

# ERNIE LEPORE ON THE IMPACT AND METHODOLOGY OF ACADEMIC PHILOSOPHY

AN INTERVIEW WITH ERNIE LEPORE

by Anders Strand

Ernie Lepore is professor of philosophy at Rutgers University in New Jersey. He is head of Rutgers University Center for Cognitive Science (RUCCS) and Professor II in philosophy at the University of Oslo. Lepore is the author of numerous books and articles, including *Insensitive Semantics* with Herman Cappelen, and *Donald Davidson: Meaning, Truth, Language, and Reality* with Kirk Ludwig.

*I want to ask you about the social role and importance of modern academic philosophy. Do you think that it has an impact, for example on the way we think about and devise our social institutions?*

Unfortunately, for the kind of philosophy I do, I don't see any direct impact of that kind. Some people say that our responsibilities are to our students, to our research, to our colleagues inside our departments, and so on. That's it; we don't have any public responsibilities. I think probably that's the received view, even if it is unconscious. I don't know of anyone who actually articulates it for himself, but by looking at the behaviour of most professional philosophers, that seems to be the implicit view. And I do think that's a shame, because we have something to offer.

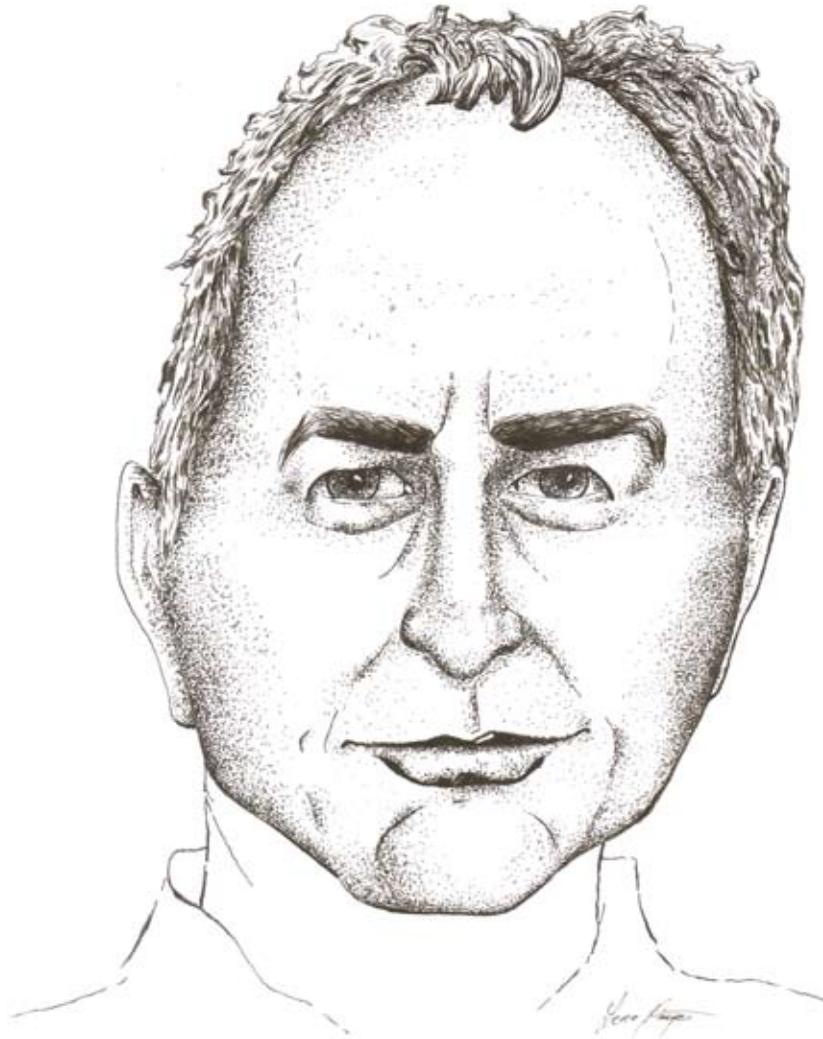
*I intended to connect this issue with another question about how professionalized and how specific different debates in academic philosophy are becoming. Consider a systematic thinker, like Immanuel Kant for example, and how he integrated his epistemology with his aesthetics and his moral philosophy. His*

*views had a huge impact on the development of human rights. It seems like that kind of philosopher is not at the forefront any more, and is the worry that something gets lost in the more fragmented and specialized ways of doing contemporary philosophy?*

I agree with that, and I think it's a shame. I don't know if it is true throughout philosophy, but it seems to me true in American philosophy. I think there is a stronger tradition in Great Britain for philosophers speaking out. Michael Dummett is certainly a famous figure. He's one of the greatest philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and his books on Frege are monumental and will be around for a very long time. Yet, he spent at least half of his life fighting against what he saw as racist immigration laws in England. I think he thought it was his responsibility, and that the special talents he had by virtue of being a philosopher should be brought to the discussion. I admire Dummett for that. I wish there were more philosophers like him; both in the world at large, and in particular in the United States where we need them right now.

*Do you think that the academic system, in its present state, encourages philosophers with such extended perspectives?*

Well, first of all, there are very different styles of doing philosophy. Being told someone is a philosopher won't tell you a whole lot about what he or she is interested in. And here's a big surprise: Being told someone is an analytic philosopher won't tell you a



whole lot more. It used to be the case that the great divide was between the analytic and the continental, or the analytic and the pluralists, where the latter was supposed to include not just continental style philosophy, but Philosophy of Religion, Feminism, Buddhist philosophy, Middle Eastern philosophy, and so forth. In my department [Rutgers University, New Jersey] we were interested in collaborating with linguists, psychologists and computer scientists on issues that interested us. We thought there might be some gold in collaborating, and we developed the *Center for Cognitive Science* at Rutgers based on that

assumption. And it has been quite rewarding for everyone involved. Philosophers seem better at certain kinds of foundational questions; they ask certain questions that the psychologists just don't ask. In my own case, I almost never teach a graduate seminar alone. I almost always teach a graduate seminar now with someone from another department.

There are many philosophers who think that philosophy is a peculiarly philosophical project; something that is insulated and isolated from the empirical sciences. You know, that it's the First Philosophy,

or something to that effect. Although when you read Descartes for example, you see a tremendous interest in empirical sciences. Sometimes I think the concern among philosophers about mixing it up with empirical scientists is just a fear of losing one's job. Think about Newton; how many natural philosophers did he put out of business? One might wonder whether a philosopher of language isn't just a bad linguist or a philosopher of mind isn't just a bad psychologist. Even if you're not worried about that, you might worry that putting so much energy and confidence into what the psychologist or the linguist has to tell you, you might lose sight of the philosophical issues. I've had conversations with philosophers who I respect, like John McDowell for example, who has told me that he does worry that the preoccupation with issues in cognitive psychology or linguistics will detour and distract us from the central philosophical issues that philosophers are particularly well equipped to investigate. In other words there are philosophers - I take McDowell and Brandom to be among them - who believe that there is a philosophical methodology different from the kind of methodology that's manifested in the sciences. They seem to think that some problems are peculiarly philosophical and couldn't be informed by the empirical sciences.

Quine blurred the line between doing something empirical and doing something a priori or something purely analytic. Without an analytic/synthetic distinction it's hard to know what analysis could mean [See Quine's seminal paper "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" for the original discussion]. Although people like Quine and Davidson, and those of us who follow them, will say that there's no First Philosophy, no real distinction between the a priori and the a posteriori, and no such thing as conceptual analysis, it's very difficult to not resort to that vocabulary. No matter how careful you are in your skepticism, you find yourself saying that something seems like a deeper truth about the subject matter than another, and thinking that it has the feel and earmarks of a conceptual truth. I don't know anyone who has actually explored this, but for some reason it's extremely difficult to give up the old distinctions that we claim people like Quine and Davidson have long ago rejected and shown to be flawed in some way. One lesson to learn from all this might be that philosophers should have a critical attitude towards the methods used in philosophical research. As you know, Stephen Stich and the expanding field of

so-called experimental philosophy has been critical to the widespread use of intuitions in philosophical research [see e.g. <http://www.unc.edu/~knobe/ExperimentalPhilosophy.html> for an overview and resources]. Since you and Stich are in the same department; what are your thoughts about his empirical approach to philosophy?

I first heard Stich present his stuff on experimental philosophy on a tour to Australia seven or eight years ago, and I was very skeptical. I wasn't sure, and the psychologists who joined us at the tour thought it wasn't good methodology. In other words that the experiments weren't designed in a way that established the conclusions that he wanted to draw. I think Steve is a very bright and sophisticated character though, and he has had many years now to refine his approach. He seems to be as adamant about those results now as he was seven or eight years ago. It seems that this caught on in a big way. When Steve puts on a seminar now, many many people show up, and they come from all walks of life. It is nice to have someone in the department who is attracting attention and researchers from areas other than philosophy. In the end, what will Steve's work show us? I'm not sure. Even if you were absolutely convinced by Steve's results, you still wouldn't give up your methodology...

*Really..?*

Well, one of his results is that in certain cases people in other cultures don't respond in the same way that people in Western European culture do [for example, people's intuitions about identity through time, and also about Gettier cases, apparently vary across cultures]. How are you going to explain that? Either people don't believe him, right? I don't know why you wouldn't believe him. What are the other options? Suppose you believe him, and then what? You stop doing philosophy, or you stop appealing to intuitions when you're doing philosophy? I'm not sure what the message is supposed to be.

*It seems to me that you can still appeal to intuitions; you just need a more reflected view on how you reveal intuitions, and whose intuitions are to count.*

*Prima facie*, it looks like it reeks of relativism. Suppose someone says: "Here's a puzzle, but if you're

from this culture it's not a puzzle..." You were hoping that you were uncovering something about knowledge, and you were assuming that knowledge is something that could be had by anyone anywhere regardless of their culture, upbringing or what part of the globe they're from. But, I do think that most people that I'm aware of, who are not parts of Steve's inner sanctum, have not been moved by the results, and the question is: *why not?* You don't have a lot of options. You could say that these experiments have serious design flaws, but that needs to be articulated. Or, you might think that you just *can't* be moved. I don't remember Steve ever telling me he wants to replace the familiar methodology of appeal to intuition with something else. I went to some of his Nicode lectures in Paris last spring which were on this topic, and they were all entirely critical. So, I didn't hear him say in the end: "Here is how one ought to marshal evidence for philosophical views." He's a good cognitive scientist and therefore my guess is that he thinks that we should marshal evidence for philosophical positions the way we marshal evidence for any other kind of thesis; by collecting data. You wouldn't appeal merely to intuitions if you were trying to figure out how the sun moves, or how a planet moves; how celestial bodies move in space. I just don't know what he thinks is the right methodology.

*I have a question in this connection that I think is important. Suppose you do experimental philosophy and try to reveal what kind of intuitions people have about, say, knowledge and Gettier cases. It seems that what you get by using that methodology is empirical data on how people use the concept of knowledge. But this might not be the kind of result you're interested in when you're doing philosophy or epistemology in general. Accordingly, there might be a mismatch between the methodology and the kind of project you're engaged in. Do you see what I mean?*

This is totally of a piece with where we began, in the sense that Steve must be scratching his head wondering what is going on here. Have philosophers been living under a rock? I know Steve has tremendous respect for Quine and his work. I'm assuming, without ever having had that conversation with him, that Steve is as skeptical as Fodor and I are of an analytic-synthetic distinction. Without an analytic-synthetic distinction, what do you think that these intuitions are tracking? They can't be tracking the concepts, because Quine has established for us that there is no such thing as analysis of concepts. One way of understanding the denial of the analytic-

synthetic distinction is this: No analytic-synthetic distinction; no analysis, where analysis means that you take some particular word or concept and divide it up à la Kant into its key ingredients or parts. Then you tease out those parts and that tells you something deep and important about the nature of that concept. Steve's rejecting that very conception of a concept. Whatever the intuitions are that are guiding us, they're not intuitions that are based upon analysis of a concept. It's not as though these intuitions are being underwritten by our introspection of our own concepts and our examination of them, that's something he rejects. So whatever the intuitions are tracking, they are tracking something else. As far as I can see, most of his work so far has been a deconstruction of certain ways of thinking about the value of intuitions. I never thought about this, but maybe Steve sees himself as of a piece with Quine and that he's providing an alternative way of thinking about showing that the notion of analysis is bankrupt. I know he doesn't want to take the conclusion that concepts are relative to cultures. It is not supposed to be a relativist conclusion that falls out of his research.

*As regards methodology - or philosophical approach more generally - do you find that there are differences between the American tradition and the way people work in Oslo?*

It's seamless to me, at least with the people I interact with here. Bjørn Ramberg and I both have books on Donald Davidson - very different kinds of books. He is much more influenced by Richard Rorty than I am. There is a tolerance in philosophy now that didn't exist when I was a student. My teachers were not as tolerant as I am, and my students are even more tolerant than I am. There's a group of philosophers who, for one reason or other, didn't respect the way Richard Rorty did philosophy. Those are the generation older than me. People in my generation may not study Rorty, but I don't have any prima facie disrespect for whatever it is he's doing. Bjørn and I just started a mini-seminar on metaphor, and he was clearly much more interested in the Rorty-esque reading of Davidson. I found it fascinating and valuable so we interact even though we're approaching these subjects from relatively different points of view. So, I think there's much more tolerance now for different methodologies in philosophy.

*Sometimes it seems to me that people haven't reflected on their choice of methodology. They're interested in a certain subject*

*matter and they approach it in whatever way is common, or in accordance with their local tradition.*

I think that's true. Rorty, however, is not a good example of that; he is the opposite. He is a person who reflected very heavily on methodology and from what I understand from conversations with him and what I've read by him he discarded a certain methodology that he thought we had inherited from Descartes and Kant. So there are some philosophers that seem to be, not only more concerned, but more preoccupied, let's say, with the philosophical methodology. People like McDowell and Brandom I think are paradigm cases. Apparently Tim Williamson has a new book on philosophical methodology...

*I just heard about that, it's entitled The Philosophy of Philosophy.*

Yeah, so I'm looking forward to seeing what he has to say about it. You know, I hope it doesn't sound smug, but it reminds me of one time I was talking with a professional musician. The other people in the conversation were musicologists and they were spinning elaborate stories about what it is that the musician does. He wasn't a particularly articulate guy, and there's no reason why he should have been. His strength was in his music playing. His response was like: "I don't know what I'm doing, I just play the music." Maybe that's the right response as a philosopher too? I'm not sure what is to be gained by becoming too preoccupied with the question: Is this the right way of proceeding with respect to this problem? Of course, there are bad arguments and there are good arguments, and there are good ways of marshaling evidence in support of a proposal. I'm not sure whether worrying about the best way to approach a philosophical problem is going to deliver much of value; different problems, different ways, and maybe same problem, lots of different ways. Who knows? Some people think that we should be really careful because maybe we have the wrong methodology and maybe we're coming up with the wrong results. Maybe the hard problem in the study of consciousness has resisted anything like an exciting solution - a palatable solution - because we just don't have the right methodology. I'm not sure that pursuing that worry is going to produce anything of great value. I don't have an argument that it won't, but I'm just not sure about that for the

same reason that I don't think the musician needs to know a theory about how one ought to perform. Knowing what's going on intellectually when he's playing his instrument might not help him become a better musician.

*I want to relate this to the new Center for the Study of Mind in Nature (CSMN) in Oslo. I'm not entirely sure how to do that, but I intended to ask you if you thought there was a methodology suitable for that kind of enterprise; a huge collaborative project dedicated to finding a place for mind in nature...*

I can say something about this. The center has assembled an incredible group of people from all over the world, not just from Norway. Everybody seems full of enthusiasm. You witnessed the opening of the center. I don't think I've ever seen an audience that large in Norway or anywhere else for a philosophical enterprise. I think people are still trying to figure out what the right nature of the collaboration will be. They're still working things out, but everybody's excited and given the level of talent and commitment of each of the members it is inevitable that it will succeed. I am certain of it. What form will the success take? Well, I hope it will manifest in important publications, the attraction of high quality students, post-docs, pre-docs, and just in general letting the rest of the world know that something exciting is going on in Oslo. It's already happening, you know. It's difficult for me now to meet a talented, respected philosopher who hasn't been through Oslo. That would be a surprise. I would pause and be curious why if I were to meet one. I see nothing but positive things coming out of this. I don't see any obvious problems.

*So you think the prospects for Norwegian academic philosophy are good?*

Very high, extremely high. And, I'm looking forward to being a participant. I have this visiting professorship in Oslo, and I will try to be here for at least a month or closer to two months every year. I'll try to divide it up into three two week visits if I can, and I hope that every time I can do some kind of collaborative project. Preferably in the form of a seminar and maybe a workshop tagged on at the end. I'm very excited about it.