

## Website bio

### BRIAN V. HILL

They were interviewing me for a promotion within the University of New South Wales. Pro-Vice Chancellor John Thornton, looking disdainfully at the CV he had in front of him, asked: "Why have you included articles published in a Christian journal?" He was a noted atheist, and he was on the warpath. He knew perfectly well that the journal in question had academic respectability, having himself interacted with the distinguished editor in an previous academic institution.

"Look", I said reasonably (I think), "I've grouped my publications in three lists according to their respective research foci. If you find the Christian group unpalatable, let the burden of proof rest on the other two categories." (Prone as I am to verbal diarrhoea, they were quite extensive). But it made no difference. Some weeks later the official letter said, "Reapply no earlier than two years' time."

Meanwhile, on the basis of the same CV, I had been called up for interview for the Foundation Chair of Education at Murdoch University in Western Australia. At one point, a professor on the 11-member panel asked: "Do you experience any conflict of interest in publishing philosophical articles on the one hand, and religious articles on the other?" I thought, "Here we go again."

I still endorse my then impromptu reply. "I'm thankful to my philosophical training for sensitizing me to the need for clear language and logic behind anything I try to write, religious or otherwise. On the other hand, I'm grateful that in my philosophical work my religious commitment motivates me to tackle questions of serious human concern, rather than the linguistic nitpicking that sometimes passes for philosophical analysis." The panel took that on board without further comment and passed on to other questions. The official letter this time was an invitation to accept the Chair.

In retrospect, Anselm's motto *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding) could fairly be taken to reflect my life's journey, beginning with a period of intellectual rebellion against the faith of my parents as I was entering adolescence. This was partly due to disillusionment with the frosty relationships and vacuous sermons I encountered so often in the suburban church my family attended.

But then two professional men of high intellect in the Scripture Union movement shook me out of my skepticism, as they invited me and many others to submit the Christian faith to reasoned inspection. Consequently (and unbeknown to anyone else) I had a revelatory moment at the age of 14 when I stood alone under a night sky and said, "God I've suddenly realised you're real, and you can have me." In one sense, reason had preceded my step of faith. Thereafter, the search for wider understanding was on. And continues. Even at this distance, I can see that this moment was a watershed for my whole life.

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My first occupational ambition was to be a sewerage-pipe layer. Born in 1934, in Bayswater, Western Australia, I was fascinated in my pre-school years by workmen belatedly connecting our working-class suburb to the metropolitan sewerage network. My parents stifled this ambition when they discovered I was laying bamboo pipes in trenches gouged out of the back lawn. Years later, an "inspector" quizzed my Year 6 primary school class as to what they wanted to be, and I

replied, "A teacher." The inspector snorted, but the teacher, bless her, said, "Good on you." I had meant what I said, and teaching is still my first love.

In any case, there seemed to be no other prospect. My parents had both left school at 14, dad taking fifty years to progress from office boy to a managerial position in the same interstate firm, mum to become a dressmaker, until obliged to raise three children and never work again (! – a grave waste of creative talent). They had ambitions for me, but there was no money for a private school education. To the surprise of all, I won a scholarship to attend Perth Modern School, the state selective high school.

On gaining my matriculation, I applied for teachers' college entrance, necessarily at primary level since "university" was then a very élite enclave. When the teacher's college principal interviewed me, I was stunned to be offered, on the basis of my results, an "extension" bursary to attend university and become a secondary teacher. This, coupled with a Commonwealth Scholarship, made it possible for me to undertake full-time study. I count myself very fortunate to have been living in the 'fifties when the economic and social policies of the time opened these doors to a boy raised on the wrong side of the tracks.

University life tested my evolving world-view. I encountered positivistic science, behaviourist and Freudian psychologies, liberal theology, and literature as aestheticism. Wooed by the professors of English and History to undertake Honours in their departments, I went with the latter, only to be obliged to relinquish the part-time Honours I had begun during my Dip. Ed. year because I had been assigned to a country high school.

While learning how to teach *in situ*, I yearned to study further, and began a part-time B.Ed program, moving on to Honours under the supervision of T.A. Priest. Bert Priest had been a Kiwi naval officer in the war, subsequently coming to the University of Western Australia as a Senior Lecturer in Education. Inheriting an urbane "history of educational thought" course from his predecessor, Bert was discovering philosophy. This, coupled with the straight philosophy units my program allowed me to include, struck a chord that has never since stopped twanging.

Even when I later left school-teaching to work in New South Wales among voluntary school groups sponsored by the Scripture Union, I wanted more, and enrolled for a part-time Master's degree at Sydney University. Drawn to undertake a thesis on the impact of various personalist philosophers on educational theory, I found a wise mentor in Bill Andersen. It was a meeting of minds. The dissertation had to be completed part-time, and meantime I had returned to W.A., as a Lecturer in my old Faculty, working with my old tutor. Bert had now discovered C. D. Hardie and Robert Ennis, and was steeping himself, and me, in ordinary language analysis.. A leading student in the group at that time was Bruce Haynes.

My Sydney thesis was awarded First Class Honours and a University Medal, and was accepted for publication in 1973 by Teachers College Press, New York as *Education and the Endangered Individual*. Two years later, Dell Paperbacks obtained rights to distribute it in the North American market – 50,000 copies in the first run. I don't think any Australians have ever seen it!

The sub-title was *A Critique of Ten Modern Thinkers*, namely Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Marx, Nunn, Mannheim, Dewey, Whitehead, Buber, Maritain and Reinhold Niebuhr. I focussed on their respective views of the nature of the human person, and how these meshed with their social theories. Faith was still seeking further understanding.

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When added to my CV, this substantial publication helped me to secure a Senior Lectureship at Wollongong, then a University College of the University of New South Wales, with responsibility for setting up a Department of Education. It was a relatively frustrating experience, though Professor Jim Pratt, my Head of School at the Sydney main campus, was very warm and helpful, and I also had some useful interactions with Les Brown. Through 1970, I travelled weekly to Sydney to audit a class on the philosophy of persons offered by Bill Andersen, and another where Bill had recruited colleague John Kleinig from Macquarie to help us apply ethics to education. I also attended the inaugural conference of PESA.

By this time I had qualified for a sabbatical year which, with some difficulty and on reduced pay, I managed to persuade UNSW to stretch to 18 months. I thought it would give me an opportunity to at least get the coursework for a doctorate out of the way and possibly obtain approval for a topic which I would then have to complete on returning home. My choice, on the recommendation of Bill Connell and Bill Andersen, was the College of Education within the University of Illinois. On the strength of my CV, Harry S. Broudy agreed by mail to be my supervisor.

In August 1971, with Margaret my wife, three children, and seven severely minimal pieces of luggage, we set off. As the plane was approaching Chicago, our five-year old son asked: "Will we see God in America?" My theology didn't stretch to an affirmative answer, though later I had doubts when I saw Richard Nixon on television.

The Illinois experience was exhilarating. Broudy was very accommodating of my wishes, so the course-work segment of my personal program consisted entirely of philosophy units, over half of them in the philosophy department itself. Interaction with such mentors as Broudy, Robert Ennis, B. J. Diggs, Richard Schacht, and Joe Burnett opened new windows. The courses I took included more detailed exposure to the emerging field of philosophy of science, sensitizing me all the more to the inevitable reliance of research in any area on presuppositions embraced by faith at the outset of the enquiry.

In my most recent book I called these presuppositions "RIBs" - reasonable initial bets. In this respect, I saw religious paradigms and scientific paradigms treading similar paths. In both cases, faith was seeking understanding. In neither case did it have to be an irrational leap in the dark, even though it preceded logical and empirical enquiry, and determined to some extent the verification procedures accepted within the paradigm.

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By overloading my semester enrolments, I found I had a semester left to begin work on my thesis. I had chosen to investigate "conceptions of morality and their implications for education." As I got further into my research, the benefit to me of Ennis's class on the logic of education was evident, though my association with him palled as Ennis begged off investigating ethical issues because he had not finished working through the applications of logical reasoning! I felt this was a positivist cop-out, given his strong moral preferences.

The four dominant conceptions of morality that I thought I detected in ordinary usage I termed Social Relativistic, Formalistic, Naturalistic, and Personalistic. Having already published some papers in the area of moral education, I had something of a head start, and as time passed Broudy came round to encouraging me to entertain the possibility of finishing the thesis in the remaining time I had available in Illinois. This meant writing a chapter a week! My family suffered somewhat, but I found myself facing a final oral examination three weeks before the end of my

leave, which fortunately met requirements. We spent the remaining three weeks in England as tourists, and returned to Wollongong.

It was very soon after my return that the invitation to take up the Murdoch Chair occurred. 1973 was therefore a frantic year, ending with farewells and a family journey in our Holden across the Nullarbor to Perth (with a second son in utero!). The next year was devoted to discussions about the ethos and structure of the new university, and to planning and recruiting staff for the School I was setting up.

Some time after this, I attended a PESA conference at UNSW. Pro-Vice Chancellor John Thornton welcomed us on behalf of the university. Afterwards in conversation, not having remembered who I was, he asked me what I did, and it gave me a somewhat sinful pleasure to inform him! He seemed disinclined to tarry.

At another PESA national conference, held in Perth, I was asked to give the opening address. I developed an argument for "committed impartiality", a position that I was recommending teachers should adopt in the classroom when dealing with the teaching of values. In the strenuous time of questions which followed, the unkindest cut was slighting criticism from John Kleinig. Ironically, this paper, subsequently published, has been one of my most often cited and reprinted ones.

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Once teaching had begun in 1975, administrative responsibilities reduced my time for writing, and I never did get round to publishing the doctoral thesis in full. I did, however, read a paper condensing its argument at a conference of the Australian College of Education in Melbourne. This paper eventually appeared in the *Australian Journal of Education*. In the course of spelling out the Naturalistic conception of morality, I made reference to C. S. Lewis's seminal little book *The Abolition of Man*.

A member of the audience came up after the session to confide that he had been a student of Lewis's in his postgraduate years. Later as headmaster of Geelong Grammar School, Sir Brian Hone said he had encountered a text-book in literature entitled *Control of Language* which reduced literary appreciation to an emotive act. He sent a copy of the book to Lewis. I knew the book, having been taught from it at school. It was actually the one which provoked Lewis to write *Abolition*, referring therein to "the green book." It is green; I still have my copy. Lewis was advancing a sturdy case for core moral principles giving rise to what he called the universal "Tao." I still consider his argument cogent and in no way pre-empted by cultural relativities at the fringes.

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Another sabbatical year loomed in 1980. I was thankful to be able to hand the Deanship over to close professorial colleague Barry McGaw. I was to be a Senior Scholar for six months at the University of London Institute of Education, attached to Richard Peters' philosophy of education department, followed by five months as a Fulbright Senior Scholar at Stanford University, associated with expatriate Australian philosopher of education, Dennis Phillips.

In London, I was interested to discover that John White shared my discomfort with Peters' austere transcendental argument. Meanwhile, Peters asked me to give a university-wide lecture, in the course of which I courteously expressed my qualms on this score. Afterwards, he urged me to submit my paper to the philosophy of education journal of which he was editor. Subsequently,

however, his referees, even more gung ho than their patriarch, advised against its publication and a brusque rejection letter followed. Maybe it was just a bad paper, but when I later became aware of Kevin Harris's *Knowledge and Education*, published that same year, and his perceptive criticism of the hegemonic coterie fanning out from London across the English universities, I thought there might also be another reason.

At Stanford University I found myself housed in the CERAS building. It was allocated to research staff and postgraduates, with no physical connection to the Education faculty. The second disappointment was that Dennis had seized a rare opportunity to have a sabbatical off campus, working at home. We had a few conversations, and played tennis a few times, but mostly I worked alone and spent much of my time there preparing a book to be called *Education for Commitment*. I also enjoyed discussions with Nell Noddings, who read my manuscript with interest and urged me to get it published. It included the marrow of my London lecture, and since it specially addressed British paradigms, my desire was to publish it in Britain. After rejections by four publishers, all of whom were happy enough to publish and republish publications by the London school, I shelved it. I decided Harris had the right of it.

Returning from sabbatical, I resumed teaching and more writing, being drawn more and more into the domain of values education. Sabbaticals in India, Singapore, and Estonia helped to emancipate me further from bondage to classical English approaches. *Values Education in Australian Schools* became an ACER monograph in 1991, and *Teaching Secondary Social Studies in a Multicultural Society* was published in 1994 by LongmanCheshire. Through the years I also published several explicitly Christian academic books.

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I retired in 2000. Despite my resolve to take it easy and enjoy my grandchildren, I've been drawn back into a number of projects. For example, an invitation to be scholar-in-residence at the Australian Catholic University for three months in 2002 gave me the opportunity to work on *Exploring Religion in Schools: A National Priority*. My intention in this book was to contribute to discourse in the public domain, and I was arguing *inter alia* that there were strong grounds for including the study of world-views (religious and anti-religious) in the public curriculum. To my surprise, the publisher entered the book in the Christian Book of the Year Awards for 2005 and it was awarded second prize! Like all of my books, it is now out of print. Perhaps I should have given them more sexy titles and lurid covers.

Meanwhile the world reels on, questions of sheer survival almost eclipsing the existential questions that have always engaged me. A pity, because the economic and political values of the developed world need to be called into question, on behalf of all persons, affluent or destitute. Such challenges require that ethical and cosmological reflection continue, if only to validate Marx's dictum that hitherto "the philosophers have only *interpreted* the world differently; the point is, to *change* it." At that point, he was embracing a religious vision. For me, the two domains are inseparable.