Simon Tormey interviews Gerald Cohen

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Simon Tormey (ST): Jerry, many thanks for agreeing to be interviewed for CPT. I wonder if I could start by asking you about the project for which you are perhaps best known: analytical Marxism. What became of the project – and should we regard it as a success or a failure?

Gerald Cohen (GC): I’ve given a brief description of the history of the formation of the September or Non-Bullshit Marxism Group in Section (2) of the Introduction to the 2000 edition of my book on Karl Marx’s Theory of History. For a few years following 1979, which was when we first met, our work was very Marxism-centred. Bob Brenner wrote about issues of transition from feudalism to capitalism (and he has continued to be very Marxist, even in his most recent extraordinarily ambitious books about contemporary capitalism). Van der Veen was writing about exploitation, so was Philippe Van Parijs, so was I – and so, of course, was John Roemer. And everybody was committed to the application of analytical standards to the corpus of and the development of Marxist and left-wing thought. In some cases that meant analytical philosophy, in other cases it meant neo-classical economic techniques (without the neo-classical ideology). I suppose that the people in the group looked inward to the Marxist heritage itself and outward to the world and to issues that engaged people other than Marxists in all kinds of different ways. Gradually a great deal of the Marxian corpus was eroded by careful attempts to decide what could be kept and what had to go. But that process of purification also led to our loss of an essentially Marxist orientation. For example, in the normative domain it came to be thought by many of us that exploitation, while a very important concept, was essentially secondary, normatively speaking, to the concept of equality. We therefore had to articulate an appropriate egalitarianism and to determine what it implies. And the egalitarianism will have certain consequences for the proper evaluation of what we had called ‘exploitative’ relations. That’s why so many of us began to discuss equality, rather than exploitation. It turned out that exploitation was
downstream, normatively, from the injustice of inequality. And that realization loosened our tie to Marxism.

In addition to that intellectual trajectory, there was also a political trajectory. 1989 saw the collapse of the communist world. Although nobody in the group was a friend of the communist world, many of us experienced the Soviet Union – hideous though it was in many respects – as a non-capitalist space onto which you could project aspirations about how you might run a planned economy in a more democratic way with more liberal freedoms and so forth. So the Soviet Union, and, consequently, its collapse, were very important. I remember that when it collapsed, Sam Bowles, who joined the Group in 1987, said: ‘We’re partying’. I thought that was a very superficial response to the collapse of the Soviet Union, because with the disappearance of the great rival to capitalism, it begins to appear axiomatic that there is no alternative to capitalism. Sam had a point, but his celebration was premature. It was only once capitalism got into serious difficulties, recently, that the demise of the Soviet Union proved to be a boon, because now our thinking about alternatives to capitalism can be freer and more imaginative. It can’t be stigmatizing as favouring the Soviet system, because the Soviet system is no longer there as a vivid example.

Two members of the group left in the wake of 1989. Neither stated as their reason for leaving that there had been this collapse of socialism, but I think this was actually a major factor – in both cases. One of the leavers said: ‘I’m leaving because we decided to get together in order find out what was true in Marxism, we found that there was very little that was true in it, and now there is nothing left for us to do’. I found his statement rather arrogant, because, first, he had not been there at the foundation of the group, and second, and more importantly, it wasn’t for him to say whether other people wanted to stay together or not (as opposed to whether he in particular wanted to leave). He said that he was leaving because the group no longer had a rationale. But that was just untrue because the group continued, and continues, to have a rationale, being composed, as it is, of a number of people from different academic disciplines who have a radical orientation and who can fertilize each other’s thoughts. There’s still a great deal of interesting work that goes on in the group, though it’s much less Marxist in its scope. For instance, one of the things that Seana Shiffrin, who is a newish member of the group, has been working on is the way credit card companies rip poor people off because of how they phrase the loan obligations. She’s done a lot of legal work on that. Well, it’s obvious that that has a radical character. It’s equally obvious that compared to ‘the contradictions of capitalism’ and how they are going to destroy the system, it’s terribly ‘small beer’, so to speak. Beer, nevertheless, it is.

So the group has been quite substantially transformed. The kinds of topics that now get discussed in the group are sometimes a number of removes from
central Marxist ideas. For example, a newish member in the group, Stathis Kalyvas who is a sociologist – I don’t know if you’d call him a political scientist – at Yale, has written very interesting stuff about the character of civil wars, insurrections and guerrilla movements in game-theoretical terms. It’s innovative, and very important for our understanding of the contemporary world, but it isn’t particularly left-wing stuff. So really what happened to analytical Marxism is that on the one hand the rigorous and honest approach to central Marxian ideas led to their erosion and radical modification, and on the other hand the history of the period, and especially the collapse of communism, seemed to render the idea of socialism obsolete.

I have a tiny book coming out called Why Not Socialism? in a series published by Princeton University Press. The series began with Harry Frankfurt’s mini-book On Bullshit. The relevant Princeton editor asked me whether I had anything comparably small that could be made into a tiny book for the general reader. So I suggested this ‘Why Not Socialism?’ essay, which was originally published in a fairly obscure place. But when I suggested it, I suggested it diffidently: I was conscious of being out of step with the times, that was 2 or 3 years ago. But now there has been this (at least) temporary collapse or wobble in the ideological armature of capitalism, and the idea of socialism will move nearer to the top of the agenda of political reflection.

A taste for sensationalism, both for producing it and for consuming it, has led people to say silly things about the current crisis of capitalism. People, and especially journalists, exaggerate everything like crazy, to get attention and salaries. I have in mind all those recent statements about how Marx anticipated the coming of globalization and, with it, a crisis of capitalism, and the inference that Marx’s work is freshly relevant to our time. That is silly, because the reasoning that Marx employed to reach the conclusion that capitalism would collapse sheds no light on what has actually recently happened. What has happened has not happened because of the tendency of profit to fall, or because of problems arising out of variations in the organic composition of capital, or anything like that. It’s rather the case that, as we once well knew but had come to forget (and ‘we’ is practically everybody), capitalism is a fragile system because lots of things have to be kept delicately in place for the system to keep on reproducing itself. And the people who run the system, especially in the United States recently, screwed up royally because they thought the market could correct some problems of maladjustment, which, in fact, the market doesn’t correct, but magnifies. So that’s why we have had this collapse. But I met a palaeo–Marxist friend a few weeks ago who said, ‘This is Sismondi all over again’. Sismondi is one of the precursors of Marx who talked about under-consumption – the workers not having enough money to buy the stuff that’s produced. And this, my friend said, is a Sismondi situation, because the problem is that the workers can’t pay for the mortgages. But for Sismondi and,
following him, Marx, underconsumption is a characteristic of the system as such, and thus built into its dynamic. And nothing like that has been shown to be true by recent events. What happened is simply a lot of reckless lending, driven by greed, and a lot of consequent bad debt. Nothing to do, really, with Sismondi or Marxian theory, but palaeo-Marxists operate on the principle: Any port in a storm that some people were allowed to depend too much on what were going to be defaulting debts from other people.

**ST:** So does the current ‘crisis of global capitalism’ alter or change your own view of the relevance of Marx – do we need to revisit the Marxist prognosis? Should we be rereading *Capital?*

**GC:** Well, *Das Kapital* is worth reading because it’s a great book, but I don’t think it has great lessons for the current crisis. I think it might have pregnant one-liners that make you think in a certain direction, but that’s the sum of it. I don’t think its analysis of the dynamic of capitalism is relevant.

But what I do think is the case, what is so welcome about the present crisis, is that there has been a breathtaking ideological transformation. Through the Thatcher-Reagan years alongside the loosening of economic regulation, there was also a radical change of ideology – a move against collectivist ideology, a belief in a corrupt and corrupting individualism.

Now in popular thought things get confused, just as they do in sophisticated thought. Two utterly different bases for Thatcherite, Keith Josephite individualism, get confused. One is the idea that every person has a right to decide what he or she is going to do with her own powers, and no one has a right to organize people in a socialist fashion to pay for other people’s needs and so forth. That whole discourse is a matter of philosophical first principle. But of course those who peddle it also believe the empirical claims that individualism produces an economy that is fantastically efficient and that works brilliantly. And that’s pure bullshit, and many more people realize that now than did before the crisis. The current crisis is not, as a matter of logic and reasoning, grounds for questioning the first, philosophical, foundation of capitalist individualism, because that foundational discourse doesn’t speak to the question of the efficiency of capitalism. It doesn’t speak to the consequences of organizing something which has that philosophical base, but nevertheless the philosophical foundation gets polluted with empirical assessments in our thought. So people come to doubt the philosophical foundation, because the further belief in the efficiency of capitalism has been eroded – even though the philosophical foundation was never based on the consequences of capitalism in the first place. People have less confidence in the philosophical foundation when they are forced to believe it as a self-standing doctrine, and not also because what it endorses leads to good results. And that creates an enormous space into which egalitarian and progressive thought can enter.
ST: On that note, some of your recent work has been about ‘rescuing’ things: ‘rescuing conservatism from the Conservatives’, ‘rescuing justice from the Rawlsians’. Is there a sense that you want to revalorize ideology? Revalorize the fundamentally different principles that people can choose as part of their self-identity?

GC: Well, first of all, there’s supposed to be a self-irony in my use of this ‘rescuing’ phrase: I’m pretending that I’m pretending that I’m Don Quixote. The ‘rescuing’ phrase is used in the title of my 2008 book *Rescuing Justice* and Equality and it’s also used in a paper called ‘Rescuing Conservatism’, which will appear in 2010. Now I certainly didn’t use the same phrase because these two works are parts of some single project of ideological re-evaluation. I just used them because I thought they would be amusing phrases.

I should say that ‘Rescuing Conservatism’ is less rescuing from the Conservatives than *Rescuing Justice* is from the Rawlsians. I’m trying to identify, in the rescuing conservatism work, an enormously large truth in conservatism that I don’t think is widely recognized. The case for the truth in question goes something like this. If something is valuable, then it ought to be cherished. But if you are willing to reject it just because something on the horizon is a bit more valuable, then you don’t cherish it. Therefore, if something is valuable (the argument continues), you should (within limits) have a bias in its favour, even if something better could replace it.

So that’s a conservative thought and I think that it has massive application in the way we think about the development of our society. Both planning and the market are hostile to that conservative truth. Planners are always looking for what’s optimal, abstractly considered: they have no particular respect for the current embodiment of value. I’m saying that the current embodiment of value warrants tender treatment, and disproportionate to the amount of value that the thing that embodies value has. My view is that we should conserve that which has value, rather than conserve value itself – because to conserve value itself simply means to keep the value rating as high as possible. You conserve five units of value if you destroy five units of it and add 10: for the non-conservative, that is just as good as destroying no value and producing five units of value. The conservative has a massive preference for the second alternative, in which nothing gets destroyed.

I think that everybody actually thinks in practice in this conservative way, that it’s a fundamental and ineliminable aspect of how we negotiate the world. We have a commitment to the valuable things that exist, not just because they produce ‘this much’ value. That would mean that the commitment isn’t there.

ST: It sounds a little bit like ‘use-value’ and ‘exchange-value’.

GC: Absolutely: there is a relationship. And it goes back to Aristotle’s distinction between use-value and exchange-value and his condemnation of the limitless acquisition of exchange-value in his critique of the so-called
‘chrematistic’. But my point is quite different. It’s not exchange-value that I’m talking about, because that is a merely instrumental value. I’m talking about intrinsic value in general, of even the highest kind of value that you might want to designate. Suppose you have a friendship with somebody, and suppose you come to know somebody else new to the neighbourhood. And suppose the newcomer’s characteristics are such that if you had a friendship with him or her instead of with your existing friend – we assume there’s some competition here, and you can’t be friends with them both – then it would be a deeper friendship. It’s still inappropriate to cash in your existing relationship for this deeper one. And that isn’t a case of use-value versus exchange-value. The value in question is deep and honourable and fine, and you don’t want to condemn people for seeking that value. But once you find the embodiment, then you are committed to its embodiment, even when you could replace it by something that has more value.

Here is a way of conveying this in somewhat popular terms. Loving and valuing have something in common. We could argue whether one is a species of the other, but certainly there are resemblances. Now, there is a song from 1953 by the Ames Brothers that goes like this, ‘You, you, you – I’m in love with you, you, you – I could be so true, true, true – To a girl like you, you, you’. If I were the girl to whom that song was sung, I would beam during its first three lines, because they are directed at me in particular, but I’d frown at the final line. The final line says, ‘To a girl like you, you, you’. If his love is arrested at the stage of the reasons for his love, if he simply loves the features in what happens to be this, my, embodiment of them, if he doesn’t reach beyond the features to love me, the girl herself, then, should someone come along who also has those likeable features, he should be indifferent between his current focus and this new person, and if someone comes along who is better endowed than his current interest is, then he has reason to drop her. The problem with the song is that it goes from ‘you’, which is fine, to ‘a girl’, which is not fine because it thereby slides down to just any old embodiment of the desirable characteristics. Contrast Olivia-Newton John’s song in Grease: ‘You’d better shape up because I need a man’. She starts with ‘a’ – and of course she has to start with ‘a’ – that is, with nobody in particular, because she is seeking love. But then when someone does shape up – John Travolta – she says, ‘You’re the one that I want, the one that I wa-a-ant (ooo,ooo,ooo)’.

So there is this dialectic of the general and the particular, and what I am saying is that though you come to value something because of characteristics it has, which other things in principle might have, you value it as the thing that has those characteristics, not just for those characteristics. And that is the centre of what my conservatism work is about.

**ST:** I am curious to get your thoughts on the Rawlsian paradigm. It was very dominant in the 1980s and 1990s, and now there’s been this ideal versus non-ideal discussion, which suggests that it might be on the back foot.
GC: I’m not really familiar with the ideal/non-ideal discussion I read very slowly and consequently, I don’t read as many things as I should. So that is something that I cannot comment on.

Now the phrase you used, ‘the Rawlsian paradigm’, can be taken more or less narrowly. It can be taken in such a way that I am anti-Rawlsian, but it can also be taken in such a way that I come out as someone who’s working within the Rawlsian paradigm. One way in which the Rawlsian paradigm, taken in a middlingly narrow sense, has crumbled is that almost nobody still has confidence in the original position as a device for generating principles. That idea is now pretty obsolete but within the Rawlsian paradigm in a wider sense we now have the Scanlonian idea that the foundation of valid norms is, to abbreviate, that no one could reasonably reject them. And that is a big transformation. How much mileage is to be got out of working with the new idea remains to be seen.

ST: Does the difference principle still inform your own views on equality?

GC: No. In Rescuing Justice and Equality there is a chapter that attacks the difference principle. I claim that there is (if I may be permitted the phrase) a décalage in the intuitive argument for it, which precedes the presentation of the original position argument for it, (which nobody would now defend).

The intuitive argument for the difference principle goes like this. It starts with the idea that no one really deserves more than anybody else, so we should really begin with equality. We begin with equality because there is no good reason for anybody to have more than anybody else. Then we reflect that if we could make everybody better off, even if unequally so, then it would be stupid to stay with equality. And so we get the principle of justice that is called the difference principle.

I claim in the chapter that the grounds given for starting with equality contradict the characterization of the difference principle as a principle of justice because the difference principle is going to allow inequalities that are based on arbitrary endowments that people happen to have, that they are just lucky to have. The original thought is that if anybody has any more than anyone else then that’s just pure luck, so, since luck is alien to justice, we should start with equality. But if it’s true that inequality traces down to luck, and that luck is unfair, then the difference principle endorses unfairness.

The appropriate thing to say is that the state of affairs endorsed by the principle is unfair but beneficial to everybody. That is the right thing to say, rather than that the state of affairs is just and that the difference principle is a principle of justice. So this is a criticism of the difference principle, not as a matter of policy but as a matter of characterizing it as a principle of justice: I think the principle is a kind of compromise between enforcing justice and being sensible – let the worse off be made better off, even if you have to bribe the better-off people unconscionably to produce the needed bigger pie. I think
it’s overwhelmingly clear to neutral reflection that capitalism as a system is utterly unfair in the contrasts in wealth and welfare that it produces and also that it is a productive system. This gets reflected in political philosophy, but the honest way to reflect it is to say: yes, it is unfair but very productive, and not, with Rawlsian liberalism, that because it’s productive, it’s fair.

In what are for me the most moving paragraphs of Volume 1 of Capital, Marx talks about the capitalist market (as opposed to the capitalist production process), and he says that here we have ‘freedom, equality, property and Bentham’. By freedom he means that nobody is required to contract with anyone else; by equality, that they all face each other equally as owners; by property, that the workers own themselves and the capitalists own the means of production; and by Bentham he means everybody is seeking his own utility or advantage. These four great values are certainly the values of capitalist civilization, and different political philosophers care differentially about these different values. Some are interested only in utility, others only in freedom, others only in equality and so forth. Rawls tried to put all the values together, but I don’t think they can all be put together, because there are contradictions among them.

I think that Rawls was like the tailor in a story I’ll now tell. A man comes to a tailor – he was there the previous week and the tailor had taken his measurements. Now the tailor has the suit ready and the man is going to try on the suit. So he tries on the suit, first the jacket. But the left arm seems too short. The tailor says, ‘You’re not wearing it right’, and he pushes down the man’s left shoulder. The man feels a bit awkward but he respects the tailor’s expertise. Then one of the trouser legs seems a bit askew, and the tailor makes the man twist his leg a bit. Eventually, and compliantly the man leaves the tailor’s place, struggling to walk within the confinement of his suit. A couple was walking in the opposite direction. As they pass by, the woman says, ‘Poor man. What an affliction’. And her husband says, ‘Nice suit, though’. So I think there is a Rawlsian edifice – the suit that Rawls tried to produce that would cover all these values – and it has lots of awkward places in it. And that’s the story of much of the Rawls criticism. But I do think A Theory of Justice is an incredible book, There are at most two books of political philosophy that are greater: Plato’s Republic and Hobbes’s Leviathan. I don’t mean that there aren’t other thinkers who are just as great as Rawls – that’s another matter – but among books in political philosophy, it’s hard to find better ones. The thing that makes the book great is its relationship to the real world. In Hegelian terms, we can say that A Theory of Justice is liberal democracy come to consciousness of itself.

ST: One of the more fertile ways in which this set of debates is being played out is in terms of ‘global justice’. I haven’t seen a contribution of yours to that debate and I wondered whether there was one brewing, or if you just felt there
was an extension of the fundamental thought there, and that in a sense that all justice is global.

GC: Yeah, I’m a knee-jerk so-called ‘cosmopolitan’. Absolutely. I haven’t got anything to say about those debates. I read them. I’m interested in them. And I think that the cosmopolitans are not only on the right side, but also that they argue better than the non-cosmopolitans do. I think that the state is a really horrible thing, and therefore unsuited to be what determines the boundaries of justice. It’s a repository of violence. Others, of course, see matters differently. David Miller, for example, sees the state as, in principle, enclosing a kind of solidary ethical community; but communities are entities quite different from states. Sometimes there might be a community that is co-terminous with the state, but that certainly doesn’t hold for Great Britain. Even if we think of England alone, it’s not one community. And the kinds of solidary ties between people that Miller says there have to be for there to be a welfare state are not ties characteristically occurring within a nation state but rather in communities *within and across* its boundaries. Miller once said in a seminar that if a student from his own Oxford college approached him with a question, he would consider it more important to deal with him than with a student from Oxford at large and more important to deal with the latter than with a student from somewhere else in the country. I have a lot of reservations about that.

ST: Are those reservations primarily ethical in origin? That all individuals are owed?

GC: In a sense. If someone writes to me from Nottingham or Keele and has a question, those people could have greater need than people at Oxford who are surrounded by a lot of people they could talk to. I just don’t share Miller’s way of thinking about the matter.

I’ve just started to write about a new essay (its in a very embryonic stage) about what it means to regard another human being as an equal. I don’t think there is too much literature about that in the analytical tradition. There is Bernard Williams’s famous paper of 1962 called ‘The Idea of Equality’, but I don’t think that there has been very much work on the topic since that time. I profoundly believe that everybody’s equal. But I don’t know what I mean by saying that and I’d like to try and find out. I’ve done a lot of work on the norm of equal distribution. But that is a different matter.

ST: Doesn’t this relate back to the starting point? That Marxian thought is a cosmopolitan egalitarian gesture?

GC: In a sense, yes. There’s this axiom hanging around left-wing thought that everybody should have the same amount of fulfilment in life, or radically similar chances of getting it. People who believe that probably also regard human beings as equal. But as I suggested, it doesn’t suffice to regard everyone as equal to believe in that kind of ethic of distribution. I do think that laissez-faire
ideologists can regard all people as equals. So this isn’t going back (as you suggested) to the specifically Marxist starting point because this is beyond and behind that starting point, something more general. In pre-bourgeois civilization people didn’t regard everybody as equal. It’s a norm of capitalist civilization. But not everyone obeys the norm. We can distinguish between those fellows of Oxford colleges who do and those who don’t regard members of the menial staff as their equals. That is the distinction that I should like to be able to articulate.

**ST:** Yes. Changing tack a little bit, there is a school of thought that says political philosophers, political theorists, should be engaging with the ‘real world’ – and they mean by that at the moment environmental catastrophe, War on Terror, credit crunch. I’m wondering how you would respond to the thought that for political philosophers to earn their keep in the world they should be addressing these kinds of questions.

**GC:** I think these things are being addressed by philosophers. And I think it’s an excellent thing that they are being addressed. For example, there is a recent paper in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* by a philosopher named Leif Wenar about what is called ‘the resources curse’, which particularly affects resource-rich developing countries. The paper is very close to the real world. So is the book by Tom Nagel and Liam Murphy on *The Myth of Property*: it has enormous relevance to how the ‘credit crunch’ should be handled. And there’s a lot of stuff out there about terror, including my own paper called ‘Casting the First Stone: Who Can, and Who Can’t, Condemn the Terrorists’, whose focus is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. All these immediate questions are being addressed, and they ought to be addressed.

But by and large my own orientation is not to address contemporary questions. I deal with more general, more abstract, questions, and I think people make a big mistake when they suppose that the discussion of such questions has no impact on the real world. People are being spectacularly myopic. John Stuart Mill wrote *On Liberty* in 1859, and Roy Jenkins implemented his no-harm principle as Home Secretary in the Wilson government of the 1960s. You could have said to John Stuart Mill, ‘You’re off the wall. What are you talking about? Nobody is going to accept your proposal’. And you would have been right, for the next several decades or so. But so what?

Ideas have consequences along many routes. It’s undoubtedly true that if you draw your government people and your civil servants from people who were steeped in Nozick in university, then you’ll get different results from what you’ll get from people who were steeped in more egalitarian thought. How will this show itself? In biases. Even in what you might think are small things, like conflicts within government about how much you’re going to tax the middle class, or local matters, such as whether we should build an expensive recreational facility in the poor part of our borough? Nobody could conceivably say
that *all* public money has got to be spent on the poor, and nobody is going to say that *no* money should be spent on the poor. Everybody is somewhere in between, and the people who listen to egalitarian lecturers are going to be biased in a certain way, rather than in another way. That’s a huge way that political philosophy has an effect. And this relates not only to government decision-makers, but also to non-government opinion-formers, such as journalists. Jonathan Dimbleby might still have become Prince Charles’s friend had he not done philosophy at UCL. But I remember him well and it seemed to me that this particular influential person was radicalized by his university experience, and he has done some admirable journalism partly as a result of that radicalization. Ideas percolate around. I think that political philosophy is very consequential. It’s myopic to think that it has to focus on the real world in order to be consequential for the real world.

**ST:** Do you have a view more generally on the health of political philosophy? Do you see political philosophers coming along who are going to produce the next *Theory of Justice*?

**GC:** Well, I think the flagship journal, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, of analytical political philosophy is in very good shape and there are a lot of good younger people coming along. What will emerge from it I don’t know. When Humphrey Lyttleton was asked where jazz was going, he replied that ‘if he knew where it was going, he would be there already’. So I can’t say where philosophy is going.

I recall Nietzsche’s remark – I think it’s in *Beyond Good and Evil* but if it’s not there then it’s in some other aphorizing place – ‘What is a people? Nature’s detour to two or three great men’. You can see that as a rather repugnant statement of contempt for non-creative people. But understood most sympathetically, it acknowledges that there have to be lots of ordinary workers in the vineyard for something special to emerge, and you don’t know when something special is going to emerge. It’s impossible to say if someone is going to come up with a synthesis of the same enormous sweep that Rawls’s work provided, but with, for example, a more progressive orientation than Rawls’s.

**ST:** I suppose a different way of putting is, do you still feel the same sense of excitement about going to a major conference or taking part in a workshop? It’s not a question of having seen it all or heard it all before?

**GC:** Well, I don’t go to many conferences and workshops. I mean, for the selfish reason that I don’t want to sit there listening to endless papers. I once said to Bernard Williams that I don’t go to conferences because either I have to be bored or I have to be rude. And he said, ‘Or like me, you could be both’.

But in terms of excitement about the ideas and reading stuff, my alacrity is not at all diminished. I remember Richard Wolheim used to say about his relationship to philosophy – he was my boss for 20 years – he used to say,
‘One’s relationship to the subject changes from time to time. At times one finds it most repugnant, at other times …. ’ By contrast, I’ve never had an ambivalent relationship to philosophy. I’ve always loved it and the stuff that gets produced, and I still do. There’s lots of exhilarating stuff out there, and, I’m sure, much more to come.

*Interview transcribed by Jennifer Martinez, University of Nottingham*