

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Howdy! Thank you for taking the time for a discussion today, I would like to start with a first part on context, background, and formation. The ways in which you became choate, philosophically mature. What is family background or lineage, e.g., surname(s) etymology (etymologies), geography, culture, language, religion/non-religion, political suasion, social outlook, scientific training, and the like?

Professor Graham Priest: *Well, I was born in 1948 in the UK, and grew up in post WW2 South London. I was a working class kid, and an only-child. My father (George Priest) was a manual labourer in a power station, and my mother (Laura Priest) was a home-maker, though she did part-time jobs sometimes to help make ends meet. Neither was well educated, but my father worked long hours to support the family, and my other was very loving. I could read before I went to school. We had no phone, car (or even TV till I was a teenager). There was nothing that you would call high culture in my home, so I had no idea of art, classical music, drama—and certainly not philosophy.*

My mother was a Christian. I have no idea of my father's religious views: he never spoke about them. I was brought up as a Christian. The church was a Congregationalist one. (I believe that this is now part of the United Reform Church.) Congregationalism was protestant, not as heterodox as Quakerism, but further in that direction that other protestant groups such as Methodists and Baptists.

In those days, there was an exam called the 11 Plus. Kids who did well in this were creamed off and sent to Grammar Schools. These were state schools, but were academically oriented. I was lucky enough to pass, and went to John Ruskin Grammar School in Croydon. When I was there, I discovered that I had an aptitude for mathematics, and decided to go to university to study it. This was made possible for working class kids, since the post WW2 Labour Government had abolished university fees—or at least, made them payable by local government bodies, together with providing a cost of living grant. So going to university cost neither myself nor my parents anything. I applied to a number of universities, and was accepted by St John's College, Cambridge. My school teachers told me that I would be a fool to turn down a place in Cambridge, so I accepted, and went there to read mathematics.

Jacobsen: With all these facets of the larger self, how did these become the familial ecosystem to form identity and a sense of a self extended through time?

Priest: *Going to Cambridge was an eye-opening experience for me in many ways. Perhaps most importantly, I was taken out of my working class culture and put in a highly intellectual and educated one. So my eyes were opened to art, drama, philosophy, restaurants, things I had known nothing about. Many of the kids came from wealthy families who had gone to public schools (which is what the British call a private school). It was the first time I had mixed with such kids. So was brought face to face with the British class system for the first time: the privileges of wealth, power, the British establishment. I guess you could say that I developed a love/hate relationship with the place*

Next, taken out of a Christian environment, I started to think about my religious views very critically, and I came to the conclusion that there was no rational ground for the belief in a god, much less a Christian god. The fact that there is so much gratuitous suffering in the world strikes me as as much of a knock-down argument against the existence of such a god as anything can be. So I became an atheist, which I am to this day.

In matters academic: I was studying with a bunch of kids all of whom were very smart, and I realised that many of them were much brighter than I was. However, an old school friend put me on to mathematical logic, and I became fascinated by the subject. It was not really taught in the mathematics degree, so in my last year I changed to philosophy. In Cambridge, the study of a degree is called a tripos. A tripos has two parts. (Don't be fooled by the name. It refers to a three legged stool that students sat on when they were examined in the old medieval university.) I had done Part One of the maths tripos in my first two years, and in my final year I did Part Two of the philosophy (called moral science) tripos, which had a logic option. This taught mathematical logic, but also, of course, many of the philosophical issues that surround the subject. I was at a disadvantage in studying these because most of my peers had already studied two years of philosophy. But when it came to technical matters, I had an advantage because of my mathematical training.

At Cambridge I met Annie, the woman who became my wife, and our son was born about a week before my final exams. After Cambridge we moved down to London to different colleges of London University. I did an MSc in mathematical logic, and then a doctorate in mathematics in the same area at the London School of Economics.

By the time I finished this I was aware of two things: first, that I would only ever be, at best, a mediocre mathematician; and second that philosophy was a lot more fun than mathematics. I applied for 52 academic jobs in my last year as a research student, and got nowhere. I was about to take a job with the British Gas Board as a mathematician modelling gas-flow, when two temporary university

jobs came up at the last moment. One was at the City University of London in the mathematics department; the other was in the philosophy department at the University of St Andrews. And for me it was a no-brainer. I took the philosophy job. Why they offered the job to someone with virtually no background in philosophy, I still have no idea (though I remain grateful to this day!). They didn't even have me teaching logic. I taught the philosophy of science.

I continued applying for permanent jobs in the UK for my two years in St Andrews, without success. The first permanent job I was offered was at the University of Western Australia, in Perth, Australia. We decided that we would go there. We thought that we would be back in a few years—and I did apply for a number of jobs back in the UK, without success. In effect, we had emigrated, and I became one of the happy band of Australian philosophers.

Jacobsen: Of those aforementioned influences, what ones seem the most prescient for early formation?

Priest: Clearly those things which engendered a love of mathematics and philosophy in me. I guess I have to say, also, my working class background, which has given me a deep distrust of the status quo, in philosophy, politics, and everywhere else.

Jacobsen: What adults, mentors, or guardians became, in hindsight, the most influential on you?

Priest: Well, that's hard to say. For a start, my mother, for her love and nurturing. My high school maths teacher, R. D. Pearce, who communicated the beauty of mathematics to me. One of my supervisors in Cambridge, Sue Haack, who engaged me in the philosophy of logic. My PhD thesis supervisor, John Bell, who showed me, amongst other things, what it was to be a good teacher.

Jacobsen: As a young reader, in childhood and adolescence, what authors and books were significant, meaningful, to worldview formation?

Priest: I hardly ever read anything.

Jacobsen: What were pivotal educational - as in, in school or autodidacticism - moments from childhood to young adulthood?

Priest: Well, being able to read before I went to school was clearly an enormous factor in my education. Falling in love with the beauty of mathematics, and realising that I was quite good at it was another. Also, I do remember reading one

book which struck me before I went to university: Alan Watts' *The Way of Zen*. The immediate effect was to make me take to heart the fact that there were religions other than Christianity, and that there were smart people who endorse these. More amorously, I was attracted to a number of ideas of Zen, as Watts described them. These didn't have a great effect at the time, but they must have lodged somewhere in my brain, since I happily turned to the study of Buddhist philosophy later in life.

Jacobsen: For formal postsecondary education, in academia, why select Cambridge, LSE, and then Melbourne for the academic path?

Priest: Cambridge I have already dealt with. London because I could do an MSc in Mathematical Logic there, and LSE because I could work with John Bell, whom I met as an MSc student, liked, and got on well with. As I said, after that I had a temporary position in St Andrews, but the first permanent job I was offered was at the University of Western Australia. I was there for about 12 years when the chair of philosophy (chair on the British/Australian sense, not the North American sense) came up at the University of Queensland. I was ambitious; I applied and I got it. About a dozen years later the Boyce Gibson Chair came up at Melbourne University. This was the oldest chair of philosophy in Australia, and the then Dean of Arts said he wanted the new chair to regenerate the department. (It had fallen a bit into the doldrums.) All this appealed to me. I applied and got the chair. To tell the truth, I had had it with the University of Queensland by then. It had been taken over by a self-serving bureaucracy. This had destroyed collegiality (which I value greatly) and introduced top-down line managerialism. Academic values were no longer important, managers were fixated only on money—and climbing the bureaucratic ladder. Melbourne had maintained its older academic values. I was at Melbourne for about 12 years. By the time that I left, the malaise that had affected the University of Queensland had effected Melbourne also. (Indeed such managerialism had taken over, and still maintains its hold on, all the Australian Universities, though this is not the place to go into how and why this happened.) I had become tired of fighting rear-guard actions (which I had done at both Queensland and Melbourne). So when I was offered a job at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, I was happy to jump ship.

Jacobsen: As a Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the CUNY Graduate Center, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position?

Priest: Well, I teach one graduate course per semester, usually on whatever I choose. I also supervise PhD dissertations by any student who asks me to do so. On top of that I run a weekly logic and metaphysics research seminar, and often go to other research seminars. Sometimes I perform administrative roles, such

as on the departmental admissions committee. Most of the rest of my time is spent on research, writing books and papers. In connection with that I frequently travel within North America and overseas to give talks and attend conferences. Finally, there is “service to the profession”: refereeing journal articles, writing references for job applications, reports on promotion and tenure applications, reports on grant applications, etc.

Jacobsen: What are the main area of research and research questions now?

Priest: Philosophy is an enormously broad area, with many sub-areas: logic, metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of science, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, ethics, aesthetics, social philosophy, political philosophy, history of philosophy, to name but some of the more standard ones. Research in many topics in all these areas is highly active. There is no hope of going into details in any sensible way here. I, myself, have many different areas of research interest: logic, the philosophy of logic and mathematics, metaphysics, socio-political philosophy, Buddhist philosophy, the history of philosophy—and again in many different parts of these. You can get a more detailed sense of some of the questions I have been engaging with from the publications page of my website: graham.priest.net.

Jacobsen: If you could give advice to aspiring philosophy students with an interest in metaphilosophy, what would it be for them?

Priest: It would be the same as I would give to students with an interest in any other area of philosophy. Find some questions that engage you. Try to figure out how you would answer them. Reading a few good philosophers who have thought about the questions is always helpful. Then write it up. (That always helps to get your thoughts straight.) Make your answer clear, and your reasons as cogent as possible. Don't confuse obscurity with profundity, or simplicity with superficiality.