

**A LIFE WELL TRAVELED:
AN INTERVIEW WITH LAWRENCE SCHMIDT**

*** This interview was conducted in April 2009. My name is Jeff Baker, a 2009 Philosophy major who graduated *cum laude* with distinction in Philosophy. I sat down with Dr. Lawrence Schmidt during a rare free hour in his office in the Raney Building.

Jeff Baker (JB): *Thank you for speaking with me today. Let me begin by asking you what first interested you in philosophy as an undergraduate?*

Dr. Lawrence Schmidt (LS): It probably goes back before that. My father was a philosopher, too, and although he didn't *teach me* philosophy, so to speak, I was certainly aware of it and what it meant. We went back and forth sometimes, as a child and a parent arguing, and I was informed about basic elements of argument and logical structure. I picked that up pretty early. When I was around twelve years old, my parents divorced, and I went to a private school for the last two years of high school, intending to focus on mathematics or perhaps science – philosophy seemed a long way away, but I was interested in it. We had a reading group and we did some readings from existential philosophy that restarted my interest.

JB: *Do you remember who you were reading?*

LS: No, but I do remember that I once tried as a high school student to read the introduction of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* and didn't understand a word and got pretty frustrated. That didn't work. Then I went to Reed College and was probably going to major in philosophy or mathematics; I'd also gotten into MIT but I decided I wanted to go west, not because either school was better than the other but because the west was somehow enticing. I went out there and the first year calculus class was fairly theoretical. I liked it, but I was really bored. I was able to talk my way into taking Intro to Philosophy my first year at Reed, which was unusual, and I got hooked. The first year we read standard things: Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, etc., and from that I just kept on going.

JB: *So the roots of your thinking were really empirical, scientific... How does that play into your philosophical attitude? Has philosophy fulfilled your intellectual needs? Do you ever wish that you'd become a scientist or a mathematician?*

LS: Philosophy has certainly fulfilled my needs more than anything else. If I had gone into science or mathematics it might have been easier finding a job, but . . .

JB: *Not that you're unhappy here at Hendrix!*

LS: Right, this has been great! But it could easily have happened that I didn't end up at Hendrix and could have had trouble finding a job. I'm lucky to have found a tenure-track and now tenured position, and I've been very pleased working at a small, Liberal Arts school, so it has worked out perfectly and I'm really happy I did it.

JB: *I understand from previous conversations that you've traveled pretty extensively. You've been to Germany, you've studied in India... Could you tell me more about your travels and how they have influenced your philosophy?*

LS: Well, I went to Europe after I escaped, so to speak, the United States during the Vietnam War – legally – and I went to travel and study. I ended up in Freiburg, Germany, which was the seat for Heidegger and Heidegger studies, and although he was alive I never met the old man. I did study with people who were teaching his work, and I suppose that was fairly influential later on. While doing that I was also interested in Indian philosophy, so one semester I went to India and studied Indian philosophy there. It was under a more British system, mostly lectures, but it gave me the foundation in Indian philosophy that I still have; but, I quickly realized that Indian philosophy was a little too esoteric and that I was more interested in contemporary German philosophy. I went back to Germany, and then back to the United States and started an MA program at the University of New Mexico.

JB: *What was it about Indian philosophy that appealed to you at first? After all that's quite a decision to take a semester to go and study just that. What was it that drew you in initially, and what led you later to a different path?*

LS: It's so long ago I'm not sure I can even say what was interesting to me, it was just radically different. In the end, the religious element that's tied in with most of the classical systems of Indian philosophy just wasn't something that I could accept, so there was no way that I could go on using any of it as a guide for my life.

JB: *But that hasn't been a problem in contemporary German philosophy, has it?*

LS: No, it's kind of interesting, I set out to write a critical doctoral thesis against Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, but the more I worked on it, the more I found that in trying to understand what he said, I was following *his* theory of interpretation, so I ended up writing a more positive account. That's what interested me most about it: I found that in trying to carefully read and understand a text, I was doing what Gadamer said I ought to be doing, so that led me to then worry about a positive answer to the problem of truth and interpretation. That ended up being my dissertation, several years later.

JB: *That is interesting. Did you ever have an opportunity to study with Gadamer?*

LS: No, I was studying with another professor at a different university, so I never actually got to study under Gadamer. I did meet him one summer and talked to him. Though I first met him in Freiburg. When I was studying there, I was in Werner Marx's seminar on *Truth and Method*. Gadamer came down to Freiburg at the end of the semester, and we submitted questions to him. We had a night out where we drank wine and talked about his philosophy and he answered our questions. That was the first time I met him.

JB: *Sounds like I would really enjoy philosophy in Germany! So what was it like, meeting him? Not as a guru, so to speak, but certainly as an intellectual forebear in your own philosophy, and a contemporary who had influenced you so strongly?*

LS: It was wonderful, there's no question about that! We had lots of conversations over the years. Gadamer was a very hospitable and open person, and would speak with young scholars, or anyone who was interested in his philosophy. It was very nice to be able to talk to him. Then later I was the principle initiator and organizer of hermeneutic Gadamer summer international symposia for about twelve years, and Gadamer usually attended so I was able to see him in action and it was quite amazing. Even more amazing because he was already in his late eighties when we started, and in his nineties later on.

JB: *It sounds incredible. I wish that I could meet some of the thinkers who have influenced me, but unfortunately for the most part they're not around anymore – except for you professors here, of course. This isn't the most elegant segue, but I'd like to talk now about some of your more recent interests. One of the most personally fulfilling and illuminating courses I took during my time here was a two-person seminar with you and another student on the Pragmatists. I even had a similar, though less profound experience when writing my final paper for the class, where I set out to argue against Dewey's insistence that there is no real distinction between “fact” and “value,” but became more and more convinced that he was right and that value is inherent in experience. I later found Heidegger's thinking in Being and Time to be remarkably similar in some respects. I'm curious if Heidegger was your path to the Pragmatists?*

LS: I'd heard and read about the Pragmatists, and even taught about some of them in “19th Century Philosophy” for awhile, but what really sparked my interest was working through Richard Rorty. Rorty's critique of Dewey got me to actually sit down and read *Experience and Nature*, and then I read several other books by Dewey that got me excited about Pragmatism – but it was by working through Rorty and his books that are both critical and not critical of the hermeneutic tradition.

JB: *What do you think about Rorty? About what he does, or what he tried to do, in philosophy?*

LS: Well, he's really important in several ways. One particular thing that is worth taking seriously about him is the move from analytic philosophy to a sort of continental position, showing the way in which that could be done. Then expanding his own position, which I thought went a little too far, but which was certainly well argued with good structure; thinking about the problems that continental philosophy can run into if it's still trying to argue for a more relativistic or post-modern or Derridean interpretation, based on a Nietzschean structure. That's really important. He did a lot also to locate different thinkers in a historical context.

JB: *I really struggle with what Rorty means to me. I have trouble placing him. He thinks of himself in so many different ways, sometimes representing himself as a Neo-Pragmatist and other times as self-consciously not a philosopher but rather a literary critic. He talks about not being worried about arguments, but he clearly has this keen analytic argumentative talent, and puts together – as you say – very well structured arguments.*

LS: Well, he was trained as an analytic philosopher first!

JB: *Right. I know our time is running short. Before we wrap up, we've talked a little bit about*

your intellectual past, your past as a student, your positive feelings about being here... Can you tell me about your experience being a philosophy professor here at Hendrix? You've been here the longest of anybody, haven't you?

LS: In the Philosophy department, right now, yes.

JB: *So what is it about Hendrix that has made it possible for you to be happy for the duration as a Philosophy professor?*

LS: I think the major difference between getting into a research institution versus working at a Liberal Arts college is that at a research institution you're more or less confined to one area of expertise and you're expected to be an expert in that, whereas at a Liberal Arts college you have the possibility or perhaps the advantage of doing lots of different things. That's one big difference and I like doing lots of different things. While I try to keep up with the research and writings on Gadamer, it's pretty difficult and I certainly don't come out with a publication every year on the subject. On the other hand I get to explore other interests, so when I became interested in the Pragmatists I could start teaching classes in Pragmatism. I've generally taught the Eastern philosophies, both from India and from China. Being in this position I've been able to teach different things when they became interesting for me, I think more easily than if I had been at a major research institution.

JB: *I agree; if you look at the works of the thinkers who've got positions at top tier research institutions, they tend to write on one theme and develop that theme more or less perpetually. On the one hand that's good, it allows them to deeply work out the difficulties and complexities of the topic, but on the other I'd imagine it's quite limiting in some ways, too, as you've highlighted.*

LS: Yes, and the other real advantage of a small Liberal Arts school involves the students you have in your classes. You have small classes to begin with, which is fun because you get the chance for real dialog and the students are usually of a higher caliber than an average group of students elsewhere. So those are the two exciting things about teaching at a small Liberal Arts college: the quality of students and the ability to teach and explore different things. Perhaps a third advantage is the chance for real interdisciplinary studies. It's just fun to learn things from other people, do things you'd never otherwise do, read books you probably wouldn't otherwise read. It's been fun to be able to communicate across disciplines.

JB: *Dr. Schmidt, I appreciate that you were able to sit down with me for this interview. On a personal note, I've really enjoyed my time here, and you've made a real difference in my philosophical development. Thank you.*