

Biography,

John Dupré

Since doing my undergraduate degree in PPE at Oxford, I have spent almost exactly half of my academic life in the US and half in the UK. My PhD in philosophy was from Cambridge, but I spent two years of my postgraduate studies in the US on a Harkness Fellowship, at Princeton and then Stanford. I was on the faculty of the philosophy department at Stanford for 14 years, and the next 14 years in various academic units at Exeter—there was no philosophy teaching when I arrived. Just tipping the balance were two years as a Junior Research Fellow at St. John's College Oxford. I also taught at Birkbeck College, University of London half time for four years when I first returned to the UK, and I spent a term in Amsterdam as the Spinoza Professor in the Department of Philosophy.

My central interest has been, throughout my career, in the philosophy of science, but always seen through the lens of the life sciences. This was unusual thirty years ago, when it was still generally assumed that physics was the only science of real interest to philosophers. This attitude, I have to say, still persists to some degree in the UK. But globally, and specifically in the US, philosophy of biology is now at least on a par with philosophy of physics, and many people share my view that biology is where the most exciting scientific action is to be found today. My specific interests have included problems of classification, the nature of species, and whether there are 'natural kinds'; the limits of reductionism; human nature, and how much evolution can tell us about what it is to be human; and more recently, the attempt to understand from a philosophical point of view the implications of a variety of rapidly changing areas of the life sciences: genetics and genomics, microbiology, systems biology, and synthetic biology among others.

This is not the place to attempt to summarise my philosophical views. But perhaps I can give a sense of them by mentioning my favourite cautionary proverb: "if you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail". The sciences I study have wonderful tools for exploring the natural world, and it is understandable that they want to employ them as widely as possible. However, one thing that never ceases to impress me about the living world is its diversity; and what this means is that different problems or topics often need different tools. One function of the philosophy of biology is to consider what is, and what is not, a nail.

As mentioned already, my time at Exeter has taken me through several parts of the institution. When I arrived I was a senior research fellow in the English Department, where my activities ranged from teaching Foucault to masters students to judging an annual competition among art works of every imaginable kind by students. After four years I was given a chair in the sociology department, with a brief to develop combined honours programmes with philosophy. At that time I resigned my half-time chair at Birkbeck and came full time to Exeter. After teaching the first year of these programmes—I well remember recruiting the first year of combined honours philosophy students through clearing (a pleasure to teach, by the way)—I found myself head of the sociology department.

It was right at the beginning of my time as head of sociology that the call from the Economic and Social Research Council for bids for centres to research the social implications of genomics crossed my desk, but little did I guess what a crucial incident in my academic career this would prove to be. I remember signalling an interest in the programme, and in

almost no time becoming the lead for Exeter's bid for a Centre. Serendipitously, the professor of sociology at the time, Barry Barnes, was developing an interest in genomics, and Steve Hughes, a scientist with a lifetime of experience in genomics both in industry and academia, was in Exeter and becoming interested in the wider implications of his science. The three of us constituted an impressively multidisciplinary team for the bid and, to some surprise in the Social Science community, we were eventually awarded one of the ESRC's genomics centres. Thus was born Egenis, the ESRC Centre for Genomics in Society, and the centre of my academic life for the last 8 years.

Directing Egenis has been an enormously rewarding professional experience. We have had a wonderful group of research fellows and PhD students pass through or, in the case of many of our research fellows, settle into long term positions in the university, not to mention an incomparable blessing for academics, a superb support staff. As a philosopher, it has been an unusual but extremely rewarding experience to engage intellectually on a daily basis with social scientists and biologists. I believe strongly that if philosophy is to have the central place in the academy that it deserves it must demonstrate its relevance across the intellectual map, and I think that the philosophers in Egenis have done a good job of demonstrating how this is possible. A final thing that I must mention in describing this most recent phase of my academic life is the pleasure of working in Byrne House. Byrne House is named for my former PhD student, Patrick Byrne, a remarkable person whose most recent accomplishment has been making a fortune with his online retailing company, Overstock.Com. Over a million dollars of this fortune have been donated to the university to make possible the renovation of the delightful Victorian Gothic mansion which now houses the Centre. A small perk is that I think I may have the nicest office on the campus.

There is a lot of pessimism today in British academic life, and this is easy to understand. It sometimes seems close to irresponsible to encourage students to pursue an academic career. But I want to resist this pessimism. Certainly resources and posts are limited, and there is no guarantee that a PhD will lead automatically to a university job. Still, an academic career is a privilege worth the effort, and though I have been very fortunate in my own career I am far from unique in thinking that I would not want to do anything else. Even the chance to do a PhD, if your material wants aren't excessive, is a wonderful opportunity. And, finally, anyone who claims to know what the state of universities in Britain will be in 5, 10 or 20 years time is deluded. I'm pleased to say that while my optimism may seem naïve, it is genuine: my son hopes to pursue an academic career in philosophy, and I could not be more delighted with his ambition.