

Interview: Professor Andy Hamilton¹

Interviewer: Anne-Marie McCallion

Transcription: Nathan Davies

Are art and entertainment opposing practices?

This is an issue I've been thinking about recently, and I am inclined to qualify the modernist view that they are opposed – but I'm not totally convinced I've got this right. I think that art and entertainment are contrasting or opposed practices, but that art and being entertained, or art and being an entertainment, are not opposed. Thus art can be entertaining without being pure entertainment. Graham Greene described one group of his novels as 'entertainments' – they are presumably meant to be lighter than his others. So perhaps *Stamboul Train* is an entertainment and *The Power and the Glory* is not an entertainment because it is more serious. However, I think his 'less serious' novels are not pure entertainment either.

'What is entertainment?' is somewhat neglected in philosophical aesthetics, and I have to persuade colleagues that this is a viable question.

Can I ask you to define 'pure entertainment' then?

It is a performance which is intended to stimulate the audience emotionally – it could be to amuse them, excite them, horrify them – in a way that doesn't call for concentrated effort. That is part of the function of art – to entertain – but it isn't the only function. Whereas entertainment doesn't have any other functions – not direct or essential ones, at least.

Do you think art should be assessed in relation to its social significance?

Yes, I do think that. Adorno rightly addresses art as an aesthetic phenomenon, and a social phenomenon. There is a lot of music that I do not think is aesthetically valuable, like Country and Western or trad jazz, but they are very interesting sociologically – and Adorno was interested in this kind of thing, though not those two forms specifically because they weren't really around. I might not want to listen to them very much – in fact I might want to turn them off very quickly – but I can't switch them off too quickly because I am interested in why people like such bloody awful music.

My neighbours, who are students, had their volume up (which they don't normally do) last night, and I could hear some of their music, and I thought "That is so awful, how can you bear to listen to it, it is so banal" ...For obvious reasons, you can't go around saying these things – I've probably been rather indiscreet already.

¹ <https://www.dur.ac.uk/philosophy/staff/?id=512>

Would you call yourself an elitist?

No.

Why not?

I think the common heritage of humankind is the canon of classic art, literature and music. And that is what passes the test of time and amasses the largest audience over time. At a particular time, Country and Western music might have a big following among certain demographics. But in a hundred years that music will be the preserve of highly specialist music historians – no one else will be interested. Commercial Country and Western music at least will not pass the test of time. A few individuals who are popular now will make it into history, but most of them will not.

If you look at concert programmes for classical music around 1900, the name Rutland Boughton – an English composer – appears very frequently, but who listens to Rutland Boughton now? Nobody. Or to take another example of a popular artist, Damien Hirst. Now I would say in a hundred years he will be of interest as a big name who was crap. It is a common phenomenon. The interest in him will be to answer 'why were people persuaded that this stuff was worth attending to?', and that is a sociological question, partly.

To what extent does your position depend on an aesthetic realism in order to not count as elitist?

I suppose I didn't really answer your [previous] question. An elitist is someone who has no respect for, or no interest in, what most people are listening to, reading, or whatever. In fact, they regard art as an exclusive phenomenon. That isn't my position at all. I'm reminded of a quote by Ernest Bevin, the British trade unionist and Labour Party politician, who referred to 'the poverty of the desires of my people'— 'his people' I think being the working class. But it would be completely absurd to call Bevin an elitist.

And obviously the way I am talking at the moment is not going to endear me to many people. But maybe there's a time when you talk and you say the truth, and a time when you try to win converts...

To what extent do you think the 'impoverished desires' are exclusive to the working class? I would say that your neighbours listening to that rubbish music are probably middle class?

Bevin's quote is great, and surprising coming from someone like him. I assume he meant the working class, I doubt he meant the people of the West Country [where he came from]. I need to investigate it – I don't know exactly what he meant.

So you're not an elitist?

Well I am a meritocrat, and I am certainly anti-populist – and if you think that anyone who is anti-populist is an elitist then I'm elitist. But I don't think of it like that – I think there is a middle way. Meritocracy is closer to elitism because it makes value judgments about art, and sociologists don't tend to do that – nor for that matter do post-modernists. So if you think that anyone who values some art more than other art is an elitist then I am an elitist. But I don't think that's elitism.

I don't think it constitutes elitism so long as we recognise that these are our preferences.

It is a very difficult question. I don't think that all popular desires are impoverished, because – going back to entertainment – the highest art and the greatest entertainment which is not art have a wide appeal. So although

most people don't go to Mozart operas, probably a large part of the population knows the theme to Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* or *Ode to Joy*, and that obviously has appeal.

That's another reason I'm not an elitist: the highest art is humane in terms of its appeal. That is a criticism of people like Schoenberg and James Joyce, that their work hasn't broadened its appeal over time, on the whole. Having a narrow specialist audience is a failing of otherwise great art – I can love much of Schoenberg, but it is a failing that he didn't manage to appeal more broadly. This is related to the issue of populism. Take the Brexit vote. People say: "this is final", "the people have spoken". Well you can ask: "why did people speak that way?" and "what questions were posed to them?". Or in the case of art: "what choices were they presented with?"

Populism is based on manipulation on the whole, and contempt for the audience. Why did Cameron call for a referendum? Because of internal political problems. He didn't want to know what the electorate thought, he couldn't give a toss – he just thought it would shut up UKIP. Unfortunately, it didn't.

To what extent has your Wittgensteinianism impacted your approach to philosophy, particularly in reference to areas like aesthetics?

Well, Wittgenstein's approach permeates all my philosophical views and approaches. It's just that he didn't write much that was good on aesthetics — he didn't write much on aesthetics at all. What he did write I haven't got very much out of. He obviously didn't rate it that much because he didn't attempt to write a work on aesthetics – most of what he said is in lectures and conversations. And also he was an anti-modernist, at least in music if not in architecture. Actually, you would expect him to have more interesting views on art – he was clearly an art lover and a music lover, which is just the reverse of Kant. Kant was not an art lover or a music lover, and yet by some miracle he came up with these amazing ideas on aesthetics.

As to what makes for a Wittgensteinian approach: much of what passes for aesthetics consists in engaging with pseudo-problems, so to that extent I would be Wittgensteinian [about them]. But I think Kant is a much more important figure in aesthetics.

Is the contextualist epistemology advocated for in *On Certainty* a rejection of traditional epistemological problems?

I can't remember what I said in my book, but I know that I don't like contextualism. Well, I don't really know. You tell me what you think contextualism is?

Well I would say that it stresses the context in which someone holds belief or is said to have knowledge, in a broad sense.

So the standards are different in physics and in history, for instance – you wouldn't say that either was higher, they are just different. I would certainly go along with that. If you are anti-contextualist in that sense you are probably scientific. You would probably think that the paradigm of human knowledge is to be found in the hard sciences, and that other forms of human knowledge fall below that level. I don't agree with that, I think that each form of knowledge has its own criterion or standard, to that extent Wittgenstein is right.

Wittgenstein is a genius, and to that extent his views cannot be captured in a slogan. The idea that Wittgenstein is an anti-realist, contextualist, quietist, reliabilist or naturalist, these are all simplifications. "There is a reliabilist strand in Wittgenstein" might be a reasonable thing to say, because reliabilism is quite an enduring view, whose origins go back to Thomas Reid at least. But contextualism seems to be something thought up by a coterie of late twentieth century analytic philosophers, and I'm not sure one should grace it with the publicity. It is a sort of arrogance to say: "here is one of the great philosophers of the western canon, does he conform to the ideas of a small coterie of probably soon to be forgotten [philosophers]?"

In that case I will rephrase the question. Do you think that Wittgenstein's approach in *On Certainty* suffices as a solution to traditional epistemological problems?

Oh I see, in other words: 'is it an effective critique of scepticism?'

Yes.

Well I think the MEANING argument - which I haven't thought about in quite a while – which challenges the sceptic by saying: "if you doubt whether you have a hand you also doubt whether you know what 'hand' means", is a very deep argument.² I think it forms the basis for a very powerful critique of scepticism. So I am not a quietist. I don't think that you find a 'refutation' [of scepticism] in *On Certainty*; but you find powerful arguments against the sceptical position. This is philosophy, these aren't questions to be resolved, they are questions to be continually debated and reformulated. The greatest philosophers on the whole cannot hope to do more than present a powerful critique of something, that to me is the highest praise.

Now maybe Kant destroyed rationalism, but that is an unusual situation, where a philosopher simply destroys a position making it no longer a live option. I don't know that Wittgenstein did that with scientism, and certainly there are still very many scientific philosophers. There are many more than in his day, so he failed in that sense. So he is not like Kant, Kant closed down debates in his day but Wittgenstein did not.

What do you think the role of the epistemologist should be, or rather, what do you think the goal of epistemology is?

Well, look, I'm not an epistemologist. Perhaps that is why it was incautious of me to write a book on *On Certainty*. My whole way of doing philosophy is epistemological, but I don't really like epistemology as a sub-discipline of philosophy. I think it is a paradigm analytic cottage industry. I suppose it arose from Gettier – it is a cottage industry that arose from a short article that criticized knowledge as justified true belief. I don't see it as a summit of one's aspirations, to have some effect on that cottage industry.

A cottage industry but still a live option?

Well, people have always been interested in whether knowledge is justified true belief...I suppose I'd rather ask questions in the philosophy of mind or aesthetics about what we know about X, Y, Z, rather than elevate epistemology. I am also sceptical of the work of some of the people who call themselves epistemologists.

² See Hamilton (2014) *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Wittgenstein and On Certainty*. pp.227-259

So you are sceptical of epistemology, I assume you are also sceptical of anti-epistemologists, or anti-epistemology as its own discipline?

Well I am less sceptical about them. But who are they? I don't know many of them.

I think you could make an argument that they are the contextualists.

Well ok. I don't know much about them. Is Michael Williams a contextual epistemologist?

Yes.

Well, he is a very good philosopher so I wouldn't take him to be seen as taking part in a cottage industry.

How has your epistemological approach impacted your research on the self?

Well, I don't think I have an epistemological approach, I have a Wittgensteinian approach, or a Kantian approach in the case of aesthetics. I got interested in the self before I thought about epistemology – although I did read *On Certainty* as an undergraduate and I was very impressed by it.

I came up with the idea of "the epistemology of self-consciousness" quite late into writing my book, when I was trying desperately to find ways of making it intelligible. People kept on saying they couldn't understand it – or not that they couldn't understand it, but that it was not easy for the reader to work out what the main claims were. That is a serious criticism, so I thought that the epistemology of self-consciousness is what I was interested in; and at least one example of it would be the immunity to error in self-identification.

I feel that there is a dilemma between trying to give an account of self-consciousness, which is what I was trying to do, and being a Wittgensteinian sceptic about the concept of self-consciousness. I still have this doubt about which view is the right one. If you are asking "what is self-consciousness" then you are assuming there is a well-formed question. I conceded that you could talk about philosophical accounts of 'self-consciousness' where you are using a term of art, which should be distinguished from everyday uses of 'self-consciousness' which are different. Feeling embarrassed or having a sense of self are the things that ordinary people understand by self-consciousness – obviously they would not be acquainted with the sorts of things discussed in the literature like the reference of 'I', self-identification and the status of avowals.

I'm not sure whether my view is that self-consciousness essentially involves both self-identification and a certain class of judgments, or whether it is a term of art. If it is a term of art, it is not the case that anything goes, but you are somewhat less constrained. It is just not clear what I am trying to do – if I am trying to give an account of the everyday use of these terms then that is a long way from these technical discussions.

Do you think there is any room for metaphysical or epistemological discussions of the self?

Well, as a Wittgensteinian obviously I am an anti-metaphysician. I said to Jonathan Lowe, when we were discussing the Metaphysics and Mind research cluster, "Shouldn't we have an anti-metaphysics cluster as well?" And he replied: "Oh, that's included in the metaphysics". I think that's a great quote.

What do you think that quote demonstrates?

Well, I don't know. It demonstrates for him the hegemony of metaphysics. But it is always a question. I remember Barry Gower, who was a professor here, saying that Kant had to be a metaphysician in order to be an anti-metaphysician, but that's not true of Wittgenstein. Kant had a metaphysics of experience, so he is clearly a metaphysician in a way that Wittgenstein isn't. Wittgenstein is a thoroughgoing anti-metaphysician if anybody is. People can be perhaps *as* anti-metaphysical as Wittgenstein but I don't know about the idea of someone being *more* anti-metaphysical.

It is the deepest kind of anti-metaphysics. There are people who aspire to be anti-metaphysical in the same way, but their critique doesn't have the depth of his. So again I'm not sure what to say. I don't have a problem with much of what goes on in metaphysics and possibly a lot of what Wittgenstein argued doesn't attack what E.J.Lowe was doing.

To what extent do you think Wittgenstein's 'metaphysics' is symptomatic of him as an engineer or as a human being – Jonathan Lowe might call it his 'metaphysics'?

Well, Jonathan might say that the *Tractatus* had a metaphysics of logical atomism. It was a common view that what happened in Wittgenstein's career was that he was a metaphysician and then became more of an anti-metaphysician. Everybody recognised that the *Tractatus* had a strong anti-metaphysical undercurrent but they also took literally the beginning of the *Tractatus*. That view is now not popular – the general consensus is that Wittgenstein was a thoroughgoing anti-metaphysician in the first place and the *Tractatus's* metaphysics is a piece of irony.

His anti-metaphysics is connected with his rejection of scientism. It is a humane standpoint, but he is not really a humanist. His view is more clearly a standpoint in the philosophy of mind, that mental states are ascribed to whole persons, rather than brains—the latter is the lunacy of the age really. He is not a humanist in the sense of defending humanities; [although] you would expect a historicist strand in Wittgenstein, but there are very few quotes supporting a historicist perspective. So in a way he is an analytic purist, which I am not.

To clarify the question, to what extent do you think metaphysics is 'trained into' philosophers? You mentioned that a lot of people aspire to possess the 'metaphysics' of Wittgenstein, but how prevalent do you think these 'metaphysical' views would be outside the realm of philosophers?

When I was a student at St. Andrews, the two departments were Logic and Metaphysics and Moral Philosophy – where was the department of anti-metaphysics? I don't think that people go into philosophy to be metaphysicians, they go into philosophy for a variety of reasons because of some puzzlement about certain fundamental questions. Some of them may aspire to answer problems about the meaning of life and so on, and are disappointed when those answers aren't forthcoming. I think there are a whole host of reasons people go into philosophy, and the desire to create a metaphysical system is one outcome of that need to find answers. But a lot of people that go into philosophy realise that it is, like the title of Rush Rhees' book, 'without answers'.

People are so unaware that the important thing is to ask the right questions – for god's sake so many people waste their time trying to answer the wrong questions. Let's at least spend our time trying to answer the right questions...I believe in finding novel questions. It is obviously going to be the case that – like any practice or discipline – 90% of philosophy is hack work, with people following fashions. This is just a feature of human

endeavour everywhere. So it follows that most of the questions people will be addressing will not be very interesting, or will be pseudo-questions.

That's one of the negative consequences of the collaborative research structure that is being imposed in the humanities. It is the straight-jacketing of research into existing paths. It is a very depressing situation.

Speaking of the straight-jacketing of research, and to bring us to the central topic at hand: to what extent do you think that philosophical research into the self has been impacted by the surrounding individualism of the West?

That is an issue I haven't really pursued, despite being an historicist. There is some very interesting work which I am not really very well acquainted with on the history of the concept of the self, and I think the answer is obviously: 'very much'. Where does the individualism of the West begin? Augustine's *Confessions* is reckoned to be proto-Cartesian. But the Middle Ages was not the age of the individual, it was the age of the collective. So you are talking about the reappearance of individualism with the Renaissance. The questions of self-consciousness that I have been working on arise from Descartes onwards.

This is a very important question, because people criticise liberalism for its atomistic individualism, and I think that they are probably very wrong to do that. What happens if you attack liberal individualism is that people start getting locked up for saying what they think. So atomistic individualism turns out to be quite a good thing on the whole, if you want to have independent thought.

Is atomistic individualism necessarily a good thing with regards to current neo-liberalism?

This is a confusion that is often made. I think that it is shown by the phrase that has come to be very popular: 'liberal elites', the people who have supposedly been punched in the face by Brexit and Trump supporters. If there is a movement to be criticised it's the movement of the neo-liberal elite. Neo-liberalism is a bastardisation of liberal thinking, it's an economic doctrine of laissez-faire capitalism. So as a liberal, I think you can be a liberal and a socialist, or at least a social-democrat. John Rawls, for instance, is not a neo-liberal, and if you are going to criticize his atomistic individualism, you should realise that the likely alternative is Vladimir Putin's non-atomistic collectivism.

To what extent do you think that the ideological values of liberalism are in fundamental opposition to a capitalist economy?

Well, obviously this is a very important question. The word 'capitalism' may have outlived its usefulness. The term began to be used in the mid-nineteenth century, but it has come to cover a wide range [of economic positions]. Does it include the mixed-economy which we used to have? What if you substitute 'market economy' or 'economy that uses market mechanisms'? It seems to me the most important thing for the people on the left to do now is to work out how to make the market work for the mass of the population and not just for the minority of plutocrats. Because no one else has shown how a modern economy could work unless it is a market-based system.

So would you agree with the claim that the non-free market economy that we have today is in fundamental opposition to the ideological values of liberalism?

We do have a fairly free market; it is regulated so it is not completely laissez-faire. Britain is supposed to stand between the Continent and America on this. I think there are other important values than liberal one – like solidarity. As a liberal I don't think that liberal values are the only values that I support. I might also say that I am a socialist, and those values are not implied by liberalism. But [then again] they are to an extent, because liberalism can't work, as we are seeing now, if much of the population are dissatisfied with the economic products of liberal democracy. So it is of vital importance to liberalism to maintain that allegiance; liberalism has an interest in solidarity but whether it is a liberal value is another question.

Clement Atlee, who is one of my great heroes, was not an articulate thinker – he found it very hard to give an intellectual justification for socialism – and when he was asked: "how would you sum up socialist values?", he thought a bit and said: "Fellowship". Now that has very Christian origins, but it isn't radical egalitarianism and it's not collectivism. Socialism is about solidarity and fellowship, which is not what the bankers in the City of London feel, because they don't feel any fellowship with the citizens of Scunthorpe or Durham or wherever at all. That is the problem that has played a significant part in Brexit and Trump, a feeling of alienation from the activities of the very wealthy. And governments – not just Conservatives but any governments to the right of Corbyn – seem unwilling, and certainly unable – although it is hard to tell which – to do anything about it.

In the age of Brexit and Trump, is it safe to say that meritocracy is a myth?

Meritocracy is not a myth. I have just been reading a history of the Napoleonic Wars, which was a time when sinecures were beginning to be abolished, and people began to be appointed to what was beginning to be called the Civil Service on merit. So it was no longer the case that some aristocrat could say: "I would like to be...", and the reply would be, "Yes that's quite alright Henry you can have that position, what are you going to do for it?", and Henry would respond: "Oh, nothing at all". We have meritocracy now because there are civil service exams and people are mostly appointed on merit. Now you might have issues about those procedures, whether or not they are discriminatory, but that's on a meritocratic assumption. So I don't think meritocracy is a myth. But I suppose what you are suggesting is that jobs in banking and the City go to people with a certain sort of background. I don't know that it's the lack of meritocracy that's the problem – perhaps you are going to tell me why it is?

To what extent do you think that the notion of meritocracy acknowledges that there are substantial barriers to 'climbing the golden ladder'?

Well I'm not an expert on meritocracy. There is equality of opportunity and equality of outcome, and liberals go for equality of opportunity and socialists go for equality of outcome. Now as a liberal socialist – and a conservative in some sense as well – I think you certainly want equality of opportunity. When I was admissions tutor [in the Philosophy Department], I had to take into account the fact that somebody who went to Hartlepool Comprehensive is not going to have as good A-level results as somebody who went to Eton. People are aware that achievement at a particular point is conditioned by your upbringing, and that has to be taken into account in predicting what your achievement will be like at the end of a degree. Equality of outcome, I assume, is probably believed in by the Corbyn Labour Party, and I don't believe in that anymore, if I ever did.

Avoiding big disparities of outcome is what is required. That seems impossible enough to achieve already. 'No large disparity in outcome' is what solidarity means.

We will close with some fun questions. Which three individuals dead, alive or fictional would you invite to your dream dinner party?

Well I have various dream dinner parties. If it was a philosophical dinner party, let's say Wittgenstein, Hume and Kant. Hume and Kant could battle it out over which interpretation of Wittgenstein was the right one.

Which individual dead, alive or fictional would you *not* invite to your dream dinner party?

Rupert Murdoch would certainly be a leading contender.

Why?

Because he is utterly vile.

What is your favourite virtue, and why?

Humility. As to why, I don't know really. I think political leadership is a very neglected topic. If it wasn't neglected Trump would not have been elected, because that is a prime case of people voting because they are not considering what political leadership is. I have a great interest in political leaders who haven't been corrupted by power. There are one or two – Atlee is the leading example. He was uncorrupted by power, and he remained modest to the end despite being deputy prime minister for five years and prime minister for six. That is remarkable. Tony Blair didn't – he went the way of most people with power, it went to his head. That interests me: why is that?

That is Iris Murdoch's favourite virtue as well.

I didn't know that.

You are in good company.

Tell us an anecdote.

I can tell you an anecdote about Clement Atlee connected with modesty. After he retired as prime minister, he would commute into the House of Commons on the Underground, and a woman came up to him one day and said: "has anyone ever told you that you have a striking resemblance to the former prime minister Clement Atlee?". And he replied: "Frequently". That's typical Atlee; he never used more words than is necessary.

If heaven exists, what would you most like to hear God say as you arrive at the pearly gates?

Well isn't it St. Peter?

St. Peter then.

I suppose he might say: "I thought you were an atheist?"

Is that what you want him to say?

Well, I would want him to say: "Come on in old chap, nice to have you here".