

## Moments of Insight

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Gillian Russell earned master's degrees in philosophy and German from University of St Andrews in Scotland and both a master's and Ph.D. in philosophy from Princeton. From 2004-2015 she taught at Washington University in St. Louis. She has also been a Killam Memorial Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Alberta, a visiting scholar at UC Berkeley and at Melbourne University, and a visiting fellow at Tilburg Center for Logic and the Philosophy of Science in the Netherlands. She is the author of *Truth in Virtue of Meaning* and co-editor of the books *New Waves in Philosophical Logic* and *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Language*.



SARA BERNSTEIN

### Beyond experiment

When I was in secondary school, I was fascinated by the parts of science classes that involved general theories and explanations of what was going on. Experiments usually involved working with a lab partner through a relatively slow process at the end of which you would have a list of numbers. This just didn't seem as exciting to me as the more general theories that explained it all. Of

course, experiment is incredibly important; the theories and the generalizations are nothing without being grounded in actual fact. But I wanted more than a list of facts. I wanted explanations. I wanted to see things come together and make sense.

### Discovering philosophy

When I went to university, I wasn't sure if I wanted to study physics or English. They're very different, but I enjoyed both. In the end I decided to study English, but when I became bored by it, I sat down with the course catalog and went through all the introductory courses and tried to find something more interesting. I signed up for two philoso-

phy courses: a political theory course and another one about logic and epistemology. That was an introduction to formal logic and some really big questions in the theory of knowledge, like How do you know that other people are conscious? or How do you know that objects really exist and you're not just hallucinating them?

I found every single part of those courses completely fascinating. The students and professors I was working with were looking for big, unifying explanations for things, and I felt like I had found my people. I had found the thing that I wanted to do. I changed my degree to philosophy, and I never looked back.

### What does it mean?

People often think when they come to their first philosophy of language class that it's going to be like linguistics, that the professor will speak a lot of languages and maybe talk about how many words there are for snow in various Inuit languages. But it's much more abstract than that.

One of the basic questions that comes up in philosophy of language is, What exactly is a meaning? A language has words, and words have meanings, but what is a meaning? If you take a word that's, say, a name for something, like Fido might be the name for your dog, then you might think that that dog itself is the meaning of Fido. That is one approach to meaning: People give meanings to expressions by associating them with things in the world. Other people say that meanings are not concrete objects in the world that we can see. The logician Gottlob Frege, for example, talked about meanings being in a realm of abstract objects, like numbers or sets. But which is the right theory of meaning? That's a big, interesting question.

### What is, and what ought to be

One of the projects I'm working on now is a study of barriers to entailment. A barrier to entailment is something that stops an argument from being valid. When people say that you can't get a certain kind of conclusion from certain kinds of premises, they are talking about barriers to entailment.

Here's an example: You claim that it follows from "Mary killed John" that "Mary ought to go to jail." "Mary killed John" is called a descriptive premise—it's a description

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of what happened. “Mary ought to go to jail” is a normative conclusion, a claim about what ought to happen, what ought to be done about it. Some people say you can't get a normative conclusion from descriptive premises alone; others say you can.

I am investigating this claim by first looking at some much less controversial claims about barriers to entailment. One of these is that you can't get general claims from particular ones. For example, you might see that some particular swan is white, and then another swan that is also white, and then another one and so on. But no matter how many particular swans you see, it will never follow that all swans are white. Another uncontroversial barrier to entailment is that you can't get conclusions about the future from premises that are just about the past.

These cases are pretty well-accepted in philosophy, but the normative/descriptive case is hugely controversial. I'm trying to come up with a uniform account of these barriers that justifies it in the same way the other barriers are justified. There would be implications in all the areas of philosophy that study not just what is the case but what ought to be the case, such as ethics and political theory.

### **The thrill of understanding**

There are lots of different skills required of an academic and so many different things you do in the course of a day. But I especially like getting excited about a new idea for a paper. I love feeling that I understand something that I didn't quite understand before—there is a high that comes from that feeling of insight—and then trying to write it out clearly in a way that is going to make it as transparent as possible to other people. That's my favorite part of the job. I also really, really enjoy teaching. I love getting to show things I'm excited about to new people and being able to offer students that sudden moment of insight and understanding.

### **Pioneers wanted**

This is a male-dominated field, but there are also lots and lots of men and women in the field who want there to be more women and minorities in philosophy and logic. It can be tremendously refreshing and encouraging to be around people who think that way, so when you find them, befriend them and join that community.

It helps to think of yourself as a pioneer. It can be almost exciting and encouraging to think, Well, there aren't a lot of women in philosophy now, but I can be one of the first, or one of the first 20 percent, or one of the first 30 percent. And of course that is going to be challenging, right? Of course there are going to be setbacks. But it's not such a terrible thing to think of your life's course as one that's going to be challenging and exciting and interesting if what you're doing is worthwhile. With that orientation to problems—where they're expected but you're not totally helpless—you get to be the hero.

### **You might be a philosopher if ...**

I think human beings have a basic need not just to eat, not just to have water and daylight, but to understand the world around them. It is satisfying and important, and philosophy is one of the subjects that can give you some of that understanding. It is intrinsically worth studying.

There's a book by Bertrand Russell called *The Problems of Philosophy*. It's a short paperback, and basically each chapter deals with a new problem. I read this when I was maybe 18 or 19, and I just found it completely fascinating. It's one of those books that makes you look at the world around you in a different way. If you find yourself excited by this, then you might enjoy doing some philosophy at university. ■