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Philosophical Profiles

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong

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IN BRIEF

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong is many things and does many more. Besides being Chauncey Stillman Professor of Practical Ethics in the Department of Philosophy and the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University, he is also a faculty member of the Duke Institute for Brain Sciences, the Duke Center for Cognitive Neuroscience, and the Duke Center for Interdisciplinary Decision Sciences and a Partner Investigator at the Oxford Centre for Neuroethics, and Research Scientist with The Mind Research Network in New Mexico. He has been invited to prestigious institutions the world over, from Taiwan to Australia, from Oxford to Harvard and Princeton. His interests range from the straightforwardly analytic to the full-on empirical. Areas he has worked in straddle the normative, legal and scientific and most recently include neuroprediction of crime, neural detection of consciousness in brain-damaged patients, psychopaths, free will and moral responsibility, and the neural basis of moral judgments. He has also taken the atheist side in debates with Christian philosopher William Lane Craig and has strong opinions about online teaching.

DETAILS

Simon Cushing conducted the following interview with Walter Sinnott-Armstrong on 26 June 2014.

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a philosophical profile

SC: The thing that you suggested that would be a good place to start that is one of your more recent interests is neuroprediction of crime. Of course, this sounds like Minority Report. Can you tell us something about the state of play in neuroprediciton of crime?

WSA: Sure, the first thing to say is it's not like *Minority Report*. It'd be great, I suppose, if it were, but maybe not. In any case it's not like it. In *Minority Report*, what you do is predict when the person is going to commit which particular crime the moment before they do it so you can stop the crime in advance. The kind of prediction that I am talking about is, instead, much more like weather prediction. You know, "there's a seventy percent chance it's going to rain at some time tomorrow. I can't tell you when the first drops are going to fall, or exactly where it's going to rain, but I can tell you the probabilities." Still, despite its inaccuracy, that kind of prediction can be very useful to the law. The law, when it sentences some people to longer sentences than others, bases that decision partly on whom they think is dangerous. When they decide whom to give probation instead of jail, when they decide whom to give parole out of jail early for good behavior—all those decisions are based on predictions of who's dangerous and who's not. In addition, the Supreme Court, in Kansas vs. Hendricks, 1997, decided that it is constitutional for the state of Kansas to keep pedophiles in prison after their sentences had been served on the grounds that they are dangerous to other people. It's more complicated than that but at least part of the decision of whom you can keep in jail until after the sentence is over is based on a prediction of future crime. So the legal system uses prediction at many, many points in the legal process. And then the question is: how do you make those predictions accurate? You know, what they do now is either the judge or the parole board looks at the person in the eye and says, "you look dangerous to me," which is kind of crazy because they're not trained to do that, so sometimes they bring in psychiatrists, but the APA, the American Psychiatric Association, themselves says that they are not experts at making those judgments. They're there to treat people, not to predict. How are you going to do it? Well, you can do it statistically with large bodies of data over large numbers of criminals. But that seems kind of impersonal.

❝ The Supreme Court, in Kansas vs. Hendricks, 1997, decided that it is constitutional for the state of Kansas to keep pedophiles in prison after their sentences had been served on the grounds that they are dangerous to other people... at least part of the decision of who you can keep in jail until after the sentence is over is based on a prediction of future crime. So the legal system uses prediction at many, many points in the legal process. And then the question is: how do you make those predictions accurate? ❞

Absolutely, because it's the most personal thing in the world—who you incarcerate. You don't want them to say "we're incarcerating you because a bunch of other people did this." It seems outrageous.

Right, even if it's more accurate many people have objections to that use of statistics. That's where neuroprediction comes in, because now it is more personal because we're looking at your brain and we're saying that the state of your brain is something that we have good reason to believe is connected to crime. Then we'll be able to predict that you will commit a crime. So, for example, we now have an algorithm that can diagnose psychopathy within plus-or-minus two on the psychopath scale, and people who are over

thirty on that scale have about an eighty percent chance of recidivating violently, that is, committing another violent crime within six years. And normal people who are below, say, twenty on that scale will have a twenty percent chance. So there's a big difference between one group of people and another, and you can use brain scans to help you place them on this continuum from the very dangerous to the not very dangerous.

Now of course once someone is in the legal system and has committed a crime, we're familiar with the idea of deciding how dangerous they are and setting their sentence accordingly because of course that's what you do, because if somebody's committed a crime previously then we can give you a longer sentence, so that's just a very crude version of this. Obviously the next step is to imprison somebody before they've done something at all if they have the wrong kinds of brains.

And I don't know any person who works on this stuff seriously who thinks that neuroprediction will ever be used for that. The reason is that the prevalence is too low. If you go to the doctor and get a scan for colon cancer and it comes back positive, well what're the odds that you actually have colon cancer? It's less than one in ten on some calculations, because there's a certain false positive rate, it's going to say you have caner when you don't and the number of people who have cancer is so low that the number of false positives is greater than the number of true positives. Well the same thing happens when you talk about violent crime, which is less than one percent of the population. Very low rate in the general population, so if you used these tests on the general population you're going to make more mistakes than correct predictions. As you said, if you use it on people who have already been convicted of crimes, that's like using a medical test on somebody who already has the symptoms of an illness. Now it's going to be much, much more reliable.

Well, but imagine I have two people and they have the same types of brains or they get the same kinds of results in the scans, I don't know the neurophysics. And one of them has committed a crime and the other hasn't. Are you going to say…basically you're saying "you have the same types of brain, but we're going to say you're much more likely to commit another crime in the future because of the past." Aren't you assuming that the reason they committed a crime is because of their brain?

Well, we're not saying you're going to commit it in the future because you committed in the past, what we're saying is we have better evidence you will commit it in the future in the case where you did commit a crime. We know that in addition to your brain being in that situation we know that you committed a crime. We have more evidence in the one case than in the other and you have to go on how much evidence you've got.

But it's not evidence they committed a crime because their brain was a certain way. I mean you're saying "you committed a crime and your brain is this way and the reason why you're going to do it again is because your brain is this way." But you haven't established the link between the brain being this way and them committing the crime in the past.

Absolutely, you don't know if they committed it in the past because of some kind of brain condition or not. And you can't know that because you didn't do the brain scan in the past. But still, the evidence we have is that this person committed a crime and they have,

you know, a smaller than average paralimbic system, if you're using a structural scan to predict PLC–R. Yes, you've got this brain condition and you've committed a crime in the past. That gives us reason to believe that you will. We don't know for sure. We have to admit that we're going to be wrong sometimes. You can't always be right, but we're going to be a lot better than some legal official looking them in the eyes and saying, "you look nasty to me." That kind of judgment is what's going on in the courts now.

So you think this is to be welcomed because it will replace decisions that are already being made—on ridiculous grounds—but are anyway being made. You're saying this is an advance because if the decisions are to be made, at lease make them on a scientific basis because of course you come across plenty of people who are horrified by this idea.

Oh absolutely, because people are afraid they're going to be thrown in jail, you know, because they happen to have this brain condition and they're not really dangerous at all—and there will be mistakes, and you have to double check everything and be absolutely certain. Sure, the possibility is there. Right now you have psychopaths in prison who commit four to five times as many violent crimes as people in prison, and yet they get out earlier and more often than the non-psychopaths. Because they're manipulative. They lie, they manipulate people, they cheat their way out of prison, and they're good at it. And it works. Now how are we going to stop that? If we have something like a brain scan, we have an objective tool to determine their status that cannot be fooled by the tricks that they have learned.

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Yeah, let's talk about psychopaths because that was another one of your topics. How old is this notion of psychopath and do you think it has evolved considerably? What's the etymology of "psychopath?" It's something we're familiar with from popular culture now, but has it become a completely different thing now because of the advance of neuroscience and these tests for them, or do you think we're getting better at recognizing what we previously called psychopaths in the past?

So that's always a tricky question when we're talking about the same thing. Do I mean the same thing by "water" that Aristotle meant by water when he thought that the earth was composed of earth, air, fire, and water? Well I don't know, I mean something kind of like that but I sure know a lot more about it. And I think the same thing holds for psychopathy. People knew that there were strange people who appeared to not have any conscience, and would commit crime after crime after crime. That's been well recorded in many cultures for hundreds of years, but they didn't have a good way of diagnosing it; they didn't have a very precise understanding. They couldn't, for example, distinguish a gang member who had become immune to violence because of their experiences, to a psychopath who was born without empathy, and that's why they're able to do the things they do. Our modern notion distinguishes those two, the old notion didn't. So I don't know whether we're talking about the same thing or not, but we do know a lot more about them today.

Did you come into this as kind of a skeptic and convinced by the science, or how did you come around? Because, again, I imagine that you encounter a lot of philosophers very critical of this, you know, very cautious of saying there is such a thing as a psychopath. I mean, what won you over?

Yeah, so there are skeptics and there are cautious people. I came into it very cautious. A skeptic, you know, won't listen to the arguments made on the other side. But I was…I thought most crime was produced by social circumstances, and I was totally in that camp, and then I started reading the literature and realized there really are brain differences between people who show one pattern of behavior and people who show another pattern of behavior. And the evidence is just overwhelming that there really is a group of people out there with a brain disorder that makes them more likely to commit violent crimes.

And is this something that's genetic, or is it…is it the result of lesions, or is it…is it inheritable? What kind of factors affect it?

Essi Viding over at the University College London studied over three thousand pairs of twins, you know how they do those fraternal twins, identical twins…and so on, and found that the psychopathy score was about seventy percent heritable, which is more than most estimates of schizophrenia. So, yes, there seems to be a genetic component. How does it work? Well nobody's really sure, there hasn't been enough research on this. It's very difficult to do the research because you have to go into the prisons—that's where many of them are—and many prisons won't let you in—for good reason, for understandable reason. And so there isn't enough research, but the basic idea that most people work with today is that a genetic mutation produces malformations in the paralimbic system, some people think more specifically in an area called the amygdala. And that because of those brain deficits, psychopaths are not able to learn the normal moral or social rules. They're not scared of punishment so they don't feel empathy, they don't respect authority. Well, how are you going to teach them moral rules? That's the problem.

So when you say "they're not able to learn," there are two ways to understand that. There's sort of cognitive sense "I just can't retain the information" and then there's the sense that, "yes, I see that's a rule that is written on a piece of paper, what's it to me?"

It's more like, "what's it to me?" So, consider this experiment: if you take a normal person and you say, "when I get to zero, you're going to get a shock in the hand that's going to hurt…it's strong enough to hurt. Five, four, three,…"

You're making me nervous!

"Two, one, zero!" Just hearing it makes most people nervous, But if it's really going to happen to you, you're usually sweating by the time the person says "four." Psychopaths don't show that. They don't anticipate the punishment, or if they do anticipate the punishment, they're not worried about it, or they figure they can't do anything about it anyway, so why should they start sweating? And so as a result they can't be threatened. You can't say, "okay, if you do that, I'm going to punish you," because it just doesn't bother them. They never learn not to do it from the threat of punishment because they don't have that brain circuit that is needed for that kind of learning.

I was listening to Dexter Filkins, the ex-New York Times reporter, the Iraq reporter who now does stuff for the New Yorker…he was talking on the radio yesterday and

he was saying that he was convinced that the people in charge of ISIS are basically psychopaths. And that the trouble with ISIS and the reason why they split away from al-Qaeda is because they're too brutal. That's why al-Qaeda didn't want these guys. They said, "look, you're not going to work because you're going to turn the local population against you." And that happened, but they resurged. And so Filkins thinks that these people are not going to be able to hold on to power because all they care about is killing. So while that suggests that psychopaths are actually very useful and very successful, and of course there are all these studies that say CEOs are psychopaths, and so on, what's your view on that? I mean it seems to be that we're thinking of psychopaths as just criminals but these qualities will make you enormously successful under pressure—Michael Jordan is a bit psychopathic when it comes to basketball…what should we think of this feature of the brain when it is discovered in someone?

So I think all of that is just a bunch of bunk. I think that is just a misunderstanding.

So you think "psychopath" is a very narrow thing.

Well, there are many different reasons why people commit crimes. If you want to call them all psychopaths, you know, then that's going to lump the other things in that are so different that it's not going to be any help when it comes to trying to treat them and do something about it. The more focused diagnosis is going to be the most useful one. You take these people in ISIS—sure they're into violence, but they're ideologues, they have an ideology they're working for—psychopaths don't have any ideology they're working for. These people are devoted to their group and they'll work for other people in their group—psychopaths don't work for other people or for the groups they're members of. It's a very different kind of thing. Group members are very different from psychopaths. Gangs typically don't like psychopaths because a psychopath won't obey their leader. A psychopath thinks they're the one that ought to be leader. And every one of them thinks that so they can't work together.

But can they be leaders—can they acquire people to follow them? Do they, obviously, not care enough about other people to retain followers?

They certainly can. They're very manipulative, they can get people to follow them, but they're not going to get other psychopaths to follow them, they're not going to form gangs, and so on.

Well, thank goodness!

Yeah, thank goodness for that, it's a very useful in trying to control them. Take CEOs, for example. Most psychopaths move from town to town and job to job and relationship to relationship on a whim, without a moment's notice or even a reason. They just sometimes feel like moving on. Well, people who do that aren't going to become CEOs. You have to work your way up through the company; you gain other people's respect to be a CEO. Now, I don't want to deny that some CEOs have psychopathic traits, right, they have some of the items that are distinctive of psychopathy, that's for sure. But none of them have over thirty on the official scale, which is an official diagnosis. And my evidence for that is there's *a* book called *Snakes in Suits* by Robert Hare and [Paul] Babiak is the coauthor—and they are two of the top experts in this area, and they went around

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looking for examples of true psychopaths in leadership positions in businesses and could not find any. And they're writing a book. If they could have found some they would have put it in the book. In the preface, they say "none of the people we're talking about are true psychopaths, although they do show psychopathic traits."

You say it's a scale: does that imply that there's a scale in nature, or is it depending on the size of the amygdala or the amount of damage to the amygdala or relevant regions of the brain? I mean, is there a sliding scale of psychopaths, or is it no, there are psychopaths, they're distinctly different and there can be people who approach them in various attributes, but the psychopath is a clear separate entity, you know, do we carve nature at the joints?

Yeah, is it a dimension or a kind? And the answer is: we don't know! We just don't know: it's hard to tell. You know, if it's a genetic condition there's some reason to think it's a kind. There's a certain genetic problem, let's just say, to use a general term, but it's specific genes coding for it, it might be something that's very distinctive. And there might be other people who get coded psychopaths and have lots of their traits because of their upbringing and then end up looking like psychopaths, but they're not psychopaths for the same reason—the cause is very different. I'll give you an example of that: a study just came out of eight—previously we had only known two—so now we're up to ten different people who have received, very early on in their lives, big frontal lobe damage. And in the first case it was something like fifteen and eighteen months; now they're up to ten to fifteen years. But in any case, many of these people with early brain damage in certain areas…in one case, for example, getting run over by a car when he was fifteen months, they end up looking like psychopaths. But not *exactly* like psychopaths. They're very similar in many of their actions, but if you, for example, give them a Kohlberg Moral Judgment Scale, the people with brain damage will get one and the psychopath will score above average…on moral judgment scales. Because they're manipulative. They know what needs to be said.

Have you actually met and interviewed somebody who qualifies as a psychopath?

Yeah, sure, I work with the Mind Research Network, headed by Kent Kiehl and Vince Calhoun down in Albuquerque, New Mexico and I've been lucky enough to go down when they're conducting interviews to diagnose psychopaths and I've seen various cases of close, not psychopath but still in the prison and psychopaths and in prison. And I've watched the interviews to see how they're conducted to get a better sense of what these people are really like.

Going back to the book Snakes in Suits where they went around and interviewed CEOs and were unable to find a CEO who was a psychopath: given what you've just about psychopaths being very good at knowing what you want to hear, how do they know that the CEOs aren't super-psychopaths who aren't extra good at disguising themselves? Did they actually do brain scans on these people?

No, they did not do brain scans of the CEOs. It's very rare that a CEO would say, "Sure, I'll let you do a psychopath test on me and a brain scan, and all that." It'd be bad press if it got out the wrong way. No, so, what they did was look at their behavior. So, for example, Bernie Madoff is often, they say, said to be a psychopath, he doesn't care

about the people that he stole money from. But Bernie Madoff also spent a lot of his time doing charity work, and he could have ratted out his buddies when he was caught and convicted. That would have made his circumstance in jail a lot better, minimum instead of medium security prison. He didn't rat out his buddies, he was faithful to his buddies. A true psychopath would just rat out his buddies—he wouldn't have wasted that time doing that charity work, wouldn't have been so devoted to his family, and so on and so on. So what happens is people resemble psychopaths in one or two respects and they get labeled psychopath, when really psychopathy is more like a perfect storm—remember the movie *The Perfect Storm* and the three storms come together and then there's this giant storm? Well, that's what happens with psychopaths. Now you can get the single storms, the single bad traits of character in some people, but it's only when you get this overall collection of bad traits—they're narcissistic, they're parasitic, they're manipulative, they're violent, they're lacking in empathy, they're unstable, constantly seeking stimulation and prone to boredom, and so on and so on. You add all those traits together, and that's when you get above thirty on the scale and that's when you get a true psychopath.

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Now there's obviously an enormous amount of interesting philosophical issues, like: is the life of a psychopath somehow worth less than the life of a so-called "normal" person? How do we measure the satisfaction that they get out of that? I mean, they don't sound like they could be very satisfied people, for one thing.

So yeah I think it raises interesting questions of that very sort. You know, for example, when I think of my life, and what makes my life valuable—and, I think, almost everybody I know—the thing that contributes most to my life is my friends, the people I like, and helping my friends, you know, through their problems, and having fun with my friends. And they don't get that. They don't have friends, and that's just sad.

Right.

But they don't miss it. They get their kicks in other ways. And so if you have a purely hedonic theory of the good life, then it might be a little harder to say why they don't have the good life. Except, of course, there's a high rate of them being in prison, and so on, but that doesn't seem to bother them. But if you have a more objective list, theory, of the good life—they don't have friends. That's a big bummer.

Are they suicidal at all?

No, no. They're never suicidal. They're never reflective enough to be suicidal. They don't think about it, they just flip from one thing to another. You know, when they get bored with one thing, they don't go into a depression; they just go do something else.

So, in many respects, admirable qualities. Enviable qualities.

Well, until you start doing it as crimes.

Right.

So one of the items on the scale is criminal versatility. You know if someone murders twenty people, but that's all they do. They just murder. They do it time and time again.

They're not going to get a high score on the psychopathy scale because they're not versatile.

"You're too boring to be a psychopath."

Yeah! You might just keep doing the same thing over and over again. Psychopaths, when they don't have someone to murder, they'll rob a bank, or they'll steal a car, they'll do drugs…

They keep busy!

…or defraud somebody. They keep their lives "interesting" by doing different things. But they still—throughout the whole thing—they don't like friends. They might have one sexual partner after another, but they're never truly in love. And that's just sad. And you made the point that that's one of the philosophical lessons. I think psychopaths put a lot of pressure on hedonistic theories of life, of the value of life, because they can be happy. But they don't have those values that we think makes their happiness worthwhile.

Yeah. And, of course, another issue that you're interested in is moral responsibility. So what's your view on whether or not or to what degree we should hold them morally responsible for the things they do?

So that's a very interesting question. And I'll mention that a lot of my work is just taking other people's work and going "oh yeah, I agree with that." I wanted to make sure I put in a plug for Kent Kiehl's new book called *The Psychopath Whisperer* since a lot of the stuff I've been saying about psychopaths I learned from him. And he's the one who helps me get into prisons. Well, a lot of the things I learned about *responsibility* I learned from David Shoemaker, and he's got a new book coming out [*Responsibility from the Margins*] where he discusses psychopaths, but the part on psychopaths was published in the journal *Ethics* ["Attributability, Answerability, and Accountability: Toward a Wider Theory of Moral Responsibility," *Ethics* 121 (2011)] and I'm thinking he's just right. You have to distinguish between different notions of responsibility. It's not clear what it means. One kind of responsibility is what he calls "attributability responsibility." Does the person's actions show something about their character and the kind of person they are? Well, in that sense, absolutely psychopaths are attributable responsible. Because the fact that they do all these crimes shows you what kind of person they are. It's not like they did it by mistake, it's not like they didn't know what they were doing…

They're not carried by the wind.

Yeah, it shows you what they are. And so you can attribute to them certain bad states of character on the basis of their actions. But there's another kind of responsibility. Are they really accountable for this? Well, if their behavior is such that…if they had a genetic condition, which made them unable to learn the moral and social rules and that's why they're doing these things in the present, then it becomes hard to see how they could be fully accountable. Maybe accountable to some degree, but not fully accountable, because of course it all comes in degrees. So you need to distinguish *attributability* responsibility from *accountability* responsibility, and my inclination is to say: yes they

are responsible in one sense, but no they're not in another sense. And that's what makes them so interesting philosophically because they force us to draw those distinctions.

Now you're a compatibilist, as all sensible people are about free will, right?

Right on.

But given that, I imagine from the work that you do, that you think philosophers have something to say in the public sphere, that we can contribute to public understandings of things like moral responsibility and whether or not psychopaths are morally responsible. But on the other hand, compatibilism is not the usual view about free will outside of philosophical circles. Do you think that being a compatibilist is a core part of your beliefs about moral responsibility or do you think you can divorce the issues about compatibilism from your view about our place in the scheme of things?

So I think it's an open question. And an empirical question. Whether the 'folk' view of responsibility outside esoteric philosophical circles is an incompatibilist one. A lot of people take that for granted, but Eddy Nahmias in particular has done some fascinating research to suggest that that's just not true. What's really going on—what removes responsibility for most people and philosophers is what he calls "bypassing." That the action was performed through a causal chain…because of a causal chain that bypasses your mental states. It happened not because you chose to do it, not because you wanted to do it, but because of this causal chain that was independent of your wants and choices and beliefs. And what happens is normal people say, "well, [if it was] caused by just the firings of neurons it must have bypassed your desires and beliefs." That's the mistake. They still think you're responsible [unless] it bypasses your mental states but they falsely infer from it being caused by your brain that it was, therefore, bypassing your mental states, whereas I would say, look your mental states just are constituted by, or at least realized in, your brain states. So the fact that it's caused by brain states doesn't mean that you're not doing it because you want to. When somebody wants to rob a bank because they want the money—you know, the Willy Sutton effect—that's going through their brain, that's caused by their brain. But that doesn't mean it's an excuse, because the part of the brain it went through is the part that's controlled by their desires and beliefs, wishes and choices. That's why they're responsible. So it's not whether it's caused by the brain or not, it's *how* it's caused by the brain that matters to responsibility.

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But at the same time that means that you can't use as an excuse your environment and your upbringing, and aren't you sympathetic to the idea that rotten social environment and constant abuse count as ameliorating factors? Because you can say, "they're the reason why I have those particular brain wrinkles" or "those particular brain states are something I had no control over." So in some sense, it's not up to me, what I do. It's not up to me what I want.

So again I think it depends on the social circumstances whether they're going to be an excuse and it depends partly on whether it's going to bypass your mental states, to go back to Nahmias' view. Now consider someone who hits their children. Now, let's imagine one person where it was true, where that's just a habit, that's just a reaction on their part, they learned something from their parents. When they said something bad, they got hit. Well they learned that as a pattern of behavior. And it might happen so

quickly that when they do it as an adult to their children they're not really thinking, they don't even want to do it. But we all have bad habits that we act on and then regret later. Well, if that's what going on, I'm inclined to say, well, they're not as responsible as that person that did not have that bad role model growing up, and then just hits their kids because they're angry, and think they ought to be able to do whatever they want, and their kids are stopping them from doing what they want.

As kids do.

As kids do.

You only find out really the influence your parents had on you when you've had children and you find yourselves doing things.

Yes, and so think of that as an example of social circumstances. If you're learning certain habits that are going to affect your behavior, beyond what you're able to control with your conscious thought, so that you're going to be doing things that you didn't really want to do, that you didn't even think about doing before you did it…and you're doing them because it's a habit that you picked up as a child or throughout your entire childhood until you left home. I think, yes, then you're less responsible. And the same goes for crime. If people grow up in crime-ridden areas and they just learn patterns of behavior, then yes, they're less responsible than the people who grew up with good role models but were just selfish and learned on their own, these criminal ways.

Now, I hate to obsess about the psychopaths, but just as a case study, it's kind of a nice intersection of your various interests. Do you think that we should view psychopathy, on the "disease model"—you use that phrase in one of your works—and what implications would that have for incarceration? Do you think that's the model we should understand psychopaths with? Or on the other hand, what if we discovered that they're untreatable or they're too clever to be affected by psychologists. Does that have an influence on the way we should treat them?

So there is some hope that they are treatable and we can come back to that if you want. But with regard to the insanity defense, there's a sense in which I want to say that yes, psychopaths are like schizophrenics who become violent—paranoid schizophrenics sometimes engage in violent behavior, although a lot less often than many people think. But sometimes they do. And now you've got a question of: is it a similar process? And the answer is: it's similar in some respects and not others. I think it is a mental illness, and in that respect it is like schizophrenia. It's a result of a genetic deficit that affects the way you learn things, it affects the way your brain functions and it leads people to a life of crime. So in that sense it's a brain illness and a mental illness because it affects your mental state. And in all of those ways it's like schizophrenia. And it's not just like an aberrant or eccentric personality type, it's a mental illness, because it causes the psychopath all kinds of problems. No friends, no stability, more likely to be in prison, more likelihood of dying than normal people. So this is an illness that carries big costs. So yes, it's like schizophrenia in being an illness, yes I think it does reduce responsibility, but does that mean we should put them in the mental institutions with the schizophrenics? Oh my god, no! Absolutely not! Because they're just going to take advantage of the schizophrenics! They're going to make life hell for everybody in that institution. And

❝ I think it is a mental illness, and in that respect it is like schizophrenia. It's a result of a genetic deficit that affects the way you learn things, it affects the way your brain functions and it leads people to a life of crime… it's a mental illness, because it causes the psychopath all kinds of problems. No friends, no stability, more likely to be in prison, more likelihood of dying than normal people. So this is an illness that carries big costs. So yes, it's like schizophrenia in being an illness, yes I think it does reduce responsibility, but does that mean we should put them in the mental institutions with the schizophrenics? Oh my god, no! ❞

so the problem is right now, it seems to me, that the legal system has these boxes that you have to fit everybody into. Do you go into the general prison population, or do you go into a forensic psychiatric hospital with the schizophrenics? And the answer is psychopaths don't belong in either of those places. And the science that's helped us learn so much about psychopaths has suggested to me at least, that it's the legal system that has to change. We need a third type of institution geared more toward these types of people. And that's going to help the guards, because the guards will better know what they're dealing with, that's going to help the other prisoners who are not psychopaths, because they're not going to get infected with this total lack of concern for other people that psychopaths show, they're not going to learn tricks of manipulating others from the psychopaths, and so on, and so on. So I think there's a lot to be gained by recognizing that psychopaths are different and therefore need to be treated differently. They're not really your typical guilty by reason of insanity person. They're also not like your typical criminal.

Now, I'm interested in issues to do with autism, there is this movement amongst people who are autistic to use the label "neurodiversity" [and avoid the idea of pathology].

Right.

So they want to say, don't—don't call it a disease, don't say "normal people versus autistic people," say that there's neurodiversity, different kinds of life. Now, part of what you were just saying, listing the disadvantages, no friends and so on... imagine [we say to the psychopath] "there's a chance where we can cure you." I can imagine a psychopath saying, "hell no, I don't want to be cured. This is the way I am. I am happy; I am capable of my own happiness. You say I don't have friends—I don't want friends, friends are for weaklings." What do you say to that?

Well, I say "you're missing out on something that is very valuable and you might now understand how valuable it would be, but that doesn't make it any less valuable. Because the reason you don't understand why it's valuable is because you're sick." That's what I say. It's very different from the autistic case, I think, in the case of autism, one of the things about autism, it seems to me that it comes in a lot of different degrees. An extreme autistic person can sit in the corner and rock and beat their head against the wall. That, it seems to me, is clearly an illness. That's not just neural diversity. And part of the problem is you get degrees, and some people are labeled as autistic when there's no real observable different between the people around them. They're just…maybe a little odd, but that's about it. I had a friend who lived down the block who said her son was autistic and I'd known this kid for a while and I, you know, he's just a normal kid.

Well that's because you're a philosopher. All philosophers are supposed to be autistic!

Yeah, philosophers! This kid's normal! So part of the problem with autism—and neurodiversity is a great story to tell for people who are minorly autistic. They don't call it Asperger's anymore but very low on the autism scale—that's diversity people can live with, and accomplish in their lives, and I don't see the problem, so I'm kind of sympathetic with that. But then you get to the other, to the extreme, end of the autism scale. And now are they saying that those people who are sitting in the corner rocking

and not able to talk to anybody else, not able to interact, you know, lonely and all by themselves…are they saying, "well, yeah, that's just their way of life"? It just strikes me as implausible.

Well part of the problem is there are different kinds of difficulties. So for example, some people who have been non-verbal until their teens…I think it's related to a number of neurological conditions related with muscular dystrophy; that there are some motor issues. So the people who can be entirely nonverbal and thought to be the mental age of a toddler, it turns out they were just having communicative differences and they end up going to college. So you can't really tell.

You know, that's also true of psychopaths, I want to point that out because when we're talking about psychopaths, the diagnosis does not kick in until eighteen. These younger kids—you don't really know where they're going.

But if it turned out it was genetic, then you could say, "we know where you're going." Or do you think that the genotype does not determine phenotype, that it's possible to have the gene, but with the right kind of conditioning that you can escape the results?

Look, everybody agrees genotype doesn't determine phenotype. I mean the environment has effects on how genes express themselves. Right?

Right, that's why we should delay diagnosis, is what you're saying? Because we all know those kids who pulled wings off flies and things like that and were abusive to animals and stuff.

Right, and you say "what do you do about that?" You say, well let's do treatment programs that are going to be non-invasive, you know, not terribly problematic, that are actually going to help them. You can figure out what to do to help those kids avoid…now it might turn out that only twenty percent of them, or ten percent of them, would have become real psychopaths. But the treatment might help ninety percent of them, even though we can't call them psychopaths yet because a very small percentage would. So the treatment programs can be helpful, even for the ones that we're misdiagnosing, and if that's the case then yeah, take a chance. You know, I'm talking about the treatment… so let me give you an example of what I mean by "the treatment." Michael Caldwell up in Wisconsin runs what is to my knowledge the only successful treatment program for psychopaths. It's aimed at adolescents from twelve to sixteen. I mentioned before that psychopaths are not scared of punishment, so you can't train them with punishment; they don't have empathy for their victims, so you can't train them by saying, "oh see how you hurt your little brother;" and they don't have any respect for authority, so you can't turn to them and say, "now I'm your father, now obey me." So none of that works, so what are you going to use? Well, what Michael's wonderful insight was, you use positive reinforcement. So these kids who have been in institutions year in, year out and have misbehaved and have been sent out because none of those institutions can handle them, show up at his institution and says, "well what do you like to do? Do you like to play Ping-Pong? Do you like to watch television? Do you like going for walks? What do you like to do?" And they've never been asked that before. And he says, "if you behave

in enough ways and get enough points, then you'll get to do those things," so he's using positive reinforcement.

It's interesting that they're less concerned with pain but they still have likes. So normally we associate the positive without the negative. That if you don't fear the bad stuff then there won't be a corresponding good stuff but that's apparently not the case.

Exactly, and why not? Well you need neuroscience to help you understand that: because different parts of the brain are concerned with the positive and the negative. And part of their brain works and part doesn't. So you have to use the parts that work and train them. But my point is: you use that positive reinforcement kind of schema. And you take a parent who has an eight year old who's starting to, you know, hurt animals, and you go, "look, we don't know what's going to happen to your kid. Your kid could grow up perfectly normal. We're not diagnosing anything, but what we can tell you is that this type of treatment might reduce the problems." And what's the cost to the kid? He gets to play Ping-Pong!

It's funny. I was thinking that that kind of result has implications for all kids of things, for example the problem of evil. This idea that suffering is not really necessary for the good stuff.

Right.

And I noticed that another one of your incredibly diverse areas of interest is debating things like the problem of evil, taking the atheistic side, or you might say agnostic, I don't know.

Oh, I would say atheistic.

Oh good you're out and proud…and for example you wrote that book with William Lane Craig [God? A Debate between a Christian and an Atheist, OUP 2004], and you debated him publically. Why do you do that?

Yeah, I'm that kind of guy. Well you know I didn't do it until my parents were both dead. Because they would have been very both upset at me coming out of the closet. But I started to notice patterns in our culture—Matthew Shepard being killed for being gay, even though by all accounts he was a very sweet, non-intrusive young boy. And the people who did that, claiming biblical authority for it, and some biblical groups saying "yeah it was a good thing," and I just went…what the…what is going on? And then people speaking out against, for example, stem cell research, which could solve problems for people with juvenile diabetes, a horrible illness. And stem cell research could have helped that a long time before it did if religious groups hadn't gotten in the way. When they held a panel to investigate…or rather to discuss whether the government should fund stem cell research, the report that I heard from a member of the government committee was that nobody showed up to the committee to speak against stem cell research except people who were there specifically to represent religious groups. So what you get is religion stopping medical advances, hurting young kids like Matthew Shepard…obviously those are the worst sides of religion and there are really good sides

“And then people speaking out against, for example, stem cell research, which could solve problems for people with juvenile diabetes, a horrible illness. And stem cell research could have helped that a long time before it did if religious groups hadn't gotten in the way. When they held a panel to investigate… or rather to discuss whether the government should fund stem cell research, the report that I heard from a member from the government committee was that nobody showed up to the committee to speak against stem cell research except people who were there specifically to represent religious groups.”

of religion as well. But when you see it causing all of that trouble, you wonder, "well is there some way to live without religion and yet still be compassionate, and still be charitable, and still have a community, and still gain many of the things that are positive that people get out of religion?" So that's what really motivated me, was to look for an alternative that would be less destructive that still had the goods of religion.

Yeah, I notice you have something in that Louise Antony collection, Philosophers without God, and another person I just interviewed, Elizabeth Anderson, had another piece in there too.

Yes she did, a very good one!

She said that she got a lot of positive emails who had been raised in a very Christian household and where wrestling with these issues. Did you find that? Because one might be tempted to say that what you're doing in arguing the atheistic side is not going to work on religious people because…they just did a study where they said the feature that makes a politician trusted the least, of all features, is being an atheist. They can be convicted of all kinds of crimes and that's not as bad as being an atheist. So, you come out in public and you debate for the atheistic side, isn't that just going to turn people off to your point of view?

Well it's certainly going to turn off some people, but they probably, you know, didn't share my point of view anyway, and so I'm not sure any harm was done. I will say, people are very pessimistic about the force of discussion and argument. But just in my debates with William Lane Craig, for example, I had a graduate student who was studying with Craig in seminary who said when he read the book, he left seminary.

Wow! His parents are mad at you!

Yeah, I know! And so I think people give up too easily. But the real trick—it seems to me—is that those are rare, that kind of case is rare and you don't want to focus your arguments on that. So when I go into one of these debates, what happens is, you know, there's sixty percent of the people who are just committed Christians, they're totally on the side of the evangelical, they're going to cheer and applaud whenever he or she gets in a good line, and when I say something they're going to remain silent or even shake their heads and so on. Or pray for me, I hope. Then there are twenty percent who are on my side, or maybe ten percent—maybe I exaggerate the number. And when I say things they're going to cheer and applaud, and when Craig says something, if he's the other debater, they're going to "boo" or shake their heads. But then there's like ten to twenty percent in the middle who are actually listening. Now I don't know about you but when I'm giving a philosophy talk, I'm lucky if there are thirty, forty people there. Whereas when I give one of these things—I remember one of my debates with Craig, there were literally fifteen thousand people listening in the church—it was this mega church. There were fifteen thousand people listening. So ten percent of that, I just need to point out, fifteen percent of that—that's a lot of people!

Yeah and they're listening to an intellectual debate in a public sphere, which is practically dead.

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Yeah, yeah. So you have some people who are truly open-minded and will actually listen to your arguments and so it really matters whether you formulate your argument well, it'll make a difference to them in their lives, and it will make a difference to the country. After all, Bush versus Gore, what? Less than one percent made the difference. If you change some people, even a small number these days, it could mean a huge difference.

Well, one of nine particular people would have been useful.

That is absolutely correct!

Okay, there are so many things you've written on and I want to touch on as many as possible. The other thing is neural detection of consciousness in brain-damaged patients. What's your interest there?

So I got interested in that only recently when I read some of the new techniques they were developing and I think they raised very interesting questions. And when I run into questions I don't know anything about but I want to learn more about, the standard tendency is: I have conference. Invite the people that do know something about it. And so that's what we did. There was a conference on these issues and some of the leaders from around the world came and shared their research and their insights and they discussed for several days on a collection coming up.

That is an amazing luxury to think that, "I'm going to have a conference!"

It's great! And so what happens is you can take somebody who has suffered traumatic brain injury and is showing no outward signs of consciousness whatsoever. In one case, diagnosed four separate occasions by some of the top experts in the field. They all agreed: no signs of consciousness whatsoever. And then what you do is train them: they're not moving but you put them in a scanner and you say, "can you think about playing tennis?" and then after thirty seconds you say, "now stop thinking about playing tennis. Now think about walking through your house." And after thirty seconds, "now stop thinking about walking through your house." And you can tell the difference in the brain activation between when they're thinking about playing tennis and when they're thinking about walking through their house. Now I hasten to add this happens in only forty percent of the traumatic brain injury cases, and less than ten percent in all people who have been diagnosed in persistent vegetative state. So this doesn't mean that people who have brain disease or anoxia…it's only the traumatic brain injury case and it's about forty percent of them can show this ability to control their brain waves, but they can't move their body at all.

In the case of Terry Schaivo, when they did the autopsy on her, the brain had basically liquefied so that wouldn't have been…?

Exactly, exactly. None of this research will show any chance of Terry Schaivo having had the slightest bit of consciousness. It's not going to generalize to that. But still there are thousands of people that it would affect. Not her, but thousands of others. And they could even answer questions. You could ask them: "Is your father's name Thomas? If it is, think about playing tennis. If it's not, think about walking through your house." People have done this and have gotten actual questions like that correct. And then you can

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ask them: "Are you in pain?" And then you can ask them, you know, "Are you hungry?" You can ask them, "Do you want to die?" And that raises a lot of very interesting issues, it seems to me, because we want to make sure they have autonomy in their medical decisions, in their own lives. And yet do they really know what's going on? How do we tell if the consent or refusal to treatment is a competent refusal to treatment?

Of course it also raises all kinds of issues to do with resources. Now we have a bunch of people who would have been organ donors; they would have been heart donors, presumably, if they were breathing because you need to take a heart from a breathing individual otherwise you can't use it. And now these people are no longer heart donors.

That's right, but I don't want them to be heart donors just because we need their heart, if they're conscious and speaking. There might be better ways to get other organs, I mean, all you have to do is change the default…if you don't specifically say, "I'm not an organ donor," then you are. Then, bam! You've solved that resource problem.

Okay, let me see, another enormously important area we haven't touched on. You've got that three-volume set, Moral Psychology, The Evolution of Morality, The Cognitive Science of Morality, and The Neuroscience of Morality.

And now it's up to four! Don't miss the fourth volume, which is *Responsibility and Free Will.*

So say a little bit about the evolution of morality.

Evolution of morality. I mean, there are certain instincts in other species that suggest that some parts that have come to be morality are present in Bonobos.

That's because Bonobos are nice, but not the chimps!

…But not all of morality is nice. Some of morality is revenge; some of morality is killing people in order to prevent them from killing other people, protecting others. And so reciprocity is not always nice, punishment is not always nice. … They have some elements that seem to be related to things that we view as morality. I don't know if they judge each other by intentions. I don't know if they follow rules. They certainly don't care about keeping promises the way humans do. So there are other parts of morality that are not shared with other species so they might have evolved but might have evolved later than the common ancestor of Bonobos and humans. So what does that tell you? One lesson I would draw from that is that morality isn't really a unified thing. There are parts of morality that are shared with other species, there are other parts that are not shared with other species, and that means that you shouldn't be thinking of morality about a single whole; instead you should be more specific about the other parts of morality if you really want to make progress.

It's kind of like language games within morality. I mean, to use a Wittgensteinian analogy: he said about language, you shouldn't be thinking about language as one big thing but you should think of these small pockets that are maybe isolated from each other.

In that way it's similar except it's biology instead of convention. So I think of it like memory. You know memory includes remembering how to ride a bicycle, remembering what a word means, remembering that the fifth digit of pi is 5. And so you can remember things that are timeless—I'll remember that tomorrow I have a luncheon date, but I won't remember when I made that luncheon date. So you can remember all kinds of things, not just the past, and you can remember them semantically or episodically—and when did the study of the psychology of memory and the neuroscience of memory really take off? It was when people quit trying to formulate theories of memory as a whole and started thinking about theories about particular parts of memory, and I think that's the type of revolution we need in moral psychology and also moral philosophy.

“I think of it like memory. You know memory includes remembering how to ride a bicycle, remembering what a word means, remembering that the fifth digit of pi is 3.14159… when did the study of the psychology of memory and the neuroscience of memory really take off? It was when people quit trying to formulate theories of memory as a whole and started thinking about theories about particular parts of memory, and I think that's the type of revolution we need in moral psychology and also moral philosophy.”

And an awful lot of what you're doing now is informed directly by science, that you get these things from science that you find fascinating and then you tease you the philosophical implications.

I know and other philosophers think that's weird, like you actually want to check out the facts before you start to speculate.

Yeah, like I said, that's what we got into philosophy to avoid. So was that always an interest of yours? I see your thesis was on moral dilemmas but it seems like you've progressed to now where you do this enormous profusion of things that is very much drawing from science. Is that something you've sort of segued into somehow, or was that always an interest for you?

So psychology and neuroscience have always been a side interest. I seriously considered being a psychology major as an undergrad in college. Back then, you really had two options at the college that I went to—you could either, in psychology, be a follower of Skinner and a behaviorist and then you spent your days watching rats run through mazes; or you could be a Freudian and had very little evidence toward the things that you were claiming. And so I didn't like either of those, and if you were a neuroscientist what you were doing was cutting open animals' brains and sticking electrodes in them, and I didn't want to do that either. And that's when I think I turned to philosophy because it was addressing the issues I wanted to address, but I always had an inclination toward the scientific method as a way of finding out what was going on and it was only much later when people developed the methods of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) that we then were able to approach the larger philosophical issues using the tools of science. So I think that interest was always there; I married a psychologist, after all, and it was only in the 2000s that we became able to really use the knowledge to address these things philosophically.

Do you think this is where philosophy is going? I mean there does seem to be a movement to have more empirical input, which is obviously a good thing. What do you think of experimental philosophy, this new trend?

So let me answer those questions separately because the first question is "is this where philosophy is moving?" I don't think philosophy moves in any direction because philosophy is a diverse group of people with very different interests using very different methods and I think that's a wonderful thing. I think that the percentage of people who are in philosophy who are also reading scientific journals is going to increase. And the

percentage of philosophers who are doing scientific experiments is going to increase over the next couple of decades. I think that's a trend, which anyone who is looking at the field would predict. But that doesn't mean there aren't going to be people doing analytic philosophy as well. I still write articles about analytic paradoxes. It seems to me you can use these two different methods and what's interesting is to see how they relate to each other. When they conflict with each other you have to decide what to do, when they agree with each other you feel a lot more confident. And so adding the science should be seen as adding it on top, not replacing the more traditional philosophy. The second question you asked was on experimental philosophy. Well that's often associated with, shall I say, surveys in opinion of the folk. I think those can be interesting, but they're quite limited often because you don't quite know what's going on in the folk's brain. Is it an intuition, or are they reflecting and applying a principle? It's very hard to tell…what about order effects? What about wording effects? Those experiments are interesting and suggestive, but they have their limit like any experiment does. Most of the work I do…and I do some of those…but most of the work I do is instead look at brain scans, look at implicit moral attitudes, looking at clinical cases—that's also a type of empirical philosophy, but it's not the experimental philosophy of the surveys that's probably better known to philosophers.

Do you think that your view of morality has been affected by your getting engaged with the sciences, or do you think your view of morality has been pretty firmly formed by your years in philosophy up to that point? Do you think that's something that can be influenced by learning more about neuroscience, or do you think there are some areas that are, sort of, off limits from what you learn in brain sciences?

Well I think there's some areas of philosophy and of common sense that are off-limits. I think it's going to be very difficult to imagine any experiment or any argument that's going to convince me that violent rape is not wrong. You know, that's just off-limits. It's hard to imagine how that would happen. I don't think it could happen. But some very deep assumptions can still be questioned, and I mentioned this a minute ago in the analogy to memory. I used to think morality was a certain kind of thing, that there are certain types of judgments that are moral judgments, and I was interested in what distinguished those moral judgments from other judgments that are not moral judgments, and a lot of moral theories depend on that. Kant says that it's just of the nature of morality that moral oughts are categorical. And others have held similar views that make claims about all and only moral judgment. And I think when you look at the data and the neuroscience as well as the behavioral psychology, that view is just not sustainable anymore. There's just not a single thing that is morality, which is not to say there is nothing wrong with rape, and it's not to say it's not morally wrong. It's to say that's a very different case from lying or from cannibalism or from burning a flag, you know, or for many other types of immorality. There's a whole bunch of different things that get thrown under the name "immoral" and it's not at all clear that they have anything in common that makes them "immoral" rather than simply imprudent.

“I used to think morality was a certain kind of thing, that there are certain types of judgments that are moral judgments, and I was interested in what distinguished those moral judgments from other judgments that are not moral judgments, and a lot of moral theories depend on that. Kant says that it's just of the nature of morality that moral oughts are categorical. And others have held similar views that make claims about all and only moral judgment. And I think when you look at the data and the neuroscience as well as the behavioral psychology, that view is just not sustainable anymore.”

For example [Jonathan] Haidt wants to say that in some sense conservatives have a broader palette of morality because liberals want to reduce everything to harm, so if it doesn't harm then it's not immoral; whereas conservatives say, "no it doesn't

have to harm to be immoral." Seems to be suggesting that the left or the liberals are stunted in some way, because they don't have this broad palette of morality.

Yeah, although I don't know if Haidt needs to claim that they're stunted, they're just different. It might be that the conservatives are reacting to something that is an illusion because we feel disgusted at things that we know are illusions. Most people will not drink a glass of water with a piece of plastic in it with an encased cockroach, even though they know it's still absolutely clean and pure, they still won't drink it because they feel this disgust reaction. Now that's just an illusion. And his studies suggest that conservatives have disgust reactions when liberals don't. But we don't know if that's an illusion or, oh the poor liberals just don't see it. Well you could go either way and I don't think any empirical data is going to solve that problem.

There isn't really a place to stand on to make the judgment because you haven't got a moral theory that everyone can accept whereby we can judge that that doesn't count as morality.

And the other thing is he talks about "impurity." And he gives examples of sex and cannibalism being examples of "impurity." And then he says liberals don't react to impurity. Well, wait a minute that's just different kinds of impurity. Let's talk about genetically modified organisms, let's talk about pollution in the environment…well maybe it's just that liberals react to different types of impurity than conservatives do. Not that they don't have that "taste bud,"' as he says. So I think there's a lot more work to be done in that area before we can draw the kinds of conclusions that he draws but I will say, a lot of people badmouth Jon Haidt…that work raises fascinating questions and I think some of it is in fact very well done and I think that that is a lot to be said in favor of it even if, after further research, a lot of it comes to be questioned.

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I don't think he's trying to win over the philosophers. He seems not to have much respect for them, like he disposes of Kant and Bentham on a couple of pages like, "oh they were both autistic so we don't have to listen to them." So it's almost like he's trying to provoke us.

He does like to provoke.

Ok well there's one more thing I want to… oh yes. One of the videos of yours online is "how to do an online course." And this was for a MOOC… How have you found that? Have you enjoyed that? Have you found that that's an important thing? Because a lot of people in academia are worried about these, and have conflicting emotions about such things.

So I have conflicting emotions too, but I'm extremely optimistic because whenever something new comes along it can be abused and you have to make sure it doesn't. I'm extremely excited about that, I mean, it could be the most meaningful thing in my philosophical life right now. We've had almost five hundred thousand students register for the course and they're from all over the world and they write and say that they've learned a lot and appreciated having that available. In other parts of the world outside the United States, people often do not have access to adequate education and that holds them back and very much dampens their life prospects. And if I can do anything to help, I'm more than happy to put the time in, and it does take a tremendous amount of time,

and I don't make any money off it, so I really want to help people. The problem is, when you're helping those people overseas, and two-thirds of my students are overseas—I should add, by the way, I say "my students," but Ram Neta and I teach this course together—this is Duke working together with Chapel Hill so we ought to advertise that! So two-thirds of the students are overseas and I am happy to help them get education that they don't have access to otherwise. The problem occurs when people like the president of San Jose State says, "well we're going to stop funding the philosophy department because our students can just take these MOOCs." Well that's crazy! That should not happen! Nobody thinks this MOOC is a substitute for a real course, I certainly don't. What it is is half as good as a real course, but more people have access to it. I think a lot of the controversy about MOOCs is people think it's going to undermine some institutions that are serving populations that we really need to serve. And the people that do MOOCs like me need to get involved with stopping that from happening—telling the president of San Jose State, "that's not the way to use MOOCs! That's wrong!" The other opposition comes from I think people that say students will just come absorbing material and that's not as good as talking in the classroom. Well I think that's not a real problem. And the reason I think that that's not a real problem is that I show my students the lectures on the MOOCs and I have more time to talk to them in the classroom. So it's not that the MOOC replaces the classroom time. It frees up the classroom time to do more interactive things.

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Well that's something they're actually tying in high schools—it's called "flipping" I believe, where they have the kids watch the videos for homework and do their homework in class where they can talk to the teacher about the homework so that when they're doing the homework they can interact.

Right, and I flip the classroom at Duke. And what we do in the classroom is we do writing assignments for every class and the students share their writing assignments and they comment on each other and talk to them about it—and that's something I could never do if the classroom time was taken up with lectures. And then we have plenary sessions where we have College Bowl Night and a murder mystery and a scavenger hunt. And class becomes this fun activity that you do together and the boring lecture stuff is done on the web before classroom starts.

I just worry because in Michigan there's a lot of talk from the legislature of online high schools. And I think online high schools would be the worst thing imaginable.

Right, right.

I mean because I'm about to teach an online class, and I've taught classes with an online element and I know that there's a huge dropout rate in online classes and there's a certain kind of person who will thrive in here, who is very self-motivated, and already engaged in the material, just wants to be told what to read and they're going to thrive. But the majority of people, they need the structure, they need someone to come in, they need someone to know their name, they need someone to talk about this stuff, they need to see other people caring about this stuff and asking questions about it, otherwise they're just going to flounder.

Sure, and so it's definitely not a replacement. I totally agree with you on that. But it's also important to know while you're doing your online class, for example, I can keep better track of my students when I teach it online than when I'm in class. Here's why: if I'm lecturing to a hundred and fifty people, there's some people out there—I don't even know which ones are paying attention. They might not have their computer out doing email but who knows whether they're paying attention or reading something on the side or just dozing off. Who knows what's going on! Well if there are a hundred and fifty people, and I don't know, I can't call them out. But when my students take their lectures online—they're like little five to ten minute lectures, sometimes twenty, but I think the average is about ten per lecture—and then there's some exercises, and then they do another lecture, and then some exercises, then another lecture and more exercises. Ten minutes each. Well, I know for each student how many lectures they watched, how long they spent watching, how many exercises they did, how many they got right…and if somebody starts to flounder, I can stop them right then. I don't have to wait until the midterm and find out that this student has not been getting it and it's too late for them to catch up. I can catch them right then and there with the electronic monitor. It sounds like Big Brother, but yeah it is Big Brother. It's watching these students because my students never fail because of intelligence. My students fail because they get too far behind and never catch up. And that's what I want to stop. And it's much easier to stop that when it's online and when you're having these small discussion groups when the lectures are done online then when you're lecturing to a hundred and fifty students and you don't even know, you know, what's happening to them.

And of course when the iPhone get the fMRI app you'll be able to scan their brains and see if they're taking in the information that way.

Yeah, so, maybe. So the bottom line is whenever you've got a new technology like this there are going to be good ways to use it and there are going to be bad ways to use it. And what we need to do is get together as a community, you know, you and I, and if the people in Michigan are saying these things need to replace high school courses, look, get teachers of high school courses to explain why that's not going to work and get the people who are making MOOCs to explain that's not going to work. That's not what this is for, and it doesn't serve that purpose. But it serves other purposes. You know we get grad students here who maybe didn't have logic in college. How are they going to catch up? Well they take a logic course. Well maybe we don't offer one until next fall—they have to wait. But if there's a MOOC, bam, start it now. Start in the summer before you start your graduate school experience. Now those courses you didn't have, you can make up that background, you can show up better prepared. Same thing with undergrads—you don't want to take the logic course because you really want to take this other course and they're taught at the same time and you can't take them both. Wait what do you mean you can't take them both? You can take them both! You only get credit for one, but you can take the logic on the side and learn the things you need. So there are a lot of uses of MOOCs that'll benefit people both inside the United States and outside the United States. But they have to be used properly. And that's going to be difficult. They're not going to be used properly. Whenever there's a transition there will be abuses and we just have to watch until those abuses are corrected.