatedo is a do (Chin: dao), that is, a way. And in Japan every do can be a Buddhist practice.

Favorite word? Least favorite word?

All words are good if they are used thoughtfully. Least favorite words? None really, though when words are misused, it always hurts a bit. I always cringe when I hear someone **using the word 'disinterested' to mean 'uninterested'**, and not meaning having no stake in the matter—and when I hear someone saying that something is 'comprised of', instead of 'composed of'. (x is composed of $y = y$ comprises x .)

Last meal?

I guess that we'll have to wait and see...

[Interviewer: Cliff Sosis]