confessions of a generalist

I am a philosophical generalist, contributing to several areas of the subject, in particular philosophy of language, epistemology, philosophy of mind, and ethics. Putting it this way makes my contributions seem larger than they are; in fact I have worked in a scattering of small areas that happen to overlap with these larger fields. But, still, I am one of the few remaining people in philosophy to have this range. Put more carefully, I am one of the few who work in this number of fields without being overwhelmingly brilliant, being a useful and respected philosopher but not one of the great figures of the subject, by any means.

The purpose of this note is to reflect on how this came about, and less autobiographically to think about the advantages and disadvantages of operating as I have done. A warning: I am likely wrong about some of my motives in following up particular arguments or indeed about finding them persuasive. (I have often argued for the extreme fallibility of self-knowledge. This goes over well in philosophy, but in everyday life it often meets with outrage. "Are you trying to tell me that I do not know my own feelings?") I have rarely argued for a conclusion whose home is in one area of philosophy and then developed the idea — that same idea — so that a similar argument or conclusion has a place in a different area. That would be more systematic and insightful than the pattern of my wanderings. It has never been that deliberate. I have worked in one area and then found myself having ideas in another, and wondered what the connection might be. So what follows is reconstruction and conjecture.

The common factor seems to me to be this: I want philosophy to address unstated and hard-to-articulate presuppositions behind what we think, both in everyday life and in science. Once they are stated we can not only assess whether they are true but join them together in different and more powerful patterns. One of the functions of philosophy is to state things clearly and explicitly, and one of the dangers of doing this is plausible, articulate, but erroneous or oversimplified formulation. This can make us mistake the parochial for the universal. When philosophers produce attractive but wrong formulations they are dangerously seductive. (As an undergraduate in mathematics and philosophy my favourite course in math was differential equations. It seemed to others not a likely favourite for someone interested in philosophy — they would have found it more believable if the favourite were set theory or logic or abstract algebra — but I would reply that differential equations was a lot like analytic philosophy because in both cases one takes an implicit condition and makes it explicit. Perhaps the analogy with the danger of misapplied philosophical articulacy is finding a solution but not realizing that it is relative to an initial or boundary condition.) Many of the topics I have worked on have meant putting into definite words things that are accepted inarticulately. Some of these are human universals that all people rightly or wrongly tend to use or assume, and some are defining assumptions of particular cultures. The two are hard to tell apart.

I mentioned differential equations just now, an allusion to my undergraduate studies in mathematics. There is a theme here that shapes the conceptual/cultural one. I was studying mathematics as well as philosophy because I was fascinated by both. I was quite good at mathematics in high school, though not at a high problem-solving competition-winning level. I did well on exams and was tantalized by the scenery of

further topics whose outlines but not details I had learned. And while I seem to have passed exams on college-level topics that I now can say nothing about I discovered that I was reaching my limit, and in particular would never be an original mathematician. I now think that I could have done more mathematics with my particular skills and my particular limits, but the approach would have had to be different. But this set up a pattern that has taken many forms in the subsequent years. I get interested in formal questions that I make little progress with. My capacity to ask mathematical questions is vastly disproportionate to any capacity to answer them. I get bogged down in formal questions that are mathematically too hard for me. This has happened to me several times over the years. (It even produced some nightmare months when I was writing my doctoral thesis.) I just get fascinated by questions I have not the equipment to answer, and the only solution is to work on something else where the obsession has not yet found a target. That inevitably leads to shifting to different topics after periods of despair.

At the very beginning I wrote about the philosophy of language. It was at the heart of philosophy then, and we arrogantly assumed that if you could make fine distinctions about meaning and logical form then ethics, metaphysics, and the rest would fall into your lap. The things that I wrote were well received, but I felt that they were not going anywhere and began to look for other topics. Other people in the philosophy of language were content to have one good idea after another without seeing a deeper connection. I found it frustrating, which is a bit puzzling because in later work I have not usually had a long-term plan but just followed my nose. So the suggestion is that I did not feel that it was digging out hidden ideas about communication by words. (Other people's work does do this, but I could not see that mine did.) At the end of my time doing the philosophy of

language I was interested in questions about modality: possibility, necessity, conditionals, causation. I have continued to have occasional worthwhile ideas on this topic, but the large systematic ideas that I was wrestling with were getting me into that quality of formal issues that are too large for me, and at that point I could not free myself of the need to approach them in that way. So I declared myself a philosopher of mind. (I cancelled my subscription to the *Journal of Symbolic Logic* and took out a subscription to *Psychological Review*.) I wrote a book on folk psychology, the lore we bring to understanding one another in everyday life. We have difficulty stating this lore so that it is more than a pile of platitudes, but it clearly leads us to substantive and sometimes false explanations of human action. My book *Frames of Mind* described underlying structures, which I conjectured to be innate, behind the attributions and explanations we ordinarily make. This was an early contribution to a discussion that was live for 20 years in philosophy and psychology, and it contributed a much thrown-around term "theory theory". I was against the theory theory mostly because it seemed clear to me that the assumptions could not be stated in any natural human language. A few years later there were people who conceived of themselves as theory theorists — for example Stich in philosophy and Gopnik in psychology — in opposition to "simulationist" accounts such as those of Gordon. They made a workable theory theory by jettisoning the idea that it should be stated in the language of the people who used it. My view was like the simulationists' in that it supposed that some of the processes are innate and automatic, and like the theory theorists' in that it made some of the presuppositions potentially relative to a culture. (And took the interaction between the two to be revealing and important.) I found this cultural aspect of it very hard to state and argue for. In effect, I spent the 80s and 90s thinking about this without much success, and so publishing

material on other topics (Such as *Disasters and Dilemmas*, about decision-making under difficult circumstances.) I also wrote a large all-purpose first year textbook *Philosophy in Practice* in which no positions were defended but there were many activities to allow students to formulate positions for themselves. So this was an exposition of the skill of making the implicit explicit. I finally wrote a book arguing for culture-relative simulationism, *The Importance of Being Understood,* in the year 2000. It has some good ideas, and draws on some of the work I had been doing in-between (either because there is a real connection or because it was there to be used — I would not know). But I did not think of the book as really satisfactory.

I had been assuming that the culturally variable assumptions about the explanation of behaviour would concern variations on the concepts of belief and desire. And I still think that there is something to this. But during these years I also began working on the philosophy of the emotions, though I did not think of this topic as giving a handle on the questions that haunted and frustrated me. But when as a spin-off from the philosophy of emotion I wrote a little semi-popular book *On Evil* I found that something like my brand of simulationism entered very naturally. So in further writing on emotion I concentrated on morally significant emotions, particularly the family of regret-remorse-shame-guilt. (The subtitle of *The Importance of Being Understood* was "folk psychology as ethics". I should have taken this subtitle more seriously.) The resulting papers eventually precipitated into a book *Emotion and Imagination* where the themes are explicit.

Morally significant emotions have become a topic for me in their own right, and their connection is no longer with folk psychology but with culturally specific moral ideas. An

elusive idea, that I can never get quite right enough to come clean about, is that we have a culturally parochial way of putting the pieces together about how we regulate and judge one another's behaviour, and that much moral philosophy perpetuates this misleading view. The pieces are real attributes of actions and lead to outcomes that really are better for the people involved, individually and collectively, but they are not all the pieces and they are not related in the way that we normally suppose. (I take the position to be hinted at in many places by Bernard Williams. I have tried to get near to stating it in some papers in what I call the damage project, developing the neglected theme of ways that people can do harm to other people without causing them pain or violating their rights. And there are connections with the discussion of smugness and hypocrisy in *Emotion and Imagination*.)

Near the end of my philosophy of language time I taught an undergraduate course in epistemology. I did not like any of the available textbooks, because in those days they ignored both the naturalism that was entering the subject and the work on the analysis of the concept of knowledge that was becoming influential. So I wrote a textbook, *A Guide through the Theory of Knowledge*, which is still in print having gone through a number of editions. (In the preface to the first edition I say that I have taken pains to minimize the connections with the philosophy of language. Interesting, given my concerns at the time.) The book was used for some people's courses, and the occasional non-expository suggestion was discussed in the literature. So I came to be thought of as an epistemologist although I had written practically nothing else in the theory of knowledge. Then in the late 90s I came to think that this is what I should have been doing all along, largely because I was finding work on folk psychology so frustrating. I

then wrote a few papers on knowledge. But like my earlier work in the philosophy of language I could not see a definite theme. This changed when I began reading the literature on virtue epistemology, notably Zagzebski and Hookway. The vocabulary of virtues, in epistemology as in ethics, directly reflects culture-specific ideas about how to achieve ends that are in fact valuable, and indirectly points to objectively effective ways of achieving these ends. (Virtues are like emotions in this respect.) So I could now connect this interest with the main thread. Or so I now reconstruct what was motivating me then.

One place where the armoury of epistemic virtues acknowledged in both everyday life and science seemed undeveloped and in places just wrong concerned the adaptation to human cognitive limitations. This connected with issues that had interested me in ethics, especially when I was writing student-level expositions of moral theories. So I eventually wrote a book about this, *Bounded Thinking*, which in a general way fits the thread of digging out presuppositions, in this case about rationality and sensible action.

Sometime in the 1990s I had a sudden revelation (on an overnight train from Glasgow to Bristol; it really did feel like a revelation.) To put it grandly, the thought is that human cognition is shaped by the languages we use to express it, and just as a twenty-year-old can say things that a six-year-old cannot, it ought to be a task for philosophers of language to increase the expressive power of human language. I would parody Marx and Engels by saying that previous philosophies had tried to understand language while the important point is to change it. But the way I wanted to tackle this made it formally too hard for me. Yet again. So while I mused on this on and off for twenty years it resulted in

nothing. There is an indirect connection with some passages in my peculiar [logic textbook](). I still think that there is an important task for some brilliant person to do sometime. Notice how it would involve digging below particular cultural forms to find inadequately expressed patterns that can be the basis for other, more powerful, forms. It would have connected several of my selves. But I could not do it.

Disadvantages and benefits. First of all, just practically, generalism is probably not a good career strategy. The way to become known in your subject is to write a fair number of things on closely related topics. Some of them will get noticed, and your themes and arguments will become clearer and more defensible as you rework them. This can be given a higher-minded appearance: if you rethink something many times you are more likely eventually to get it right. Generalism can lead to pretension: you act as if you are more capable and have a wider range of things than you do. As if you can get it right the first time.

A mixed blessing is the connection with a number of ideas which have a life of their own long after you have touched them. You never know whether your own work was influential or if you were simply part of an awareness that was dawning at that time. One example is the terminology of theory of mind. I certainly did introduce the words "theory theory" (imitating Jonathan Bennett's "idea idea"), but what about decades-long later discussion of "theory of mind". It is that suggested by my terminology and the issues I used it to raise, or not? I doubt that I shall ever know, so there is room both for self-glorification and for modesty. Another example is my one paper arguing that [predicates do not have to have a fixed number of arguments](). Others used the idea, notably David

Lewis and George Boolos, and took it further, referring to me, and yet others took these people's work yet further, usually not referring to me. But no doubt there were many other sources as well. A third example — not sure there are any more — is my use of sensitivity of a mental state to counterfactual changes in its object (in "Because he thought he had insulted him"). This idea is found in a lot of epistemology in the following ten years, for example in Nozick. But then it is a natural solution to a problem, which anyone thinking about the problem is likely to find for themselves. (The influence on the topic of Fred Dretske is in any case earlier and greater, and not that often acknowledged.)

A straightforward benefit is that generalism is more interesting. You do not get into a rut. (I would claim this benefit in the past 20 years. But not in the previous 20 years; during that earlier time I thought I knew what my main topic was, and knew that it was not going well.) And if you get blocked on one topic you can move to another. Unless you are overwhelmingly brilliant you had better choose these topics so that they do not require that you master the full range of the literature or engage with all the clever people working on them.

There is another argument for generalism, that connects with my own particular disposition. If you think that philosophy should engage with the wider culture, then you will want it to produce material that is not too technical, recondite, or embedded in large bodies of difficult literature. Non-genius generalists will inevitably produce this sort of material, since we are not capable of dominating any of our component fields. I do not think that all philosophers should be obliged to give easy or popular expositions of their

work. But someone has to give these expositions, and the breadth and connectedness that this needs is precisely what generalism encourages.

Writing this has had a sense of discovering the obvious for me. I have joined things up into a pattern that makes more sense than I would have thought possible. This may be because the pattern is real, or it may be a tribute to the human power to find an order in disparate things. In either case, it has been interesting and surprising to me to trace these connections.

appendix: Since I now see more connections than I had thought were there, I can now see a rationalizing explanation in terms of intrinsic connections between sets of questions. It does not give any detailed insight into my particular angle on the various issues, but just some rather standard connections between topics. Here is a diagram, where these superficial connections are indicated with colours.

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