

I N T E R V I S T E

Conversation with Achille Varzi

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*Achille Varzi is John Dewey Professor of Philosophy at Columbia University in the city of New York. His multifaceted scholarly production ranges from logic to metaphysics and formal ontology, the philosophy of language, and the philosophy of literature, utilizing different forms of philosophical writing such as prose, dialogue, and poetry. His first book, *Holes and Other Superficialities* (with Roberto Casati), appeared with MIT Press in 1994; his most recent book, *Mereology* (with Aaron Cotnoir), was published by Oxford University Press in 2021. This interview, divided in*

four parts, offers a wide-ranging overview of Varzi's scientific production and of his approach to philosophy.

Part I: A Story of Possibilities

1. Ciao Achille. Great seeing you and thank you for agreeing to do this interview. I want to start by asking you about our meeting place. We are in Trento, Italy, a city that you know well and to which you are particularly attached.

AV: It's the city where we first met many years ago, when you were still an undergrad.

2. It is. But Trento is also the city where you did your own undergraduate studies. And you told me that right here, in this beautiful Piazza Duomo, there used to be a little wall behind the fountain where you and your fellow students sat long hours, discussing ways to change the world. I gather you were all speaking and thinking in Italian. Then, while studying Sociology at the University of Trento, you encountered Logic; you wrote a thesis on the subject and eventually ended up as a Ph.D. student in Philosophy at the University of Toronto, in Canada. From that moment on, you had to deliver a good part of your ideas in English. How did this shift to a different language impact your way of thinking?

AV: You are making it sound as though leaving sociology for logic and philosophy meant giving up on my plans to change the world...

3. On the contrary, I wanted to foreground that it all started there, with those plans. But before we say more, I am curious about your personal experience with this language business. We all have to deal with it some way or other. Do you find it matters, in your work, whether you use English or Italian?

AV: In a way I don't, or not anymore. I was in Toronto in the Eighties and I have been at Columbia University in New York since 1995, so it has been a long time. Eventually one learns to switch languages rather naturally,

depending on the context, and when I am on my own I may not even be aware which language I am using. I am sure it's the same with you. In another way, however, I do think it matters that we have to work and express ourselves in different languages. For then it becomes clearer that every word counts. In our own language, it's easy to fool ourselves; we feel so comfortable that often we speak without thinking, and we often speak without really saying anything, as if the sound of our words were enough. In a non-native language that is impossible, at least initially. Precisely because it does not come as easily, we are pressed to think about what we want to say and we are able to say something only if we have something to say. Clearly, that matters. Just a few days ago, Andrea Moro was telling me that Eugène Ionesco wrote most of his works in French rather than in his native Romanian – including works of the caliber of *Les Chaises* or *Rhinocéros* – exactly for this reason. For Ionesco, writing in a language that we have learned in a conscious way, however difficult, puts us in a position to better master the relationship between the words we use and the contents we wish to express (whence his castigation of futile empty talk). Of course, we can hardly compare; but the point applies nonetheless. And when it comes to philosophy it is especially important, at least insofar as we care about content.

4. That seems almost an argument to the effect that philosophy is best done in a non-native language. Is this perhaps the reason why we are doing this interview in English?

AV: I was about to ask you: Why on earth are we doing it in English?

5. To focus on content...

AV: But I am not finished yet. I said that expressing ourselves in a foreign language makes us realize that every word counts: simple sentences made up by simple terms show their content on their sleeves and we are under pressure to cut to the chase and go straight to the point. Yet that is only half of the story. The other half is that once we face this necessity, we also come to appreciate its possibility and the importance of doing the same in our native language. So, to return to your question, in the end I don't really think it matters whether we work in English or in Italian. One can do philosophy in any language. It's just that working in more than one

language helps us see better how language works. If you like, it helps us feel responsible for what we say, which in philosophy is a good thing.

6. Could this have been maybe one of the reasons that brought you to study logic?

AV: Yes. We are all familiar with the idea that we are responsible, not only for our actions, but also for their consequences. I throw a stone against a window and the glass shatters; my only action is the throwing of the stone, but I am responsible also for its effect, the shattering of the glass. The same goes for language. We are responsible, not just for what we say (a *speech act*), but also for what follows. In this case we are not dealing with causal consequences but, precisely, with logical consequences: if I assert A, and if A implies B, then B follows from my assertion and I am equally accountable for it. Of course, this presupposes that A has clear truth conditions, hence a clear meaning, which is not always the case. But that is the whole point of this discussion. If we do not speak clearly, it is not clear what follows from what we say. And if it isn't clear what follows, it is not clear what we are saying. We often defend ourselves by accusing our critics to have misinterpreted our words: "I didn't mean that", "I have been misunderstood", etc. Well, I am sorry, that is not how it works. It is up to *us* not to be misinterpreted. Once we appreciate this point, we also appreciate the importance of logic, or one sense in which logic is important.

7. Are there others?

AV: I think logic is important in many other ways. For one thing, the notion of logical consequence is a fundamental tool, not only for articulating our beliefs responsibly, but also for understanding the reasons of those who think differently. In an ideal world, people don't fight; they argue (in the relevant sense of 'argue'). Second, logic is, at bottom, a science of possibilities: to say that A implies B is to say that it is not *possible* for B to be false when A is true. Thus, logic is concerned, not only with how things are, but also with the many ways in which it is conceivable that they could be. And everything depends on the range of possibilities we are able to discern, beginning with our hopes and projects.

8. Including one's plans to change the world?

AV: Very much so. Our ability to work for a better world is a function of our ability to conceive of different ways our world could be, hence of our sense of possibility. You know my motto: We are not what we could have been, but we could be what we are not!

9. Don't you think this sense of possibility is also at work in other areas of philosophy, such as metaphysics?

AV: I do, and I know you are an expert on the topic. But you were asking me about logic. In my case, that really was the starting point. Metaphysics and the rest of philosophy came later (including philosophical worries about whether it even makes sense to speak of 'logic' in the singular, as we have done so far).

10. Your first book – Holes and Other Superficialities – had in fact little to do with logic. How did that happen?

AV: That's when I met Roberto Casati. In July 1989, back in Italy, I was giving a series of lectures on "Reasoning about Truth" at a summer school in Bolzano. Kit Fine was there, too, lecturing on the metaphysics of ordinary objects (I don't remember the exact title). Casati was in the audience. One day my lecture focused on truth-value gaps whereas Fine spoke about material absences, mentioning holes as a case in point. Casati asked whether one might think of truth-value gaps as holes of a kind, namely holes in the semantic structure of the statements that exhibit them. It thought it was a nice suggestion (especially if the gap is due to referential failure rather than, say, vagueness), though the analogy was somewhat too metaphorical to be of much import. Yet it soon became clear that it was too metaphorical mainly because, while we knew enough about truth-value gaps, we had no idea what a hole really is. *No one* had any idea. How curious! Except for the famous dialogue by Stephanie and David Lewis, and a few other passing remarks, philosophers seemed to have paid no attention to such things, despite their apparent ubiquity in the world around us. Fine didn't pursue the topic but Casati and I couldn't stop thinking about it. It turned out to be so intriguing and amusing that we ended up writing a whole book.

11. So it started as a philosophical divertissement?

AV: I guess you can say so. But we quickly realized that the topic was genuinely fertile. Darkly amusing as they may be, holes give rise to questions that have deep and far-reaching ramifications in all sorts of philosophical domains, from ontology and metaphysics to the philosophy of perception, the philosophy of mind, the philosophy of language, and more. (Even logic, actually: what warrants the inference from “This donut has a round hole” to “This donut has a hole”?). Moreover, both Casati and I were moved by a thought that is closely related to the responsibility issue we discussed above. Philosophy is full of books about such upper-case mysteries as Being and Nothingness; but how can we honestly say anything intelligible in those regards if we do not even know how to deal with those little chunks of void that we find in a slice of Swiss cheese? If it is so difficult to come up with a good theory of holes, of these modest entities so close to everyday experience and so well defined geometrically, how can we possibly hope to philosophize in the upper case?

12. Sounds a bit polemical...

AV: I know.

13. Can you give me an example of a philosophical puzzle involving holes that points to a larger philosophical problem?

AV: Take this donut. You can clearly see the hole in the middle. You see where it is and how it is – round. But the hole is immaterial, and traditional wisdom says that only material bodies can be the source of causal flow. Does it follow that the causal theory of perception is false? Take your ring and put it inside the donut’s hole. Surely the ring does not become part of the hole. But then, neither does the hole inside the ring. The hole in the ring merely ends up being partly co-located with the larger hole in the donut, i.e., exactly co-located with part of it. Does it follow, then, that we have a counterexample to the general principle according to which two entities of the same kind cannot be in the same place at the same time? *Et cetera.*

14. Holes was only the first of a series of books (and many articles) that you wrote with Casati. Can you say something about the others and, more generally, about your long-term collaboration?

AV: Our next book, *Parts and Places* (also published by MIT Press), was in many ways a natural follow-up. Among other things, we were interested in working out a general theory of the two main tools that proved helpful in our study of holes, namely mereology and topology (and their interaction). It was much more standard, as an academic book, than *Holes*, and in many ways it proved more influential. We also worked on other topics, though, such as events, the philosophy of geography, or the theory and practice of representative democracy (especially voting systems), and we continued to pursue the idea that sometimes philosophy is best done in lower case. Never mind studying holes rather than Nothingness. If it is true that philosophy began with wonder, as Plato and Aristotle put it, there is a lot to wonder about in the apparent simplicity of all sorts of ordinary things and phenomena, and we feel it is important to keep that sense of wonder alive. I would even say that our sense of possibility depends on it. It is in this spirit, for example, that we wrote a number of short stories for the general public. Most of them appeared initially in the Italian newspapers *La Stampa* and *Il Sole 24 ore* and were eventually collected in two books. We also wrote a little book of illustrated philosophical stories for children, full of characters eager to ask questions and to look around for small surprises.

15. *The first of those books was aptly called Insurmountable Simplicities.*

AV: That beautiful title is not ours; it came from the Laterza editor, Anna Gialluca, to whom we owe a great deal. But yes, we thought it captures well the idea that even the simplest things may be wonderfully complex.

16. *Is it true that some of those stories were adapted into stage play, and one even became a movie?*

AV: Yes, but don't think of Broadway or Hollywood... The stage adaptation was for the New York Fringe Festival and the movie is really a short film (*Stanza 88*, directed by Pierluca di Pasquale) that was presented at some Rome Independent Film Festival and that now you can only watch on the internet.

17. *Still, it's clear that you and Casati have been experimenting with ways of doing philosophy that are not so common in today's academic world. And then there is your work with Claudio Calosi, *Le tribolazioni del filosofare*. A*

poem in twenty-eight cantos in medieval Italian hendecasyllabic terza rima written in the style of Dante's Inferno?

AV: Right. In that case it is perhaps even more tempting to describe it as a *divertissement*, if not a parody. But it isn't. It is meant as a genuine piece of philosophy (a defense of nominalism). It's just that we thought it would be more effective if the positive view were presented indirectly, by chastising the "wrong" views. And what better example do we have of this strategy than Dante's masterpiece? Since we both love Dante, we thought we should follow his lead all the way and do the job in the form of a poem rather than a standard treatise – indeed a poem that we pretend we found on a medieval manuscript (to be on the safe side). Thus, whereas Dante's *Inferno* is all about human sins and moral felonies, our *Infero* is about philosophical errors and fallacies. Whereas Virgil takes Dante through the gluttons, the wrathful, the heretics, the blasphemers and sodomites, etc., our poet is escorted by Socrates on a journey through the downward spiral of the philosophers' hell, where all sorts of thinkers are punished for their faulty views: the realists, the sceptics, the dualists, the nihilists, the worshipers of language and easy myths, etc.

18. Don't you worry that it may send the wrong message to place so many philosophers in hell?

AV: Not if it's done with Dantesque *pietas*. Our poet shows enormous respect for all the "sinners" he meets along his journey. You can be a good philosopher even if you are wrong. If Calosi and I will ever manage to publish our *Empireo* sequel, it will have room for the very same philosophers we put in hell. Isn't that how we all feel about ourselves, philosophers by birth but not in manners? "Abisso e stelle stesso foco chiama."

19. I understand you are working on an expanded English edition?

AV: Yes. It is a good exercise *vis-à-vis* what we said earlier about languages, though obviously in this case there are other challenges. And it will be hard to find a publisher...

20. *Let us return to your more standard publications. Earlier you mentioned mereology. This is also the topic (and title) of a book you published recently, this time co-authored with Aaron Cotnoir.*

AV: Yes. This area of research has grown tremendously in recent years and I never let it go. The relations of part to whole (with a ‘w’), and of part to part within a whole, strike me as crucially central in any attempt to articulate a systematic picture of the ways things are and can be. Cotnoir and I do not quite share the same picture but we share that thought, so we joined efforts. The book does not present or defend any particular mereological theory; it proved difficult enough to gain some understanding of what the options are, formally as well as philosophically.

21. *What about your other books? You evidently enjoy working in collaboration with others, but you published a number of books on your own, too.*

AV: Those are mainly attempts to work out my views on more traditional questions in ontology and metaphysics. I mean questions about existence, identity, persistence through time, causation, free will, etc., including possibility and necessity to the extent that these notions go beyond their purely logical characterization (as you noted above). In the course of the years I found myself thinking more and more about these important traditional topics. This is partly thanks to the fact that they take up a good half of my teaching duties at Columbia. Partly, however, I have been motivated also by the desire to share my captivation with such topics with readers on the other side of the ocean, where so-called analytic ontology and metaphysics were, until recently, not as popular. This is why I published three such monographs in Italian, along with a largish anthology of classic contemporary readings (that you helped translate). I also wrote a short book in ethics, *I colori del bene*. But, again, the view I defend there is a broadly constructivist account that reflects rather closely my views in metaphysics.

22. *What about An Essay in Universal Semantics, the very first book that you wrote (in English), even though not the first in order of publication. You do not talk so much about it. Why so, if I may ask?*

AV: Simply because it is an awfully complicated book and I find it difficult to talk about it without going into the details. You are right, though:

that is my earliest book, even if it was only published in 1999. It grew out of my Ph.D. dissertation, which I wrote under the supervision of Hans Herzberger, and so it falls squarely within my early work in logic. Let me first explain the title. It may sound a bit grandiose, but it's just what you get by combining Richard Montague's "Universal Grammar" with David Lewis's "General Semantics". For that was my goal in the dissertation: to work out a general framework for logic theorizing that did not rest on any specific constraints on the languages we may consider (in the spirit of Montague grammars) and on the models by means of which we may interpret them (following in Lewis's footsteps). I wanted to come up with a truly universal – philosophically neutral and widely applicable – semantic framework. Only a framework of this sort, I thought (and still think), can accommodate an account of logic as a general science of possibility, in the sense we talked about earlier.

23. *Otherwise one would get a sense of logical possibility that is relative to a specific language and a specific class of models, hence limited.*

AV: Exactly so. In fact, the framework I had in mind was significantly broader than the result of combining a Montagovian universal grammar with a Ludovician general semantics. That is where things get technical, but never mind. The main point is precisely that I always felt one cannot go very far in logic, or with logic, if one assumes *ab initio* a whole series of philosophically loaded formal constraints on what is possible and what is not.

24. *For example?*

AV: For example, the distinction between logical and non-logical constants. Any way of drawing that distinction gives expression to a certain conception of the bounds of logic and, as such, is philosophically loaded. We do need to draw the line somewhere; but where we draw it is a philosophical decision that should not be built into the very framework we are working with; it should be *specified* in terms of the framework. Unfortunately, the standard way of doing things makes it hard, if not impossible, to proceed that way. (This is also true, to some extent, of Montague's original framework). For another, more concrete example, in classical predicate logic one assumes that every model of the language must involve a non-empty domain of objects. That means ruling out *a priori* the

very possibility that there might be nothing at all. (This is also true of Lewis's framework). But, of course, that there is something rather than nothing is hardly a logical truth, even if we thought it expresses a metaphysical necessity. As Heidegger famously put it, it is perhaps the first of all philosophical mysteries, and Wittgenstein didn't hesitate to say that therein lies "the mystical". Even Bertrand Russell, in a footnote toward the end of his *Introduction to mathematical philosophy*, regarded it as a "defect in logical purity" that the primitive propositions in *Principia Mathematica* yield theorems that begin with an existential quantifier.

25. *Is there a connection between this sort of project and your laurea thesis? If I am not mistaken, it was on free logic, and I take it that "free logic" means "logic free from unwarranted presuppositions".*

AV: Strictly speaking, it means "free from existential presuppositions". So, yes, free logic is a good example of how one can overcome the "defect in purity" of classical predicate logic I just mentioned, and my laurea thesis (written under the supervision of Edoardo Ballo) was motivated precisely on such grounds. That is actually why I went to Toronto for my Ph.D., since their faculty included notable free logicians. But that is just the beginning. Free logic itself rests on a number of other philosophically controversial assumptions that I later came to see as problematic, and relative to which I wanted my "universal semantics" to be neutral. Among other things, free logic shares with classical logic a commitment to the law of non-contradiction, to the effect that nothing can be both P and not P. In this case, it is perhaps more plausible to think we are dealing with a genuine a logical truth. Yet the very fact that some philosophers regard it as false suggests otherwise; this law, too, betrays a notion of logical possibility that is metaphysically loaded. As you know, there are philosophers who think the law is even contingently false. "To be and not to be, that's the answer", says Graham Priest.

26. *With whom you recently taught a graduate seminar on Nothingness...*

AV: That was the informal title under which it circulated. It really was on nothingnesses, lower-case.

PART II: TO BE AND WHAT TO BE

27. *Thank you for walking us through the main phases of your philosophical production and through the motives – methodological and philosophical – that inspired it. What you said suggests that a common thread unifying your work over the years resides in certain ontological preoccupations, both in the negative (the quest for an ontologically neutral semantic framework in terms of which to pin down our sense of logical possibility) and in the positive (the need to be clear about one’s actual ontological commitments, including holes and other “superficialities”). What is ontology, for Achille Varzi?*

AV: I like to distinguish two main ways of understanding ontology. One is often associated with the work of Willard Quine, and it comes with the idea that ontology is concerned with the three-word question, What is there? Since to say that there are things that are not would be self-contradictory, Quine famously pronounced that such a question can be answered with a single word – Everything! However, to say ‘Everything’ is to say nothing. It is merely to say that there is what there is, unless one goes on to specify the population of the domain over which one quantifies – and here there is plenty of room for disagreement. You may think that ‘everything’ covers particulars as well as universals, I may think it only covers the former; I may think the domain includes holes along with chunks of cheese, you may think it only includes the latter; and so on. Exactly how such disagreements can be framed is itself an intricate question, as is the question of how one goes about figuring out one’s own credo on such matters. But some way or other we all have beliefs of this sort, at least as soon as we start philosophizing, and to work out such beliefs is to engage in ontological inquiries. The other notion of ontology stems from a different concern and is almost orthogonal to Quine’s. In this second sense, the task of ontology is not to specify what there is but, rather, to lay bare the structural organization of all there is *whatever it is*. Regardless of whether our domain of quantification includes universals along with particulars, holes along with chunks of cheese, and so on, it must exhibit some common traits and obey some general *laws*, and the business of ontology, in this second sense, would be to figure out such traits and laws. For instance, it would pertain to ontology to determine whether every entity, no matter what it is, is self-identical, or whether an entity may consist of a single proper part, or whether an entity can depend for its existence on another entity when the

latter depends on the former. More generally, it would pertain to ontology to work out a general theory of such relations as identity, parthood, dependence – what Edmund Husserl called a pure theory of objects “in general and as such”, if not a theory of “being *qua* being” in Aristotle’s sense.

28. The second notion of ontology seems to have a lot in common with logic, especially insofar as logical laws are meant to be neutral with regard to what there is. What is the difference?

AV: The laws of any ontological theory, in the second sense of ‘ontology’, would indeed possess the same kind of generality and neutrality that should characterize the laws of a logical theory. Both would be formal laws, laws that are taken to hold as a matter of necessity and that may perhaps be asserted *a priori*. But there is an important dissimilarity. The laws of logic are meant to govern what Husserl himself called the “interconnections of truths”; the laws of ontology, in the relevant sense, would govern the “interconnections of things”. For instance, a plausible law such as the transitivity of implication (“If *p* implies *q* and *q* implies *r*, then *p* implies *r*”) and a plausible law such as the transitivity of identity (“If *x* is identical to *y* and *y* is identical to *z*, then *x* is identical to *z*”) would be equally formal insofar as both are supposed to hold for all possible values of the relevant variables. In the first case, however, the variables ‘*p*’, ‘*q*’, and ‘*r*’ range over statements, i.e., claims *about* the world; in the second, the variables ‘*x*’, ‘*y*’, and ‘*z*’ are meant to range over things, i.e., entities *in* the world. Thus, whereas the former would normally qualify as a logical law, the latter would be an ontological law. Of course, whether such laws really hold is an open question, in one case as in the other. That is where things get philosophical.

29. And, in both cases, the answer would give expression to our sense of possibility.

AV: Exactly so. And what goes for identity goes for any other ontological relation you may take to obey formal principles of this sort: parthood, dependence, or what have you. It is precisely because I take parthood to fit the bill that I think mereology is so important.

30. *Just a point of clarification. These two notions of ontology that you are distinguishing – the “Quinean” and the “Husserlian”, to give them a name – are they somehow linked to the distinction between ontology and metaphysics, as you see it?*

AV: They are insofar as the latter distinction is only intended to apply to ontology in the Quinean sense. We said that Quinean ontology is concerned with the question of what there is, a task that is often identified with that of drawing up a “complete inventory” of the universe. By contrast, I take it that the task of metaphysics is to explain, of all that is, *what* it is, hence, ultimately, to specify the “fundamental nature” of the items included in one’s inventory. For example, a thesis to the effect that there are such things as colors or virtues would strictly speaking belong to ontology in the Quinean sense, whereas it would pertain to metaphysics to establish whether such entities are Platonic forms, immanent universals, tropes, moments, or what have you. Similarly, it would fall within the scope of ontology to determine whether Madame Bovary, the number 7, or Sebastian’s strolls in Bologna should be included in our inventory of the universe, but it would be a further metaphysical task to say something precise in regard to the ultimate make-up of those things, if such there be – for instance, that Madame Bovary is a theoretical artifact, that numbers are abstract individuals, that events are property exemplifications, and so on. Now, if you agree with this, then it seems plausible to say that ontology, in the Quinean sense, is in an important way *prior* to metaphysics. One must first of all figure out what entities exist or might exist; then one can attend to the further question of what they are, specify their nature, speculate on those features that make each thing the thing it is. In the language of medieval philosophy, the *an sit* comes before the *quid sit*. I reckon the thesis is controversial (Descartes, for one, said that it violates “the laws of true logic”), but never mind. It seems to me that it captures a natural thought, a practical necessity if not a norm, and I have always valued its guidance in assessing actual philosophical disagreements. So that’s how I see the relationship between metaphysics and ontology in the Quinean sense. It doesn’t extend to the Husserlian sense, though. In the Husserlian sense, ontology is not concerned with what there really is; it is about the laws that govern what there is *no matter what it is*. This means: no matter what Quinean ontology you adopt and no matter what metaphysics you attach to it. Thus, Husserlian ontology is not prior to metaphysics in the sense I have just tried to explain. It is, rather, *independent* of metaphysics. It consists of

laws that, like the laws of formal logic, should in principle accord with any Quinean ontology and, hence, any metaphysical theory.

31. But can you really engage in metaphysical inquiries without first having engaged in Husserlian ontology?

AV: I see what you mean. How can we even address such questions as whether you are the same as your body, or whether the ship of Theseus at time T is the same as the ship at time T', without some prior characterization of the identity relation? How can we even address such questions as whether Tibble the cat survives the loss of its tail without some understanding of how parthood works? You are right, we can hardly do any metaphysics unless we have some Husserlian ontological theory in the background. In this sense, the latter is a prerequisite of the former. But that's very different from the sense in which the *an sit* comes before the *quid sit*. Husserlian ontology is a prerequisite of metaphysics insofar as it defines the very conceptual framework in terms of which we can understand a *quid sit* question and articulate a sound answer.

32. Good. So, in a way you are also explaining how Quinean ontology relates to axiological issues. For someone like Thomas Aquinas, for instance, the question an Deus sit is directly related to religion, ethics, and other value-laden domains. I gather you would say something similar with regard to all sorts of an sit questions. But I wonder, do you also think that different ways of answering fundamental questions in Husserlian ontology (e.g. how we formally conceive of identity) may have implications for axiological issues?

AV: This is complicated. I agree on the first point, i.e., that Quinean ontology has axiological implications. In fact it has plenty. One sort of implications is well illustrated by your example: the inclusion of distinguished entities in our ontology, such as a divine being, may shape or inspire the values we attach to other entities, if not our entire value system. Our history is filled with ethical theories that are grounded in extraordinary ontological assumptions of this sort, theistic or otherwise. Another, perhaps more obvious sense in which Quinean ontology has axiological implications is that a lot depends on the ontological status of the values themselves. Take rightness and wrongness. You may be a realist about such values, i.e. regard them as objective features of the world, or you may be an anti-realist. The

difference will show up in your ontological inventory and surely it will affect the way you theorize about what's right and what's wrong, hence the normative import of your ethical principles. In the first case, you are likely to be a *moral* realist, typically an ethical monist; in the second, your ontological anti-realism is likely to result in some form of moral subjectivism (or conventionalism, constructivism, etc.), a position that tends to go hand in hand with ethical pluralism and relativism. But let me add a third sense in which Quinean ontology may be said to have axiological implications. It stems from the fact that we only truly care about those things that exist, hence only those things that pass the *ansit* question. Coming to hold certain ontological beliefs, no matter how mundane, will therefore define the very range of those things that may play a role in our scheme of values. If our Quinean inventory includes such things as human beings, our value system and our criteria for rightness and wrongness, praiseworthiness and blameworthiness, etc. will be directed towards their deeds, their endeavors, their vices and virtues. If it also includes such things as chairs and tables, we may think they are not as deserving but they will still play some role in our overall scheme of values, e.g. in terms of usefulness. But unicorns? If we believe that unicorns do not exist, i.e., that nothing is a unicorn, then unicorns will play no role whatsoever. To put it in a slogan, no axiological dignity without ontological citizenship; we can only attach values to those things we have welcomed in our Quinean inventory. So, summing everything up, you see I can only agree with your first point: ontology in the Quinean sense is replete with axiological implications. Coming now to your second point, is this true also of Husserlian ontology? I am not sure. You mentioned identity. I can see how some formal properties of this relation may be relevant to one's axiological framework. If, for example, you think identity is temporally rigid, so that one thing cannot become two and two things cannot become one, this principle will affect your way of dealing with the ethical puzzles that we face in cases of fission and fusion (Parfitian split brains, amoebas, etc.). Ditto for any other formal-ontological relation you may consider, such as parthood. If you subscribe to some form of mereological rigidity, so that nothing can lose any parts or gain new parts without ceasing to be the thing it is, this principle will affect your way of dealing with issues of diachronic responsibility. Think of Epicharmus' paradox: if the individual who contracted the debt yesterday is no longer around (because of the mereological changes that occurred in their body), who is accountable for returning the money today? It is not difficult to come up with examples of this sort. But I am not sure they really point to the axiological relevance of Husserlian ontology as such. One may hold – as

Quine himself did – that the key to such puzzles is to be sought, not in our conceptions of identity or parthood, but in our conceptions of thing and person. It seems to make a big difference whether you address the puzzles from, say, a three-dimensionalist conception of persons or from a four-dimensionalist conception. If so, then the examples would rather point to the axiological relevance of metaphysics.

33. Is this a way of saying that ethics is grounded in metaphysics?

AV: Yes and no. Suppose you and I share the same ontological commitments but disagree on the relevant metaphysics. We concur that there are such things as persons, hence that persons have axiological dignity, but disagree on *what* persons are. Chances are that persons will play different roles in our respective schemes of values. For example, since persons are not sempiternal, suppose we disagree on their conditions of existence and persistence: one of us embraces a three-dimensionalist conception while the other goes four-dimensionalist. Then we may end up holding different views concerning a person's rights and duties across time, beginning with the debtor's case. In this sense, I think it's fair to say that our ethical views are grounded in our respective metaphysics. However, this is not to say that they are *driven by* our metaphysics. Nor would this be a good reason to suppose that ethics *must* be grounded in metaphysics that way. No 'is' implies an 'ought' and no 'ought' requires a specific 'is'.

34. Can you elaborate on this last point?

AV: I take it that ethics, like politics, has normative import. It is about what we ought to do, what we may or may not do, what is right, good, praiseworthy, etc. and what is wrong, bad, blameworthy, etc. In my opinion, such issues are to a great extent independent on our views about how things are, metaphysically. If we have specific views concerning the nature of persons, such views are likely to constrain our ways of dealing with ethical issues insofar as they constrain our sense of possibility and, hence, the range of admissible norms that we may consider, but not to the point of determining a unique ethical theory. Any way of selecting a specific set of norms will yield a corresponding theory. Thus, you and I may end up holding different views regarding a person's rights and duties even if we both embrace *the same* metaphysical conception—three-dimensional, four-dimensional, or whatever. That's what I mean when I say that no 'is'

implies an ‘ought’. (There is perhaps one exception, viz. if we are both realists about values, in the sense mentioned earlier, and we fully agree on the relevant metaphysics. But then our ‘ought’ would be built directly into our common ‘is’). As for the other claim, that no ‘ought’ requires a specific ‘is’, I simply mean to acknowledge the other direction of the independence: one may work out their views in ethics without bothering much about the ultimate nature of the entities they countenance. This is not unusual, in philosophy.

35. True. And I appreciate your point: there is nothing wrong with that way of proceeding. In ethics we need to be explicit about our ontological horizon (no axiological dignity without ontological citizenship), but that doesn't require a full metaphysical picture. Out of metaphor, politicians only care about their fellow citizens, regardless of what they are.

AV: Hopefully. But at least within the metaphor, that's exactly the point. Even Aquinas, for all his theistic approach, thought that an affirmative answer to the question *an Deus sit* need not and indeed cannot be followed by any answer to the question *quid Deus sit*. This is another important sense in which the priority of ontology over metaphysics shows its significance.

36. On the other hand, we often do care about the full metaphysical picture. Granted that our views in ethics (or in politics) do not require one, don't you think that they can sometimes drive or at least inspire our metaphysics?

AV: I do. After all, our views in ontology and in metaphysics do not come out of nowhere. Among the evidence we consider – common-sense intuitions, the scientific image, the logical analysis of language, etc. – we may as well look for inspiration also in our ethical or political convictions. However, this may happen in two ways. One way is to think that, because we have certain convictions, the world must be structured accordingly; it must be structured in such a fashion as to *match* those convictions. I think this is bad philosophy. It's bad enough to mistake the rational for the real, much worse to sell our preferred set of norms as if they were the norms of the world. Unfortunately this happens all the time. Our history is full of horrible things that we have done on such grounds, cleverly backing up our policies and practices with a convenient metaphysics: slaves are different from us “in kind”; non-human animals are mere “automata”; interracial or

homosexual relations are “against nature”... This is not the way to go. The other way is better, though, and strikes me as perfectly legitimate. It proceeds from to the idea that, inasmuch as our ethical or political convictions are not absurd, we should in principle be able to implement them, hence the world must be structured in such a fashion as to *permit* their implementation.

37. *As opposed to requiring it?*

AV: Yes. I am not sure how to articulate this idea in the abstract. But since I am sympathetic to it, let me tell you how it works for me. I am a subjectivist about values. Just as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so are goodness, rightness, praiseworthiness, etc. Thus, when it comes to ethical or political norms, I am what you may call a constructivist, or a conventionalist: such norms are the product of collective agreements and stipulations whose main purpose is to regulate our social lives, on the understanding that one's individual freedom ends when one's actions result in damage or harm to others. Norms are curbs, rotaries, traffic lights that we install to reduce accidents and promote the common good, i.e., welfare. You know what I mean.

38. *I take it that this is the view you defend in your book, I colori del bene?*

AV: Yes. The title alludes to the idea that values are not intrinsic qualities of things but rather extrinsic qualities, like colors, whose possession by material objects is relative to the experiences and the dispositions of an observer. And the book is a defense of that idea *vis-à-vis* the need to attribute genuine normative import to the ethical principles we adopt. Many philosophers think that if norms have no other foundations than conventional agreement, if our ethical principles have the same traits of arbitrariness as any old social stipulation, then we may end up justifying all kinds of awful things. As Cicero famously put it, if rights were established arbitrarily by our own orders, then there might be a right to rob, a right to commit adultery, a right to substitute false wills, and so on, so long as such things were approved by our resolutions. Perhaps so. But precisely here, in the arbitrary nature of our norms, lies the benefit of a conventionalist perspective with respect to the fundamentalism and intolerance that loom over any realistic approach. ‘Arbitrary’ does not mean that anything goes; it means that it is up to us – *in arbitrio nostro* – to adopt the norms that seem

right to us but also to modify them when they turn out to have unpleasant consequences. A law that says that robbing is a right won't last. If a traffic light creates more congestion than fluidity, we remove it or turn it off. I doubt one can do the same with "natural laws". Moreover, from a conventionalist perspective we are free to negotiate and revise, not only a norm that doesn't respond to the goals we had set for ourselves, but also the goal itself. This is immensely important in view of what we said earlier about our sense of possibility. That sense isn't fixed once and for all; it is in constant flux, and it is our duty as philosophers to make it grow. And as we come to see new possibilities, we come to see new ways our world can be, beginning with our social world. We come to see better ways of organizing our lives. That's the only way we can speak of "moral progress", I think.

39. I can see that your young, revolutionary self is still alive and kicking inside you... But let's resume the main point; how does this sort of view inspire your metaphysics (the second way you mentioned)?

AV: Well, for one thing, it has inspired my ontology, which is obviously antirealist with regard to the status of values and norms. And it has inspired my metaphysics insofar as it suggests a spare picture of reality. The more you put into our conventional practices, the less you build into the nature of things, which must be fluid enough to put up with our resolutions. That's what it is for the world to be structured in such a fashion as to "permit" the implementation of our ethical and political convictions. But I can say more. Over the course of the years I've become more and more convinced that what I have just said about the prominence of our conventions applies across the board, not only in the normative sphere. There is a tendency, in philosophy, to fancy metaphysical systems that are reassuringly robust, grounded in persuasion that the world comes structured into entities of various kinds and at various levels. I have grown more and more suspicious that this is wishful thinking, if not plain deception. I have become more and more convinced that much of the structure that we tend to attribute to the world out there lies, on closer inspection, in our heads, in our organizing practices, in the complex system of concepts and categories that underlie our representation of experience and our need to represent it that way. In short, I have become a nominalist of sorts, ever more extreme and ever more convinced that the world out there, cleaned out of all the superstructure, is utterly simple, an amorphous totality, a desert.

40. *I see. That is why you and Calosi placed all those philosophers in Hell... And if I remember correctly, the exit from Hell actually leads to a "luminous desert".*

AV: Yup. "Sotto le povertà d'un solo fiato / nascondonsi abbondanze polverose. / È tutto quiete e soffio dislungato, / una semplicità fatta purezza. / È il fine, è il deserto illuminato."

PART III: THINKING IN SLOW MOTION

41. *Let's switch gears. At the beginning of this interview we mentioned the notion of what follows from what and the importance of clarity (in lower case). These two notions seem central to your philosophical perspective. Do you think that, with their help, we can somehow draw the boundaries of our discipline? More generally, do you think there is any principled way of deciding what counts as philosophy and what doesn't?*

AV: I am not sure. Hide Ishiguro once said that philosophy is something that those involved with can identify, without being able to concur on how to characterize it. I am afraid that's true. And it may well remain true even if you drop "concur"; most of us are even unable to characterize our own way of understanding philosophy. Thus, in my case, I would agree that the two notions you mentioned are central, but I doubt they can be of much use in drawing the boundaries of the discipline. In fact, I think they are central in *any* field of inquiry, so long as we are serious about our endeavors, and I don't know what further notions should be added to characterize my personal way of drawing the line. *A fortiori*, I am not sure there are any general, principled ways to decide what counts as philosophy and what doesn't. That said, there are a few things philosophers have been saying that I find inspiring and helpful in this regard. Earlier I mentioned Plato's and Aristotle's famous remarks that philosophy begins with wonder, and I said it is our job as philosophers to keep that sense of wonder alive. The latter point is an implicit reference to Russell, actually, who also urged us to proceed by showing "familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect". I am not sure this task is a prerogative of philosophy, but I certainly think it captures one of its hallmarks. I also said that it is our duty as philosophers to enhance our sense of possibility, because everything depends on it, beginning with our hopes and projects. Again, perhaps it is presumptuous to think that this is a prerogative of philosophy, and I should like to think it isn't. But it is true

that philosophers are generally more serious about it than others. As Russell himself put it, philosophy is rarely able to offer with certainty any answers to the doubts it raises; but precisely for this reason, precisely because it ends up diminishing our feeling of certainty as to how things really are, it increases our understanding as to how they may and could be, suggesting possibilities that free us and our thoughts from “the tyranny of custom”. Even ontology and metaphysics, for all their ambition to go fundamental, are best seen in this light (if done honestly rather than dogmatically). I don’t think such considerations are of much help in determining what counts as philosophy and what doesn’t, but they point to a common denominator in the various ways philosophers have pursued the questions that have shaped the history of the discipline. I also like an image of John Campbell’s, who described philosophy as “thinking in slow motion”. The philosopher scrolls the film of life frame by frame, pausing at each move and paying attention to those details that escape us at normal speed. Every move, even the smallest and least noteworthy transition, is scrutinized and assessed *vis-à-vis* the innumerable alternatives it conceals. There’s a risk that this may degenerate in futile hair-splitting, and oftentimes we succumb to it. (This is especially true today, as an inevitable consequence of the “professionalization” of philosophy). Yet Campbell’s image is right on spot, I think, and captures another common denominator in the work of many great philosophers. So perhaps I should officially answer your question by saying that, no, I doubt there are principled ways of deciding what counts as philosophy and what doesn’t, but there is an all-things-considered robust family resemblance among the many things philosophers do, the many reasons why they do such things, and the many ways in which they go about doing them.

42. *Nelson Goodman famously wrote that, since works of art do not share any intrinsic, defining characteristics, the vexed question “what is art?” should be replaced by the question “when is art?”. Are you suggesting that the same applies to philosophy? That it isn’t the “what” that identifies a philosophical question but rather the “when”, or maybe the “how”?*

AV: That is a nice way of putting it. There is an important difference between the two cases, though. For Goodman, the “when” of art is determined for the most part by the likes and dislikes of art critics: if, say, Marcel Duchamp’s *objets trouvés* or Andy Warhol’s *Brillo* boxes count as artworks, despite their utterly nondescript intrinsic properties, it is because a

certain community has decided to treat them as such. (I say art critics, but you can add all sorts of other agents such as curators, collectors, gallerists, etc.—what Arthur Danto called the “artworld”). The artist’s own intentions may play a role, too, but they are not crucial and certainly not sufficient; the art status conferral comes from the outside and something counts as art only if and when it receives this external imprimatur. With philosophy, I don’t think it works quite the same way. It is true that, as with artworks, there do not seem to be any intrinsic defining characteristics that distinguish philosophical questions from non-philosophical ones. It may even be that *any* question can be dealt with philosophically, or regarded as philosophically significant, just as any *objet trouvé* may be regarded as artistic, including a bicycle wheel or a signed urinal. In that respect, the analogy holds and works beautifully. But I don’t think that in order for a question to be regarded as philosophically significant, it needs the imprimatur of an external community. It is up to the philosophers themselves to treat it that way. It is the philosophers themselves who think in slow motion, not a community comprised of self-appointed philosophy critics, admirers, denigrators, historians, or what have you. The likes and dislikes of such people may be sociologically relevant, and they may even be pivotal in determining the rise and decline of philosophical fashions (our discipline is full of slyboots who built their careers on such grounds), but they are not necessary and certainly not sufficient to attribute genuine philosophical status to a question. In this sense, I think the analogy does not hold. To the extent that it does, I would however say that in philosophy the “what” should be replaced by a “how” rather than a “when”.

43. Thank you. This brings us nicely to my next question, which concerns research methods. This is an important subject when philosophers bring their work to colleagues in other disciplines. If you had to describe your research methods, what would you say?

AV: That’s a big phrase. I don’t think I have a “research method”. I wish I had one, though, as I wish I knew more about the research methods of other philosophers. Our colleagues in neighboring disciplines – in the humanities as well as in the social and the natural sciences – all seem to have clear and recognized methodological standards; it is embarrassing that when we have the opportunity to bring our work to them, we are often unable to be explicit about ours. Even from a purely administrative perspective, our universities have a much harder time deliberating on hires

and tenure promotions in philosophy than in other fields precisely because our work seems to elude any well-defined methodological standards. Still, we are not utterly unmethodical, are we? For my part, I can think of a few guiding principles that I try to follow, especially when it comes to writing. The first concerns *originality*, and is as simple as it sounds: before pursuing an idea, or a line of argument, I try to make sure I'm not reinventing the wheel. In practical terms, that means I generally start by looking at the literature and the history of the topic. Since philosophy is more like an activity than a doctrine, it is not cumulative in the same way other disciplines are and so it may be more difficult to locate our work within the map. Nonetheless it is important that we try, and I can certainly tell you that on many an occasion I discovered that my great ideas were just old wine in a new bottle. A second guideline concerns *quality*. How do we know whether we are doing good work? It's really hard to figure out some way of keeping this worry under control, which is why we all suffer from the impostor syndrome. But there are a few things we can do, and one thing I find especially useful. Whenever I engage with someone else's views, e.g. by attacking their arguments, I try to imagine that my opponent is in front of me, listening to my words and eagerly waiting to respond. I find it that this helps me a lot, at least insofar as it puts me under pressure to avoid shortcuts and not to be satisfied with easy criticisms. It's not enough to raise an objection; we have to be able to defend it in front of our opponent. And this applies no matter who the opponent is. They can be a contemporary philosopher, who might actually be in a position to respond, or a philosopher from the long-gone past, in which case they will never respond but we can still pretend that they could. Either way, the very thought of their possible reaction should help us raise our standards. And once we do this with our negative, critical arguments, we can perhaps try and do the same with our positive views. Always pretend our "audience" consist of the very best philosophers, people who can't be tricked so easily. Finally, a third helpful criterion concerns *clarity*, about which we already spoke a lot. If someone misinterprets what we are saying, or what we have written, how should we proceed? My answer is that it doesn't help to complain; chances are that we have not been clear enough. We have to try again. This is especially helpful when it comes to the reports we receive from our referees. We often feel their reservations are misplaced, their objections misguided, their criticisms unsound or based on serious misunderstandings of our work. Well, too bad. Evidently that's because we gave them work that is open to misunderstanding. In philosophy we are all familiar with the principle of charity, which governs the interpretation of the beliefs and utterances of

others: we are supposed to maximize the truth and rationality of what they think and say. It's a good principle. But we should not present our views on the assumption that our interlocutors will be charitable to us, especially if we do not make an effort to deserve the treatment.

44. But sometimes we do make an effort; it's just that we do not succeed... Clarity is hard to achieve.

AV: Fair enough. I am only saying that a good measure of our success is the feedback we get, and I find it helpful to keep that in mind. Anyway, you see, I really do not have a "research method". These three guidelines regarding clarity, quality, and originality are all I can offer. And I suspect there is nothing especially philosophical about them; presumably everyone, in every discipline, follows similar guidelines (and I should stress that I only *try* to follow them, for obviously it's all easier said than done).

45. What about logic? Earlier we said that clarity goes hand in hand with a certain seriousness about the logic of what follows from what. Do you follow any special logical guidelines in your research?

AV: Well, I don't know... There is indeed a fourth thing I try to do. When it comes to articulating an argument, I usually take stock and try to represent it in logical form (to the extent that it can be done in some familiar system) and then check for its validity (on the logic I am assuming). It's just an exercise, but it can be helpful, and more often than not it reveals that my reasoning is actually deficient, if not downright fallacious. But then, again, I think logic is always important, not only in philosophy, so there is nothing special in this way of proceeding. If you asked me, I would say everyone should do the same!

46. Noted. I assume the partial guidelines you have just described are meant to apply especially to your strictly academic work. Would you like to add something about your methodology when it comes to other aspects of your work, such as your books for the general public?

AV: Right. Your question was about *research* methods. When it comes to presenting our work, and more generally to *writing* about philosophy, we all rely on additional guidelines or techniques. I am afraid I don't have much to

say in this regard, either, except for the obvious number one rule: we must always keep in mind for whom we are writing and to what purpose. Think again of Bertrand Russell, whose books range from *Principia Mathematica* to *War Crimes in Vietnam*. He won the Nobel prize in literature (precisely in recognition of his “significant and varied writings”), so I think we may look to him as a perfect model for that rule. But perhaps there is something I can add, especially with regard to writing for general public. For in my experience, this sort of writing can even have important feedback on our research methods. Here I am entirely indebted to Roberto Casati and the work we did together. Most of our philosophical stories follow a basic pattern: we introduce an imaginary situation – a cat that can talk, a mirror that reflects images in delayed mode, a young poet who finds a future edition of his *opera omnia*, a traveler who takes a pill that cancels her consciousness while leaving her behavioral skills intact – and ask our readers to contemplate its possibility. The idea is that, by positioning themselves in these imaginary situations, they will gain new perspectives on our familiar reality, and it is in this sense that the stories are meant to be philosophical. It’s not mere intellectual tourism. Contemplating these “mental landscapes”, as Casati calls them, can in some cases be a source of aesthetic pleasure, but the point of the estrangement is different: it is like visiting a foreign country to better see what we like or dislike about ours – to better *understand* ours. Now, in order for this to work, it is of course important that the imaginary situation can be properly accessed by the reader, and here, too, we follow a basic pattern. Our preferred way to attain this result is to present each situation as a slight variant of the world we live in, a possible world that is obtained from ours by changing just a few parameters: cats can talk (but otherwise behave normally), mirrors are slower (but otherwise work normally), etc. Well, Casati taught me that doing this is like working with a hypothetical metaphysical software, a software with a scroll-down menu that allows us to choose among all sorts of metaphysical options just as an ordinary word processor allows us to switch from *italics* to **bold** to UPPERCASE. In a word processor, changing a few parameters affects the whole appearance of the text; in our “world processor”, it affects the appearance of the world. What concepts should we use in this modified world? Can we understand its inhabitants? Can we explain our point of view to them? This technique underwrites most of our story telling, and my sense is that it worked well, at least in some cases. But for me it has become much more than a writing expedient. It has become a way of thinking, hence, if you like, an additional piece of my “research method”.

47. *Very nice, thank you. I would like, now, to talk a bit about your teaching. Which aspects of teaching do you find most challenging, and which ones most rewarding?*

AV: There are plenty. The main challenge, I think, is to be able to convey to our students, not only various possible answers to the philosophical questions we are discussing, but the importance of the questions themselves. If you teach math, or physics, or history, etc., you rarely find yourself in the need to *motivate* the significance of what you are doing, except maybe when things get super-technical. In philosophy the motivation can hardly be taken for granted and is often constitutive of the subject itself. Perhaps it's obvious enough that ethics deals with important questions, and the same may be true in other areas such as epistemology or political philosophy. But when I teach metaphysics, for example, things are harder. Why should a student care about the fact that one day some philosopher said that we can't step twice into the same water, or that a monad can have perceptions of which it is not aware, or that so long as there are trout and turkeys, there are also trout-turkeys? Explaining that claims such as these, too, deal with important philosophical questions, and why those questions are important, is not always easy, and it can be really challenging insofar as it requires that we do so from the point of view of the students, not from our own. Another challenge, in my experience, is to teach our students that when they are confronted with an argument, they should not start from the conclusion but from the premises. This applies to metaphysics as well as to ethics and the rest: that we like the conclusion does not mean the argument is good, just as it need not be a bad argument if we disagree with the conclusion. This may be obvious to the adept, but it doesn't come naturally, especially at the beginning, and many students find it hard to resist the temptation. Setting things right can be challenging. As for rewards, for the most part I think they lie on the other side of the same coin. Overcoming challenges such as these is the best reward we can get as philosophy teachers. Of course there are other rewards, beginning with the privilege of playing a role in our students' lives. But that goes without saying; it applies to teaching generally.

48. *I take it that the challenges you mentioned, and the corresponding rewards, depend also on the students you are teaching?*

AV: To some extent, yes. It surely makes a difference whether you are teaching an advanced graduate seminar, an introductory undergraduate course, or a multi-year high school program. They also depend on where and how you are teaching, and more generally on contextual factors. Teaching in person and teaching remotely, as we all now know, aren't quite the same. Nor is it the same whether you are teaching in a fancy college classroom, a community learning center, or a guarded jailhouse. It's not that some students are better than others; all students can be equally passionate and all can be weak, strong, or terrific, no matter who and where they are. But as the contexts change, so do the challenges (and rewards) of teaching philosophy.

49. Can you say something more about teaching in prison? I know you have been quite active on this front. Is there anything in particular you would like to stress regarding your experience so far?

AV: It's all part of a Columbia University project that started some time ago, called "Justice in Education". We teach in some federal, state, and municipal prisons in the state of New York. The conditions are execrable, as you may well imagine. Some of these "correctional facilities", such as Sing Sing, are of maximum security and contacts with the outside world are extremely limited. Nonetheless, the project is not confined to offering a few more contact opportunities. The goal is to provide incarcerated people with the opportunity to take college-level courses as similar as possible to those we regularly offer at Columbia, avoiding easy paternalisms and respecting the expectations of those who attend classes. For example, I have taught courses in logic and critical thinking. It may seem disrespectful, given that in prison one has far more serious problems than the validity or invalidity of a syllogism. Yet precisely here lies the challenge, in the mutual ability to go beyond stereotypes and to work together on those issues and those subjects that most incarcerated people had no opportunity – let me say, no luxury – to pursue. One day, on the subway, I saw a young man with a T-shirt that said: "Do you think education is hard? Try ignorance!". Nothing truer than that, unfortunately, especially in a country where education can be awfully expensive and, therefore, unjust and discriminatory. Of course, our project is little more than a drop in the ocean, and for what it is worth, I think I may have learned much more, teaching in prison, than each of the students who took my courses with such passion and proficiency. But every drop counts. In the United States, the stigma of imprisonment is very harsh for those who

manage to return to freedom, with marginalization effects that translate into a high re-incarceration rate. For those who attend this sort of study programs (and Columbia's is by no means the only one) the numbers change significantly for the better, as I think do the lives of many of our students.

PART IV: A TOUGH JOB?

50. My last set of questions concerns the practical side of things. What is, in your experience, the role of academic and research institutions in shaping how philosophy is done?

AV: You mean, their role today? Then I would say it's huge. After all, today philosophy is done almost entirely within the halls of such institutions. It is very difficult to *be* a philosopher unless you are employed *as* a philosopher in some academic or research organization. There are a few exceptions, a few public intellectuals who, for better or worse, manage to make a living as self-appointed philosophers. But everyone else has an institutional affiliation and philosophy is their official job. Obviously, this "professionalization" of the discipline has had and continues to have a large number of consequences. It has gradually become the primary factor in shaping the boundaries and prospects of every philosopher's activities, exerting a forceful influence on what we are expected to do, how we are supposed to work, which topics we should pursue, the quantity and venues of our publications, and all sorts of career-related matters such as funding, recruitment, promotions, awards, and so on. Diego Marconi's book, *Il mestiere di pensare*, gives a perfect picture of what this all means. And I have to say it isn't a cheerful picture. It is hard to keep alive an authentic sense of wonder under such conditions, even harder to think in slow motion when the mantra is "publish or perish", and I suppose my experience in this regard is no different from yours or anyone else's. That being said, every cloud has a silver lining. Thus, while these developments are genuinely alarming, I think they bring in their wake also a few positive signs, beginning with the fact that philosophy has become a certified discipline worth funding in some way or other, despite its lack of firm methodological standards. Indeed, as the number of academic and research institutions has grown tremendously over the past few decades, so has the number of

professional philosophers. Compared to thirty or sixty years ago, not to mention centuries ago, we are legion. One might think this is not by itself a good thing. Moreover, I often hear people complain: there may be herds of philosophers, but where are the Platos, the Descartes, the Kants in contemporary academia? I don't know where they are and presumably there aren't any. Clearly, this institutionalized system of ours has done everything to turn philosophers into "competent artisans" rather than "cathedral architects", as Marconi puts it. But for someone like me, who likes philosophy in lower case, that needn't be a problem. As with other fields of inquiry, it might even be a good thing if it turned out that the practice of philosophy no longer needs to depend on the leadership of a few luminaries (especially in the form of white men with long beards). I actually think it *would* be a good thing if it turned out that genuine progress need not require the extraordinary inventiveness of a few individual minds. A good team or community working together might contribute truly ground-breaking ideas just as well, in philosophy as elsewhere. So, individually it may indeed be harder to think in slow motion, and that may be frustrating; but collectively we could still do a good job, if not a better job.

51. The geography of academia has changed, too, in terms of regions where you can do philosophy. Today there is much more mobility than in the past. There are philosophers who studied in the United States or in Europe and end up working in the Middle East, in East Asia, in South and Central America, in Africa... From nearly any country in the world, colleagues contribute to philosophical debates that are truly international.

AV: Yes. In this regard, philosophy is perhaps even more untrammelled than other fields, if anything because we do not need much equipment to do our work. We don't need expensive labs or demanding experimental settings; thought experiments are good enough. So long as we are *in touch* with our fellow researchers, we can work together – and today we can be in touch in so many ways with pretty much anyone, anywhere and at any time. Our actual location is virtually irrelevant and our community virtually unlimited and more international than ever.

52. On the other hand, for all this globalization at the level of philosophical exchanges, perhaps there are still important differences from place to place when it comes to one's daily professional life. I am thinking of the different kinds of institutional pressure that you may experience depending on

whether you work, say, in a private university in the US, in Italy's public system, or in the higher education establishment of China.

AV: Globalization and professionalization don't necessarily go hand in hand. Our location is virtually irrelevant in one respect, but not in the other, and I agree it can still make a big difference when it comes to institutional pressure and related factors. But this is true across the board, not only in philosophy, don't you think?

53. Of course. In most other fields, however, the existence of robust, internationally recognized research standards tends to offset all sorts of local idiosyncrasies. I mean, institutional pressure can vary, but is highly constrained by those standards. By contrast, we saw that philosophy is not governed by the same sort of standards, to the point that it's even hard to be clear about one's own erratic research methods. Doesn't this make philosophers much more vulnerable, professionally, to local administrative strains and policies?

AV: Good point. I suppose a good example would be the different kinds of pressure that different systems place on their philosophy faculty with respect to publications, teaching, administrative service, or effectiveness in securing external research funds. Consider how these factors may affect a philosopher's career in its early stages. In a major US university, the first criterion I just mentioned – publications – trumps all the others. The publish-or-perish model literally means that unless you manage to publish a good number of articles in top-tier refereed journals, you don't get tenure regardless of your teaching and service record. And if you don't get tenure at your first institution, it can be quite difficult to find a job at another institution and get a second chance. Since it is virtually impossible to survive in the profession without a tenure position, the pressure to publish, on junior faculty, is therefore enormous. In a different system, things may work quite differently. Getting published is always important, but the pressure may be stronger in the other respects, along perhaps with such "political" factors as submissiveness to the senior faculty, putting one's fate in the right hands, or outright *do ut des* practices. (I am just speculating, of course). Even at later career stages, the pressure can vary from system to system. In the US, once you receive tenure you are expected to devote a good amount of your time to service – service to the department, to the university, to the profession. This year, for example, I am serving as director

of our department's graduate program, I am serving on the promotion and tenure committee for Columbia's division of Arts and Sciences, and of course I am doing tons of refereeing and letter writing for external organizations and institutions. Elsewhere, a different model in the overall academic organization may translate into different expectations and, therefore, different administrative labor: senior faculty may be under greater pressure to engage in academic "politics", for example, or to pursue extramural joint ventures, or to organize conferences, foster international collaborations, etc. And these are just the first examples that come to mind. So, you are right, in the end it can still make a big difference where we end up getting a job. But I am not in a position to say much more, as most of my personal experience is limited to Columbia University.

54. You are also a regular visiting faculty at the University of Lugano, in Switzerland, and you have recently been awarded an honorary professorship right here at the University of Trento...

AV: That's because I am a lucky man. And the honor is mine, in one case as in the other. But, you see, in both places my involvement with institutional matters is very limited, if not inexistent. I am not a "regular" faculty member, so I don't feel under any particular pressure except for trying to do my best to contribute to their teaching offerings and to the their overall intellectual climate.

55. Do you think it is necessary, for a philosopher, to have a "regular" appointment at some academic institution?

AV: I am afraid it is. As we said, today it is practically impossible to be a philosopher unless you are employed as a philosopher. And I mean, either tenured or on a tenure track. A temporary visiting or adjunct position pays very little and can easily turn into plain exploitation. You can't last long. By the way, this means that the sort of institutional pressure we have been discussing is only part of the story. With the professionalization of our discipline, the most basic form of pressure is *pre-institutional* – not the pressure that comes with your academic job but the pressure to *get* an academic job. And we know how excruciating that can be.

56. *Which brings me to my last question. Do you have any recommendations for a researcher who is beginning or about to begin their philosophical career today? In particular, how would you recommend approaching the fundamental turning points in their career, from doing well in graduate school to hopefully getting a “regular” job?*

AV: For what it is worth, in my opinion the first important step is the obvious one: choose a good dissertation topic and try to write a solid piece of work. A lot will depend on this. By a “good” topic I mean one that is original *and* recognizable as a contribution to some existent debate in philosophy. Sometimes, the pressure to come up with an original dissertation topic leads a student to focus on an utterly neglected subject, e.g., the philosophical work of some minor figure in the history of philosophy. That *may* be a good idea, if you can make a sound case that the neglect is unjustified. (This is certainly the case, for instance, with the work of early modern women philosophers). But chances are that you are embarking in the wrong project. If that minor figure has been completely ignored, chances are that their work is not interesting and, hence, that no one is going to be interested in yours. Similarly for more theoretical projects whose originality lies entirely in their futile narrowness. How truly historicist is Bertrando Spaventa’s *Rivoluzione e utopia*? Is there a Wittgensteinian bias in Cacciari’s interpretation of Heidegger’s Nietzsche? Does love obey an analogue of the weak supplementation principle? Good questions. But who cares, really? Your doctoral dissertation is going to be your primary entry pass in the “job market”, and will presumably shape the nature and scope of your future projects, so don’t invest in topics that are bound to give you a job only if you are willing to spend the rest of your life as an acolyte of your dissertation advisor (the only person who is likely to think you did great). Second, and relatedly, it’s important to keep in mind that your dissertation is just the beginning. Assuming you did a good job, there is a risk that you spend the rest of your life belaboring the same ideas over and over again. That is not a good way to plan your career, and you are not (or no longer) going to get tenure on such grounds. Moreover, chances are that sooner or later you yourself will get bored. Your dissertation focused on an interesting tree that belongs to an important forest? Good. Then go back to the forest and look for other interesting trees, or look for other forests to explore. A third important turning point comes with the realization that you are part of a community. At the beginning it may not be easy to fully grasp this, but eventually part of your life as a philosopher will be devoted to contributing to the progress of philosophy as a collective

enterprise. Writing papers and books on your own is one way of doing this, but you can't work in complete isolation. You have to keep studying, go to conferences, listen to what others have to say, engage in exchanges, look for constructive feedback. I personally enjoy doing such things, but even if I didn't, I could hardly overstate how important and useful they are. Even the choice between publishing your work as soon as you have a chance vs. submitting it to a serious journal or publisher, with the delay that this entails and the torture that a long refereeing process may involve (not to mention the chances of seeing our work rejected), should always be assessed in this light. Peer feedback and peer reviews are the main tools with which we can control the quality of our work, distressing as they may feel at times. Finally, I guess I should emphasize the importance of teaching. Sooner or later you have to come to terms with the fact that your life as a philosopher is not just going to be thinking, writing, and giving talks on your latest research. You will also have to teach philosophy. Rightly so, I add. In philosophy, teaching is as important as research, regardless of how your institution feels about it career-wise. If you don't like the idea, or if it turns out you do not enjoy teaching, then you are probably doing the wrong thing with your life. The sooner you find out, the better.

57. I said it was my last question, but may I ask you one more? How did you come to philosophy? Going back to the beginning of this conversation, initially you moved to Trento to study sociology; what made you switch to logic and metaphysics?

AV: A book I received for my birthday at the end of my freshman year. You won't be surprised to hear it was *The Man Without Qualities*, by Robert Musil. The enlightenment came right at the beginning, Volume 1, Chapter 4: *If there is a sense of reality, there must also be a sense of possibility...*

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