

Thinking Like an Austrian

Barry Smith

Preprint of version published in J. A. Cavallo and W. E. Block (eds.), *Libertarian Autobiographies*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-29608-6_1

I was born in 1952 in the small town of Bury, near Manchester, England. My father Reginald was a bricklayer and trade union organizer, and I grew up with a never seriously questioned adherence to old-fashioned British Labour Party politics. As a working-class child who was good at passing tests, I won a local authority scholarship to attend what is now a public (which means in England: private) school. This gave me an excellent grounding, above all in mathematics and the German language.

From there I won a scholarship to Oxford, where in the first week I attended the introductory fair offered by the various Oxford student societies. Not at that time interested in lacrosse or punting, I drifted in the direction of the political corner and listened in for a while on conversations around the Marxist stall. From there, by a fortunate accident – since I was then entirely ignorant of libertarian politics – I drifted over to the libertarian stall, where the conversations seemed immediately to be much more interesting. And so I joined, in what was probably the first political act of my life, the Oxford Libertarian Society. A new world was opened up to me, and in a rush of enthusiasm, I read many books, including Ayn Rand, Carl Menger, Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek (a lot of Hayek), Murray Rothbard, and (somewhat later) Walter Block (whose *Defending the Undefendable* contributed powerfully to my subsequent contrarian leanings). I also came to know some of the leading lights in English libertarianism, including John Gray, Chris Tame (founder of the Libertarian Alliance), Jeremy Shearmur (research assistant of Karl Popper at the London School of Economics), and above all David Ramsay Steele, with whom I remain in close contact. (Libertarianism in England is, it should be noted, different in many ways from its US counterpart. The Wikipedia page for “Libertarianism in the United Kingdom,” for example, contains as its centerpiece a large picture of Margaret Thatcher.)

I was enrolled in Oxford in the newly established joint degree in Mathematics and Philosophy, where my studies were organized under what I believe is a most excellent system. On the philosophy side, I was required to write one essay per week, to be read out loud at a one-on-one session with my philosophy tutor. I thus learned how to write for a deadline and how to withstand criticism. In addition, I was required to attend occasional meetings with my mathematics tutor to ensure that things were going well with my studies on the side of mathematics and logic. Otherwise, I was required to attend no lectures at all. A system of this sort works well not least because of the two sets of written exams which all students were required to take at the end of the

first and final (which means third) years, the latter consisting of some 24 hours spent writing down answers to difficult questions in a large hall with hundreds of other students all wearing academic gowns.

I was surrounded in Oxford by world-class philosophers. But my lecture-going activities were confined almost entirely to those given in the Mathematics Institute, especially the lectures given by Michael Dummett who was at that time Reader in the Philosophy of Mathematics. For the rest of the time I did a lot of reading under my own direction, gradually breaking away from the kind of analytic philosophy which was then (and is still today) dominant in Anglosaxophone countries, and searching instead for an alternative approach, which involved exploring the various philosophical traditions growing out of Continental Europe.

By my second year I had an idea that after graduation I would work on a PhD on the aesthetics of abstract entities (on why certain mathematical proofs, or certain chess games, or certain pieces of abstract music, are considered more beautiful than others), and my reading in philosophy was guided by a search for ideas that might be useful to me in achieving this goal. This led me, again by lucky accident, to Roman Ingarden, a Polish philosopher well known for his work on aesthetics. But I landed specifically on a slim book by Ingarden entitled *Time and Modes of Being*, which is a translation of parts of his mammoth (four-volume) treatise on ontology entitled *Controversy over the Existence of the World*. It was Ingarden who inspired – both through his work on ontology and through what I slowly discovered about his place in the tradition of Continental philosophy – all of my subsequent work.

First, I discovered that Ingarden, although very much a Polish philosopher, wrote almost all of his writings in German. Importantly for our purposes here, Ingarden (like his friend Karol Wojtyła, the Polish Pope St. John Paul II) was born in a part of Poland that was at the time a part of Austria. Moreover, the Polish philosophical tradition of which he formed a part had its roots in another part of Austria, namely Lemberg (now commonly called ‘Lviv’ and for the moment a part of the Ukraine). This Polish tradition was thus in its turn a part of a much larger *Austrian* philosophical tradition, with interesting connections with the Austrian school of economics. (See my *Austrian Philosophy: The Legacy of Franz Brentano*, La Salle and Chicago: Open Court, 1994, and also Wolfgang Grassl and Barry Smith, eds., *Austrian Economics: Historical and Philosophical Background*, New York: New York University Press, London/Sydney: Croom Helm, 1986.)

The former was rooted in the work of Franz Brentano in Vienna, and included philosophers based in Prague, such as Christian von Ehrenfels and Anton Marty. It included also Edmund Husserl, another philosopher born in Austria, but one who made his name in Germany, where his earliest followers – the founders in the early 1900s of what came to be known as the “phenomenological movement” – were based in Munich. The school they formed, after some of them moved to join Husserl in Göttingen, is nowadays referred to as the “Munich-Göttingen” or sometimes as the “realist” school of phenomenology.

The work of this school can be characterized as the attempt to apply a broadly aprioristic ontological method rooted in the *Logical Investigations* of Edmund Husserl to the study of topics such as law, language, the state, religion, and human action, all topics falling outside philosophy more narrowly conceived. The most important of these philosophers was almost certainly Adolf Reinach, whose monograph entitled *The A Priori Foundations of the Civil Law* (written in 1913) anticipated later developments in what is now called the theory of speech acts. This monograph also contains an account of the foundations of law which, as documented by Jörg Guido Hülsmann, Stephen Kinsella, and others, has interesting parallels with the account of the foundations of economics advanced by Mises and others in the Austrian school of economics. Ingarden, too, was one of those realist philosophers who studied with Husserl in Göttingen. On returning to his native Poland he founded what we can think of as the Polish branch of this realist phenomenological school, in which Wojtyła, too, can be included as a member. It is an interesting feature of the wider realist phenomenological movement that two of its members – namely Wojtyła (St. John Paul II) and Edith Stein (St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross) – were canonized. (Stein was the author of a big book on what we can think of as the a priori ontology of the state.)

After graduating from Oxford in 1973, with Husserl and Ingarden in my knapsack, I moved to the University of Manchester to write a dissertation, not on aesthetics but rather on ontology. I chose Manchester, since it was at that time one of the few places in England which offered the opportunity to do research on philosophy outside the mainstream analytic tradition. Soon after arriving in Manchester I began a long-standing collaboration with Kevin Mulligan and Peter Simons, two other PhD students with strong realist inclinations and an interest in Austro-German philosophy.

Upon completing my PhD studies in 1976, I received a postdoctoral fellowship to continue my work on philosophy in Austria and Poland. At the same time, I founded with Mulligan and Simons the Seminar for Austro-German Philosophy, under whose auspices we together organized some 40 meetings at venues throughout Europe and the UK with the goal of reawakening interest in Austro-German themes. Topics of these meetings included “On Austrian methodology,” “Human action and the social sciences,” “The Austro-German/Scottish axis,” and “Austrian philosophy and Austrian politics,” the last of these in collaboration with the Carl Menger Society in London. Speakers included John Gray, Philip Pettit, Jeremy Shearmur, and David Steele, as well as philosophers notable for their work on the roots of analytic philosophy in Central European thought such as Roderick Chisholm, Dummett again, Rudolf Haller, J. C. Nyíri, and Jan Woleński. (A full list of these meetings can be found at <http://ontology.buffalo.edu/sagp>.)

In 1979 I moved back to the University of Manchester as a member of the faculty, and in 1980 I organized in Graz a Liberty-Fund-sponsored symposium on “Austrian economics and its philosophical and historical background” in which a central role was played by Israel Kirzner. One goal of the meeting was to explore some of the interactions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries between Austrian philosophy and Austrian economics, interactions especially in the area of value theory. The book resulting from this meeting (reviewed by Rothbard in the

Journal of Applied Philosophy) included my first, heavily Kirzner inspired, publication on Austrian economics, which was followed by a series of essays on the ontology of economics and on the question of apriorism, in all of which I was attempting to work out a position on the foundations of economics and of the social sciences in general on the basis of a realist apriorism in the spirit of Reinach that would build upon the work of Menger and Mises. During this period I edited with the German philosopher Karl Schuhmann a 2-volume critical edition of Reinach's works, which appeared in 1989.

In the same year I left Manchester, foreseeing problems for the Department of Philosophy (which was indeed closed down shortly after I left). I moved to the International Academy of Philosophy (IAP) in the Principality of Liechtenstein, where Hans-Hermann Hoppe's ideas on the virtues of monarchy as a political system are being put into practice as we speak. The IAP had been established by friends of the philosophy of John Paul II, a philosophy derived in no small part from the work of the Munich-Göttingen realist phenomenologists.

In 1994 I accepted a position at the State University of New York at Buffalo, where I have remained ever since. I continue to work on topics related to Reinach and apriorism, but most of my activities in recent years have been in the field of applied ontology, where I have been involved in a series of research initiatives in fields such as biomedical informatics, defense and intelligence, and industrial manufacturing. I have also recently completed a book, co-authored with the German philosopher and AI entrepreneur Jobst Landgrebe, with the title *Why machines will never rule the world*, to be published by Routledge in August 2022. The book can be summarized in multiple ways, but one summary would read as follows: that the Misesian economic calculation argument is in fact just one instance of a much more general argument to the effect that any complex system (which means *inter alia* any system involving human beings as active elements) will be incapable of being modelled by a computable algorithm, and thus every such system will behave in a manner that is unpredictable by any sort of computer.

Barry Smith is an Anglo-American philosopher with a background in the history of ontology, especially in the tradition of Brentano, Husserl, Reinach, and Ingarden, and a current interest in applied ontology and in the limits of artificial intelligence.