*In A. Bianchi, ed.,* Language and Reality from a Naturalistic Perspective: Themes from Michael Devitt*, Cham, Springer, 2020, pp. 1-3.*

INTRODUCTION – MICHAEL DEVITT AT EIGHTY

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It is difficult to deny, I believe, that during the last forty years or so Michael Devitt has been a leading philosopher in the analytic field. The purpose of this volume is to celebrate his many important contributions to philosophy on the occasion of his eightieth birthday.

Born to Australians in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Devitt was initially raised in Sydney – and anyone who has had the chance to meet him knows just how Australian he is – but at the age of eight moved to England, where he spent all of his youth. There, after a passionate reading of Russell’s *The Problems of Philosophy*, he started to become interested in philosophy. Back in Australia for various reasons, in 1962 he enrolled at the University of Sydney, where he majored in philosophy and psychology. In 1967 he moved to the United States (an unprecedented choice for an Australian philosopher) to take a Ph.D. in philosophy at Harvard University, where he had W.V. Quine as his supervisor and Hilary Putnam among his teachers. Back in Australia again in 1971, he taught at the University of Sydney for seventeen years, before returning to the United States to occupy a position first, in 1988, at the University of Maryland and then, in 1999, at CUNY’s Graduate Center, which he contributed to making one of the top places for studying, and doing research in, philosophy. A tireless traveler, throughout his career Devitt continuously gave talks and participated in conferences all around the world, disseminating ideas within the philosophical community, fostering the philosophical debate, and building deep intellectual as well as human relationships everywhere.

Together with Quine, from whom he inherited his unabashed naturalism and the animadversion to the *a priori*, and Putnam, a thinker who had a deep influence on Devitt’s philosophical development was Saul Kripke. In fact, in 1967 Devitt attended a series of lectures by the young Kripke at Harvard, which anticipated those on naming and necessity given at Princeton University in 1970 – as he likes to recall, he missed only one of them to take part in a rally against the Vietnam war. Impressed by them – he was among the first to realize how revolutionary Kripke’s ideas were –, Devitt decided to work on the semantics of proper names and other singular terms (a topic to which he had been already introduced by C.B. Martin in Sydney) and elaborated his causal theory of reference, which brought him international fame. His Ph.D. dissertation, *The Semantics of Proper Names: A Causal Theory* (1972), was devoted to it, as well as his first philosophical article, “Singular Terms” (1974), his first book, *Designation* (1981), and dozens of later publications. In the following years, Devitt defended the related, and “shocking,” idea that meanings can be causal, non-descriptive, modes of presentation, and began to be interested in the more general issue of the nature of language. This led him to argue, first, in *Ignorance of Language* (2006), against Chomskyan orthodoxy, claiming that languages are external rather than internal; and, second, in *Overlooking Conventions*, which is about to appear for Springer, against various forms of contextualism in the philosophy of language. On philosophy of language he also wrote, together with one of the contributors to this volume, Kim Sterelny, an opinionated and very successful introduction, *Language and Reality* (1987), whose title (which he did not like) inspired that of this book (which, alas, he likes no better).[[1]](#footnote-1)

But Devitt’s philosophical interests extend way beyond philosophy of language. He is famous for vigorously defending realism (in his second, successful, book, *Realism and Truth*, 1984), against various, once trendy, forms of constructivism – from Kant through Goodman and the “renegade” Putnam to post-modernism –, which are less trendy now perhaps thanks to his criticisms too. Moreover, he has always been interested in methodology and metaphilosophy: he has tried to get clear about the role and nature of intuitions, he has criticized the widespread idea that we may have *a priori* knowledge from a naturalistic perspective, and he has insisted on *Putting Metaphysics First*, as the title of a collection of his essays (2010) declares. And he has also contributed to philosophy of mind, advocating a version of the representational theory of mind, and, more recently, to philosophy of biology, where he has argued in favor of a version of biological essentialism.

I first met Devitt in April 2005. I had just come back to Italy from Los Angeles, where I had spent one year doing research at UCLA after finishing my graduate studies. Invited by the late Eva Picardi, he and Stephen Neale came to Bologna, the city where I was living at the time, to discuss the referential use of definite descriptions, a topic made famous by Keith Donnellan. I admit that I was quite surprised to discover that even outside California people were able to say sensible things on the subject. However, my human and intellectual relationship with Michael did not begin until some years later, when, in September 2009, we were both speaking at a conference on meaning organized by Alex Burri in Erfurt, Germany. We started to argue about reference, and we are not through with it yet. Afterwards, Devitt came various times to Parma (because of the quality of its food, he would probably gloss), to give talks and take part in workshops and conferences at my university. We have also frequently met elsewhere: in Bologna, in Rome, a couple of times in Barcelona thanks to another of the contributors to this volume, Genoveva Martí, a couple of times in Dubrovnik. And, more recently, in his wonderful house (“Versailles on Hudson”!) in Upstate New York. Although we disagree on various issues, as my contribution to this volume also witnesses, on each of these occasions I learned a lot from him. And, of course, it was always fun.

Most, if not all, contributors to this volume came to know Devitt much earlier than me. All renowned philosophers from all over the world, they are former students or colleagues, but first of all friends, of his. And they have all used the chance offered to them by this celebration of his eightieth birthday to add another twist to their, often long-lasting, intellectual exchange with him, engaging with many aspects of his philosophical work.

As should have become clear from what I have written so far, Devitt likes to argue, or, as they colorfully put it in Australia, “to stir the possum” (*Stirring the Possum* was indeed his suggestion for the title of this volume, a suggestion which, to his dismay, was eventually rejected because of its potential obscurity to non-Australian readers). Philosophy advances this way, he says. Thus, he wrote extensive replies to all the contributions to this volume, which, organized, like the contributions themselves, into five parts (*Philosophy of Linguistics*, *Theory of Reference*, *Theory of Meaning*, *Methodology*, and *Metaphysics*), are collected at the end of it and reveal his current stand on many of the issues he has been interested in during his long career. And I am pretty sure that the show will go on: many of these exchanges will continue, back and forth, for years. Thanks, Michael!

1. Just for the record, Devitt and Sterelny wanted to call their book *Language, Mind, and Everything*, inspired on the one hand by the opening of Quine’s “On What There Is” and on the other by the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything in Douglas Adams’ *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. The publisher found the title too jocular. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)