

# Barry Smith and His Influence On (Not Only, But Mainly My) Philosophy

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## EARLY YEARS

I first met Barry when he came to Manchester in 1973 as a postgraduate student to study for a PhD with Wolfe Mays, having completed his undergraduate studies in Philosophy and Mathematics at Oxford. I had then been studying philosophy for just two years, having transferred into the subject as a postgrad after getting my own BSc in Mathematics at Manchester. Wolfe was also my supervisor, more by default than choice, because I had started out being interested in existential philosophy, and he was the go-to person in Manchester for that. Barry had enjoyed the benefit of an Oxford undergraduate education: the most impressive of his teachers, he said, was Michael Dummett, whose first big Frege book was just out. I was a tyro by comparison. Wolfe was Barry's deliberate choice as supervisor, because he was interested in Husserl and phenomenology, which was off the Oxford radar, and Wolfe as founder-editor of the *Journal for the British Society for Phenomenology* was Mr. Phenomenology in Britain at that time.

From the start, it was obvious that Barry was possessed of two characteristics that have stayed with him ever since and marked his career: a strong passion for the things that interested him, including of course but not confined to philosophy, and an amazing capacity for sustained hard work at those things, which left the rest of us bobbing in his wake. When I say that neither I nor the third partner in our discussions and enterprises, Kevin Mulligan, is particularly slow or sparse in our production, this may give some idea of his

enviable fecundity as a writer, and latterly, as an ontological entrepreneur.

Barry is a native of Bury in Lancashire, a few miles north of Manchester, and on several occasions my wife Susan and I visited him in his house there. What I recall most vividly is the extent to which the house was dedicated to the storage of vast numbers of books. Bookshelves lined everywhere in the main room except doors and windows. When food or a bottle of wine was to be produced, books were moved and the required article brought out from behind them. We soon discovered our political differences: Barry was a Thatcherite, Susan and I were what he called 'Guardian social democrats'—*The Guardian* (formerly *Manchester Guardian*) being then, as it has remained, a left-leaning quality daily. This discrepancy remains. Avoiding hard-left, hard-right, (and now hard-Brexit) views, I wobble around somewhere in what one might call, in analogy with chocolate, the Soft Center. We have long agreed to disagree about politics.

Barry's energy exhibited itself not only in his cycling from Bury to Manchester, but also in his annual estival philosophical pilgrimages about the continent of Europe. From these meetings he returned to Manchester with ideas and links from a range of places, most notably Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Poland. In Kraków he met the philosopher-cardinal-archbishop Karol Wojtyła, whom I recall him describing as "probably some sort of saint." This was before the latter was elected to the papacy. When Wojtyła's philosophy writings started to appear, we all decided he was a better pope than a philosopher; religious phenomenology was not for us. However, *realistic* phenomenology was. It was

Barry who evangelized in our circle for Roman Ingarden, one of Husserl's most talented students, and the one who most vigorously opposed the latter's lapse into transcendental idealism. Barry also admired and praised Adolf Reinach, the leader of the Munich and Göttingen realist phenomenologists, and, together with Kevin and also the late Karl Schuhmann, exerted considerable effort to get Reinach's work edited, documented and more widely known. Together with Karl he also publicized the work of the real instigator of the phenomenological movement as a movement, the brilliant but dysfunctionally perfectionist Johannes Daubert. Through their tireless editorial work, much of it channeled through Munich's Philosophia Verlag, many of the less well-known figures of realist phenomenology have been made more accessible, especially to the English-speaking philosophical world, and the same goes for other central European realists such as Anton Marty, Brentano's most faithful student, and Christian von Ehrenfels, the father of Gestalt psychology.

The most important connections Barry made in central Europe, at least for me, were in Austria. In Graz he met Rudolf Haller, whose conviction that philosophy in Austria had taken a different (and generally better) line of development than in Germany (especially the former Prussian part—Bavaria was less affected by Kant and post-Kantian philosophy) was championed before Haller by Otto Neurath and after him by Barry. Kevin had independently arrived at a similar opinion, and I was readily persuaded. The other important Austrian connection was Edgar Morscher in Salzburg, of whom more is below.

Wolfe's weekly seminars, which had always been fairly free-wheeling affairs, were turned by Barry, Kevin and myself into exercises in presentation and discussion on a wide range of topics, with no holds barred, and the three of us rather dominated proceedings. We were extremely direct and often rude in our criticisms of one another, which no doubt helped us to acquire thicker skins for the times ahead, to lend our discussions a direct style which has become moderately well-known in our circles, but also to align our views more closely. Even more than forty years later, we are able to predict one another's views on more or less any philosophical topic, because they are nearly congruent and the few differences obvious.

## MOVING INTO CAREERS

Barry's PhD on reference in Frege and Husserl was a *tour de force* in bringing together these then rather disjunctively compared philosopher–mathematicians, and it brimmed over with interesting side-topics on such figures as Reinach, Ingarden, Schröder and Wittgenstein. It placed ontology solidly in the center of philosophy, and pulled me over from the philosophy of language into ontology. After my doctorate I was working in the university library in Manchester, while Barry got a research fellowship in Sheffield. I then got a lecturing job in Bolton, which involved much teaching with little time for research. By the later 1970s, the three of us were keen to keep our philosophical seminars going, so with the support of Barry's *padrone* in Sheffield, Peter Nidditch, we set up an informal grouping we called the Seminar for Austro-German Philosophy, which from March 1977 for several years held themed meetings around the UK, and occasionally abroad. The meetings were sparsely funded and depended mainly on enthusiasm from the participants. Many of the more senior figures Barry had encountered on his peregrinations were rounded up as Honorary Presidents. The people we had as speakers included not just established figures, who seemed pleased to participate, but also other younger upwardly mobile philosophers, and many a lifelong friendship resulted. The doctrinal line of the SAGP was that scientific philosophy in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries did not coincide with analytic philosophy, important though that was, but included strands from Austria, Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia and occasionally elsewhere. By and large, that message has become available in print, although its reception remains patchy; this is especially true among analytic philosophers, whose knowledge of central European thought is often confined to Wittgenstein, himself standard by no measure.

When Wolfe Mays retired as Reader in Manchester, Barry and I both applied for his position, and Barry got it. At the time I was put out, because Manchester was my home and I liked the eclectic mix of philosophies in the department. There was soon however a side-effect of the appointment which proved very advantageous for me. One of Barry's Austrian acquaintances, Edgar Morscher, had just been appointed in 1979 as Full Professor (*Ordinarius*), which in the Austrian system brought two assistant positions with it. Edgar had Barry in mind for one, but Barry had just accepted Manchester and felt unable to let them down. Edgar turned at Barry's suggestion to me: we had met in Manchester and Sheffield the previous year and had got on well. After tack-

ing a visit to Salzburg onto the end of a summer trip to Italy (staying with Kevin and his wife) and Kirchberg-am-Wechsel (my first Wittgenstein Symposium—the fourth—Barry had been in on the second), I decided I'd like to try working in Austria and managed to persuade Susan to give up her work and come too. It was a huge change—and as it turned out, for my own work and career, massively advantageous. I learnt German, and got to know a whole new and partly alien set of institutions and practices, as well as enjoying the cultural and natural wonders of Salzburg city and its surroundings. Despite knowing about Austria and Austrian philosophy at arm's length, I found the cultural shift involved challenging, but mostly very positive. Edgar became not only my *Chef* but also a close friend, and the department was outward-looking and welcoming. Employment conditions for foreigners were then not good: I had no permanent post and a lower salary than natives—this was before Austria joined the EU. Over the years, we slowly settled in: our children were born there, acquired both languages and went to school, and we made great friends. Teaching duties were modest, research was strongly supported and encouraged, the philosophers there, especially Paul Weingartner, had good connections, and the attractions of the city ensured a regular stream of good visitors. The stability of Austria at a time when Britain was undergoing socio-economic upheaval was welcome, and the position of the city in the centre of Europe facilitated easy travel to many philosophical destinations. In time I got my *Habilitation* and became an Austrian citizen, returning to Britain only in 1995.

In the meantime, Barry, Kevin and I were co-operating at long range on several projects, including the large edited volume *Parts and Moments*, to which I contributed three essays on aspects of formal ontology on which I had been working since Manchester days. Kevin and Barry wrote a magnificent introductory essay, 'Pieces of a Theory', which is a marvel of historical acumen and philosophical wisdom, as are their later essays in *The Foundations of Gestalt Theory*. Following the 1982 Wittgenstein Symposium we three put together a joint paper, 'Truth-Makers', which was published in 1984 and helped to make that notion and the terminology (which we discovered had been invented independently by C. B. Martin) much more widely known and discussed. The term is new, but the notion is old: it is there in embryo in Aristotle (like so much else), is commonplace in medieval philosophy under the terminology of a proposition's being *verified* for such and such items. Our immediate inspiration came from Husserl and Russell. (That one should be able without blushes to mention both in a conjunctive noun-phrase is part of

the ideology of the SAGP.) Nowadays, instant telecommunication and exchange of drafts by e-mail is taken for granted, but in those days it involved three-way postal exchanges, which took much longer. Since that time, while Kevin and Barry co-authored several papers, I have only been involved in one other triauthorial piece, our short 2006 'What's Wrong with Contemporary Philosophy?', whose strongly critical tone we would all not only maintain but amplify in the light of later developments. In regard to what one might call Bad Philosophy, Barry and Kevin hold strongly evangelical views, and they have studied specimens of it under the title 'nosology'. My own practice has been less interventionist: when I encounter Bad Philosophy I tend to ignore it and get on with something else. Their practice is preferable, since it often helps to be told and shown why some things are bad, but I do support them from the sidelines. We all three signed the famous letter to *The Times*—drafted first by Barry—deploring Cambridge University's decision to award an honorary doctorate to Jacques Derrida, and I still consider that opposition was right and justified. It helped the cause (but not the outcome) that we got famous names such as Quine, Armstrong, Marcus, Haller and Bocheński on board, all of whom have since sadly accompanied said Derrida into the *Jenseits*.

## PHILOSOPHICAL CONGRUENCE IN BIG THINGS

Many of the philosophical opinions that I hold most tenaciously derived from discussions with Barry and Kevin. Of these, perhaps the most important is our implacable opposition to any form of idealism, whether subjective, transcendental, or other. I was always inclined to realism, but being around philosophers of language can mysteriously undermine one's robust sense of reality, especially if one spends too much time trying to piece together what the latter Wittgenstein was driving at. Out and out idealists in the fashion of Berkeley are few (though I have known some), as are latter-day absolute idealists (I met one once), but responsibility for making a weaker, more insidious form of idealism acceptable, even normal, lies squarely with Kant, the philosopher who did more to ruin German-language philosophy than anyone before Heidegger, and whose influence will far outlast the latter. It is possible to write philosophy clearly, even beautifully, in German just as in other languages—Bolzano, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Frege and Reinach stand as examples—but Kant's enormous presence made it accept-

able to write in tortuous sentences with poorly explained or inconsistent terminology, leaving those readers (the majority) who flounder in their attempts to understand the Master vaguely worried that it's their fault for being insufficiently "deep" to appreciate the subtle points being made. That has led historically, as Barry has pointed out, to a plethora of commentary literature, which is far less prevalent in analytic than continental philosophy, with the notable exception again of Wittgenstein. While our early inspiration came from Ingarden and other realist phenomenologists, we later found agreement with such unabashed analytical realists as Herbert Hochberg and David Armstrong, and it was with great pleasure that we discovered the trenchant and witty dismissals of idealism by David Stove.

Barry and I do not quite see eye to eye on matters ontological—he is a realist about universals while I (like Kevin) am a nominalist; Barry is more of an Aristotelian, while I am more of a Whiteheadian—though we do all agree that it is incumbent on the ontologist, no matter how revisionary, to effect a meeting with the language and beliefs of the average person as well as the practicing scientist. This does not mean accepting or adopting common sense wholesale, but it does mean the onus is on the revisionist to provide positive reasons to think commonsense beliefs and ordinary ways of speaking are wrong or defective. An area in which Barry has made this stance very much his own trademark is his work on the application of formal ontology to database ontologies, to the extent that I frequently find myself calling BFO not "Basic Formal Ontology" but "Barry's Formal Ontology." The amount of common sense that he has instilled into IT ontologies and their practitioners is inestimable and admirable. The work of clearing up the messes created by earlier conceptualist or idealist approaches to such ontologies has been very much in the mold of philosophical nosology. It is no wonder that BFO and other realist frameworks for ontologies, based on solid realist philosophical foundations, are proving ever more popular.

Barry has consistently combined philosophical depth with a concern to reach out and interact constructively with experts in other disciplines such as geography and medicine, an attitude of which I heartily approve and that I have in a smaller way followed in relation to and collaboration with engineering. The idea of a philosopher anchored in an armchair, excogitating the structure of the universe *a priori*, is one which we both deride, and it would be otiose to need to mention that it has become obsolete since the scientific revolution, were it not that so many philosophers tenaciously hold on to that view or some variant of it, (wrongly) anx-

ious no doubt that their discipline would render itself redundant by merging into natural science. The concern to corral philosophy into a safe area beyond the reach of potential falsification or revision explains much of the appeal of transcendental idealism. To see that philosophers continue to have a negative, critical role, it suffices only to read some of the more puerile would-be philosophical statements of even great scientists. However, a more positive impression of the empirically answerable but non-capitulative systematizing and structuring role of good philosophy can be gained by examining the framework of formal ontology for scientific and everyday knowledge crafted by Barry Smith.