

Philosophical Profiles

Elizabeth Anderson

John Dewey Distinguished University Professor of Philosophy and Women's Studies and Arthur F. Thurnau Professor at the University of Michigan

IN BRIEF

Elizabeth Anderson, besides being a 2013 Guggenheim fellow and Arthur F. Thurnau Professor at the University of Michigan, recently transitioned from being the John Rawls Collegiate Professor to the John Dewey Distinguished University Professor of Philosophy and Women's Studies. She has written on a wide range of normative issues, including surrogacy, dependent care, animal rights, affirmative action and the theories of John Stuart Mill and Immanuel Kant. In her 1999 article, "What is the Point of Equality?," she coined the term "luck egalitarianism" for the then dominant view of egalitarianism in political philosophy, even though her intent was just to have a name for the obituary. Her article "If God is Dead, is Everything Permitted?" was included in Christopher Hitchens' anthology *The Portable Atheist*. Her most recent book, *The Imperative of Integration* was winner of the 2011 Joseph B. Gittler Award from the American Philosophical Association. She is currently writing a history of egalitarian movements.

DETAILS

Simon Cushing conducted the following interview with Elizabeth Anderson on 18 June 2014.

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a philosophical profile

Simon Cushing: Your current project, I happen to know, is a history of egalitarianism. Could you say a little bit about that and how that came to be your current project?

Elizabeth Anderson: I've been involved for many years now in a dispute with the major school of post-Rawlsian egalitarianism, which in an article I wrote back in the 1990s ["What is the Point of Equality?" *Ethics*, Vol. 109, No.2 (Jan 1999)] I dubbed "luck egalitarianism"—and that term stuck. So luck egalitarians think that the principle in justice is that people get stuff out of sheer luck, that inequalities are generated due to factors that have nothing to do with what they deserve or what they're responsible for. And when I read this—the whole school of philosophers who believe that—I thought that it was basically wrong, and my inner Rawls came out—Rawls, of course, was my dissertation advisor—and even though earlier I wasn't all that concerned about issues of distributive justice, this really fired me up. And I thought, "that is not what egalitarianism is about." It's not about objecting to inequalities that arise that are undeserved. Fundamentally it's about constructing a society of free and equal people, where we relate to another as free and equal. So I called this "relational egalitarianism" or...

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“Democratic egalitarianism.” And it was definitely inspired by the account of distributive justice that Rawls had in mind. He thought that free and equal people in a democratic society would sign on to his principles of distributive justice because they expressed their relations to one another as free and equal. And then I was thinking “well, I think this is really deep in the history of egalitarianism.” And I wanted to vindicate this relational view by going back to the origins of egalitarian thinking.

The Levellers...

The Levellers, yep! Well, you could even go back a little bit further to the Anabaptists—they were pretty wild! The Anabaptists, they had a lot of egalitarianism, but they weren't so keen on the freedom part. So what I'm interested in is that part of egalitarianism that wants to combine the ideas of freedom and equality. And I'm starting it with the Levellers and I'm going to move forward, certainly through the nineteenth century, probably through the Second World War, maybe even up to the present, but that's a little ambitious now. Right now I've just chunked off one piece of the story—it's a pretty big piece—which is about abolitionism. Who were the abolitionists? What were they about? How did they inspire all kinds of other egalitarian movements?—Which they did. Feminism in the United States grew out of abolitionism, for instance—Democratic movements, the labor movements. And in particular, I'm interested in questions of moral epistemology. So if you look back three hundred years ago, very few people thought that slavery was morally wrong. I mean, you could find isolated people who condemned it, but in society as a whole it was just taken for granted, 'well sure we have slaves.'

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And then you see these abolitionists in the early eighteenth century, not just from the enlightenment, but also religious strands. The Quakers, notably, who of course... they got their start in the English Civil War back in the mid-seventeenth century—

Then went on to make very good chocolate

They did indeed—and oats. They were actually very prosperous and successful—they were good capitalists, but they wanted free labor. So I'm going back and I'm trying to think how does moral consciousness change? And I think that this is incredibly important because starting with the Quakers and other abolitionist groups, evangelicals, enlightenment figures; they start a whole new way of thinking about morality and interpersonal relationships within which slavery appears to be the most horrible injustice, a paradigm of injustice, whereas before people felt that there's no problem with it, of course there are slaves. So this I find incredibly interesting. From the standpoint of moral knowledge, what it shows is our moral thinking can change in fundamental and dramatic ways, and we think, looking back, that this is a mark of great progress—and I agree—but without begging the question in favor of our current moral intuitions, I'd like to know: can we look at the process by which our moral beliefs changed and find anything that would be indicative of progress without just begging the question in favor of our current beliefs?

The current movement about gay marriage, you'd think, would be a fairly good place...

Absolutely!

I mean, that's the most amazing change in my recent lifetime. When I first started out as a graduate student we had, homosexuality as a "contemporary moral problem." It wasn't even gay marriage, it was just being gay.

Right, right.

And now you have Michigan Republicans who have just come out and signed a document saying "Okay, our bad, you know, we realize we screwed up."

Yes, exactly! This is a great moment even today. Advancement in egalitarian moral thinking. So I'm very interested in investigating how that came about. So maybe we should talk a little bit about how that came about because I think there are connections. What got this tremendously rapid change in moral orientation to LGBT people? We had a whole social movement. Gays decided to organize and strategize about how to change people's beliefs, and a critical part of that was the movement to come out of the closet. I think this was tremendously important because what they were doing was building on the fact that people already had good, strong, loving, cooperative relations with their family members, with their co-workers, their neighbors, and friends, and so forth. So they already knew and trusted these people. Coming out sort of reveals, hey, you know...

They're everywhere.

Gay people are just as, you know, cooperative...

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Who was the Supreme Court Justice who ruled on that case and then, you know, said “I don’t know any gay people” to his most loyal and trusted clerk, and it turned out that person was gay and had never told him, and it was like, “why didn’t you tell me before we made this decision!?”

Right, right, that was Justice [Lewis] Powell yeah, exactly. So what I see is critical to this is that you had a social movement, and that also was critical to abolitionism, certainly in England. The British abolitionists essentially invented the social movement. The whole collection, the whole repertoire of activities that we now take for granted, whenever we want to change some public policy, you know, you create local chapters, you take down everybody’s name, and you organize committees, and you submit petitions, and you publicize grievances, and you collect documentary evidence of what the problems are, and have book tours, and publicity campaigns, and icons, and slogans.

Twitter.

Twitter, right. And you know, you have various vivid images and so forth that encapsulate the grievance, and you go around and you try to persuade people and get them on board, have fundraisers, you write a report card on your legislator, and report back to the members on how they voted on issues. All—the whole repertoire—litigation strategies...putting that whole package together—that was the genius of the British abolitionists. They invented the social movement, and basically we today are still reaping the benefits of that. Whenever we want moral change, we look back at that handbook, so to speak, on how to do it.

Well, unfortunately it fell into the hands of the NRA as well.

So, yeah, one of my stories is just that, you know, social movements, in and of themselves, are not formally progressive. Not just in content, but epistemologically. And so one of my questions is: how can we tell? Is there anything that distinguishes the ones that are liable to lead to moral learning from the ones that don’t? And one way to think about it is: is that social movement speaking truth to power? Okay? Because I see the social movement, fundamentally, as an instrument for dislodging, or altering, or correcting, or counteracting the moral biases of the powerful.

Now, do you think it’s always grassroots, because a lot of the figures that get remembered tend to be members of the elite who had a crisis of conscious or something and suddenly came around, and they were already in a position to make more waves. So, you know, John Stuart Mill, of course, is a figure, but he was very much a member of the establishment and was in a position to have an influence. And it’s not—maybe the Levellers are more of an anomaly than the main kind of model.

Yeah, so actually that’s a really great question. Mill was certainly a pioneer in certain respects, especially with regard to his feminism, you know, he stood up as a member of parliament and argued for giving the franchise to women, and he was laughed at in parliament practically for even suggesting it. So he was ahead of his time in certain ways. But it’s also the case that he was riding a wave of popular democratization, so it wasn’t all top-down. And in fact, the way I read most egalitarian theorists in the canon of philosophy is: you dig down below and you see there are popular ideas bubbling up. And what the canonical authors are doing is making them rigorous and, sort of, analytically

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putting the pieces together in a sharper and more perspicuous way than what you find, in, say, popular panels.

But there had to be people who convinced them to be their voices on the road to Damascus.

Well, right. And so for Mill, for instance, Harriet Taylor was clearly a critical actor in converting Mill to feminism.

Now this work is predominantly intellectual history. Are you finding this—is this a novel experience for you, or is this an outgrowth of the way you’ve always done things?

So more and more, the way I do philosophy is to read a whole bunch of stuff that isn’t philosophy and philosophize about it. I’ve found this to be an incredibly fruitful way to work. There’s a lot of latent philosophical ideas out there in all kinds of social scientific works, in popular culture and thinking, the works of popular movements, and so forth. They’re incredibly rich with ideas. So more and more what I like to do is to take my problems from the world or from other areas of inquiry and think philosophically about them. And the appeal of this, though, goes way back in my own personal history because the way I learned how to do this was when I was an undergraduate at Swarthmore College, I took a legendary history of philosophy of science course from Hugh Lacey—a wonderful philosopher of science. And what we did in that course was read a lot of the original scientific texts. We were poring over Galileo, and Copernicus, and Newton and trying to make sense of it—but also seeing that there were all kinds of philosophical problems and conundrums that these texts, that these scientific works, are generating internally. And the drive for philosophy comes from inside practice and from inside inquiry. And then, sometimes, you have to maybe just engage in philosophical thinking with these other problems. Now of course philosophy also generates its own internal problems but I prefer to work with problems that originate in other domains.

Real problems! The other person I’ve just interviewed was Allen Buchanan, and I don’t know if you read much of his stuff, but he approaches things in the same way, I mean, both of you are very much interdisciplinary thinkers. And I notice actually one thing you mentioned is you’ve started a PPE [Philosophy, Politics and Economics] program at Ann Arbor.

Yeah.

And this is the same kind of theme—that you want to get this kind of cross-disciplinary approach?

Absolutely; and I think it’s important both for philosophers to be more empirically informed and also for the social sciences to be more normatively informed. I think in a way the division between philosophy and the social sciences is partly intellectually a product of the fact-value distinction, as if when you come up with values without referring to any facts at all! I don’t think that’s true, really.

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I hope not.

But it's also the case that the social scientists have found that their legitimacy rests on getting rid of any connection to values, and I think that's just crazy! What are we investigating society and human beings for? Because we have normative concerns. What's going to enable people to flourish? What kinds of social relations lead to good results, or horrible results?

I think, yeah, when I read stuff that is not philosophical, but is more social scientific, or even medical stuff, the impression I get is that they don't think they have assumptions—they don't think that there are assumptions under what they're doing, they think that it's all a tower of facts without any assumptions in the basement. And I think that is a value of applying philosophical methods to this is to point out: "no, you're assuming this and, you know, because you're assuming this, you need to defend this," and I think that is something maybe distinctive about the philosophical approach. And that pisses the other people off, because we're always asking questions that they thought they moved past.

Yes, to some of them it pisses them off, but others are actually more open to the idea. People who are engaging in the social sciences with an underlying normative impulse—like they want justice—are actually interested in seeing that impulse...the legitimacy of it vindicated in their own inquiries. So I think that we have sort of a split, because a lot of people are in the social sciences precisely because they want to make the world a better place.

Yeah, it's odd that philosophy has, I get this impression, this love/hate relationship with the other disciplines, particularly science. I mean, it's a criticism from continental philosophers, which means we can dismiss it, but you know—that Anglo-American philosophy, analytic philosophy is science-worshipping. And there's a little bit of that, that I think we're a little bit envious of the scientists' tools, you know. And you can kind of see this when philosophers really got into logic, there was a period when everything had to be demonstrated in symbolic logic form, otherwise it wasn't really an argument. But at the same time we also have this view where we're more fundamental than science, so it's...we're kind of like Dostoevsky's *Underground Man*. We think that they're great, but at the same time we think they're not so great.

Yeah, there's something to that. The other thing, too, is that it's worth looking at the continent for certain models. So I just finished Thomas Piketty's work, *Capital in the 21st Century*—and here's an economist who in fact criticizes economics for having excessive mathematization, he thinks you don't really need this to get the core economic realities on the page...this massive tome has two distinguishing features. One is a work of economics, the whole theory is encapsulated in three equations, two of which are accounting identities, so we're talking very simple mathematics. But he gets the core of the argument out with basic algebraic equations that any educated person could easily grasp. But secondly, he's also a humanist. What he's interested in is not just, you know, technical measures of inequality like the Gini coefficient. What he wants to know is: when the distribution of income looks like this, and the distribution of wealth, what kind of a society do we end up having? So he digs back into nineteenth century novels by Balzac and Austen and shows you: look, if you have a society where the really immense wealth

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is acquired by inheritance, you create a society in which the actual work you do counts for almost nothing because you can't make a fortune just by working. The only way to be really big and powerful is to marry into wealth, or be lucky enough to have really wealthy parents. And, you know, you get a very decadent society that looks like this. So his worry is: we're heading back, you know, to the Bell epic.

Yeah, but where's our Jane Austen? We want at least a Jane Austen if we're going to go back.

Right, right.

Well, do you think, then, that egalitarianism might have a "moment?"

I think it's ready, yes. So what we're getting now is a return to the extreme levels of inequality that were seen in the nineteenth century and, you know, I see the Occupy movement, even though it didn't last, as a kind of... initial kind of protest movement as people become aware of where we're headed and what its implications are. And more fundamentally, people are more and more angry at the way the rich have captured the political process. In this respect, just to give you an example, is not a concern that's solely on the left. So if you look at, say, Eric Cantor who just got unseated.

By an economics professor!

Yes by an economics professor! Who is known to be a Tea Party candidate but if you look deeper, it turns out the press said it was all about immigration and people are upset about immigration. But if you look deeper, actually, a big part of his campaign was that Cantor was creature of crony capitalism—that he's handing out from Washington all kinds of favors to big business and it's Wall Street that's screwing over Main Street.

And actually if you see the people on the in the Republican Party who are mobilizing against him, well yes, he is not popular amongst the big business part of the Republican Party.

Yeah.

So what about the Tea Party? The Tea Party seems to be a "social movement"... would you say that it's not really a cohesive thing, that there are parts of it that may be grassroots, but there's also these forces that are trying to co-opt it, or what is it?

Yeah, there are parts of the Tea Party that I think resonate and can connect up with the egalitarian agenda. Front and foremost is resentment against crony capitalism. That's why they hated the bailouts of the big Wall Street banks. They thought they should have just gone under. You know, they made a bunch of bad bets, why should Washington bail them out? Now as an economic proposition, I think it's a little crazy because if you let them all go, then we're in a great depression and it's very hard to get out of something that big. So I see the Tea Party though, also, as very disturbed by emerging plutocracy and corruption. The idea that the super rich are just buying elections—they don't like that. This is a real opportunity, I think, for a wide spectrum of the American people to get on board. The downside of the Tea Party is that if you look at their organization information, who they listen to, and how they process information, I think they're in a

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major epistemic bubble. And so they're not really connecting up with reality in useful ways. There's too much paranoia, too much bigotry, too much listening to people who are scamming them...and not enough listening to a wider diversity of opinion.

Well how do you, I mean...how does that bubble get burst? I mean we're now at a point where we do tend to—more and more it's driving towards a case where you're just exposed to the reality that some algorithm has decided is the reality you want.

Oh yeah, I agree. The way Google is filtering our searches and tailoring them I think is really wrong. I think what they should do is: there are reasons why they have some tailoring of search results, especially if you're shopping or something. But if you're looking for information or political information I think the Google algorithm should be tweaked so that at random they just toss out some stuff far outside the sources you're used to looking at—and invite you to click!

Maybe this is what [Anonymous] should be doing; maybe this will be the goal for hackers. Don't mess with our reality.

Yeah, yeah.

Your most recent book was also in this theme of sort of engaging with social science, *The Imperative of Integration* [Princeton University Press, 2010]. Could you say a little bit about that?

Right. So for a long time I've been interested in issues of racial inequality and it started off as more of a curricular concern at the University of Michigan where I teach, where there's a lot of racial animus because students were coming to campus from different racial backgrounds and, kind of, meeting each other for the first time—those initial encounters aren't always that great. So years ago, decades ago really, a group of faculty at the University of Michigan decided to address this with a curricular response, and I taught one of the courses that was dealing with racial inequality and other kinds of inequality; a law and philosophy course that I've taught for many years. But after teaching, it kind of inspired me to think more systematically from a research perspective about these problems. And I started reading a lot of social scientific works about the origins of racial inequality and how its perpetuated today, and even after the abolition of slavery and Jim Crow and establishing anti-discrimination law, we still see a lot of inequality. And what I discovered was a lot of this is generated by racial segregation, especially at the residential level and it's quite severe. I lived in Detroit for a few years in a neighborhood that was about, I don't know, maybe about 75% black. And I was commuting from Detroit to Ann Arbor, which is overwhelmingly white—you just see this tremendous difference—people are living in different worlds.

Hey, I'm in Flint.

Yeah, yeah exactly. Now a lot of whites predominantly I think are completely out of touch with the reality of segregation and what it means, and how that builds into concentrated poverty and very deprived neighborhoods and very few resources, difficulty finding jobs, high unemployment, and so forth. So I started putting the pieces together using a lot of the work of social scientists and also thinking about these problems from the perspective

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of democratic theory, largely informed by people like John Stuart Mill and John Dewey about how democracy isn't just about the dictatorship of the majority. That's a wrong conception of democracy and if you want to see it in action, you can look at what the Muslim Brotherhood was doing in Egypt. And they said, "okay, we're the majority now, we won, now we just dictate, no compromises." You get something like that, it's not democracy—democracy is based on people from different walks of life getting together and trying to hammer out common solutions. Negotiation is critical to it, compromise, trying to come to grips with differences and not just steamroll the opposition. But that requires actual exchange, it requires interaction, it requires people getting together from different walks of life and talking and pooling knowledge. So I see a lot of this as a kind of epistemic problem. We have to share knowledge of perspectives and build new perspectives out of that pool of knowledge.

I liked that nugget that you had about how interracial juries are better instances of, I don't know, public reason than non-integrated juries. What's the research been on that?

Yeah, well there's this one guy, Samuel Sommers who's done some wonderful work on mock juries. So he goes down to the courtroom where real juries are being impaneled—so these are people who have actually been selected into the jury pool—and then, if they haven't been selected for a real trial, he goes up and says, "well do you want to be in a mock trial?" He gets people who are already in a kind of jury mind.

Does he give them six bucks a day, or whatever it is?

I think he pays them more! And then he exposes them to the facts of a fictional trial, and then he mics the jury room. Now in the old days, you know, they actually mic'd real jury rooms, but then that was nixed—you're not allowed to spy on real jury deliberation, but it turns out that even in a mock jury people really take on the kind of conscientiousness of jury service, they take it seriously. What he found was you get together a mock juries—you can have an all white jury, you can have a mixed-race jury—what he found is the mixed race jury is more epistemically responsible on every measure you could think of. They deliberate longer, they consider more effects, they consider what is known as "missing evidence"—that is: what evidence did the prosecution fail to present that really should have been presented in order to nail the case if this person is guilty, they're more likely to notice racial bias in the trial proceedings, you know, if there was any bigotry that was appealed to by one or the other sides.

Well you kind of see this like in cases like the OJ trial where the white audience is gob-smacked by the results, but there are actually white jurors and the white jurors were...because they were in an integrated jury, you know, they say, "well actually, it was pretty reasonable if you had been there" and, you know, whereas you can imagine if it was an all-white jury it would be like the general white reaction.

Well yeah I think that's right, now personally I find it hard to believe he wasn't guilty, but I think part of the issue was distrust of the police, given the long history of racism by the police, and it's not unreasonable distrust...

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A piece I just saw was how judges that have daughters—male judges that have daughters are demonstrably more likely to rule in a more women-favorable way than judges that don't. Did you see that?

No, no I hadn't seen that.

I think what it was, was politically oriented that even conservative Republican appointees who have daughters tend to...their decisions are more towards the middle than if they didn't have daughters, so. So, yeah, you're a philosopher engaging with the social sciences; you started as an economics major and you sort of answered this already, but was it that philosophy of science class that drew you to philosophy, or were you already tending there?

Yeah so I originally started as an econ. major, but I was taking philosophy and it was actually one moment of truth. So I'm studying the foundations of economic theory and I came across this wonderful article by Amartya Sen that was published in an economics journal. It was called "Behavior and a Concept of Preference" [*Economica*, August 1973]. And basically it was a beautiful piece of analytical philosophy. He looks at the concept of preference as it's used in economic theory and he says: "look, they're conflating three entirely distinct ideas." One is what you choose—you know, you prefer A to B in the sense that you chose it over B. The other is preference as "this is what I want for myself, like I really like A more, I like A more than B." And the other is, you want it for some other reason but not necessarily because it's for yourself, like you might want it because you think you're obeying a norm of etiquette. So why might you not take the last roll in a basket at the dinner? Because you think somebody else might want it, seems rude to take the last one.

But you really want that last roll!

You really might want it, that's the thing! You might be the person who most wants the last roll, but the rule of etiquette constrains you. And I'm thinking, "wow this is really big" because what it does is...if you're not allowed to conflate those concepts then all the basic theorems of welfare economics fall to pieces. You can't infer just because somebody chose something on the market that it advanced their self-interest, that it was better for them, you know, no! If they feel constrained by some other duty or obligation or social norm, then you can't assume that what they chose is something that really is helpful to them or advances their welfare. And there are a variety of cases, which I think choice under those kinds of perceived constraints calls into question the nice ideas that we have about the outcomes of market exchange. Now it doesn't mean that markets are all bad, I think markets are indispensable in a free society but it does raise questions about how far we should push the logic of untrammelled free markets.

But, yeah, that's become something of a fundamental idea in American culture, that what the market produces is good, is what people want. It's like it's taken to be not even theoretical, it's supposedly pre-theoretical now. It's kind of like how [Richard] Mohr who's at Illinois who was a Plato scholar and then he taught a class on gay ethics in the summer—you know what I'm talking about? And when he first took it—he taught it—it was a bunch of jocks, he said, who took the class because they thought it was a blow off class, and they'd never come across the term "heterosexual"

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because, they just said, it was just “regular guys.” And the same thing is I think true about capitalism now. It’s like “no, that’s reality. This other stuff is theory.” And it’s kind of come to that point that you can’t even say, “look, this is just one amongst competing theories and it should be questioned just as much.”

Well there are also competing practices. So, just to give you an example, right, underlying the ideology of capitalism is the idea that people aren’t going to do stuff for other people if you don’t give them some incentive. What’s in it for me? But then you look at alternative social practices and you see people are perfectly willing. Look at the Internet, all this free information. It’s an unbelievable boon not just for scholars but for anybody who is just curious about stuff. Look at...

Wikipedians!

Wikipedia, also all these academics, right, are putting all kinds of free information up there. We just want to be read! We want to communicate!

Well but, you know, we’re in a different situation, though—it is true we want to be read, but you know, we’re in a position where we can.

That’s quite right, but there’s also a lot of people who just put up information without any expectation for compensation, because they want to communicate with people.

Yeah if you ever want to change the batteries in something that’s tricky, it’s on YouTube. Somebody...you type in the model of what it is and there’s a little video, where somebody, usually with a Sheffield accent for some reason, you know, shows you how to change the batteries, and it’s great...like some teenager. And my kid pointed that out when I was trying to update the memory on a laptop, he just said, “well, go to YouTube,” and there it is.

Yeah, exactly. And here’s another remarkable thing: is that...so my husband has a long commute to Dearborn and back, and he likes to listen to history tapes. So there’s this guy online called Dan Carlin who does history lectures. He’s a total amateur, but he’s very entertaining and very erudite. He’s really, you know...

An autodidact?

Yeah! And he just gives these wonderful lectures. So—for free! It’s on there, on the web. And my husband downloads them. And then he thought, “you know I’ve been getting so much learning from this guy, I really feel like compensating him.” And there’s a little link you can press and you can pay this guy for stuff that he’s providing for free. And my husband decided, “you know we should really give him a hunk of change for this.” Well he did and we got this lovely message back from Carlin saying that, in fact, he’s so pleased by the generosity of people who, you know, didn’t have to pay that this has enabled him basically...this is how he makes his living. Imagine that! So now economics theory would say he’s crazy, why, you know, why pay for it? When, in fact, there’s enough people out there who pay for it that he can make his living from it.

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But I think what most people would say is: “well that’s the free market! You want it, you pay for it.” So I think he gets subsumed in to the general, you know...that’s not a counter-example, that’s just the market in all its wonder.

Well, but it’s not the market in the sense that there’s no contractual relation. It’s pure gift giving on both sides. It’s pure reciprocal gift giving. And as we know, as the anthropologists will tell us is that gift giving ... that’s a distinct logic form the market.

And sometimes a fraught process.

It is definitely. I am not at all advocating that we return to a society where people get what they need through gift giving, because, you look at the potlatch system and other systems, there’s always something in the background. In return for getting what you need, you need to subordinate yourself to the person who gave it.

You seem to be forging a path a little bit away from how analytic philosophy has been practiced. Would you say that’s true, or would you say you’re part of a new trend? I mean, I think, for example, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* was—that something like what you’re doing, was the idea behind it. But you do see an awful lot of like standard philosophical nit-picking going on that is not really going to be of much interest to non-philosophers.

Yeah, so part of what is inspiring me is pragmatism.

Dewey.

Dewey, exactly. And Dewey, even though he overlapped with the analytics, the truth is he was educated intellectually for decades before analytic philosophy came to the United States, and you know the downside of that is you actually read Dewey and it’s an incredible smog—he’s not reading as clearly as you know we would like. But at the same time I think his instincts are fundamentally right. You get your problems from the world, and you work through them, and that’s what I want to bring back. And I also want to bring back the idea that it doesn’t take a lot of technical apparatus to get at what’s really important, and to express it. These ideas should be communicable to people who don’t have sophisticated training in the tools of analytic philosophy. Most of the core ideas you can get out very simply, and that’s one of the reasons I like Piketty—you don’t need a whole lot of technical apparatus.

And your writing style in general is very accessible, and I—it’s always a relief to come across philosophers who write like you write. [Jeremy Waldron is] another one. But it’s kind of rare to come across writers in philosophy who might make a genuine effort to be accessible. Is that a goal for you, in particular?

It’s definitely a goal, yeah. I want to be accessible and also show that philosophy can be really fun! It’s also one of the reasons why my current work on the history of egalitarianism—I’m reading all these non-canonical authors, a lot of them are really loopy and wild, but boy are they fun.

Yes, I’ve noticed you’ve given a talk on Thomas Paine, for example.

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Exactly, yeah.

You've also just recently changed your title from the John Rawls Collegiate Professor of Philosophy and Women's Studies to the John Dewey...is that like a mark of your change in [approach]?

Well, basically I got promoted from collegiate professor to university professor and every time that happens you get to change your title, so, in fact, I had always wanted to be the John Dewey Professor, but at the time I was asked to be collegiate professor; my colleague Steve Darwall had already nabbed the Dewey line, but now that he's at Yale I could get it.

Nice.

A tremendous debt, of course, to my advisor John Rawls but I wanted to dig deeper into the history.

Talking of Rawls, in the twentieth century, Rawls was sort of the preeminent political philosopher, towering over everybody in Anglo-American philosophy. But at the same time when you read Rawls—and it can be painful—it's very dense, there are very few examples, but he's a systematic thinker, and it is ideal theory. And you do non-ideal theory, as you say. Do you think that Rawls's influence has been a good thing, or has it been a bad thing? Because for the longest time political philosophy was basically responses to Rawls. Do you think that's changing? I mean obviously, as you said your inner Rawlsian came out in response to luck egalitarianism, but, in general?

Yeah, so I learned tremendous amounts from him.

Everybody says he was just the nicest guy in the world.

Very, yeah, amazing; really amazing human being, so I'm very grateful for that but I do...I'm much more moved by contemporary trends in non-ideal theory, I think a lot of philosophy—political philosophy—is moving in that direction, especially when we look at international justice, because people see that there are all these intractable problems in the wider world and even to come to grips with it, we take for granted the familiar domestic American scene or, European scene, developed world scene...the problems in the least developed countries are dramatically different, and so I think it almost forces us to come to grips with very different social contexts and different sorts of problems. And that's the impulse towards non-ideal theory is you start with what the problems are that people are suffering from and look at them in some detail about what's causing them, what are the underlying mechanisms of self-worth and start building theory out from that.

But do you think you have a grand view underneath? I mean because you've written on affirmative action, surrogate motherhood, dependent care, and you've had stuff on animal rights, atheistic morality, emotions in Kant's moral philosophy—well, putting those to the side, I mean things like affirmative action and surrogate

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motherhood, do you think you maybe have an overall theory that would be...you don't quite know what it is but it's emerging, or do you think the use of ...you should genuinely deal with these problems in isolation?

Well so I have some background values or ideals... I am very moved by this background ideal of a society of free and equal people and what it would take to achieve that.

And you say you do non-ideal theory?

Well, it's an ideal in the way Dewey thought of ideals, which is: they're more like instruments or tools of exploration. And so you can't vindicate an ideal just through sheer argumentation. Ultimately you have a picture of a kind of society you want, or social relations or solutions and their problem, but then you have to test them in an experiment in living. Mill was the same way. And so just because you have this picture you think is justified by argument, it's not sufficient. You put it into practice and see whether you can actually live the results.

That's part of the reason you're even interested in this history of egalitarian movements.

Absolutely.

But isn't it a bit depressing about how so many of them failed?

Well that's actually part of the richness of the story, right? And in fact it's very important to look very closely at the failures. You know, people have had all kinds of ideas about how to create a society of equals—maybe we should all live in a commune. This has been tried time and again, time and again, and it always fails! Well that's really interesting. It turns out there are only a small number of people in developed societies who can tolerate living in a communal society. I mean there are some people for whom it really suits them, the vast majority of people are much more individualistic. Once they have the freedom and the material means to live in a smaller unit they prefer that. That I think is an incredibly powerful impulse in human beings and egalitarians really had to pay very deep attention to it. So the history of failure of communal experiments I think is a tremendous source of learning, and what you see is egalitarians really did learn from this. You had in the early nineteenth century a huge number of experiments, you know, the United States was the hotbed of experimentation in utopian socialism. You have the Oneida Community, Owens coming out...it's like, the United States was this super-radical place where there was all this open territory and people could create these amazingly radical experiments—but they all failed! Okay, so egalitarians really did have to go back to the drawing board, and they had to think of a way in which you could realize a society of equals where you don't have too much intimacy, and in a way democracy is part of that. You scale up the size of the unit but with more distance between people. So we're only partially accountable to each other in a democratic form—we're thinking at the state level. We still reserve a lot of freedom and independence for ourselves and we only regulate those matters that are credibly shared.

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Elizabeth Anderson

I think the only people who should be allowed to write on those are people who've had kids who demand their own rooms and insist on what is theirs despite the fact that you paid for it all.

Well you know it's funny because Bob [Robert C.] Ellickson, who is a very interesting property theorist, more on the libertarian side, he has some really wonderful work on the origins of property and how, for instance, the Mormons started off in communal existence out in Utah but then pretty soon decided they were going to divide up the plots into mutual farms. There's very compelling reasoning for this but one of the reasons he said about the collapse of the hippie communes—how come the hippies couldn't get it together with all their idealism about communal living? He says because they couldn't figure out who had to do the dishes—they just began piling up because nobody wanted to do it!

Which is why you said the bureaucracy is enormously important, which is a sad thing to discover, but an important thing.

Well, right: bureaucracy exists because it does actually serve some functions, and one is, you can assign people a role then they have to perform it, but they're also replaceable. You know a downside to communal existence is that usually what keeps it together is some kind of charismatic leader—the leader dies and the whole thing falls to pieces. Bureaucracies, they don't have any charisma. Which, you know actually is an advantage because if you look at what charismatic leadership gets you, you know, sometimes it's really bad.

Another thing I heard recently is about a history of kitchens and kitchens in the Soviet Union. It was very important that Stalin had these...instituted these policies of communal kitchens, and it was very oppressive because this would be a way that the secret police would spy on everybody and it was only in the Brezhnev years when kitchens became more private that people carried over this idea that they should meet there, but then they became sort of hotbeds of, you know, subversion, when it was less obviously a tool of oppression. But this thing about communal kitchens, their role, developed and how important they were to Soviet society I think is another instance.

Yes, I agree, yeah. The impulse to privacy is really, really a very important thing for human beings.

But it didn't used to be, I mean, like when apparently we all slept in one big room and, you know, people had sex in public except the royals. I mean isn't that supposed to be the way it works?

Well even the royals, if you visit the palace at Versailles you find out they hadn't invented the hallway yet, and so you would go from a salon to a bedroom to another salon through a bedroom, and so forth—you know I don't think they had much of an idea of privacy!

All of the great political theorists make a stance on how malleable human nature is, you know, whether or not human nature can be shaped by institutions, or whether or not human nature shapes institutions, or to what degree...and if they'd been

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shaped by this institution, they're sort of baked for a while and you can't rush in and try to install these new institutions because it won't work. What's your [view]? Do you think there is a basic human nature that all institutions have to take notice of, or do you think it is more malleable?

I think human nature is basically the same everywhere, but that institutions draw on human nature in the sense of our emotional capacities and repertoires, our fundamental responses to the world, I think is the same everywhere. But what institutions do is they'll channel those impulses in different ways, they'll make more use of some than others, they can mobilize cooperation on a larger and larger scale—I think that a major feature of modernity is: how do you get cooperation beyond the scale of the local tribe to larger and larger units? I think that's a major key to both the advancement of peace in the world and cooperation and economic development is just scaling down...

You don't want people to sulk on their own rocks.

Expanding the extent of cooperation is just really critical to expanding prosperity. And trust, too. So, if you look at the most fundamental level, how do you expand trust? I think those institutional forms are, you know...of course there has to be cultural variation in different societies depending on background ideologies, and norms, and traditions, and so forth. So there's a lot of variations on a theme, but the general idea that you can do stuff to expand trust between strangers is—that's what a lot of institutional development is about—so we're capable of cooperating with strangers, but you need the right intuitional context to make that happen.

I think reality TV is perhaps the most important thing. I mean I'm only half-joking. I think that, for example, now that we've had the gay marriage movement, the next hurdle is transgender people.

I agree, yeah.

But I think in the time...you know, over the past ten years, I think people were just not aware of transgender people, like ten years ago—the vast majority—obviously if you're in some urban centers you'd be aware, but you know the vast majority of people...But I think because of this profusion of reality TV shows and things like that, people are much more aware and I think that helps towards acceptance.

I agree completely. And you know showing transgender people getting on with their lives and, you know, being basically normal and having the same kind of, you know, loving people and working hard and having just ordinary concerns like anybody else I think is critical to humanizing them, and to acceptance...

And so it's interesting that in the United States at the moment you have these, sort of ...in one sense those on the left see there's this sort of retrenchment and, you know, gun rights seem to be...well the fact that I said "gun rights" means that I'm using terminology that's favorable to the legalization side—that seems to be expanding. And abortion rights are being cut back everywhere. But at the same time we're also getting this huge—as I would characterize it—steps forward in gay rights and things, and I see the gay rights as sort of a cultural issue, and it's coming from being

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exposed on the TV, being exposed on the internet, whereas the gun rights and stuff seems to be motivated politically. So, you've got the forces of culture, the liberals like what they're doing, and but then you have this drive to muddy the water on global warming, you know, now a greater percentage of people are doubtful about global warming than ten years ago, despite the fact that the science hasn't changed, if anything it's gotten more and more alarming. And so there're sort of different channels of information. And, of course, the woolly liberal says "once you show people what people are like, you will come to accept them."

And so one of the worries here is the kind that psychologists never tire in reminding us. Human beings are not all that rational. So much for the worse for philosophers!

No.

Arguments aren't really what cut it. It's a real problem. But at the same time I do think that there's a certain degree of interesting movement. So a lot of it depends on framing. If people see action on global warming as coming from the Democratic Party or from liberals—that labeling makes an awful lot of people very suspicious. On the other hand you talk to a Republican farmer in Oklahoma who is facing long-term drought, okay, he's got a real problem and he knows he's got to deal with it. It's a matter of how you reach people and what level you communicate with them, and there are channels that can be used. A lot of it has to do with the circles of trust. What sources of information do you trust? What do you not trust? And, sure, your typical Tea Party person is not going to trust the liberal talking head on TV, they're not going to trust Al Gore, but they will trust...

But the fact that they see them as a "liberal talking head"—that's something that is an achievement of certain forces on the right, that they have succeeded in presenting this view. I mean maybe there's some truth to it if you can show studies that the majority of reporters are left-leaning or whatever. But...

Although, you know, the majority of newspaper owners are very right-leaning.

That's true, but the majority of newspaper owners are Rupert Murdoch. But, you know, that's sort of an achievement in changing the mindset is: they've managed to get this idea out of "it's a little relative." It's funny that you hear Republican talking heads talking about moral relativism of the left, but the real relativism is coming from the right. It's saying that it's all just opinion so we'll stick with our opinion because you trust us, we're like you.

Well I think there is a certain amount of truth to that, but there's also ways to change minds. For instance there are some Christian evangelicals who are on board with climate change. So my recommendation for environmentalists is: don't send Al Gore out to the heartland of America—

Although he is from the heartland!

You know, go find evangelicals who are on board. And, I don't know, I think of the heartland of being like Kansas. So you have to pick the right people to communicate. People who are ready and have some bond of trust, but that's possible. And the left has

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to talk more to the right. It's not just a problem with the right only talking to itself, the left has its own problems and its own echo chambers. I don't think those are as severe as those on the right but, you know, there has to be a lot more communication across these ideological boundaries.

Talking of which, now that you're writing stuff that has impact outside academic philosophy, are you finding the critical response different? I mean, are you getting sort of blowback from both sides? Are you getting the same kind of thing or are you finding that there's a wider range of criticism when you put stuff out?

So it's really interesting when you put stuff out to the wider public you get a much wider range of responses. So by far the most influential piece I've ever written from the standpoint of non-academics is this little piece I wrote on atheism ["If God is Dead, is Everything Permitted?," in Louise Antony, ed., *Philosophers without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life* (Oxford University Press, 2007)], which I got a tremendous response from.

Oh, yeah that's because Hitchens put it...

It was in the Hitchens volume [Christopher Hitchens, ed., *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever* (DaCapo Press/Perseus Books, 2007)], which by the way he lifted without telling me! I didn't mind—apparently I had signed away the copy write to Oxford and so Oxford just sent it out, but I think as a courtesy they should tell the author. I found out about it because I was looking on a bookshelf at the bookstore one day and came across Hitchens' volume and I just remember being surprised to see my own essay in there. But it got a tremendous response because a lot of people who read it are people who were raised in a Christian household—seriously Christian household. And they had doubts and exploration, and they start reading Hitchens, and I got a lot of emails, very appreciative emails about it. On the other hand, you get a lot tougher stuff. So I appeared on a panel at the University of Michigan campus that was dealing with police racial profiling of students on campus, and the panel included some African American students who felt very intimidated when the police have a bulletin that says, you know, 'black male wearing blue jeans and a backpack, looks between the ages of 18-24, and he's between you know, 5'7 and 6'2' and that describes 90% of black males on campus!

Well, not the basketball team...

Well no not quite but that's a very small number of people, you know. And so it's said that they would actually skip class that day because they didn't want to be harassed by the police, and they told vivid stories about how they'd been harassed...and I was on this panel, and I talked about how completely generic descriptions like that are number one, not useful as warnings. What are they doing? They're teaching to avoid all the black men under any description practically. It's not useful, it's very damaging to them...I didn't say you shouldn't have any racial descriptions at all, but you have to have something very narrow and specific so you can actually identify somebody in particular. You know like "scar on the left cheek," or something like this that's identifiable.

Or which team their baseball hat says.

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Whatever, yeah. At any rate in response to that I received death threats from racist organizations.

Wow.

So you get all kinds of responses when you speak to the wider public.

Okay well thank you very much. This was great, and thanks for making the time.

Yeah it was fun, thanks for the invitation.