The Philosopher's Role:
AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. RUSS SHAFER-LANDAU
Interview by Benjamin McIntosh

Stance: *Many of your works have focused on critiques of other philosophical writings. In general, do you think it's more valuable for the philosophical community to present new and novel ideas or to critique already existing works so they can be strengthened?*

Shafer-Landau: You know, I'm really damned if I do and damned if I don't one way or the other, right? Of course, there's real value in both of those enterprises. I think that the way philosophy is actually done today—and this is always the way it's been—there's a much smaller percentage of work that's truly original, as opposed to work that advances things at the margins. I think there's a third option besides the two you've identified, and that's the development of novel ideas that are not earth-shaking. There are no Kantian-Copernican revolutions, for instance, or they're not the developments of a whole new brand of empiricism like the logical positivists did in the '20s and '30s. Very few working philosophers are going to be in a position to totally offer earth-shattering new lines of thinking, and I include myself in that. Nonetheless, there can be valuable work done by philosophers that is novel, that introduces and that develops new arguments, but not huge, big-picture, systematic kinds of gestalt shifts in philosophy. That's where I think the bulk of the interesting work is being done in philosophy.

And my take on things is that folks who are relatively young in the profession feel that they've got to publish things. But it's also the case that because they're relatively young, only a minority of them will have really well-developed, mature views to offer the philosophical community, and so they're going to focus a lot on critical work—which is not to say that only young philosophers are doing critical work, and it's not to say that all young philosophers focus primarily on critical work. There's something of course valuable about this. My own work has been the subject of a fair bit of criticism.

Stance: Do you think that your approach to your field of study is unique compared with your peers'?

Shafer–Landau: No, what I do is not unique. I pursue philosophy in a standard way, so-called regular, old, analytic philosophy. I am not the deepest thinker, and what I do in order to understand someone else's work is to try and put it in my own words as simply as possible. I'm someone who really likes to lay arguments out step by step in a really clear fashion. And when I'm developing my own views, I do it that way as well. I try to come up with three-step arguments as much as possible to see if I can establish a thesis or conclusion that is pretty readily graspable by people.

The reason I study my field—which is, broadly speaking, ethical theory; if you're going to get a little narrower, meta-ethics, questions about the status of morality—is because it's the coolest part of philosophy to study and I'm attracted to really cool things.

Stance: In your Arizona Law Review *article, you identify luck as a factor in making rights narrow using the trolley problem as an example. Specifically, you say the lone person on the other track is unlucky. At what extreme does luck play a role in moral decisions? Does luck have a universal value to it, or are there varying strengths of luck?*

Shafer–Landau: What I'd like to do is punt it right back to you. Basically, I don't have a good answer to your question. That's not because your question is a bad question—it's a really good question, it's a deep question—it's just one that is really hard to answer. And you picked an article that's like twenty years old. It's been twenty years since I was thinking about that stuff, and I confess that after I wrote that I didn't really spend time reading in the literature on moral luck. I've taught a couple classic articles, I've read a few PhD dissertations in this area, but I don't feel that I have original thoughts about this. I don't

even have well-considered thoughts about the extent to which luck plays a role in our moral assessments.

Much of who I am is constituted by my character, and much of my character is determined by how I was raised and the era I was raised in and among whom I grew up. I didn't have any control over those factors, yet to the extent that I've got a good character, that merits some praise. On the one hand, it seems if I merit praise at all, it's because of things I control. Likewise, if I merit condemnation or blame of some kind, it's only by virtue of the things I control; otherwise it's thought that the moral assessment's unfair, and that all makes perfect sense. On the other hand, when you take a look at particular cases in which people, say with malevolent intentions, deliberately set out to do harm and they don't do all the harm they intended, or by some fortunate circumstance, something fortunate intervenes and prevents them from executing their malevolent intention, we tend to let those people off the hook a little more than those who had the same intentions and set out to do the same actions but who actually achieve what they set out to do. Those intuitions about those cases run very deep, and at the heart of our moral thinking is this kind of paradox where we say on the one hand only that which is under our control is morally assessable, and yet on the other we have all these concrete judgments about which we're very confident are incompatible with what we'd call that control principle. And so to that extent I do think there's a paradox at the heart of our thinking, and I don't know how to resolve it.

> *"At the heart of our moral thinking is this kind of paradox."*

Stance: You sketch some thoughts on intellectually virtuous methods of moral investigation in your book Moral Realism, *and you add that in order to understand which virtues may be present in such methods we should look toward epistemic exemplars. What might such a person look like, and how can we know when we've found them? What are some examples of poor exemplars in media and culture who might instill us with bad moral investigative methods? How can we combat this?*

Shafer–Landau: The last few questions have to do with the possibility of misidentifying your moral exemplar and taking folks who don't deserve to be emulated as examples of moral paragons. I think many people just did this in the recent election, so there's no doubt that it's not only possible, but it's actual. A lot of people elevate those who are undeserving to exalted moral status and then try to model their own behavior in reference to the misidentified moral exemplar. So I think

that there's no question that that happens. The real question is, how can you protect against that? The pretty unsatisfactory answer is that the only way to identify a moral exemplar is by deploying moral convictions already. Hume called this an "is-ought gap," where you can't make any direct inference from what is the case to what ought to be the case. The reason I bring that up is because there's a very similar kind of problem here when it comes to the identification of moral exemplars. Here's what would be really cool and really satisfying, but I don't think you can get: if you can identify a set of criteria and wholly non-moral ways and say those people who fulfill these criteria are the moral exemplars. That would give us a kind of neutrality, a kind of independence, and a kind of impartiality that would make the project of indentifying moral exemplars really appealing and satisfying. But I think there's no way to do that, and that's because of the Humean "is-ought gap." I think what that project would amount to would be laying out a whole bunch of descriptions without any moral content and saying any person who meets these descriptions is going to be the person we should morally emulate, but I don't think that project is going to be successful. That's my reason for saying

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that any answer is going to be to some extent unsatisfactory, because what we will need to do in order to identify someone as a genuine moral exemplar is to bring moral convictions to the enterprise already. So what we will have to do is make assumptions, for instance, about the wrongness of torturing people for fun, the wrongness of killing people just because they violated your religious ideology or your religious convictions, the wrongness of suppressing people and denying them the vote just because of the color of their skin or their gender or their sex—these are moral convictions that we bring to bear in the identification of who counts as a moral exemplar in the first place.

What that means is that those who have very different starting points from ourselves will be led by their own personal moral convictions to identify people who are very different from our own preferred candidates. Then the question is: what do we do if we try to come to some reasoned consensus about who counts and who is excluded as a moral exemplar? We identify, for instance, Martin Luther King, Jr., as a moral exemplar and identify Donald Trump as a …. He's not the worst of the bunch, and for those of you who voted for him, I apologize. Pick your own poison; pick your own person who

strikes you as someone who exhibits many, many vices and very few moral virtues. I shouldn't have even offered Trump as an example. Whoever it is, there are going to be people who disagree with you about that person's status either as an exemplar or as an exemplar of what to avoid. At that point, there's nothing for it but to get into the weeds and have an extended moral conversation—but the thing is, as we know, there may well be intractable moral disagreements, and in that case, you're going to be in a position of having great confidence in your moral platitudes or your moral paradigms because you're talking with someone who is inconvincible. My own view—and this raises lots of very interesting conversations of the view of moral disagreement and whether or not it's resolvable, even in principle—is that just because you come up against someone who is absolutely inconvincible doesn't make your view and his or her view on par, doesn't make them equivalent, epistemically equivalent or morally equivalent. I think to say more would be to go way deep into another set of issues, so I'm going to stop there.

Stance: In Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?*, you mention that without an objective moral standard, we would not be able to say definitively that Hitler was bad or that we are morally better today than we were centuries ago. However, many people would not hesitate to argue that Hitler was indeed bad, and many people today hold an objective stance. With that said, what are some of the implications of accepting or rejecting an objectivist meta-ethic?*

    Shafer–Landau: Well, the short answer is read *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?*, and you'll find out what the implications are. To fasten on one of the most important [implications], if we abandon the idea that there are some objective standards of right and wrong, or good and bad, then we're going to be left with one of two positions. One is that the whole thing is just made up, it's just a bunch of make believe—morality is bum. It's convenient fiction or maybe it's inconvenient fiction, but it's fiction nonetheless. And so we can't make mistakes. We can't say anything true when we speak morally. That's a very extreme position known as the error theory. And in general, I would like to avoid it. In general, I think we're pushed to a very radical skepticism about morality only if there are exceptionally powerful arguments for it, and I don't think there are. I don't think we're required to give up on morality. But if we're not required to give up on morality—but we are required to give up on the possibility of objective standards on morality—then there's only one other alternative, and that

is a kind of subjectivism or relativism where there are correct standards of morality but they're not objective. Instead, they are a function of someone's opinion or some group's opinion. And I think the implications of accepting subjectivism or relativism are really radical. I think that when people think through those implications they'll find themselves. Although they might have initially found things attractive about subjectivism or relativism, they really will find the package at the end to be deeply unacceptable. There are a lot of reasons for this, ... [and] we can follow up as you like. I think the right attitude to take toward one's own moral thinking is that of modesty and the recognition of one's own fallibility. No one is morally omnipotent. We all make moral mistakes. Even if we're convinced we're right, we know we might be wrong. That's the kind of modest appraisal of one's own epistemic powers when it comes to moral thinking. I think that that's a virtue, not a vice. I think a view that encourages or even entails that we are close to something that is morally infallible is in itself deeply problematic. Both relativism and subjectivism have that implication. If you're a subjectivist and what's morally right and wrong is just in the eye of the beholder, if you think something's right, it is. So if you think that genocide or if you think that sexism or racism is morally right, as many of our fellow citizens apparently do, then you're not making any mistake. I pick examples that I think you'll find persuasive with me. It doesn't matter which examples you pick as long as you endorse the idea that none of us is morally perfect. In fact, most of us are very far from morally perfect in our thinking. Subjectivism makes it nearly impossible to make a moral mistake. And relativism, although it does make it possible to be morally in error, makes it very easy to know what's morally right. In fact, I think it makes it too easy. So if relativism is correct, then what's morally right is what your society ultimately stands for. The problem is that, so long as you think that societies, a bunch of people getting together, can make mistakes about what is right and wrong, relativism is in deep trouble. It says that just because a group of us, our culture, our society or perhaps a subculture, thinks that something's right, then it is. Morality is nothing more than the interpersonal agreements of folks in groups, societies, or cultures. If that's all morality is, then for something to be morally right [means it is]

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endorsed by the society or culture or its ultimate principles. If you think like I do, that people can be very off-base—perhaps I am about some things, I admit that possibility, it's a very likely certainty that I am off-base about some things, morally. It is because I don't get to make up what's right and wrong, and neither do the groups that I'm a member of. We have to answer to a different standard. And that's the definition that is, by definition, objective. I'm not saying what that standard is—I don't have a theory of what's right and wrong—I'm just convinced that whatever that theory is, it's not true because I think it is. It's not true because a bunch of folks think it is. It's not true because anyone thinks it is. It's true for independent reasons. And that is my very long-winded answer to that question.

Stance: We tend to speak in moral absolutes, like we say things are good or bad in a definitive way. How do you feel about us speaking in an objective moral language when there are people who don't believe that there are objective moral truths? How do you suppose that might have come to be?

Shafer–Landau: Okay, first of all, I want to allow that a lot of people in your generation, I think, speak in the following sort of way. When they make a moral judgment, they tend to qualify it by saying "in my opinion, that's right," or "as I see it, that's wrong." When people speak in that way, I don't think that they are using what you call "objective moral language," but rather they're qualifying things in such a way as to indicate that what they're doing is expressing what they regard as a merely personal opinion. But even there I think that, if you push a little bit, what these folks would say is that my moral judgments—that when I judge, for instance, that slavery is wrong—I'm not really telling you the same thing as when I'm telling you that I prefer chocolate to vanilla. When I say I prefer chocolate to vanilla, I am acknowledging the standards of the evaluation here are not objective, rather the expression of a personal preference, even if I were to say something that sounded objectivist or absolutist like, "Chocolate's better than vanilla." But if you pushed me a little bit, I would have to acknowledge that people have different taste buds and that some people like vanilla better than chocolate. I don't think that they are wrong or mistaken—they're just different. But despite any differences in kinds of qualifications I mentioned a minute ago about the way in which we convey our moral opinions, I think that most people, even people who are self-proclaimed relativists, don't believe their relativism in

practice very often. I'm not saying that being a consistent relativist is impossible—so don't get me wrong about that. But I think that when people reflect on their own practices and convictions, they are very likely to think that the expression of personal preference is one thing, and that's the chocolate/vanilla example. But my preference that people not enslave others is of a wholly different order, a different kind from my preference of chocolate over vanilla. Because when I say that people oughtn't enslave others, I'm saying that applies not just to me. It's not an expression of how just I want to go about doing things; it's a very strong commitment about how everyone else ought to be doing things. I understand that people often want to step back from that kind of commitment because it can sound intolerant or dogmatic. But, in other things I've written, I try to show a commitment to an objective standard of right and wrong needn't be intolerant or dogmatic.

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Stance: *I wonder about the idea of not being dogmatic. How do you offer in your moral language an opportunity for pushback while also acknowledging that you are appealing to an objective standard in your ethics?*

Shafer–Landau: Well one thing, to be dogmatic is to be close-minded and not willing to entertain the possibility that you are mistaken, much less entertain incompatible opposing views. I think that if you acknowledge that you are not the author of morality, that you have to answer to some objective moral standard, then the appropriate attitude to take towards morality is humility—in just the same way that someone who is investigating the laws of physics or the laws of chemistry should be appropriately humble. They don't get to make up those laws; their thinking has to answer to a set of standards, principals, laws, whatever you want to call them, that are not of human construction. So in that case, the kind of attitude to take is a kind of wonder. Wow, this thing is so complicated, and there's just little ol' me here, maybe I'm getting a lot of this wrong. So, the right attitude to take in that case is to be willing to listen to people—especially those who aren't your own private echo chamber, something you already believe —to engage with people who disagree with you and hope that the same courtesy is extended to you at the other side. Nevertheless, if it's the case that you don't get to have the final say about what's right and wrong because they're objective

standards—not subjective or relative standards—then you'll do best for yourself if you're interested on landing on the truth to talk to as many people who have cogent views and who disagree with you as possible. So dogmatism is a really terrible recipe for trying to discover a truth not of your own making.

Stance: Contemporary philosophers seem to be more drawn to research concerning social institutions and their respective effects—such as educational and prison systems; you've written on the role of punishment and moral education in the past, but how else might meta-ethics be applied to these social issues that I just mentioned?

Shafer–Landau: It's really hard, to tell you the truth. Meta-ethics is to ethics the way fundamental issues in metaphysics now go under the fancy heading "meta-metaphysics." I've had to face this question a lot in my career because early in my career I did write about punishment—for instance, the stuff that you're citing and philosophy of law. I have in the last fifteen years dedicated the bulk of my research to questions about meta-ethics, and by my own acknowledgment this is something that is not unique to me. I think that most people in the meta-ethics research community would admit this—it's the least practically applicable branch of moral philosophy there is. So, what we're not trying to do is solve practical moral problems that beset people, but rather we are asking much more theoretical questions about the fundamental metaphysical and epistemological questions regarding the nature of morality. It's very hard to turn that sort of investigation into practical benefits.

To the extent that I can identify any such benefit, it's this: I think that a commitment to various forms of moral skepticism about moral objectivity can have very serious practical import. Those who are committed to moral relativism, for instance, have been thus committed because they are independently committed to the value of tolerance—as I see it, that is a deeply confused pairing. If you really care about tolerance—if you think tolerance is especially important for those who are oppressed within a society—then you can't consistently endorse a subjectivist or relativist view about meta-ethics. In societies which systematically oppress women or religious minorities, African-Americans or various indigenous populations, that system of oppressive values is mistaken despite that kind of oppression being located at the heart of that society. What that society could benefit from is

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a much greater dose of tolerance, despite the fact that a call for tolerance is incompatible with the basic dictates of that society.

I think what I just said is very plausible, but it's not something that can consistently be said by someone who rejects an objectivist meta-ethic. It's on points like that that I think meta-ethical investigation can have some practical benefit. What it's not going to help us do though is tell us, in any way, whether we ought to reform the Electoral College for instance or whether we ought to reform the tax code in this way or that way so as to make it more equitable or more just—that's outside the purview of a meta-ethical investigation. So, to some extent for those who are interested in moral philosophy as a way to help improve the world, meta-ethics is not the first place I'd recommend going.

Stance: *Do we have a moral obligation to be active in politics and social change? Do scholars have more of an obligation to be active in this way? If so, do you think that today's scholars are satisfying this obligation?*

Shafer– Landau: I do think we have a moral obligation, as citizens within a democracy, to be involved—absolutely. Do academics have a special obligation? It's not clear to me that they do. Some academics are doing things that don't really bear directly on pressing social issues, and I think that's okay. For instance, within philosophy I think that folks who are working in logic or in various areas of metaphysics don't have much—by way of their research—to add to debates about contemporary social issues. I don't want to say there can be no connection whatsoever, but what connection there is is likely to be tenuous, and in almost every case there's likely just not to be a connection. That's not to ding those areas of philosophy. I think they're very valuable areas and the same is true with meta-ethics, as was indicated in my last response. There's very little in the way of a direct application to current policy matters, so you can't run an inference from a particular meta-ethical position—whatever it happens to be—to a particular policy recommendation. I don't want to say you can never do that, but I can't think of a single one of the top of my head

So what about political philosophers, or philosophers of law, or people who do normative ethics? Their work is likely to be highly relevant to contemporary debate about social policies. The question is, "do they have a special responsibility that others in the academy don't?", and I'm not sure what to say about that. I can see a case on both sides of the matter. On the one hand, they bear special responsibility to the extent that

anyone who has special expertise about policy has an extra responsibility to weigh in on things. That said, we live in a pretty heavily anti–intellectualist society. Not every society shares this trait, but many societies do. If you want to say they ought to do more than the rest of us to help effect change, you have to be able to validate the claim that they can do more—and it's not clear that they can. It's not clear that the voices of the academy are ones that are very highly respected in this society.

The answer to your question is really context sensitive. Not everyone is well equipped to appear on CNN as a talking head to talk about the merits or demerits of a particular policy just because their research deals with that. Even among those who are well equipped, the reception of their input remains an open question. A lot of folks in this society regard professors as egg-heads occupying the ivory tower, out of touch with reality. It could be that a professor weighing in favor of a particular position on the basis of their work may actually turn

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people in the other direction because they're so suspicious of academics. It might be—if you want to effect a particular social change—better to keep your mouth shut. Your question really depends on a lot of contextual factors, we can't just give an across-the-board answer.

Stance: *Comparing the philosophy education system when you were in school to our education system today, what differences do you see between then and now, and how do you see the field changing in the future?*

Shafer-Landau: I don't see a great deal of change in philosophy pedagogy, but there has been some change in the content—for the good. There are many more areas of study nowadays than when I was your age—I'm 53 so you know it's a thirty- to thirty-five-year difference here. When I went to college there were no environmental ethics classes, no bioethics classes—the emphasis on oppression was either non-existent or very, very marginal. In the '80s, in a history of philosophy class, for instance, you'd never read a female philosopher—I don't want to say never, almost never; I never did, for instance, and I got a pretty good philosophical education. These are all changes for the good.

In terms of making predictions about how things are going to go for the next generation, I'm going to take a pass on that. I made pretty confident predictions about how this last election was going to go, and that didn't turn out so well. So, I've learned, I'm not a very reliable predictor.

Stance: *All right, that's okay. Which of your works are you most proud of or passionate about, and why?*

Shafer–Landau: That's a cool question—I think I'm most proud of my good-and-evil book [*Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?*]; I wrote that in a white heat. My daughter wasn't born yet; my son was an infant; and I was living on fumes for many months. But this idea of trying to defend ethical objectivism to people who have never read philosophy before was a really exciting one to me. I had such a great time writing that book, and although it's not a book that maybe any professional philosopher has read for her or his own edification, sometimes it is taught. I like the idea, to the extent that it's read, that it can reach people and hopefully get them excited about meta-ethics—and also hopefully get them to have the right view about meta-ethics, which is that there are, after all, some objectively correct moral standards. That's what I hope for a legacy—I don't think there ever will be one—but I hope that book will continue to be read by some folks.

Stance: *Relative to that, what are your hopes for the future of your work and your work's legacy in the philosophical community?*

Shafer–Landau: Well, I have a near-term and a longer-term hope for my work. Right now, I'm working on a book that, unsurprisingly, is another defense of ethical objectivism. I'm doing this collaboratively; I'm working with two other really great philosophers. One's a guy named Terrance Cuneo, and the other is a former colleague of mine from Wisconsin, a young guy named John Bengson. I'm really excited about this project. I only have written one thing collaboratively before and that was with Terrance—we wrote an article a couple of years ago. My hope is that we can finish this book in about a year and a half.

So that's my near-term hope, and then my longer-term hope is to turn to the issue that got me into philosophy when I went to college: to try to figure out the meaning of life. What I'd like to do is write a book about that—I'm not sure about what the meaning of life is, or whether that question is actually a well formed question. I would like to think a lot more about it and have something interesting to say. My hope is that, by giving

myself the next many years after this collaborative book is done, I'll be able to figure things out and put something down on paper that's going to be accessible to other people—ideally, I'd do for that issue what I had hoped that the good-and-evil book would do for people who were puzzled about the nature of ethics.

When I went to college, I went wanting to learn what the meaning of life was. I didn't find a course that did that, so I went in other directions. The other thing that was really exciting me intellectually was how ethics could be objective, if it was—I had very inconsistent views about that. On the one hand, I was thinking to myself many, things that would imply a relativist view, while also thinking many things that would imply an objectivist view. By my sophomore year it became clear to me that what I was really intellectually obsessing about was meta-ethics, but I didn't know that word, and I wasn't hanging out with people in the philosophy department who were teaching about that or who knew what to recommend for me to read—what would've been so wonderful for me, at that stage of my intellectual development, was to have a book that's like the good-and-evil book I wrote. A book that talked to people who weren't really philosophically sophisticated and sort of walked them through the issues in a way that was pretty clear. When I wrote that book a long time ago, thinking about my nineteen- and twenty-year-old self was the inspiration for me. My long-term hope for myself, in my research, is that someday I'll be able to do that same sort of thing when it comes to issues about the meaning of life.

Stance: *We look forward to both of those projects.*

Shafer–Landau: Thanks. It's been great talking to you all. Thank you so much for putting together those really penetrating questions, for taking all the time to do the background reading, and for listening to me go on and on over this.

Stance: *It's been a pleasure.*

About Russ Shafer-Landau, PhD

Russ Shafer-Landau received a PhD in philosophy in 1992 from the University of Arizona, where he studied under Dr. Joel Feinberg. Before becoming a distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, he held positions at the University of Wisconsin, Madison—where he served as the chair of the Department of Philosophy for five years—the University of Kansas, and the University of California, Berkeley. In addition, he has been the director of the Parr Center for Ethics since 2015, has organized the Annual Metaethics Workshop for over a decade, and has been the series editor of the Oxford Studies in Metaethics, *which is now on its twelfth edition. Dr. Shafer-Landau writes extensively on metaethical issues and has published several seminal texts in his field, most notably* Moral Realism: a Defence, *which was awarded Outstanding Academic Title by* Choice *in 2004, and was an honorable mention in the APA's Biennial Book Prize in 2005. He is currently working on a new book on metaethics, co-authored by Terrance Cuneo, PhD, from the University of Vermont, and John Bengson, PhD, who is currently a visiting professor of Philosophy at Harvard. For more information on Dr. Shafer-Landau's work, visit http://sites. google.com/site/shaferlandau/home.*