

# On Concepts, Art, and Academia

*Christopher Peacocke*

**H**RP: You have written explicitly about Descartes, defending the *Cogito* and responding to Kant's criticisms of him in the First Paralogism. Your epistemology, also, has been broadly characterized as foundationalist. How much of your philosophy is shared with Descartes? Where do the two of you part ways?

*Peacocke:* Yes, I argued that the *Cogito* is sound; and I also argued that not all of Kant's criticisms of rational psychology succeed. But these arguments were not offered as part of a general foundationalist position, and not as part of a defense of Cartesian egos either. For Descartes, by contrast, the *Cogito* was the essential first step of a foundationalist enterprise. If foundationalism is the claim that our knowledge is, or can be reconstructed as, obtained by inference from propositions known with indubitability, then I am not a foundationalist. Part of the interest and significance of some of Descartes's arguments is that they can be assessed, and some of them defended, independently of foundationalism in this sense.

I do believe in something that may look like foundationalist structures, but are to be distinguished from them. I hold that there are entitlement and justification relations between mental states and propositions, and between some propositions and other propositions, and that some of these entitlement and justification relations are founded in the nature of the concepts involved in the propositions, and in the nature of the contents of the mental states. Examples of such relations include the entitlement to form a suitable perceptual belief on the basis of a perceptual state, and the entitlement to make a self-ascription of an action (mental or physical) on the basis of apparent action-awareness. Entitlements to form beliefs can also be based on certain fundamental logical relations. It seems to me to be part of the task of philosophy to explain why these entitlement relations are as they are, and to say something about their significance, by drawing on a positive account of the nature of the concepts and contents involved in these relations.

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These entitlement relations concern contents of certain types. They can apply to the beliefs of particular thinkers, but the relations are in the first instance concerned with contents in general. The relations do not require for their instantiation that any beliefs that entitled a thinker to further beliefs must themselves be indubitable. I do of course regard the status of transitions that a thinker makes as entitled or otherwise as relevant to the epistemic standing of beliefs reached by those transitions. But this point too can be made without commitment to indubitable foundations.

**HRP: You mention that some relations are founded in the nature of concepts involved. Comparably, Thomas Reid says that some propositions are linked “by a natural kind of magic.” Reid explains this magic by innately programmed “signs,” but in his view there are also natural signs that are acquired (by way of a Humean mechanism). Are some of your entitlement and/or justificational relations innate and some acquired? Secondly, how does inference play into the two relations you distinguish? Can we regard entitlement relations as non-inferential, whereas justification relations might be inferential?**

*Peacocke:* Certainly some concepts are acquired; and in acquiring a concept, the subject acquires something that features in propositions that stand in various entitlement and justificational relations distinctive of the concept in question. It is an empirical scientific matter how a concept is acquired, a topic on which there is much terrific psychology. But the entitlement and justificational relations in which a concept stands are not an empirical matter. They are constitutive and a priori. The concept of a real number is certainly acquired rather than innate in humans. There will be mechanisms, open to scientific investigation, by which it is acquired. The basic justificational and entitlement relations in which mathematical propositions about real numbers stand will however be constitutive and a priori.

The distinction between an inferential transition and a non-inferential transition is in my view sharp and pre-theoretically intuitive. An inferential transition is one between contents themselves. By contrast, in a non-inferential transition, the type of state that has the content is crucial to the entitlement to make, or to the justification for making, the transition. Perceptual experience with a given content can entitle one to make a judgment, while mere imagination, even if it has the same detailed content, cannot. But in my view, the inferential/non-inferential distinction cuts right across the entitlement/justification distinction.

The entitlement/justification distinction involves technical terms of art. Justification is often thought to involve some kind of conceptualization by the thinker of the justifying state or event. If that is the distinction, then there are inferential transitions that present in pure entitling cases. Conversely, there are also non-inferential transitions in justificational cases. For the combination of the inferential and the merely entitling, we can take the case of animal inference. There is justly famous work by Josep Call (formerly of Leipzig, now at St. Andrews) making a strong experimental case that some primates successfully make the following inference: that if some object is either in this container or that container, and it is not in this one, then it is in the other. Josep Call has a range of studies giving evidence that the actions explained by this inferential transition cannot be explained by associative mechanisms. Whether this inferential ability is to be explained by grasp of a rule, or rather by some Bayesian mechanism, is not conclusively settled. But whatever the explanation

of the ability, these primates do not need to be conceptualizing their own mental states, or even to enjoy conceptual contents, to make these inferential transitions.

The other way around, perceptual experience and action-awareness can justify the formation of beliefs (“That book is rectangular,” “I’m adding up these numbers”) by a subject who conceptualizes her mental states and events, without these transitions being inferential. The nature of the mental states and events that have the content are crucial to their status as justifying.

**HRP: On the subject of the “a priori,” you have argued for a type of moderate rationalism as a means of explaining the status of a priori thought. How does this project differ from other contemporary moderate rationalist projects?**

*Peacocke:* There are two differences from several other contemporary moderate rationalist positions. The first difference, which is founded in something not initially to do with the a priori, concerns the role of truth and reference in a theory of meaning and understanding. Quite independently of considerations about the a priori, I argue that we cannot explain meaning and understanding except in terms of some kind of explanatory grasp of truth conditions. On this view, truth and reference cannot be elucidated as something riding on the back of a purely conceptual role theory of meaning, and cannot be explained in purely minimalist terms (in the tradition of Frank Ramsey, continued by Paul Horwich and others). If that is correct, it then has consequences for a theory of the a priori. For I hold that the status as a priori—as something that can be known justificationaly independently of experience—of some basic principles and transitions is founded in the grasp of the concepts involved in those principles and transitions. If grasp of concepts is to be explained in terms of truth and reference, then it follows that the status of something as a priori has to involve truth and reference too.

I myself find this pre-theoretically intuitive. Our rational acceptance of basic logical principles and axioms is founded in our understanding of the expressions involved. In rationally accepting them, we draw on the content of our understanding of those expressions. That too is a fundamentally rationalist idea, found for instance in Leibniz. We can say that basic a priori principles are obvious, and they often are, but their obviousness is not a brute fact; and that is a second difference from several other contemporary theorists. They are obvious because of what is involved in understanding the expressions they contain. What this understanding consists in, how we draw upon it, and how this can explain not only our logical knowledge, but its status as a priori, is something I have been working on further, and will publish more soon.

**HRP: You have remarked how skepticism regarding the a priori is a fairly American idea, and less popular in other countries. Coincidentally, one of the criticisms of your book, *The Realm of Reason*, was that you focused on the a priori. Do you encounter philosophical disagreements rooted in the cultural context often? To what extent do you think regional differences play a role in professional philosophy?**

*Peacocke:* My own experience has been that there was a seachange between the 1970s and today in attitudes in North America to the a priori. When I was a very young Kennedy Scholar at Harvard in the early 1970s, very few people I encountered (and not just at Harvard) seemed to think that there is an a priori/a posteriori distinction that was non-empty on both sides, and was also of some philosophical interest. As attitudes gradually

changed, I was struck by the results of an informal survey of participants, carried out by David Chalmers, at the 1993 NEH Seminar on Meaning at Rutgers. It showed that although almost everyone there believed that no one else believed in such a distinction, each of the participants believed in it themselves.

Part of the explanation of the change was the clear elaboration of the distinction between the a priori and the necessary in the work of Saul Kripke and David Kaplan. There was a corresponding realization of what would need to be involved in a substantive explanatory account of the a priori, as opposed to the very different kind of account required for necessity. It is now common knowledge that it is widely accepted, both in North America and in Europe, that there is an interesting a priori/a posteriori distinction. The debate is rather focused on the question of the philosophical explanation of the nature of the distinction. Should we offer an expressivist account of it, or a conceptual role account, or one based on a more substantial truth conditional account of meaning?

On the last part of your question about regional differences in philosophical approaches: in an era in which so much is available so easily online, it is easier than before to read writings outside one's own national, cultural, or doctrinal traditions. Nevertheless, and cutting across national boundaries, there are still strong networks of influence, educational pedigree, and deference in the setting of philosophical agendas and the adoption of certain forms of treatment of philosophical issues. We ought to read more of the writings that are outside the networks in which we have grown up philosophically.

**HRP: Are there particular areas where you find “strong networks” to be troubling, or areas that you see as doing a good job of reading “outside the network,” so to speak?**

*Peacocke:* We are all enormously influenced by the conception of the agenda and possibilities for philosophy to which we were exposed as undergraduates and as graduate students. Early rewards and approval come to those in the profession from addressing questions that are set by these inherited agendas. No doubt we can grow out of them, but even someone growing out of an agenda may be restricted in what she is reacting to. I was struck by Michael Dummett's published remark that it was not until years later in his career that he discovered that there was much of value and interest in Carnap (hardly an obscure or unpublished figure). Perhaps Oxford in the middle of the last century was unusually provincial, but everywhere is provincial in its own way. Some of this is inevitable, given the massive and exponentially growing literature in our discipline. But we do need to be aware of it, and to be alert to the dangers of not knowing what is going on outside our own comfortable networks.

**HRP: Something that is very interesting about your philosophical oeuvre is the seamless integration of the analytic and continental traditions. You often refer to Sartre in your work regarding self-consciousness. Recently you have also responded to the work of a contemporary continental philosopher, Sebastian Rödl. How do you engage with continental philosophy, and in particular, the existentialist tradition? Has the existentialist construal of the subject been influential to your conception of subjectivity? More generally, how, if at all, do you see yourself negotiating between continental and analytic terms and methodologies?**

*Peacocke:* There is overlap in the questions addressed in the continental and analytic traditions, even if their styles of thought, writing, and argument differ so much. Questions in

the overlap include some that have interested me, including: What is it to employ the first person notion or concept? What is it to have a conception of many subjects of consciousness, or which I am merely one? What is to have notions and concepts of what is in fact an objective world? What is to be able to perceive temporal properties and relations?

If you are grappling with questions like these, it makes sense to read and think about the answers others have offered, in whatever tradition they arise. When working on the self and the first person, I found Sartre answering some, but not all, of these questions in ways that fitted in with the approach I was developing. Sartre's view that the idea of another subject is the idea of something of the same kind as me I completely endorse. He also writes vividly about the phenomena of interpersonal self-consciousness. I part company with him, and many writers in the continental tradition (and not only in the continental tradition) when they claim that first person thought and representation is possible only for someone possessed of the conception of many minds. But I think all of the arguments for that claim are worth considering. There is an especial neglect in the analytical literature of important writings that, to the best of my knowledge, have not received translations into English. Sartre's stimulating 1947 essay "Conscience de soi et connaissance de soi" is one example (and my unsolicited recommendation is to read it with the highly entertaining discussion following its presentation). My hope is that what is best in the analytical stream flowing from Frege and the continental stream flowing from Husserl will rejoin to form one unified continuing tradition. There are promising signs of this in the more recent literature from both traditions.

**HRP: Are there any recent works that you have found exciting because of their contribution to unifying the two main streams of academic philosophy? Are there dangers associated with this kind of work, say, of appropriating the literature of one to the methodology of the other?**

*Peacocke:* I don't want to pick out any particular recent works, but I would make the general comment that it's right to use multiple methodologies in addressing hard philosophical questions. If we are considering the nature of certain kinds of mental state, for instance, all of the following can be relevant to answering questions about it: the traditional method of thinking of examples and counterexamples to proposed hypotheses; evidence from good psychological science, including all of developmental psychology, computational psychology, and psychopathology; and evidence too from fiction that can show that certain alleged possibilities are intelligible. I see the dangers not as being those of widening our methodology in philosophy, but rather being those of not distinguishing which questions are being addressed, and of unduly narrowing our focus on possible methods once a specific question has been properly formulated.

**HRP: Your most recent books on self-representation follow the rising interest in an embodied account in philosophy of mind. How do you regard the trendiness of embodiment in philosophy of mind today?**

*Peacocke:* I do think the role of embodiment in the mental is overstated in some of the literature of the past twelve years or so. Some of the phenomena to which embodiment is said to be crucial can, I think, be explained in other ways that do not make reference to the body at all. I also think there are distinctions between perceptual contents that have no connection with embodiment at all. Since we are discussing the perception of music

elsewhere in this interview, let's consider an example from that domain. The perception of some interval in music as an augmented fourth (such as C and the F# above it), as opposed to a diminished fifth (C and the G flat above it), seems to me to have nothing distinctive to do with any particular bodily actions I can perform, and certainly not musical actions, of which a subject who has such a distinctive perception may be quite incapable.

**HRP: According to your theory, what is the role of the body and movement (somatic and enactive) in self-representation?**

*Peacocke:* One of the many, many interesting challenges in thinking about self-representation is the issue of what is minimally required for a creature to be capable of it. We can conceive of an organism that represents the environment around a "here," where the "here" refers to the location from the organism has a view of the world. The organism could do this without self-representing at all, without possessing any first person notion. It could also represent what is in fact its body, and do so in a distinctive way, on the basis of internal and external perception of its body parts, though of course without thinking of the body as its own (as "mine"). So what more must be added to the description of a case for the organism to self-represent?

Educated in the western philosophical tradition, almost as a reflex we are tempted to answer this question by saying that a subject who possesses the first person notion must be able to make sense of Cartesian possibilities that it does not have a body, and so forth. But it is wholly implausible that creatures who self-represent must be capable of engaging in such Cartesian speculation. Insofar as we ourselves can make sense of such speculations, our ability to do so must be founded in some feature of the first person notion that is shared with simpler creatures that self-represent. I think the crucial feature is the ability to ascribe actions, using the first person notion, where the ascription is based either on action-awareness, or on the basis of some causal mechanism that is sensitive to the subject's being the generator of the action. In the basic case, these will be bodily actions, of which for conscious creatures there is a distinctive action-awareness. So, under this approach, there is a deep and fundamental constitutive link between being an embodied agent and having the capacity to self-represent.

**HRP: You have a long-standing interest in nonconceptual content. Can you speak about how your views have shifted in the past years?**

*Peacocke:* Nonconceptual content is a species of representational content, with correctness conditions concerning the world. The basic form of nonconceptual content is that of an object, or objects, given in certain ways, having a certain property, or standing in a certain relation, where the property or relation is also given in a specific way. The distinction between entities in the world that are capable of being in states with such content and those that are not is fundamental. I think all content, including the most sophisticated conceptual content, is possible only in virtue of relations to a level of nonconceptual content. Conceptual content is the kind of content present in beliefs and judgements, and in the content of mental actions that are done for reasons. Nonconceptual content has a nature that is independent of reason-giving explanations. In my view reason-giving explanation ultimately presupposes a level of nonconceptual content. States and events with nonconceptual content can provide reasons for actions, including mental actions. But states with nonconceptual content are not themselves to be elucidated in reason-giving terms.

Way back in *A Study of Concepts* (1992), I mistakenly said that there is an interdependence between nonconceptual and conceptual content. The ground I offered for this claim was mistaken in two respects. The ground I offered was roughly that basic spatial content required a sensitivity to a changing first person perspective over time. I overlooked the existence of nonconceptual content of a first person kind. For some years now, I have held that the level of nonconceptual content is fully autonomous from that of conceptual content.

Nonconceptual content engaged my interest in several ways. In my view it is needed simply in characterizing accurately the distinctive kind of content found in perceptual states. But the topic is of interest both as the locus of the mind's most fundamental form of representational interaction with the world, and as a point of intersection of metaphysics with the theory of intentional content. The perceptions of size, angle, duration and other perceived magnitudes derive their contents from the very magnitudes that causally explain those perceptions, in philosophically central cases.

Probably along with several other theorists, I hold that the property of being an analog mental representation, as opposed to a digital mental representation, underlies states and events with nonconceptual content. I have recently been developing an account of the analog/digital distinction that draws in part on a metaphysics of magnitudes, and gives a distinctive role to laws involving analog representations, both in the case of psychological laws, and in the case of analog representations in non-psychological domains.

**HRP: You mention analog representations both in psychological and non-psychological domains. Is this investigation aimed at producing something that will do work in your philosophy of perception, thought, and science alike?**

*Peacocke:* I need to step back a little in addressing this question. A few years ago, I developed a metaphysics of magnitudes on which magnitudes are regarded as elements of our ontology in their own right, rather than as reducible to anything explained in terms of purely extensional mappings from objects or events to numbers (Peacocke 2015). Under this conception, scientific laws are treated as specifying relations between magnitudes of particular types. We commonly formulate scientific laws in terms of real numbers, but those numbers are just means of encoding relationships between magnitudes that can be specified without reference to numbers.

Some magnitudes, as real entities in the world, can be perceived. Perceptible magnitudes include a range of distances, angles, durations. Perception that is sometimes described as having analog content is fundamentally perception of magnitudes. Such perceptions have a fine-grained character because the magnitudes perceived slice more finely in the world than our perceptual recognitional capacities. I also think that states with analog content, both in perception and imagination, are explained by subpersonal magnitudes. So, for instance, psychological phenomena such as the time it takes to scan a certain distance in a mental image is explained partly by distance magnitudes involving locations in a retinotopic map in the brain, possibly in V1.

More generally, analog computers are computers whose states are explained by laws relating magnitudes of certain types. Successive states of an astrolabe are explained by such magnitudes as angles of movement of its parts, successive states of an electronic analog computer are explained by voltages and resistances, and so forth. The human mind is partly an analog computer in this sense.

Digital representations are those that can be recognized as the same again, and so can be input to reliable read-write mechanisms that preserve and transmit a text, as several authors have emphasized. The ability to recognize is completely dependent upon the perceptual and memory capacities of the user of the representations. A “1” followed by twenty-three zeroes counts as digital notation in some people’s books, but it is not perceptually recognizable—unlike the notation “10<sup>23</sup>,” which is perceptually recognizable, and reliably reproducible without counting zeroes (without counting in Arabic notation, of course). Analog representations, by contrast, are those made available in perception by experiences that we express in language by such demonstrative as “that length,” “that shade.” They do not necessarily involve any recognitional abilities. In my view, the quartet of analog magnitudes in the world, analog subpersonal representations, analog perceptual content, and analog notations are all closely involved with one another.

**HRP: Your works draw significantly on science—for instance, the work of Harvard developmental psychologists Susan Carey and Elizabeth Spelke and popular neuroscientists such as V. S. Ramachandran. What are your thoughts about the interaction between science and philosophy, particularly in the realms of philosophy of mind and epistemology?**

*Peacocke:* I do not think that “pure” theoretical philosophy exists, if purity consists in an agenda entirely independent of the empirical and the abstract sciences, including mathematics and logic. Who are the pure amongst the great theoretical philosophers? Not Aristotle, not Kant, not Leibniz, not Frege, not Russell, not James. When philosophy has been at what is thought of as its purest, I doubt it has been at its best.

A scientific theory can be rejected on philosophical grounds, and a philosophical theory can be rejected on grounds drawn from the sciences. Philosophical considerations are needed to say what is wrong with a Newtonian conception of absolute space and absolute time. Equally, empirical phenomena, such as that of blindsight, and that of the evolutionarily older, unconscious, dorsal perceptual system, provide counterexamples to various philosophical theories of the nature of perceptual experience. Yet philosophy is not science; so how can this be?

Philosophy is largely concerned with constitutive questions, questions of the form “What makes something a so-and-so?” A scientific theory may violate a correct answer to the question “What makes something an explanatory property or magnitude?,” in which case the objection to it is philosophical. This is arguably so in the Newtonian example. Conversely, a philosophical theory with a claim about what makes something perception can be completely undercut by empirical phenomena that demonstrate that perception can exist in the absence of what the philosophical theory says is constitutive of it. When philosophy is conceived as concerned with the constitutive, the distinction between the philosophical and the scientific is entirely consistent with—indeed it arguably implies—the mutual bearing on one another of philosophical and scientific theories.

Developmental psychology is a domain in which the inextricable involvement of the constitutive with the empirical is particularly clear. A good theory of acquisition of a concept has to draw on a theory of what makes something possession of that very concept. Only with such a theory do we have a good description of the end state of the process of acquisition, of what is to be explained by the process of acquisition. The same goes for a theory of the nature of the mental representations underlying possession of a concept. It

applies also to the issue of what would be evidence that a child possesses a given concept. Only if we know what the evidence has to be evidence for are we in a position to assess whether it is good evidence. The fact that the concepts whose possession is discussed by developmental psychologists are themselves concepts of philosophical interest further enhances the interest of developmental psychology for philosophy. The investigations of the past few years of Susan Carey and her postdoctoral fellows into the understanding of logical concepts could hardly be of greater philosophical interest.

Another phenomenon I would emphasize is the possibility, and in some cases the actuality, of convergence between empirical theories in psychology and philosophical accounts of the notions treated in those psychological theories. One example would be the mental representation of an event as an action. Amanda Woodward and her colleagues have made a strong case that an infant can perceive an event involving another person's body as an action only if the infant represents it as the same kind of event as an action that the infant herself can perform (Woodward, Sommerville, Gerson, Henderson, Buresh 2009). There is also a philosophical idea that the concept of an action involves a sensitivity in the application of the concept to occurrences of actions by the subject herself—in effect, that there is a first person component in the concept. If that philosophical idea is along the right lines, the Woodward phenomena are what one would expect in basic cases.

I think there is convergence in other areas too, for instance in the idea that humans and other animals possess a general-purpose analog representation system. A good constitutive theory of what makes a representation analog rather than digital can be drawn upon to explain the nature and advantages of having a general analog representations system. My hope and expectation is that we will find further examples of such convergence as we proceed to other interesting cases. Perhaps we will even succeed eventually in providing an interdisciplinary convergent treatment of the notion of a free action.

**HRP: You suggest that philosophy is widely concerned with questions of constitution. Do you take the goal of philosophy to be answering such questions? Is this questions-of-constitution approach to philosophy another way of thinking about your meta-physics-first approach to philosophy?**

*Peacocke:* A large range of subdisciplines of philosophy are unified by their addressing questions of the form “What is it that constitutes an F?” Even in the most applied areas, questions of this form are a driving motivation: “What makes something a fair distribution of national income?” “What makes something a good explanation in economics?” My own recent work can be seen as investigating the relation between the correct answers to two questions of constitution: “What is it that makes something an element of such-and-such domain?” and “What makes something an intentional content or a meaning concerning that domain?” My claim that is that good answers to this question of the relation between the two is also something constitutive of one, or in some cases possibly both, of the subject matters of each of the two constitutive questions.

**HRP: In interviews, you have discussed your interest in the philosophy of music—you have written an article on the subject, and have taught Music Humanities at Columbia. We have also heard (from Alison Simmons) that you have a keen interest in opera. What sorts of questions excite you in these areas? Or, do you draw a line between your “serious” philosophical interests and “hobbies”?**

*Peacocke*: Music has always been an important part of my life, but it was only after I came to Columbia, where music is in the bloodstream because of its presence in the Core Curriculum, that it was feasible to bring it into my teaching and writing. The questions about music that have always interested me include these: How is it possible to hear an emotion, or even something not about the emotions at all, in a piece of music? How is it possible for music to have an expressive and communicative power that is so different, and in some cases so much richer and fine-grained, than anything made available by straightforward linguistic communication?

A central resource for addressing these questions is the capacity we have to experience some feature of the music metaphorically—as something else. We can experience some change in the music metaphorically—as the subjective change from despair to hope; we can experience some sequence of notes metaphorically—as a fluttering of veils or sails in the wind (as in the Debussy prelude *Voiles*). Sometimes you can hear in the music some complex emotion with which you have never previously been acquainted.

Since you mention opera, one striking example is the music of Wotan's farewell to Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre*. You can describe the situation of a father forced for reasons of principle to say farewell to the daughter of whom he is so proud, but no amount of linguistic description can prepare you for the subjective emotion you experience as the metaphorical content of feature of the music in this farewell. There is a distinctive acquaintance relation that great music can exploit in the phenomenon of hearing some features metaphorically—as something else. I hold that the structures of poetry can also permit us to experience certain features of the poem metaphorically—as something else. These phenomena allow us to explain some of the ideas of one of Harvard's greatest products, T. S. Eliot, about the importance and interest of unnamed emotions.<sup>1</sup>

Since the basic phenomena of music are all perceptual, and perception has been one of my standing interests in philosophy, these questions are of double interest to me. My interest in music long predated my work on perception. But philosophical questions about what is going on in any art form in which you are immersed simply bubble up in the mind—and those about the perception of music are particularly challenging and engaging.

**HRP: You say that we are able to experience features of music metaphorically—for instance, that we can experience music as complex emotions that we have never before felt. To what extent do you view “metaphorical experience” as a feature of human perception, and to what extent do you view it as a special feature of music—or is it perhaps a special feature of aesthetic experience more generally?**

*Peacocke*: Experiencing some feature of the music metaphorically—as something else is a special case of mentally representing one thing metaphorically—as something else. So, we can think of one thing as something else (thinking of a commentator as in orbit around his subject matter). We can imagine one thing as something else (an insect as a war machine). Whether this ability is restricted to humans I do not know, but I do think the ability is exploited in the arts in all sorts of ways. In the case of poetry, we can, in reading or hearing the poem, experience a line break metaphorically—as someone making a choice between alternatives, or, to take another example, as some particular kind of process such as breeding taking place. The results of the choice or the process of breeding are then revealed in the next line of the poem. This applies to two of the best-known lines in poetry, to Robert Frost's “Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—,” and also to the first line of Eliot's *The*

*Waste Land*—“April is the cruelest month, breeding”. These are very simple examples. The phenomenon of hearing certain features of the large-scale syntax of the poem metaphorically-as something else is complex and deep in other cases. I conjecture that the property of representing one thing metaphorically-as something else will be a resource of further use not only in philosophical reflection in aesthetics, but also in first order artistic criticism and discussion of particular art works.

**HRP: What are some books outside of philosophy which have aligned with your research interests?**

*Peacocke:* Noam Chomsky’s *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* had a huge impact on me when I read it as an undergraduate in Oxford, just after hearing Chomsky’s Locke Lectures during the summer term of my first year. Chomsky is skeptical about the possibilities of treating semantics in the way he treated syntax, but some of my work aims to keep that possibility alive. When I was a young faculty member, David Marr’s *Vision* had almost as strong an impact. Much more recently, I was helped in my work on the metaphysics of magnitudes by the formal treatment in Dana Scott’s still unpublished mimeo *A General Theory of Magnitudes*. It provided the algebra that the treatment of laws in my work on magnitudes required. Dana was my first graduate advisor when I studied for the B.Phil. at Oxford (after returning from a year at Harvard as a Kennedy Scholar), so the discovery of the relevance for me of this work he did over half a century ago now was especially pleasing for me.

**HRP: When *Columbia College Today* interviewed you in 2008, you said that you were initially advised against philosophy by an economics tutor who said that “philosophy had been going for 2,000 years and the chance of making any kind of contribution was virtually negligible.” Now that you are further along your career as a philosopher, how would you advise students considering a life in academic philosophy? What do you take to be your own most significant contribution to the field?**

*Peacocke:* People who are riveted by philosophical issues are unlikely to find non-philosophical careers fulfilling. A good Ph.D. program will tell almost anyone whether a life in philosophy will work for him or her intellectually and emotionally. However bad the job market may seem in the US in philosophy at present, it is as nothing to what Margaret Thatcher and her ministers did to British universities in the 1990s, in the years when I was helping to run the graduate philosophy program in Oxford. At that time, we told promising undergraduates contemplating graduate work in philosophy that spending four or five years in a graduate program working on something that really interests them is not something they will ever regret. The statistics in the UK also showed that those with Ph.D.’s in philosophy do extremely well if they do decide eventually to move into a non-philosophical position, something that should not be surprising given the skills we aim to inculcate. I would be very surprised if the same were not true in North America.

On the second part of your question: it’s hard for anyone to assess his or her own contributions to a discipline. From the mid-eighties onwards, for much of the time I have been grappling with the right way to conceive of the relations between three great areas in philosophy: metaphysics, epistemology, and the theory of intentional content. My 1999 book *Being Known* was explicitly on one aspect of this topic. In the past few years, I have been working on what I call a general metaphysics-first view, on which the metaphysics-

ics of a domain is prior in the order of explanation to a theory of intentional contents about that domain, and prior also to a theory of meaning and understanding for sentences about that domain. I am currently writing a draft of a book developing a metaphysics-first view. Maybe what will survive me is some conception of how we might address these ur-questions in philosophy, both in general and in one or two specific problematic domains of philosophical interest. But it's hard to take seriously anyone who claims to know the future of philosophy, with its zig-zag, stop-and-start character. I should add that in my view, that character does not undermine the possibility of progress in philosophy.

**HRP: Many people involved in philosophy argue that philosophy endows students with transferable skills that allow them to do well in non-philosophical fields, as you just suggested. However, particularly in the areas of metaphysics and epistemology, it isn't immediately clear that the actual content studied and discussed can enrich students in non-philosophical fields. Are there ways in which you believe the content of metaphysics and epistemology courses can make student better equipped outside the domain of professional philosophy?**

*Peacocke:* I agree, it's at most in very special cases that the actual content of philosophical investigations can make a student better equipped outside of philosophy. The special cases would, for instance, include those who go on to work in some discipline, and maybe become concerned that current first order theory in that chosen discipline does not conform to the constitutive standards of good explanation. I certainly wouldn't make any case for the distinctive transferability of skills in the areas in which I myself work. But though the content of philosophy is specialized, anyone who has been through a good undergraduate major or good graduate program will have been concerned with issues in ethics, in explanation, in formal and informal reasoning, in politics, and many other diverse areas in which there's a wide variety of analytical skills that are transferable, concerning both humanistic and non-humanistic subject matters. For those who go into the law, to which there is a well-trodden path from philosophy, there are much closer connections with philosophy. The ability to extract plausible general principles from particular cases, and the ability to think of counterexamples to proposed principles, are directly relevant in the higher courts that work in the common law tradition.

**HRP: In the same 2008 interview with *Columbia College Today*, you said that “once you get interested in meaning and truth, you can't spend your life in economics. Everything else seems like a minor problem.” Are “meaning and truth” the philosopher's Calypso?**

*Peacocke:* If we are adopting Odyssean terms, I'd prefer to think of meaning and truth as philosophy's Penelope, rather than as philosophy's Calypso. Meaning and truth are where we start, and if the long journey goes well, they are where we will also return.

### Note

1. There is more discussion of these ideas in my article “Music: The Perception of Relational Properties and their Aesthetic Significance,” forthcoming in *The Oxford Handbook of Western Music and Philosophy*, ed. N. Nielsen, J. Levinson, and T. McAuley (expected 2017), with a response by Nicholas Cook of Cambridge University.

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