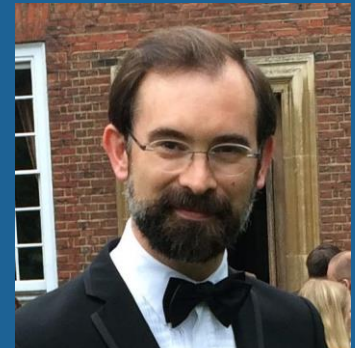


INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM SIMPSON, JUNIOR RESEARCH FELLOW AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

April 2021



EXCERPTS:

- “The lack of a humane philosophy – a logos, or general account of how everything ‘hangs together’ – has fragmented the academy and divided our society. We must reclaim what Gilson called ‘the unity of philosophical experience’.”
- “These are exciting times to be a Catholic intellectual engaged in analytic philosophy. We are beginning to witness a tectonic shift in Western philosophy of a kind that has not been seen for several centuries. There is a turn back toward Aristotle which is gathering momentum, and new opportunities for drawing upon the Catholic philosophical tradition to address contemporary philosophical problems.”

Would you describe where you work, and some of the particularities of your university?

I am currently a Junior Research Fellow of Wolfson College, which is a constituent College of the University of Cambridge, where I am engaged in research in metaphysics and the philosophy of science. Cambridge is the second-oldest university in the UK, and maintains a traditional collegiate system that differs from modern universities: most people are part of self-governing colleges distributed throughout the town, which are responsible for their own membership and activities, and which each maintain a fellowship of scholars who engage in research, teaching and mentoring. All of the colleges have distinctive characters and histories. Before I joined the fellowship of Wolfson, I was a postdoctoral affiliate of Trinity College, where Isaac Newton formulated his theory of universal gravity; before that, a doctoral student in philosophy at Peterhouse, the oldest and quirkiest of the colleges. I have been a member of the University of Cambridge since 2015, when I embarked on a Masters degree in the History and Philosophy of Science at Fitzwilliam College. Cambridge is certainly an inspiring place to work: you are never far from the fine architecture of ancient buildings recalling the scholarly achievements of years past.

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, William Simpson, Junior Research Fellow of Wolfson College, a constituent College of the University of Cambridge, shares insights about the work that he received an Expanded Reason Award for, and about life in academia as a Catholic philosopher with new ideas.

Visit us at www.GlobalCatholicEducation.org.

What is your main field of research, and why did you choose that field?

I am principally a philosopher, although I have academic interests in theology and physics too. Before I became a philosopher at Cambridge, I pursued physics at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel and at the University of St Andrews in Scotland. I hold doctoral degrees in both philosophy and physics, and am currently working as part of an international and interdisciplinary project called “God and the book of nature”, which is generously funded by the John Templeton Foundation. I am attracted to the discipline of philosophy because it is the most rigorous of all the humanities, and because I find its use necessary to make sense of the sciences. Philosophers ‘keep the books’ on everybody, including theologians and physicists, using reason and logic to sort out their beliefs into a coherent whole.

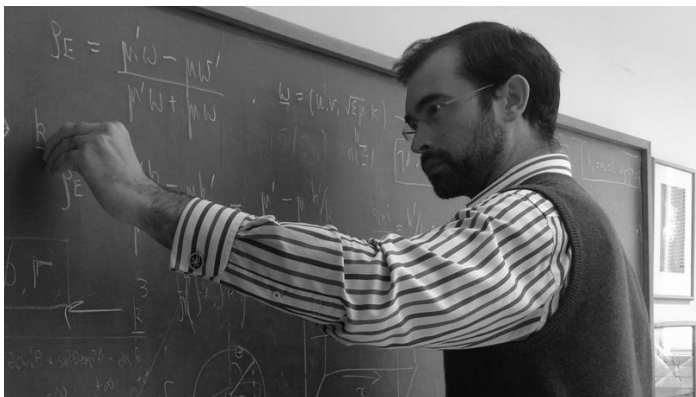


Photo: William Simpson at
The Weizmann Institute of Science, Israel.

Would you share with us how you ended up in your current academic position? What was your personal journey?

It began with a desire for a general account of things which could make sense of the world and unite the various interests that I was accumulating. Although I was not raised a Catholic, the Gospels were part of my upbringing within the home, and they instilled me with a sense of Christian identity. Yet I had no way of relating my Christian identity to the world outside. My formal schooling had been secular, scientific, and conducted in an environment that was hostile to Christianity, and I found myself pressed to give reasons for why I was refusing to ‘go with the flow’.

Before attending university, I began studying Christian theology, which seeks to provide a systematic account of what Christians believe. Christian theology, however, makes claims which are incompatible with the beliefs about reality that most people imbibe from our education system and the surrounding culture today, be it the frosty reductionism of modern materialism which typically

accompanies the hard sciences and analytic philosophy, or the soul-withering cynicism of ‘post-modernism’ which now dominates the humanities. I decided that I needed to know more philosophy and physics in order to make sense of my life within the rather arid world in which I found myself.

I commenced my university studies by starting a degree in ‘Logic and Philosophy of Science with Physics’; a combination I found stimulating and enjoyable, although the physics and philosophy were not well-integrated. I discovered that the imaginative world of our leading philosophers continues to be shaped by an antiquated conception of physics that has been superseded by what one might call the ‘Quantum Revolution’ of the last century. I also discovered that I was quite good at university-level physics, which is more interesting than the physics one is taught at school, and I eventually switched to physics and mathematics in order to access some of the more advanced courses. I was awarded a generous scholarship to pursue doctoral research in physics, which I only accepted after an inner-struggle, resolving to go back into philosophy later in life. My research took me to many parts of the world, and I had several adventures which someday perhaps I shall write about. It was in many ways quite a glamorous lifestyle! But I began to feel that I was drifting away from my ‘calling’, and that it was time to get back to the books.

Leaving behind the well-funded world of physics I had known for the impecunious world of philosophy was a big step of faith. I had no formal qualifications in philosophy and no private means to support further studies. Nonetheless, Cambridge offered me a place on a Masters course in the History and Philosophy of Science, and I won a partial scholarship which covered the bare minimal costs. After some prayer, I decided to take up my offer, and the rest of the funding fell into place over the following months. It was also during this year that I was formally admitted into the Catholic Church, since I had come to believe that the Church had been right about many things concerning which I had been wrong, and had discovered within Catholic Teaching a vision of the whole of reality that I found compelling.

When it came time to apply for PhDs, however, I found that Research Councils do not fund second doctorates, and had difficulties uncovering any financial provision for the kind of interdisciplinary project I had in mind. Fortunately, some of the Cambridge colleges have scholarships in their gift, and I was awarded a full scholarship from Peterhouse to pursue a PhD in philosophy, at the eleventh hour. My postdoctoral fellowship also fell into place in the nick of time, when I thought I’d reached the end of the road. I’ve been unusually blessed on this journey. We’ll see what happens next...



Photo: Peterhouse, University of Cambridge

You are a recipient of the Expanded Reason Awards. What was your contribution for receiving the Award?

I was awarded this generous prize for my doctoral thesis in philosophy: “What’s the matter? Toward a neo-Aristotelian ontology of nature”. In this thesis I argued, firstly, that the Quantum Revolution which has taken place in contemporary physics requires a radical reimagining of the standard way in which people thought about nature in the mainstream analytic philosophy of the last century. Whereas modern materialists have typically supposed the world to be built of some set of microscopic constituents, the physical properties of quantum systems seem to depend irreducibly upon the wholes of which they are parts.

Secondly, I argued that when we take seriously the diverse kinds of empirical content that can be captured by quantum theories – macroscopic observables, phase transitions, chemical and thermodynamic phenomena – this reimagining is further constrained to take a shape that would have been familiar to medieval thinkers like Thomas Aquinas; namely, something like Aristotle’s ‘hylomorphic’ philosophy of nature, in which the world consists of entities which are composed of both ‘matter’ and ‘form’. This vision of nature is more accommodating of traditional Catholic Teaching concerning how we fit into the material world, in which the human soul is conceived as the form of the body’s matter.

How easy or difficult is it for you to share your values with students when teaching?

This is not how I would frame the problem: it assumes a split between ‘facts’ and ‘values’ that I think we have reason to reject, and it presupposes a theory of how we get to know facts which I wish to call into question. I am rather in the business of putting forward a different conception of reality – you might say, of restoring an older conception of reality – that is more accommodating of the Catholic Church’s moral teachings. When you begin to think in this way, you will not need to add a second exogenous layer of values to your picture of reality.

On the one hand, this is very challenging work, in which I find myself locking horns with some of the leading philosophers and thinkers of our age, who see the world very differently. On the other hand, I think these are exciting times to be a Catholic intellectual engaged in analytic philosophy. We are beginning to witness a tectonic shift in Western philosophy of a kind that has not been seen for several centuries. There is a turn back toward Aristotle which is gathering momentum, and new opportunities for drawing upon the Catholic philosophical tradition to address contemporary philosophical problems.

But I should not exaggerate my own contribution: as an analytic philosopher, I spend most of my time focusing sharply on small parts of the Great Puzzle.

What is your advice for students who may be Catholic and are contemplating doing graduate work or a PhD, or may be seeking to become an interdisciplinarian like yourself?

Do you have questions you feel compelled to think about more deeply for the good of your soul, for the good of the Church, or for the good of the world around you? Are you adept at the subject which you are proposing to study and willing to put in the hard work that is necessary to push the frontiers of learning a little further, even if that work is undervalued and provides paltry remuneration? Then do it for the glory of God, and follow the truth wherever it leads you.

But be warned: it is difficult to make a lifelong career in academia. Many scholars doing excellent work come to dead-ends, especially in fields like philosophy and theology, because the job market is poor and funding is sparse and competitive. The university campus is also becoming increasingly politicised, creating pitfalls in your path that can be difficult to negotiate. And academic inflation has reduced the value of university degrees, so you should not expect immediate employment if you leave the academy to do something else.

It is even more difficult to become an interdisciplinarian. Whilst the modern academy pays lip service to interdisciplinarity, there are no career paths to becoming interdisciplinary, and many hurdles facing those who attempt to chart their own course toward competency in more than one field.

Still, a university – if it is to be a university – needs people who can testify to the unity of the truth. All too often, we see the sciences being pitched against the humanities, and technical expertise being played off against common sense. The lack of a humane philosophy – a logos, or general account of how everything ‘hangs together’ – has fragmented the academy and divided our society. We must reclaim what Gilson called ‘the unity of philosophical experience’. The Catholic Church has a special role to play – historically, and in the present age – in achieving this synthesis.

Finally, could you share a dream or aspiration – something that you are passionate about?

I would like to see more Catholic institutions which are willing to pursue a distinctively Catholic vision of the nature of intellectual inquiry, without turning in on themselves and failing to engage the best of secular scholarship, and without putting respectability ahead of the truth and becoming second-rate simulacra of secular institutions. I’m afraid that the Church today often fails to value and support people engaged in this difficult endeavour, and that Catholics often waste time and resources trying to convince people that they are not really different, instead of revelling in the traditions which set them apart and generously sharing their Deposit of Faith. Our business is not to keep our heads down at all costs, or to play second fiddle to the latest disharmonies of the Devil, but to bring the light of Christ to a world in darkness. I think the Catholic philosophical tradition provides us with the resources to do that.