Interview with Francesco Berto

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L.: Hi Franz, could you please tell us something about your academic career?

F.: My career has been extremely lucky. I got my PhD from the University of Venice, Italy, in 2004. Then a two-year postdoc at the University of Padua, after which I found myself jobless in Italy. But I was lucky enough to get a so-called 'Chaire d'Excellence' Postdoctoral Fellowship in Paris, at the CNRS, from 2007 too 2009. There I did mostly ontology with Friederike Moltmann, a philosopher and linguist. In 2009 I applied for a lectureship in Scotland, for I knew that Crispin Wright was moving to Aberdeen to set up a new research centre, the Northern Institute of Philosophy. Again, I was lucky enough to get the job, and I've been working there until the end of 2013. In the middle of this, I also spent one year in the US, at the University of Notre Dame (IN), as a fellow of their Institute for Advanced Study, and I also got a research grant in Venice again. In 2013 I was offered a professorship at the University of Amsterdam. Since 2014 I have been working there, at the Institute for Logic, Language and Computation (ILLC) and at the Department of Philosophy.

I said that I have been lucky, for though I had learned a lot of philosophy in Italy, my Italian PhD was not considered very competitive abroad. Of course I didn't know it at the time, nor did I intend to leave my home country (indeed I realized that, to get a job in the world out there, one should publish in international peer-reviewed journals of philosophy, only at the end of my PhD!).

L.: It seems to me that one of the topics of your research, when you started your career, was Hegel. This sounds a bit weird for an analytic philosopher like you! Please tell us about your interpretation of Hegel—you have a paper on it in the *European Journal of Philosophy*, it seems to me.

F.: My PhD thesis was on Hegel. It became a thick 450-page book titled: *Che Cos'è la dialettica hegeliana?* [What Is Hegel's Dialectic?]. They had me study a lot of Hegel in Italy, which I found very difficult and obscure. So I thought about applying tools from analytic philosophy of language to clarify and understand Hegel, in particular his famous "dialectical method". It turned out that there's some literature on that, by authors like Robert Brandom, Paul Redding, and others yet. My main inspirers were two Italian philosophers, though, Emanuele Severino and Diego Marconi. The latter had also done a PhD on Hegel at Pittsburgh. Marconi's idea, which I developed, was that Hegel's dialectic is a theory of concepts. It looks at how certain conceptual words are used, both in the vernacular and in the philosophical and scientific jargon, and at the inferences that people make with them. It then spots contradictions in such uses and inferences, and aims at overcoming (*aufheben*) them.

I stopped working on this, years ago. The main reason was that nobody was listening. The analytic folks (to employ the stereotypical labels) would keep thinking that Hegel is not worth reading. The continentals (ditto) would claim that my attempt at clarifying Hegel was a betrayal, a misunderstanding of Hegel's "richness and depth". So I gave up—life is too short.

L.: Ah this is interesting. And where did you go from there?

F.: Into non-classical logic. Some had used relevant logics to try to formalize Hegel's

dialectics (in their early works Bob Meyer and Richard Routley called some of their relevant systems "dialectical logics"; they even published their stuff in *Studies in Soviet Thought!*). I discovered such logics while working on Hegel, and I was infected by the "Australasian syndrome" (if you want to call it that way).

L.: By the way, I remember that I first met you in Australia. It was, possibly, 2007.

F.: 2008. I was there for the 4th World Congress of Paraconsistency in Melbourne but I also passed by in Sydney.

L.: Right. I remember. But you are also a metaphysician. Aren't you? And how this relate to the fact that you are logician? How did you get into metaphysics?

F.: While I was in Paris doing ontology, I was reading Routley and Priest on non-classical logic. It turned out that they were also non-classical *metaphysicians* (neo–Meinongians, in fact). That was another non–standard and very Australasian way of doing things that infected me. Suddenly the combination of deviant logics and deviant ontologies became an interesting mix.

L.: How do you conceive of metaphysics? What relation between metaphysics and science in your opinion? Can we do metaphysics without doing science?

F.: That's tough! I think that the so-called "armchair metaphysics"—whether Williamson-style (think of *The Philosophy of Philosophy*), or as conceptual clarification, or as the attempt at providing a unified and comprehensive worldview—still has a lot to say. Even in domains that seem to require deep appreciation of results of hard science, such as the metaphysics and ontology of material objects. In their book *Identity in*

Physics, the philosophers of science Steven French and Decio Krause nicely show that our best current physics leaves important questions undecided—it is in fact compatible with two very different, and indeed reciprocally incompatible, ontological packages. When, as they say, "the problem is, it is not always clear what it is that physics teaches us!" (p. 190), armchair metaphysical reflection can step in to help.

And it's not only about clarification. The two incompatible ontological packages, in this case, are—very roughly put—that the particles of QM lack identity and are not individuals, and that, on the contrary, they have identity and are individuals. The first option is currently more popular—indeed, they call it "the received view". But French and Krause nicely show how the received view may call for a deep revision of set theory, thus of the foundations of our current math, and perhaps even of logic. Should we go for this or not, and if so, exactly how? These questions call for a unified and balanced view of the relations between logic, mathematics, physics… One of the things that armchair metaphysics has been traditionally supposed to do, is attempt such a unified view.

L.: Let's go back to logic. What is logic about, in your opinion? Where are logical structures? Is logic a normative or a descriptive discipline?

F.: I have been fond of a traditional view of logic, according to which logical laws are most general principles governing reality itself at the most general level (I did an AHRC project on this). That's how Aristotle understood them. In Book Gamma of *Metaphysics*, he considers (what was later on called) the Law of Non-Contradiction. Aristotle speaks about the Law also in *Organon* (his works on the subject of logic). But only in *Metaphysics* does he come up with a defence against opponents. He also claims that it is only up to what he called the "first philosopher"—nowadays we would say, the

metaphysician—to come up with a defence. That's because the "axioms", as he calls them—and an axiom par excellence for him is the LNC—are principles of "being qua being"; that is to say, of reality as such, in its most general features—which is what metaphysics is about.

Is logic normative, in this view? Well, the point of a deductively valid inference is that there is just no way things could turn out, such that the premises are true but the conclusion false. If logical laws are principles governing reality at the highest level of generality, there is just no kind of reality, or way reality could turn out to be, such that logical laws are defied. Add that truth (preservation) is good, and you get the normativity of logic.

L.: Franz, you mentioned your AHRC project—that was in Aberdeen, within the defunct *Northern Institute of Philosophy*. But it seems to me that now, in Amsterdam, you run another project in relation depending on a big grant you were recently awarded. It is about logic and modal epistemology. Isn't it? Could you please tell us something about it?

F.: Yes it's called "The Logic of Conceivability. Modelling Rational Imagination with Non-Normal Modal Logics". We want to investigate how intentional states like *conceiving* and *imagining* work inferentially. An obvious place to look for logical techniques to do the job is modal-epistemic logic with possible worlds semantics. But the standard approach has a number of problems (logical omniscience, inconceivability of inconsistencies, no hyperintensional distinctions, etc.). I think these can be addressed using non-classical modal logics with so-called *non-normal worlds semantics*. And I think the framework can have nice spin-offs for AI, but also for issues like the link between conceivability and possibility, and modal epistemology. But I'm no expert of

epistemology and only moderately expert in epistemic logic for AI. Also, the project ventures a bit into cognitive psychology and I know nothing about that. So I applied for ERC money in order to hire people with expertise to give me a hand.

L.: Do you see some general "path" in your research as a whole? Are there recurrent themes or topics? Is there anything that you think you are basically interested in?

F.: Maybe that I look at non-standard views? Non-classical logics, non-standard metaontology, etc. (the 'Australasian' bit). Other than that, I don't know. It seems to me that what one gets interested in, and where one ends, are products of lots of very random factors.

L.: Yes I fully agree… It seems to me that in your career you were awarded a number of very good grants... and recently an ERC Consolidator Grant. What do you think of these grants?

F.: I think there's something good with ERC grant policy, namely that they fund pure research and they don't ask a lot of questions about impact, practical applications, and so forth (why pure research is important… Well that's a long story and there's little need to persuade philosophers about this anyway, I guess).

I also think there are bad things about big and very selective individual grants in general. One is that when the ratio of success is 10% or less, and people have to work for months to prepare a grant application and go through the whole process, 90% or more of months and months of work by people will be working time that went lost (that's not exactly precise, for one can re-use one's work to submit elsewhere or again ; you get the picture). That seems a high price to pay even in the name of competitive selection.

Another thing is that it's not clear that the competition here matches the competition for research quality precisely. I know people who are excellent researchers but not into grant-writing, which is an activity very different from writing research papers. It has to do with selling your stuff well, and it's not clear that this is very meritorious (I hear people say that researchers should learn this skill too, but it would be nice to back this up with an argument different from "that's how things are now"). One other thing is that bigger grants tend to go where smaller grants went before. Which means that a minimal and accidental initial divergence on this at the beginning of two people's career (A gets an initial grant as fresh PhD, B is that close but doesn't get it), can develop into a very big divergence across the years. And I say "accidental" because one needs luck in these things (I think on the average it takes more luck to get a grant than to publish in a top journal).

L: Grazie Franz!

F: Di niente. Ciao!