

**ON FRENCH PHILOSOPHY AND TENNIS SHOES:  
AN INTERVIEW WITH J. AARON SIMMONS**

**Interview Conducted by Alana Buie on April 16, 2009**

**Alana Buie (AB):** *Some people consider the discipline of philosophy to be a mental exercise that has no relevance to anything outside of itself. Having taken up philosophy as your life's work, you clearly think it is a valuable way to spend one's time. Does some of its worth involve practical applications?*

**J. Aaron Simmons (JAS):** I think that there are two spaces in which the question of practical application can be seen to gain traction. First, is philosophy, as such, something that has what we might term “existential relevance”? I think that philosophy has existential relevance insofar as we as humans are constantly engaged with big questions. Questions such as “Does my life have meaning?” “Is this claim something I should believe?” “How ought I to act in a certain situation?” are all questions of this sort. These questions can occur when we go to Wal-mart and have a dollar in our pocket, and the United Way is asking for donations, or the Salvation Army is out at Christmastime. But, our intention was to spend that dollar to buy a candy cane, say. Here we are presented with a philosophical question that has existential relevance. Philosophy functions, it seems to me, as a mode of discourse (perhaps there are others) that systematically investigates the big questions. And in that sense, I think that doing philosophy is something that happens beyond the professional space of academia. Philosophy is better thought of as a mode of being-in-the-world. In that sense, I find it to be extremely practical because we couldn't help but *be* practical in those ways. Now, of course we can think really poorly about *being* practical in those ways, and that's where philosophy steps in to help us understand a better way forward.

The other way of asking the question about existential relevance is relative to the exercise of “professional” philosophizing. Here, too, we even need to more narrowly ask whether philosophy has existential traction internal to what I do in my own area of specialization. My primary area of research is contemporary European philosophy—specifically the intersection of continental philosophy of religion and political philosophy. So, we might ask, do those debates about God after the death of God have some sort of existential traction? For me, the answer is: *I hope so*. I put my answer as a hope because in some of my writing I'm actually critical of the failure of continental philosophy to articulate its ability to be relevant to the real issues of existence in embodied, socio-historical, material contexts. I think there is a reason to take seriously the charge that continental philosophy should be open to a self-chastisement in its attempt to critique analytic philosophy as being detached, too speculative and un-engaged with the real historical realities of human existence—and this, of course, is what gives rise to movements like existentialism, Marxism, French feminism, critical theory, psychoanalysis, etc. That said, I think that the discussions about how we become aware of contextualism can be just as esoteric, detached and speculative as the discourses that we were trying to overcome by reengaging in these discursive practices. So, I would say the existential relevance of contemporary continental philosophy is best understood as a *task* rather than a clearly articulated *achievement* that we can point to and say, “Yes, here's how it's been done.” I think instead it's something that we are constantly trying to do and I am excited that the new generation of continental thinkers is, I think, seriously trying to take up that task. For example, really

interesting things are being done right now in continental political philosophy by putting Rawls in conversation with Levinas, say. Similarly, great stuff is being done on how deconstruction opens spaces for environmental philosophy. My mentor, David Wood, in fact, has done a lot of work in that trajectory in particular. Also, the ways in which continental philosophy opens spaces for thinking about the restored possibilities for passionate faith lives in a postmodern world is especially important.

All of those areas involve existentially pressing questions. Contemporary issues surrounding immigration—I think Derrida's notions of hospitality should be brought to bear on these sorts of questions. Health care relative to issues internal to deconstructive conceptions of subjectivity and selfhood—who counts as a moral person? What are we to make of human rights in a time where the "subject" (as least as often found in modern philosophy) is more of a problem than an answer? Is feminism best understood as a response to a logic internal to institutional structures, or as a material attempt to make tomorrow better for traditionally marginalized and oppressed people in the world? To return to your question: does philosophy have existential relevance? Continental philosophy practiced by professional philosophers in the academy has existential relevance insofar as we continue to put our energy into showing what it means to claim that it does.

**AB:** *Can you explicate one of these practical considerations from your own published works—or even a project you're working on now, but is not yet available to the public?*

**JAS:** Sure. I'll give you two examples. One area is environmental ethics. I have an article coming out in a collected volume on Levinas and ecology in which I argue that climate change presents what I describe as a meta-ethical emergency situation that requires a radical alteration in what will count as a plausible environmental moral theory. So, given that we have a limited amount of time to address climate change before catastrophic results occur, we need to only operate internal to moral theories that have epistemic coherence relative to this problem and an ethicopolitical viability in regard to the social situation in which policy needs to change. My claim is that only a certain kind of revised anthropocentrism is going to be able to answer both the epistemic and also the ethicopolitical challenges. I draw on the work of Emmanuel Levinas to show what this revised anthropocentrism might look like. This Levinasian model is a notion of anthropocentrism that is not simply a straightforward trump card for human interests over non-human interests, but is instead a theory that tries to rethink what community means internal to a context of ethical beings or moral individuals in relationship. I think that this provides a conception of community that is responsive to issues of intergenerational justice and inter-species justice as well. And for me, that's a space in which real practical application demands in public policy are pressing on how I'm thinking about these issues in environmental philosophy and contemporary continental ethics. . .

**AB:** *But haven't we just realized that it's in the human interest to be more sensitive to non-human interests? We want to protect our species' viability from whatever threatens it, and it happens that being aware of ecosystems and their inhabitants is an important part of that. If humans are still primary, and we came to this conception of community out of concern for humanity, have we transcended the old anthropocentrism?*

**JAS:** This is a good point. I realize that the worry here is that I am simply abandoning something like moral truth in favor of pragmatic utility and such utility will always, seemingly, cut in favor of human interests. I would respond that, for me, it is precisely because of what I consider to be a moral truth—that we should work to address climate change because of its impact on so many species—that I advocate this particular way forward. Certainly, my approach will seem too conservative to some since I advocate a hierarchy of moral standing. However, it is important to realize that too rigidly sticking to a particular conception of moral theory might actually eliminate the possibility of working to bring about solutions to the problems that one deploys a particular theory in the hopes of addressing. I envision this Levinasian model of anthropocentrism as something that overcomes the political extremism of so many anthropocentric conceptions while still being viable in the context of contemporary American (and global) polity. This is the upshot of the emergency situation: political viability stands as a constraint now in a way that it might not were we not in such a situation.

**AB:** *You mentioned that there was a second example where your work performs the existential traction of philosophy.*

**JAS:** Yes. This other area occurs in my work in political philosophy—specifically concerning the possibility of religion in the public square. I argue in an essay that was published in a couple years ago in the journal *Soundings* that contemporary debates about religion in the public square are problematically framed all too often in terms of epistemological issues. For example, “What’s going to count as a legitimate reason in public discourse?” “What’s going to justify this or that way forward in public policy?” In response to this epistemological approach, I argue that in light of Kierkegaard’s conception of the “public” as a space that is religiously open and Levinas’ conception of religion as a space that is always socially situated, that what you get is in fact a model of religion in the public square that is *ethicopolitically* constituted instead of *epistemically* constituted. What that does is to allow for the question of religion in public square to really be recognized as a question of how one is going to be open to the claims and calls of others that may or may not fit my community of discourse. The idea, then, is that politics is the very space where we can ask the seemingly impossible question of how to hear an other who I may not be able to hear (at least at present). For me that’s a better model for understanding something like religious debates internal to public discourse than is the more standard account of reason-giving internal to political liberalism.

**AB:** *So, is there anything that individual believers or nonbelievers can take away from this new direction in postmodernism?*

**JAS:** Well, I think that one question in postmodern philosophy in general is “What is ‘belief’ going to mean now?” Where “now” is “after the death of (a certain conception of) God.” A classical model of belief is the idea that I believe in something or I have faith in something because I don’t have enough proof to convert my belief into knowledge. On this model, faith is simply a weak version of knowledge. I have faith because the evidence just isn’t sufficient to meet the higher standards. What is happening in postmodernity—and this is interestingly occurring both on the continental and noncontinental sides of the aisle—is a move to start rethinking faith as an existential investment in a particular narrative that will constitute one’s mode of being-in-the-world. Consider the work of Kierkegaard, for instance, who famously says

faith is a *passion*, but it's the *highest passion* available to a human. For Kierkegaard, this means that what I invest myself in, what narrative I choose to open the space for, is always something that's extremely risky. There is never going to be a finally justified account that's going to give me some sort of epistemic, metaphysical, or moral guarantee that I've chosen wisely. Instead, as Kierkegaard said, as existing individuals, we continue to struggle up a hill. We constantly revise our positions in light of new evidence and new experiences, but we also encounter the future as a space of possibility—possibilities precisely opened to us by the dominant narrative that I accept as the operative context in which experience or evidence could even be considered. It seems to me that this model of rethinking faith not as something that is in competition with knowledge, but instead as the locus where something like a question about knowledge could actually happen, is really what postmodernity is all about.

This happens in all kinds of ways, of course. According to Gianni Vattimo, for example, with the death of God and the weakening of Being comes the possibility for real “faith” once again. Similarly, for thinkers like John Caputo, with the death of *religion* comes the possibility of really being *religious*. For individuals like Jean-Luc Marion, when we start thinking God as not primarily understood in terms of Being, but instead begin to understand God as being primarily an expression of radical charity, then we actually open the space for something like a relational existence *with* God rather than an ontological account of the relation *to* God. It seems to me that the impact this has on the lives of existing believers occurs at two levels. On one level it causes us to now say that what counts as a believer's life is not something that is separate or compartmentalized over and against what we do as philosophers. Instead, the very question of living life in a relationship with God ends up being legitimate as a philosophical (and phenomenological) question.

Now, do I think that the average evangelical member of the mega-church is going to pick up Derrida or work through a recent book by Jean-Yves Lacoste? Probably not, and I do not think that this is necessarily unfortunate. This stuff is hard to make your way through even for professionals. For folks without much background in philosophy reading Derrida or Henry can often lead to thorough-going confusion. That said, there is, I think, a need for books that translate postmodern theory into the discourse available to most individuals in popular culture. Some people have started doing this. There's a series at Baker Books (edited by James K.A. Smith) that has recently published some very important texts in this vein. Smith himself has a book called *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church*. John Caputo just published a book in that same series called *What would Jesus Deconstruct?* Carl Raschke has a book in the series called *Globochrist*. So there are, I think, these moments starting to emerge where postmodern theory can stand in conversation with popular culture in a way that is making the theory accessible, inviting, and engaging for people who otherwise want nothing to do with it (or might just lack the training to be able to make much of it on their own). And I should mention some other thinkers who have also been instrumental in this way. Brian McLaren's has conducted this sort of translation project at a less theoretical level and Peter Rollins has been doing some fantastic work in this direction as well (in particular as it concerns the notion of Christian practice). So, I think the signs are good that these conversations might start happening in church small groups and not only in seminar classes at research universities.

**AB:** *You've talked about making ideas accessible to a group of people who would not normally come into contact with them, and you've also mentioned a lot of European philosophers. Thinking about all those French names, is language a barrier to the philosophical conversation*

*as much as the complexity arising from the reality of different levels of understanding and engagement?*

**JAS:** Of course. Language can be a barrier in a couple ways though. In one sense there are really good reasons why we require our students to learn other languages—so they can read primary sources in the original language. I strongly encourage my students to read Levinas and Derrida with me in the French, to read Heidegger in the German, etc, and there are reasons to do this. I think there are real, substantive philosophical dimensions that are not available in translation. That said, there's another way in which language is a problem that I think is probably more pressing to your question. Namely, philosophers don't tend to speak in common vernacular. Our discourse is not operative according to journalistic clarity. We tend to be more concerned about conceptual rigor and logical precision. And this, of course, can sometimes create very complicated formulations, sentence structures, word choice, etc. I believe that this is what often makes philosophy intimidating to nonphilosophers. I should point out that this reality is not unique to continental philosophy. Anybody who picks up a book by Quine or Davidson or Sellers will quickly recognize that this is also not easygoing stuff. Difficulty is not solely the possession of European thinkers. That said, I think that there is a heightened complexity internal to continental thought because it also makes so much use of original languages internal to its own discussion of philosophy itself.

In Heidegger, for instance, the way etymology functions is crucial to his philosophical point. Reading Giorgio Agamben almost requires a background in French, German, and Italian, not to mention Latin and Greek. If one lacks such a background, there are moments when one will probably say: "well this is just impenetrable." I think that this, then, should raise a task and not name a failure. It shouldn't be the case that since this stuff is so hard we should just stop reading it. One doesn't have to be a philosopher to realize that with hard work comes great reward. So those of us teaching this material should do our best to make it accessible to our students in a way that invites them to then want to go even deeper. We should not allow them to be okay with philosophy in a sort of Reader's Digest version. But at the same time, I think we should not forget that, well, Reader's Digest has a large readership for good reasons. There's nothing wrong with John Caputo and James Smith writing to audiences that would never go on to read Derrida. If this stuff is true, if it is meaningful, if it's practically efficacious, then we need to make it inviting to a larger audience (beyond the philosophical classroom). To say, "We have truth, but only those of us who read French are able to access it" seems to violate the very notion of being open to hearing the other in her language. And I think that's the task of postmodern ethics in the first place.

**AB:** *How does your teaching style bring out the philosophical project at hand? How do you strike that balance between attaining intellectual rigor and reaching your students?*

**JAS:** I think there are two tasks for the philosophy professor. One is to make students who have never thought philosophy was something that they were even remotely interested in to reconsider that stance. This doesn't mean that we will (or even should) make them into philosophy majors; it just means that we make the elective in philosophy not something that immediately gets a sort of robust belly laugh. The second task is to make philosophy something that those who are already interested in it can take up as a passionate narrative guiding their own lives. These are two different tasks and they should not be confused. For me, they roughly separate in the way

that I approach lower level courses and upper level courses. In my lower level courses, I tend to be very performative. I try to get the students engaged where they live, as it were—to get them kinesthetically understanding philosophy as a tangible engagement with their own existence. For instance, when I talk about Kierkegaard's conception of contextual truth, I have my students go outside, hopefully when it's very cold, and put their hands in the freezing water of our fountain here at Hendrix. We then talk about the fact that it's impossible to think clearly about Kierkegaard when one's hand is frozen. Yet, this very fact clearly articulates Kierkegaard's point about the inescapable existential location of all philosophizing. What this does is to open the space for them to really grasp the Kierkegaard text as something that impacts them. They leave that day's class with both a cold hand and also a better conception of what Kierkegaard is really up to. In my upper-level courses, alternatively, I am less performative and more robustly textual and analytical. I expect substantial engagement from my students, but I make following deal with them: if they will give me more energy and more devotion than they think they have to give then I will guarantee that the reward will also be something better than they ever expected. This deal tends to always work out in their favor. Watering down courses at the upper level is something that is unfortunate and, I believe, should never be done (except in extreme cases). Instead what we should do is expect the students to be okay jumping over really high bars. My role as professor is to should show them how to jump—how to bend their knees, how to get the best spring in their step, what kind of tennis shoes to wear, etc. That is the task of the good instructor: to help the students be confident that they can jump higher than they ever thought they could before they came into class.

**AB:** *I know you've been highly involved in department activities outside of the classroom—supported the Philosophy Club, brought speakers to campus, helped make our website into a better resource, and encouraged students to write papers worthy of submitting to conferences and publications. How important are these opportunities to connect with a community of scholars outside the classroom and to engage with ideas and experiences that do not directly relate to the syllabus?*

**JAS:** What I love about doing philosophy is that it provides the opportunity to be in conversation with some of the smartest people in the history of the world. I cherish this fact. The reason that I do so many conferences is that I love being in conversation. I robustly celebrate the reality of having colleagues and friends working in other areas at other institutions being able to come together and exchange ideas and critique each other and then go out and have dinner (at the MidSouth conference in Memphis it is always Barbeque!!). And for me, that same sense of collegial engagement is what I try to develop and foster internal to my own institution with the students and faculty. The reasons that I do this are (a) it makes the students better—I am a better philosopher because I have very smart friends, and I know that my students will be better if they see each other as philosophers as well, and (b) the passion that I want to cultivate in my students to do philosophy is something that is more likely to take hold if they see others that are passionate as well. Sometimes you can get excited if you see a professor show this passion, but it's better if you see your peers doing this when they are sitting next to you at the table, talking to you at lunch time, and getting together with you at the coffee shop. For me, that's where philosophy happens. I mean, it is not unimportant that philosophy for Socrates was something that was done in public—it was something that one did while walking and talking with others. It involves getting out of the libraries and really engaging each other about issues that matter. So I

think that if we make the philosophy major a space where all of these individuals come together to be a part of something bigger than themselves—namely, part of the philosophic conversation of humankind—then this will yield increased energy and excellence for all involved.

Moreover, I think that there are reasons to encourage students to develop skills that will serve them well should they want to go on to graduate school in philosophy. One thing of which I am convinced is that it is beneficial to develop professional relationships and professional experiences early on. This is why I encourage my students to go to conferences, to send things out for publication, to think about when they're constructing papers or theses that this is something that then has some larger lifespan than just turning it in, getting a grade, and then going into some file on my desk. Instead, I try to get them to realize that this or that paper is something they turn in, get some feedback on, get a grade for, rework over the summer, send out to a conference in the fall, get some more feedback, send it out to an undergraduate journal in the spring, etc. It is crucial to have a vibrant space of substantive engagement for both students and faculty.

**AB:** *In addition to the chance to foster this sort of academic community, what have you liked about your time here at Hendrix and/or what do you look for in a home institution?*

**JAS:** The two things that I'm committed to are excellence in research and excellence in teaching. The type of institution that I enjoy being at is an institution that allows both arenas of my own life to be developed in a way that they actually support each other. Hendrix, for instance, is a wonderful place precisely because I'm able to teach courses that are directly related to the research that I do. This semester, for instance, I'm teaching a seminar on John Rawls and I'm finishing a book manuscript dealing with deconstructive political philosophy. So, some of the work I'm doing in my own book research shows up in how I'm teaching this class. Further, I'm teaching a directed study right now with some very excellent students on radical political theory and we're reading Zizek, Agamben, Vattimo (among others) and talking about distinction between ethics and politics. A central claim in my book is that this distinction is something that we require in order for political critiques to make much sense. So there again is an example of how my research and teaching are really two sides of one coin. Next year I'm teaching a course on Philosophy and Literature, and seminars on the work of Kierkegaard and also the Postmodern God. In the latter course, I will be dealing primarily with New Phenomenology, which is another area in which I have recently published a few articles. The ability to have research and teaching not be at odds with each other is something that I look for in an institution. But, of course, having students that are capable of challenging me is also essential. At Hendrix I've been very enriched by students that are good enough to require that I also jump over really high bars. That is, they have suggestions for what type of tennis shoes I should be wearing! When I set the bar really high for my students, they also expect me to continue to set it that high. And that's been a rewarding experience. Who says that French philosophy doesn't have existential traction?—it's all about having the right tennis shoes!