



RADICAL MONISM AND THE FREEDOM TO PLAY

EVELYN ROSE MAUDE, *University of Toronto*
in conversation with MICHAEL DELLA ROCCA¹

Maude: You went to Harvard for your undergraduate degree and you did your PhD at Berkeley under Wallace Matson. How were your experiences at Harvard and at Berkeley?

Della Rocca: Yeah, I was an undergraduate at Harvard and a graduate student at Berkeley, this is now many years ago, and my experiences at both places very much shaped my philosophical career.

I went to Harvard knowing nothing about philosophy really except that I was drawn to what I thought were philosophical questions. And while at Harvard my interests were shaped in part by the great senior faculty there — there were people like Rawls and Nozick that I took courses from — but they were sort of distant figures for me, these great figures. I wasn't close to them but I learned from them. But more influential for me at Harvard were a series of junior faculty members who were there really only briefly but who worked closely with me. Courses from them had an even bigger impact on me.

The first course that helped shape my philosophical interest was a survey course in early modern philosophy — I'm teaching that kind of course now, and I teach it a lot here at Yale — with Gary Hatfield who was at Harvard at the time. There was just a week of the course, I think, devoted to Spinoza. And I had never heard of Spinoza before. That stuck with me, that week. It made me very intrigued about Spinoza and I wanted to pursue that more. In my sophomore year at Harvard, Don Garrett was a junior faculty member there also, and he taught a seminar on Spinoza, so I said I had to take that seminar. That was the first time I ever read the *Ethics* all the way through, in Don's seminar. That was a great experience for me. And then in my junior and senior years I worked a lot with Paul Hoffman who was also a junior faculty member in history of philosophy at Harvard. Harvard had what was called at the time 'folding chairs' in philosophy — kind of postdocs in philosophy, but they were assistant professors but just three-year appointments. It was a nice gig, I guess, but it brought in some really good people. And so Paul worked very closely with me and he advised my senior thesis on Spinoza. It was working on the senior

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thesis with Paul that convinced me that going to graduate school in philosophy was something that I wanted to do.

I didn't go to graduate school with the idea of working in the history of philosophy in particular. I was really open to what I would focus on in philosophy. And I think that was a good attitude to have because I think now people tend to specialise very early and I wasn't specialising in anything, I was just really exploring different areas of philosophy. And that served me well, I think, that kind of openness to philosophy. I was always interested in contemporary areas of philosophy, those were very much in my mind as well. And so I went to Berkeley and wasn't working on history of philosophy particularly, but when I started studying for my qualifying areas, qualifying exams, in philosophy, I returned to Spinoza and started working in history of philosophy as well as other things then.

At Berkeley, there were some great figures that really influenced me a lot. Donald Davidson was there, and he was a tremendous influence. I took a couple of courses with him and that was very influential for me. He wasn't on my dissertation committee but his approach to philosophy stayed with me. Bernard Williams was there for some of my time at Berkeley, and that of course is very influential. I regret that I didn't get as much out of the presence of Bernard at the time. I did have a lot of interactions with him, but I wish I had gotten more out of working with him. It's now that I revisit some of his work, just in recent years, that I can see what an impressive figure he was. Barry Stroud was a big influence on me, and Barry particularly because he blended interests in history of philosophy and contemporary philosophy, as did Bernard actually. But Barry was someone who really was a model for me about how to combine history and contemporary philosophy. George Myro and Hans Sluga were people I took courses from a lot, and they were also very impressive and very influential for me. Janet Broughton was on my dissertation committee — she wasn't the supervisor, but she was on my dissertation committee — and she shaped my PhD thesis more than anyone except my main advisor Wallace Matson. Janet was a great model for me. And Janet and Barry Stroud taught the first year seminar when I was a first-year graduate student. That was a crucial moment for me too. And then of course there's Wallace Matson, who was my dissertation adviser. He was very well known for his works surveying the history of philosophy, ancient and early modern philosophy. Really supportive person and really a great Spinoza scholar. Not very well known, not as well known perhaps as some of the other figures at Berkeley that I mentioned, but really for me he took me under his wing in a lot of ways and that made a big, big difference for me.

Maude: In your early career, you focused your research on Spinoza. What direction did you take in your study of Spinoza?

Della Rocca: My dissertation turned into my first book, *Representation and the Mind-Body Problem in Spinoza*. What I tried to do in my dissertation — I can describe it this way looking back — was to give a coherent account of Spinoza's theory of mental representation and to defend that account. So I was really always concerned with seeing how viable these philosophical views of Spinoza's were. And I was able to give, I thought, a pretty powerful defence both of his theory of representation and for his non-standard account of the mind-body identity

relation. He was a kind of identity theorist, as I interpret him, and I think that he really grounded his identity thesis in his views about the conceptual independence of thought and extension. It's a combination of Cartesian dualism, conceptual dualism of thought and extension, combined with a radically monistic identity theory. And I was able to defend that, in some way, in the dissertation and then in the first book. And that was the theme there.

In the background of that first book was an interest in the Principle of Sufficient Reason, but that wasn't the theme of the book. And in my second book on Spinoza, which came out twelve years after the first book, I had in the meantime, between the first two books, seen the power of the Principle of Sufficient Reason as a driving force in Spinoza's philosophy and as providing the key to a resolution of a lot of the interpretive problems that had faced interpreters of Spinoza. That kind of key to really highlight Spinoza's rationalism, understood as a commitment to the PSR, that really did a lot of work for me and I think it really solved a lot of problems. And it generated a lot of interest, that kind of reading in Spinoza: a lot of people disagree with it, a lot of people agree with it, and it's been, I think, a productive way of seeing Spinoza and generated a lot of discussion.

And that emphasis on the PSR, looking back, the seed for that was planted in that first seminar on Spinoza with Don Garrett. I really am very happy to acknowledge my indebtedness to Don, because Don had this famous paper, a 1979 paper called "Spinoza's 'Ontological' Argument," where he showed that Spinoza in his version of the ontological argument was relying on the Principle of Sufficient Reason in a perhaps surprising way. That was right, and that was really an important insight of Don's. I took that insight and, especially in my second book on Spinoza, I ran with it: that the PSR could provide insight not only into Spinoza's argument for the existence of God but throughout his metaphysics and throughout his philosophy in general. And so that early paper of Don's, which I was first exposed to in that seminar back in 1982, a long time ago, that was more influential on me than I had realised at the time.

Maude: In your more recent work, you've followed the philosophical implications of the PSR. How did thinking about the PSR take you beyond Spinoza?

Della Rocca: I think the PSR is definitely at work in Spinoza and fundamental in Spinoza. And I've taken this — it might seem — well beyond Spinoza, into areas not just in history of philosophy but in contemporary philosophy. I think that the PSR not just provides the key to understanding Spinoza's philosophy but can provide a key to understanding lots of different areas of philosophy today. I apply this in the more recent book, *The Parmenidean Ascent*, to not just metaphysics but epistemology, philosophy of language, philosophy of action. And since my most recent book, I've been applying the PSR to try to help us understand some areas of ethics as well. In each of these cases, what I arrive at, through the PSR, is a kind of radically monistic view in each of these areas of philosophy. So I've taken this insight and driven it past Spinoza in some way. But I gotta say that, although a lot of my recent work is not dealing explicitly or at all with Spinoza, Spinoza's in the background. And I'm not sure I'm actually going beyond Spinoza. I have a non-standard interpretation of Spinoza as an extremely radical monist, and that's

also controversial and that controversy is fine, but I don't know if I've gone beyond Spinoza — maybe I have, and I'm not committed to defending Spinoza down the line — but he's certainly a presence for me even in these areas of philosophy that might seem to be far removed from what Spinoza says.

Maude: One of the central themes in your new book, *The Parmenidean Ascent*, is that relational thinking, thinking in terms of the existence and intelligibility of relations, is a source of great philosophical confusion. In a nutshell, what's wrong with relations? What is your argumentative strategy against them?

Della Rocca: Here I'm inspired to some extent by Bradley, it's obvious from the book, but here I do also go beyond Bradley and offer different arguments. I should say that my interest in relations begins with Leibniz. Before the most recent book, I was working on a paper on Leibniz on relations. I saw that Leibniz had an argument against the reality of relations that was grounded in the PSR and led to a view that relations are not real — he saw them as ideal in God's mind. I saw or came to see that that Leibnizian argument was really just a version of what was more recently known as 'Bradley's regress argument,' and that argument itself predates Leibniz, of course, in certain medieval philosophers and back maybe even into ancient philosophy. So nothing new under the sun in philosophy, perhaps. But I started with Leibniz on relations and that led to a deepening of my interest in Bradley on relations. I saw Bradley as giving a kind of rationalist argument against the reality of relations, an argument informed by the PSR. I try to rework that argument and actually, I think, offer a better version of that argument in my own terms.

What's the problem with relations? Basically, if there's a relation R , say, between two relata, say A and B , then my argument begins by saying that that relation R cannot be free-floating, in the sense that it must be grounded in something. You can't just have a relation by itself, as it were, there must be other things besides the relation, and the relation must be grounded in those things, in particular a relation must be grounded in its relata. But a further point: because it's essential to a relation to not be free-floating, then it's essential to the relation that it's grounded in its relata. That means, because the grounding relation is essential to the relation, that the relation is grounded not only in its relata but also in this grounding relation that it bears to its relata. So the relation is grounded not only in the relata but in the relation of grounding between it and the relata, and that relation of grounding, of course, has to be grounded too. So we're off here on a vicious regress, or we're off here on a circle. You can do it either way, in terms of circles or regresses, and I argue that it's vicious in either case. That shows that there's something incoherent about the notion of relations, because relations lead to these vicious regresses or vicious circles.

I defend that argument from a lot of different perspectives, and it's a complicated argument — I just sketched it here. It can be defended in lots of different ways. There have been many objections to this kind of argument, against Bradley's argument and similar objections could be raised perhaps to my argument. But I defend against those objections by showing that I'm not committed to treating relations as things, I'm not reifying relations, I'm not reifying the grounding relations

at all, and there are various ways to defend against those kinds of objections.

Maude: Your philosophical conclusions are quite extreme and, for many, unpalatable. There are delightful moments in your book where you report the reactions of your colleagues to your Parmenidean views. Can you share some of these reactions? How do you respond to them?

Della Rocca: These are reactions — and I say this lovingly, in the book — not just from my colleagues at Yale but from colleagues in the profession in general. I'm not going to single anyone out by name, of course. But I've received a lot of different reactions.

I don't like it when people dismiss my views out of hand, which sometimes happens. But I do enjoy, in a way — get a kick out of — some of the reactions that people have. One colleague said "We're doomed!" if my views are correct. And okay, that's fine, so they don't like where that goes, that's okay to have that reaction. Someone after a talk I recently gave somewhere, a philosopher in the audience, said "Well, I guess I'll have to find another line of work," as I'm criticising the approach to philosophy in most areas of analytical philosophy. These are proper reactions, I mean, I'm not surprised by those reactions and, indeed, I welcome them because it shows that people are understanding the seriousness of the kinds of critiques of ordinary ways of philosophy that I'm offering. People sometimes shake their heads in dismay, people sometimes feel sorry for me — I get that, and that's okay — they get annoyed, they get hot under the collar. This is all predictable and understandable.

I want to mention two reactions that I mention in the book also, because these are instructive. One time a colleague after seeing one of the radically monistic arguments I was making said "There's gotta be a *reductio* in there somewhere!" So my view can be reduced to absurdity, it's too extreme. And I said and I thought, "Yes, that's exactly the point!" The point behind my views is that I'm offering a challenge to the way of doing philosophy itself, my view is so radical that it undermines itself in a way that I welcome and embrace. And I want that because I'm challenging the notion of metaphysical realism, of philosophical rationality itself. So I'm using rationalist arguments to undermine rationalism itself, I'm using metaphysical arguments to undermine metaphysical arguments themselves. That's the point. That there is a *reductio* is exactly the point.

At various points in the book I invoke the image of Wittgenstein and kicking away the ladder at the end of the *Tractatus*. That's an image not original to Wittgenstein, of course, it goes back to Sextus Empiricus at least in ancient philosophy. The strategy of devising certain arguments that you then undermine in order to, as Wittgenstein puts it, "see the world aright," I think that's actually the kind of thing I'm trying to do. So, in a way, Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* is subject to a *reductio* too on his own terms, and that's precisely the point of Wittgenstein. It's such a radical view that he was offering there that it undermines itself. The view was designed that way. And I say in the book, and not flippantly, "if Wittgenstein can do it, why can't I?" That leads to one of the other reactions from colleagues. One colleague said, "Well, we don't like what Wittgenstein does." And I say, "Okay, you don't have to like it." But obviously what Wittgenstein is doing is regarded

as really important and worthy of discussion. And my views are not maybe in the same category as Wittgenstein's, but I want the views to be taken seriously in that way too.

And that leads to the last kind of reaction that I get sometimes, and I do mention this in the book. Someone said, after seeing one of my arguments, "I don't like that view." And I said "You're not supposed to." The point is that I'm trying to unsettle philosophical opinions. I think that philosophy is valuable only if it challenges our ways of thinking. And I'm offering a certain challenge to our currently very popular ways of doing philosophy. So that's the idea, to unsettle opinions and shake up conservative ways of thinking. I think philosophy is a very conservative field and the profession of philosophy is very conservative — not necessarily politically conservative, although to some extent I think that's true too, but conservative in terms of being wedded to ordinary ways of thinking and not being willing to consider different ways of thinking. Especially what I find problematic is when there are good reasons to question our ordinary ways of thinking, people are resistant to make those changes or to take those questions seriously. That's the kind of reaction I want to avoid. The kind of reaction I really like is where, even when people disagree with me, they engage with my views and explore them and take them seriously and offer me suggestions for ways to make my arguments even stronger — I always welcome that. So I get those reactions sometimes, and those are the reactions I like best, where people don't necessarily agree with me but engage with the views and try to explore them and see how they work.

Maude: You argue that distinctions are unintelligible. One of those distinctions is the distinction between the history of philosophy and philosophy proper. What's wrong with this distinction? How should studying philosophy's past inform our current philosophising?

Della Rocca: One of the things that I think is really important is that prior to the rise of analytical philosophy in the early twentieth century, we had very often philosophers more willing to consider radical views and to shake up their views. There are philosophers committed to common sense before analytical philosophy and that inspired analytical philosophy but before the rise of analytical philosophy there was less reliance on what I call 'the method of intuition' and similarly there was less reliance on common sense in philosophy. And so, I think, going back to the history of philosophy can open up for us areas of philosophy which were less conservative than is the dominant approach in contemporary analytical philosophy. That's one of the benefits, I think, for contemporary philosophy.

But another benefit is that, I think for a principled reason, I see no distinction between philosophy and the study of its history. I think that issues in contemporary philosophy are relevant to the meaning of historical texts in philosophy, and I think that historical texts in philosophy are relevant to the meaning of our contemporary texts, our contemporary views in philosophy. The meaning implications, the meaning relations, go both ways. Precisely because I have this radical holism, and really it's a radical monism, which makes it the case that there is not going to be any sharp distinction, or any distinction at all, between philosophy and its history.

Maude: One of the notable things about your book is its delightful, conversa-

tional style. It's a rare combination: it's rigorous, it's a pleasure to read. How did you find your playful prose style? Is there a philosophical point to this style?

Della Rocca: The use of humour in the book is an important feature. I mean, I've never seen why philosophy can't be enjoyable to read, and I do inject humour at times, not overwhelmingly so but sometimes in my writings. That's a kind of gift to the reader because it makes the philosophy go down more easily and makes people find it more easy to understand. So it's a gift to the reader, but it's not just that. For me there's a philosophical point behind the humour. Because it's a spirit of play, and it's a spirit of not being under constraints by things and of being free. So there's a kind of freedom of expression in these jokes or the humour in philosophy that's part of the philosophical point. Because with the radical monism I'm giving up metaphysical realism, so we're no longer under the constraints of metaphysical realism. And that frees us up to say the same things but without the metaphysical import, but also to say new things. We have this kind of spirit of freedom because of this Parmenidean Ascent, and that freedom makes it possible to play, to have humour, to joke. And that's part of the philosophical point. Indeed, that's all we have. And so, of course we should do that.