I N T E R V I S T E

Conversation with Lawrence Blum

by Federica Berdini

Lawrence Blum is Distinguished Professor of Liberal Arts and Education and Professor of Philosophy at University of Massachusetts Boston. His scholarly interests are in race theory, moral philosophy and psychology, moral education, multiculturalism, social and political philosophy, and philosophy of education. Over the last decades Blum has brought his skill as a moral philosopher in the racially and ethically diverse context of the Cambridge Rindge and Latin High School by teaching on four occasions a course on race and racism to a class of seniors. The interview looks back on the development of his philosophical identity by illuminating its relationships to the social and academic environments in a time span of over forty years.

1.   *Professor Blum, let me start by asking you how did you come to philosophy, first as an undergrad at Princeton, and then as a grad student at Harvard. How did your interest in ethical theory develop?*

LB. This is a long time ago. When I entered college I was originally a math major, I didn't really know anything about philosophy, I barely heard of it. I took one course and it was quite intriguing, but I was sticking with the math. Then I took a second course, and I just got more interested in it, and I also started feeling like math was too

abstracted from the world, while philosophy was really about the world. Of course this turns out to be somehow ironic because many people find philosophy itself to be too abstracted from the world, but in contrast with math, philosophy seemed to me engaged with the world. My first ethics course was with Joel Feinberg, who was an important moral and political philosopher. I just fell in love with the subject of ethics. So, I basically got into philosophy through ethics and I became a complete fanatic. I just thought about ethics and ethical theory all the time. And when I went to graduate school it was natural for me to want to head in that direction.

2.   *How was the philosophical landscape you found at Emerson Hall like, and how did your philosophical identity take shape there?*

LB. I was a grad student in the mid 1960s, a time of great political upheaval. A distinctive thing about the philosophy contingent at Emerson Hall during the Sixties is that it was a center of political activity. That was very important to my own formation; it made me feel I wanted to be engaged. Of course you could be politically engaged without your intellectual work being engaged, and there were some people who would do, you know, philosophy of language, but then they would demonstrate in the streets against injustice. But I felt like I somehow needed the intellectual and activist pieces to "fit together." They didn't always actually fit together, but it was something I was aspiring to.

3.   *So, how did you get to your dissertation topic?*

LB. Despite the interest in ethics, in terms of my own intellectual development, I fell "under the spell," you might say, of Wittgenstein. I studied Wittgenstein with Stanley

Cavell and Rogers Albritton. I got into Wittgenstein in a way that wasn't particularly related to ethics. Other people of course have bridged normativity with Wittgenstein, but I just got caught essentially into the sort of Cavellian type of Wittgenstein. It was so many years ago, I can't remember the details, but I remember feeling like Wittgenstein was taking me into almost like a kind of "mental illness," where I was so obsessed with these metaphysical issues that seemed like a pit that you just got sucked into, and then you lost the connection with the world, somehow.

That was a real struggle for me: on the one hand feeling like I should be this more engaged person, but then going into this other direction which had this problematic underside. So, one of the things that happened to me in graduate school is that I wondered if I should stay in philosophy, and I consulted with Stanley Cavell, and he sent me to Ronald Dworkin, who was a Yale law professor at the time. I wondered if I should go to law school, because I felt that law was "really" engaged, you know by this time, with the math having fallen by the wayside, philosophy seemed less engaged than law. I was in quite a bit of anguish, this was a really serious personal crisis of mine, it was in the second semester in my first year in grad school. Dworkin heard me out and said: "I just think you'll be somebody who'd be happier being a professor, being a teacher and being a philosopher." That helped me to sort of find my way. But at the same time it was still a continual struggle trying to figure out whether philosophy needed to be a relevant subject, or whether somehow if it was relevant you were in some way watering it down, and not doing "the real thing".

Eventually, after this Wittgenstein-detour, I came back to ethics. I am not really sure how I got to the dissertation topic, but it was on Kant's theory of the emotions and why

Kant thinks emotions don't have very much of a role to play in ethics. This was before the development of the, you might say, "new Kantians," who were trying to find a more friendly version of Kant, looking for a rapprochement between Aristotle and Kant, and trying to find more positive views about the emotions in Kant. The stuff I was doing was before that literature arose. To me Kant was completely missing the ball on this emotion-thing, by making reason the centrepiece of morality; it didn't feel right to me. So my dissertation was a scholarly treatise on Kant's view of the emotions, but with a critical add-on, which was trying to say that sympathy, compassion, friendship, and concern were core moral phenomena, and that Kant was not able to account for them.

My first book, *Friendship, Altruism, and Morality* [Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980], left the more Kant textual scholarship aspect of the dissertation behind, and developed the idea of altruistic emotions as core moral phenomena, defending them against various rationalist-like attacks, but also expounding them as distinctive moral phenomena in a way that really hadn't been done very much before in the moral philosophy of that time.

4. *The focus on emotions characterized the early stage of your work as a scholar, but you also co-wrote a book on Simone Weil. How did you get to that?*

LB. The Simone Weil book came from a different route. I studied in Oxford for a year, and I met Victor Seidler, who was a philosopher but also a social theorist. We got connected with a course on Simone Weil taught by Peter Winch, an important moral philosopher — I guess he's best know as a philosopher of social science because of his book *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*, but he wrote some fantastic essays in moral philosophy. It was at King's

College in London, so I would come down from Oxford and Vic and I attended Winch's course on Simone Weil. I was completely enamored of Simone Weil, I think she was really fantastic. She has a very moralized view of social phenomena and was an unusually engaged intellectual. She worked as a factory worker, even though she was completely unsuited to be a factory worker, and a lot of her early writings came out of that period. I definitely admired the fact that she wasn't just a pure philosopher, she was someone really engaged with the world, being involved with the union and left movements in the 1930s. She had a really complicated relationship both to Marxism as a theory, but also to Marxist practice and Marxist groups. So she was a sort of an exemplary figure for me, both intellectually and also as an engaged person. Vic and I decided to try to bring her early political thought into a sort of space where other people, especially those who worked on Marxism, but more generally people in social philosophy, could recognize that she is someone that they should be concerned with. That's where *A Truer Liberty: Simone Weil and Marxism* [Routledge, 1989] came from.

5.   *The direct engagement with real life is a recurrent theme in your work. I would say that your interest in the concrete, embodied, and felt aspect of morality is something that has really led you throughout your philosophical development. How did you come to bring moral philosophy "into the field," in a concrete real life context like the high school one?*

That's interesting. I think there are several different parts of this. It's true that I had always been interested in a moral philosophy that seemed more connected with the way people live their life, and I think that the critique of Kant in some way was connected to that. The concern with emotions as moral phenomena lead very naturally to a concern

with particularity, and with how we respond to individual other persons and groups of other persons. What I wanted was a theory/philosophy that helps to illuminate the nature of ordinary moral experience, rather than being driven by a set of intellectually framed concerns. So that was always there, and with *Moral Perception and Particularity* [Cambridge UP, 1994] that became the prominent part of the work I did in moral theory.

I think a second influence on my going into a social philosophy direction was the university where I work, and in particular the Philosophy department. I teach at a very non-elite university, that has never been very concerned about where we stand in the rankings. An advantage of being in a place like that is that you are sort of freer to go your own way, and you don't have to worry as much about how you are going to be looked at, or whether you are going to fall from position #12 to #15, and so on.

My colleagues at UMass-Boston, where I've been for forty-two years, had the same spirit: to follow your own muse. Of course we also have a very good philosophy program and we cover all the standard sub-fields, but in terms of things that people work on in their own research, it's a little bit unusual what different people in the department do. So, I think I have been influenced in a really good way by a community of people who are interested in each other's work and very intellectually engaged, but who don't feel like "Oh, this is what's going on in the field now, and therefore we have to do that." So that's both a sort of permission but also a way of nurturing a more independent intellectual sensibility.

It wasn't just the department, it was also our students. They come from not very privileged backgrounds, and so teaching working-class students and poor students

meant in a way that your work already had a social justice dimension to it, where you are trying to promote the development and opportunities for people who were not given them as part of their background. I think that also helped to push me both in a more engaged direction, and also in the direction of social philosophy. With the ascendancy of neoliberalism the state has withdrawn a lot of support for our university and this is happening to state universities across the United States, so we do not get so many poor and working class students as before; but our students are still much less privileged than those at selective universities.

6.   *So your teaching experience at UMass-Boston really played an active role in the development of your philosophical work in the last two decades.*

LB. Yes, it was definitely part of it that we were not primarily training people to become philosophy graduate students. Very few of our students go on to do that, although we nurture very strongly the ones who do. But since you couldn't think of your philosophy teaching primarily in that pre-professional way, there was no temptation to do that. So you ended up really thinking about what would be valuable to these students in becoming citizens of this society; what could you give them that would help to further their own development. So I think that "kept it real;" it kept me grounded.

In terms of my turn toward race as an area in philosophy, in addition to that there was this very distinctive thing that happened to me, which was that my own children (I have three children) started attending the public schools of Cambridge. Cambridge, especially when they were young, was an extremely diverse city. Of course, one aspect of Cambridge is the great universities: MIT and Harvard. But that part of Cambridge is

very different from the public-school-attending one, which had a wide economic spectrum. Because there are a lot of prominent private schools around here, many wealthy people send their children to the private schools. So the public schools were quite mixed economically, and they were also very racially mixed. Cambridge is an immigrant-receiving city, so it also has a large immigrant population. It also has a historic African American population, and so these different populations were part of the public schools. When my children started experiencing this diversity I just got fascinated by it, and I became active as a parent in their elementary school. I teamed up with two other black parents – one of whom was African American and one of whom was Latin American but saw herself as black and would be seen as black in this country – and we had a little committee, that we called "the Race & Class committee" and we met and dealt with racial, class, and cultural issues in the school. People in the school would come and present concerns they had – sometimes that would be teachers, sometimes that would be parents. And we would occasionally hold events for the school at large. At that time the school had a strong Haitian language program (which doesn't exist any more because of some terrible legislation that happened about ten years ago), so the students would be in that program for several years. The Haitian parents often didn't feel themselves to be part of the community, though. Many of them didn't speak English very well, or they didn't feel comfortable negotiating with people in the school. So our committee had this event that was in two languages, and it took twice as long because everything was translated back and forth. But it really was a way to bring all the different populations together into one space, which was something that almost never happened in the school, and that was really great, great for me, too. At that time

race wasn't a professional or philosophical interest for me, but over time I started thinking about these issues in a sort of values/social values/moral values-way. So I started thinking "What kind of values I want my children to get from this experience? Which values do I hope the school itself would convey?" That's really what got me into both race and multicultural issues, that was the source of it; it really was from my personal life like that.

At the same time, if you look at it historically, in the 1980s there was a group of African American philosophers, who were starting to deal with African American issues in a philosophical idiom. But other people didn't recognize this, they couldn't understand it "as philosophy," you know what I mean? Unfortunately, at first I didn't recognize it, either. You would think that I would, given my background, but my idea of philosophy needed some work. So, it took me a little while, but then I saw: "Oh yes, there are these fantastic resources within philosophy to help you think about these value-questions." So, I feel extremely indebted to this group of people, one of whom was a member of my department in the 1980s, his name is Tommy Lott, and he helped to show me the way. Bernard Boxill, Howard McGary, Anita Allen, Lucius Outlaw, and others. They helped me see the light. Then, in the '90s, work on race was still banging on the door of Philosophy from the outside, but we had started to make some headway in bringing it into Philosophy.

Because it was partly forged in the schooling context, my interest in race and in education happened at the same time. In recent years I have identified myself more strongly as a philosopher of education, but in the early years the race part took over. In the book that I wrote on racism [*"I'm Not a Racist, But": The Moral Quandary of Race,*

Cornell UP, 2002] I got involved in various debates about race and race theory, such as What is the nature of race? What kind of grouping is a racial grouping? Debates about social constructionism and the fact that race is a scientifically faulty idea. And my concern was: "What do we do with that? How do we incorporate the falsity of the scientific idea of race into our way of understanding people who are categorized in terms of race?" People recognize this as a problem, but I think it hasn't been adequately dealt with.

7.   *Where would you position yourself within the debate on the nature of race and how to normatively assess racial phenomena, for example with respect to other scholars like Anthony Appiah and Tommie Shelby?*

LB. My view on the specific issue of the nature of race isn't really the same as any of the ongoing views. In a fairly recent article [2010] I argue that there are no races, so I agree with Appiah about that, and disagree with the constructionists. I say that the notion of race carries all these specific associations that are part of the meaning of race, and that there are no groups that satisfy all these conditions. On the other hand, there are groups that were treated historically *as if* they possessed the characteristics in the traditional view of race, and that created them as distinctive groups. There are some people who look at race and race classification as a sorting mechanism that is faulty. But what I want to say is that it actually created socio-historical groupings that identify themselves, and rightly so, as having a distinctive character as "racialized groups." The idea of racialized groups emphasizes more strongly than somebody like Anthony Appiah does, or a strict constructionist, that the groups are, as it were, "ontologically real." So, even thought the concept of race is ontologically faulty, the racialized groups

are ontologically real. I think that somebody like Tommie Shelby basically agrees with that view, but in his book *We Who Are Dark* [2005] the idea of blacks as a distinctive people gets sort of lost. And I think the reason it gets lost for him is because he is afraid that if you say that there is a shared identity among blacks, then that idea becomes too restricting – and that's also like Appiah's view – and it undermines the autonomy of individual black people. But I think Shelby overstates the degree to which the shared identity constrains, but also he overstates the importance of the lack of constraints. He has a strong autonomy-based view as a central value, while I am more a pluralist about values, and I don't think that autonomy has this kind of overarching value.

8.   *What did you get, from a theoretical point of view, from your practical experience with issues of multiculturalism?*

LB. I think that the kinds of values involved in an ethnically and racially diverse society or sub-community (like the community of a school, or a neighbourhood) are quite distinctive values, I am sort of a pluralist about this. There are some values, for example, that have a universal character, like that everyone should have respect for everyone else independent of their background. So that's a universal value that is identity-independent and race-neutral, although the implementation of it might require you to recognize that the identity of the other is getting in the way of your respecting them, because you have some prejudices, and so you have to learn to get over these prejudices about that specific group. But then there are other values which require a positive embrace and acknowledgement of the ethnic and racial difference between yourself and someone else, where you have to recognize the importance of that identity feature to them, but also you should learn – and this is an educational value, thinking of

this in educational contexts – about the histories and heritages of different groups, and also how those differences mean that these groups are quite differently placed in the society. You know, there is a way of thinking about multiculturalism in which everybody just is on the same level, regardless of their socio-economic status, and we have to respect each other across these identity differences. But of course that's not at all the way it actually is on the ground, in almost any society. I think that recognizing the injustice of various disparities between groups has to be part of an educational project as well. So, we should look for some universal values, but also for others that are more sensitive to various particularities about the social placement and the groupness of those people.

9.   *Let's come a bit more closely to your experience as a teacher at the Cambridge Rindge and Latin High School (CRLS), whose upshot is your last book:* High Schools, Race, and America's Future. What Students Can Teach Us About Morality, Diversity, and Community *[Harvard Education Press, 2012]. Where did the idea of a high school course on race come from?*

LB. I think this is one of the most both unusual and gratifying professional experiences I've ever had. At the same time, I sort of drifted into it. My children all went to the CRLS. I got to know some of the teachers there, even thought there isn't as much space for parental involvement as there was in elementary school, so I wasn't an active parent. At the time there was like sixty-four different home-languages spoken at the school, it was the single high school that all the other elementary and middle schools fed into, which was great, because it meant that people that lived in very different kind of situations all met at the high school. It was a high school that was about one third white.

There were a lot of black students, and they were ethnically diverse. There was a strong contingent of Haitian students, but there were also Afro-Caribbean Anglophone students (from Jamaica, Trinidad and so on) and a fair number, about fifteen percent, of Hispanic students, who came from a range of different backgrounds. There was a wide class diversity. Once I was talking with a social studies teacher at the school and I asked her: "Do you think the school is making educational use of this diversity?" And she said "Not as much as we could".

(A little background: I had started to teach a course in the UMass-Boston graduate education program at this time – this is in the '90s. It was a course called "Anti-racist and multicultural education," and I was feeling a little bit "inauthentic," because I was teaching people who were going to work in the kindergarten-through-twelfth-grade school system [the sum of primary and secondary education in the US] and I never had any experience in it. Of course a lot of people teach without having had experience but it didn't feel right to me, exactly. But I didn't know that I could ever do anything about it, either).

When the social studies teacher said this thing to me I proposed that I organize an after-school discussion group for kids from different backgrounds, in which we talked about racial topics. So the teacher sent me to the social studies coordinator, Nancy. Since the students didn't have any free time after school, because they were already busy with homework, working, and extra-curricular activities, Nancy suggested that I offer a whole course on race and racism. I had never thought about that. So she called me back the very next day and said the course was now official, starting the following semester. I almost couldn't believe it, because the image of the public school system often depicts it

as bureaucratically slow. And so, there I was "on the book" for the following semester with a course on race and racism.

10. *How did you structure the course in terms of topics covered, and which were the aims and methodological principles that guided you through it?*

LB. I've learned a lot over the four times I taught the course, and each time I changed the syllabus a little bit, but the first time it really was a trial by fire. I worked with the school to get a demographic that mirrored the demographic of the school. I was particularly concerned not to have a majority of white students. That was a kind of bottom-line. Whites seldom have a chance to experience what it is like to be a racial minority in an important social setting. I thought the class demographic might help my white students to better empathize with the more usual situation of racial minorities.

The diversity I wanted was not only racial. I was also interested in ethnic diversity within the black racial group. How these different groups related to one another and learned from one another was an important part of the learning from diversity I was looking for, and it would tell us something important about possible futures for the diverse black population of the United States. I wanted the course to show the distinctive value of integrated education. Their diverse backgrounds would enrich their joint learning.

But I did not want the course to be mainly about experiences, either their own or those of authors we read. I wanted the academic study of race to anchor the course, and to be a framework that would help the students understand what they were experiencing. I wanted the course to be a "taste of college" for those high school students, to prepare them for college's intellectual demands – historical thinking, developing an argument,

analyzing ideas, recognizing and respecting expertise in a field, and other elements of higher-order critical thinking and academic study.

So the course had a philosophical framework, although to the extent that philosophy came in, I didn't name it as philosophy. It was a social studies course. The way I conceived of it was as a course on the historical construction of race: Where did this idea of race come from? Where did we get it? When did it come on the scene in European and Western history? And how was it intertwined with developments in the slavery system, especially in the United States, but I also spent time comparing the US with the slavery systems in Latin America and the Caribbean, and looking at the different racial conceptions that arose in response to different historical conditions. I also gave them material on the scientific critique of the idea of race.

I was a bit worried that the black students might feel that the critique of race was an attack on them personally, a way of saying "You call yourself 'black,' but the whole idea of blackness is a fraudulent idea." I was nervous about that, but I also saw it as extremely important for them to understand that the scientific underpinnings of the idea of race are completely fallacious. So I just decided that I would try it and see what happens, and fortunately I didn't get that response from them. They basically saw the undermining of the idea of race as liberating. The course helped them to be aware of the oppressive social structures under which they had lived, and helped them to challenge those ideas. They got that, so that was really great. I am saying this to give you a sense of the issues I had to worry about from an ethical point of view that related to their identity and me as a white teacher, and the racial character of the material.

Each time I taught the course, I found an education student of color at UMass who was willing to be my teaching assistant, to share the responsibilities of teaching with, and provide a complementary point of view on the racial dynamics in the class.

11.   *What do you think could be done to help the conversation about race issues going in an effective way, to eventually implement paths to redress social injustice? I am thinking for example of the* Black Lives Matter *movement and the* Why We Can't Wait campaign*, and the now public conversation about anti-Black violence in the US. In particular, which further steps do you envision for the philosophical work on race and education that might give a positive contribution to this conversation?*

LB. I am not an expert in the particular question about how social change happens. I am not particularly optimistic about this country, because the tendencies towards inequality are so intense, and the ideological support for inequality so entrenched – I don't just mean racial inequality, but the overall inequality and the acceptance of the unbelievably and obscene differences between the top 1-10% and the bottom – that make it really difficult to bring about change. Everywhere this place is run by plutocrats – a rule by the rich; that's what this country primarily is at the current time.

Having said that, although the racial issue is deeply affected by the inequality-generating processes, it has a somewhat different history and has some autonomy from it. I think that those movement and campaign are a really hopeful sign. I am very hopeful that they keep going, as I think they have opened the eyes of a lot of white people. White people have to recognize their own unjust privilege, and they can partly do that, in this country, if they are able to understand their history and that of the whole country. In the US people tend to think that each individual just "makes it" on their

own. They don't understand the weight of history. White people don't understand how for their ancestors, even if they came all the way from Italy and had nothing, their whiteness gave them all kinds of advantages, which they then forgot that they got for that racial reason, especially the younger generations. One slightly positive thing that came out of the horrible issue of the police shootings in 2014 and 2015 is a recognition that there is a larger problem here, that it is about whole communities and the way they are treated, the forces that have kept so many black people very poor. I do think that white people can wake up; white people need to wake up.

So, one very small part of an answer to your question is that we need to understand what can go on in schools, that might help these conversations. After my book came out in 2012, I started trying to figure out if there was some way that I could work with teachers around the fact that I taught this course. Finally, after many months of banging on doors and not knowing where to go, I was asked to put in a course proposal for what's called "professional development," for teachers, and I will be teaching this course on talking about race with students and colleagues in spring '16. I am really pleased about that, because I see schools as not really doing their part enough to teach students how to think about these racial matters. And one reason they don't is because teachers are understandably afraid of the emotional minefield that teaching about race is. And also people aren't used to thinking of race as a topic that has a kind of intellectual complexity to it. I found in teaching my class at the high school level that not all of the students before the class fully recognized that race was a field of study, like chemistry, or history.

So, I think that getting teachers to learn how to present the material to students and figure out how to bring race into their different disciplines, would be a good step. High school subjects are generally seen as building blocks, defining a basic level of knowledge every citizen and worker must have to contribute to society and to understand the world around them. There is a basic level of knowledge about race, and specifically race in American history, that every American should have – a kind of racial literacy. There are many people around the country working on doing this, but there is no question that that's not happening enough.

12. *The situation has changed a great deal from the '90s, when "work on race was still banging on the door of Philosophy from the outside." A conversation about diversity and inclusiveness issues has started, at least in the US and in other Anglophone countries.* [Just to have an overview on the phenomenon at issue and on some figures, see http://stereotypethreatinphilosophy.org/] *I am thinking about the* MAP *(Minorities And Philosophy) project,* APA*'s task forces and statements, the undergraduate inclusiveness program* PIKSI *(Philosophy in an Inclusive Key Summer Institute), and the burgeoning of blogs where many voices articulate their first-person experiences of a bad climate within the discipline. I see these as signs of a positive effort to undergo a process of self-scrutiny to honestly tackle the biases and stereotype threats that pervade our philosophical practices. In other words, it seems to me that Philosophy is gaining momentum and concrete resources to improve itself as a discipline and become more inclusive. Much has still to be done, but all this seems to me to be a promising start. Which are your impressions with regard to this?*

LB. I believe these efforts are necessary and it is my impression that professional philosophy has begun to really take these diversity issues seriously. It is a scandal that philosophy should lag behind every other humanities or social science discipline in this respect.

This summer my Department engaged in one of the most promising initiatives to try to do something concrete about this. We paired up with MIT to run a "PIKSI" workshop, one of the initiatives you mention. This is a week-long summer workshop for students from "underrepresented groups" who are thinking about going on to post-graduate study in philosophy. The workshop has several purposes – introducing students to the various aspects of applying to graduate school, the challenges of doing so and also of being a philosophy graduate student, especially from an underrepresented group; creating bonds among the participants (there were 20 in our group) that will allow them to use each other as resources but also just to feel supported in their moving toward graduate study. I was very pleased that "underrepresented" was construed as including socio-economically disadvantaged students, and sexual minorities, not only women and students of color. The focus on socio-economic disadvantage is a result of the non-elite nature of my university and the consciousness of my colleagues who helped to organize the workshop.

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