

# EDITED INTERVIEW WITH TONY DANDRUFF

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—How do you rate your “brother in philosophy” Levi Kleiss ?

—Kleiss is a legit researcher. He knows what philosophy is. He tries anyway to clear things up.

—Armchair research ?

—Yeah, logical-linguistic investigation of basic concepts. Figuring out what the fuck we are even saying or trying to say.

—Explication, unfolding ?

—Right. And looking at the etymology of explication is itself an example of unfolding the concept of explication. And the great Brandom says, we are making it explicit — that “it” being our own doings and sayings, what we are already knee-deep in.

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—You tend to praise the young Wittgenstein.

—And the old, but he was amazingly good at such a young age. And that means I think he is right more than not in both his form and content.

—Could you summarize what you take to be his neutral monism ?

—Sure. Now I’m going to assume your readers aren’t completely ignorant of the problems with indirect realism. That may be a bold assumption, because rookies just lap the stuff up.

—Let me help. The view you are against goes like this. Ultimate reality is out there, but we are “trapped in a bubble” by the limitations of the human nervous system, “behind” the “reports” of our sense organs.

—Yes.

—What’s the problem with that ?

–To name just one, the whole framework takes the sense organs themselves, along with the nervous system, to be completely real. But according to the theory those sense organs are themselves the reports of...those sense organs.

–So indirect realism assumes direct realism right from the beginning ?

–Right. It assumes the parts it needs and then goes on to contradict itself immediately. Ridiculous. But once one unties this strange knot the question becomes how was it so seductive in the first place ?

–Fair. Got a theory about that ?

–Sure. Things in the world (your nose, 99 red balloons) are seen by various pairs or batteries of eyes (I think here of the insects) from many differing positions in space. And some eyes are colorblind or nearsighted. And the source of illumination will have a different relationship with these various systems of eyes and their necessary accompanying nervous systems. Note that visuality is only one “dimension” or “flavor” or “fold” of reality, but it’s a good metonym for the larger situation.

–I take it that visuality works so well because we know very well that the same object appears differently depending on where its seen from and who it is seen by.

–Right. And computer graphics are good at the math involved. We have a deep understanding of this. So the position I’m working towards is even called (phenomenological) *perspectivism*.

–So everyone has their own perspective on the world ?

–Yes.

–But is this really different than indirect realism ? Are we not still caught in the bubble of our perspective ?

–It is the fixed version of indirect realism. The difference is crucial.

–Could you spell it out ?

–When I see the hammer on the table “through” *my* eyes, I am still seeing **the** hammer. I don’t see an image of the hammer. I see the hammer from one place rather than another place, through (or with) my own glasses-corrected eyes.

–In contrast, an indirect realist sees some kind of appearance stuff that may have nothing to do with “real reality.”

–Right. So with Kant you get claims that even space and time are somehow only in the subject, basically unreal. Though don't expect one of these dazzling psychedelic philosophers to smooth it all out and commit. It's a position that doesn't make sense, so the complexity of its articulation is a feature rather than a bug.

–Cynical much ?

–To be a little more fair, Kant himself absolutely nails it sometimes. I'm not frustrated with a genius like Kant any more than I am with Locke, who is also great. They both made mistakes that are easy to see *now*. But they helped make seeing those mistakes possible in the first place.

–So your ire is reserved for ?

–That ancient enemy of philosophy, which is ink-squirting, self-deluding vanity.

### 3

–I take it that you see confusion in the philosophy to therefore originate largely from character defects.

–Right. And I'm not the first to say so. The way of death and devastation. Philosophy burns you alive. It is the ultimate science, but it's like an art, because one is forging illuminating sentences. And one is also hacking away.

–Hacking away nonsense ?

–And sentimentality and superstition.

–Examples ?

–Babble about God in Locke. Schopenhauer's confused Kantianism, which only gets in the way for the most part of great philosophy. Berkeley is great too, but there's also plenty of superstitious babble.

–You also mention sentimentality.

–Yes. So I am fascinated by Buddhism, but I can only turn my nose up

as the householder “Buddhism” of the breeder with a company credit card. But this isn’t only a Western thing. In the source or home cultures, the edgy core (think of *The Fire Sermon*) is “betrayed”. And one gets chicken soup for the soul, angels, the usual comfortable confused superstition.

–Just like so-called Christianity over here.

–Yes. And both doctrines were originally unworldly and unworkable, so such a thing “had” to happen. But it’s embarrassing when someone pretending to science or philosophy is clueless on this issue. Doesn’t even notice that all that’s left over is “indirect religion.”

–So that the envelope has become the letter ?

–Right. I get to keep stuffing my face and piling up coins and offspring, because baldy does my mystified spirit work for me.

–Why the contempt on this issue ? Because you yourself are not religious ?

–I’m “religious” about science, which is to say I’m apriori invested in some pointlessly heroic honesty.

–So your objection is to *philosophers* who are “goofy” on such spiritual issues.

–Exactly. Look, “nothing is funnier than unhappiness.” So even my griping and mocking is ultimately a form of play here. But I’m pointing out what *I* consider to be foul play in science. I articulate what science is (how I see it to be) partially by calling out what I don’t think makes the cut.

–And this is why you embrace the title of “positivist.”

–Yes. Though I reject crude forms of positivism, the kind that throws out the conditions of its own possibility, I grant that the *spirit* of positivism is right. In some sense philosophy, the real stuff, “is” positivism. If we want a scientific philosophy anyway.

–As opposed to mysticism or religion ? And so on ?

–Exactly. And I don’t care much about the *word* “philosophy.” Sometimes I use “science” or “ontology” or “phenomenology” for what I’m up to, what I believe in.

–The point is a critical inquiry.

–Yes. And this inquiry is productive, gets somewhere. Unfolds basic concepts. Makes them shine again. Resuscitates the fundamental metaphors. Makes the darkness of tacit knowledge visible *as* darkness. All kinds of things.

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–Can you connect this unfolding of basic concepts to perspectivism as briefly sketched above ?

–Sure. I think John Stuart Mill is excellent on this issue. Paraphrasing, objects are durable possibilities of perception. He said *permanent possibilities of sensation*, which I’ve tried to update, coming as I do after Husserl and Wittgenstein.

–But isn’t that a metaphysical *claim* or hypothesis ?

–I think mostly not. The point is to look at what we can even mean by our talk of tables and chairs. The “real” chair is not hidden *behind* my perception or your perception of it. The table is a system of all of those perceptions. It is (at least) a relatively permanent possibility of perception.

–So the table is all the ideas in the heads of those who see it ?

–No. That’s a tempting mistake. But no. We don’t see the table in our heads. We see it in front of our eyes, very much outside of our heads. And (philosophers aside) we refer to that table-in-common that lives in the world. To perceive the table is not to see a perception of the table. That confusion leads to an infinite chain of nonsense. We simply see the table from this or that position in space, with this or that pair of eyes. But it’s **the** table we see, the one that, crucially, also appears in inferences.

–But isn’t there a real object out there somewhere causing the brain to create an image ?

–No. Yes, there’s a table “out there.” But it’s exactly the one we perceive already. But no the real table is not a cause of some fake or mediated table. Because that way of thinking makes the brain itself one more image. It’s true of course that the table, one object in the

world, is causally connected to other objects in the world like brains and eyes. So I might get double-vision from drinking too much alcohol and see the same table differently than if I were sober.

–So instead of us all having private images of the table, we just have different perspectives on the table.

–Basically.

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–Does the difference matter much ?

–Practically, no. But that shouldn't surprise us. Serious ontology is like pure math. Most people don't care and won't care. So be it. But “within the game,” the difference is huge.

–I still don't see it.

–There is no “deep” distinction between the inside and the outside. But some philosophers want to think of a pure outside which can never be reached. Because we are trapped in a pure inside, a veil of ideas, a realm of mediation, where the Real World is only ever available in a cooked form, never in its naked rawness.

–Aren't we trapped within the limits of the human nervous system ?

–I understand the temptation to say so, but one ends up in paradox, speaking from both sides of the supposed limit. Any limits we can make sense of aren't the limits they are supposed to be. It's trivial that some animals can see or smell better than us. I can also speculate that Van Gogh saw irises differently than I will ever see them. But the animals see or smell objects in the inferential nexus, and so does Van Gogh.

–And you'd don't know what it feels like to give birth.

–Right. And I never will. But I understand the concepts. I live in the “field” of the usual conceptual inferential norms. I hope you'll note that of course I'm not denying that there's always more to see. There is infinitude in the human situation. But a Kantian approach to this infinitude is nonobvious and seductive nonsense. But let's note that Kant also has passages that put him in my camp. Something like this : if I say that maybe there are people living on the moon (we are back in Kant's time), then that *means* that certain experiences are possible,

given certain assumptions. If we go there and check, we'll see them, find their ruins. So the meaning of the talk of being is possible and actual "experience."

–OK. OK. So for you the issue is semantic.

–Yes. My whole philosophical life is centered on meaning. The inexperienced-in-principle "thing in itself" is nonsense. Like the square root of blue.

–Because meaning depends on experience.

–Yes. Actual and possible, with our sense of possible informed by the actual, of course. But we are of course imaginative creatures, with brains that love to run simulations. So we are awash in possibility.

–And this gets us to inferentialism.

–Yes. The meaning of a concept is smeared across the supposed moment, running from the past into the future. Being is time. Being streams. We are thrown projecting creatures, endlessly making sense of the blurry go round. A tool is (also) what it might be used for. A claim gets its meaning from a vast tacit background of ways it might be used in (for an important instance) arguments.

–Hold on for a moment. Why was experience in quotes above ?

–Because experience is just the **being** of the world which is only given perspectively.

–Ontological cubism ?

–Yes. The moon exists as a system of actual and possible perceptions, as something like a limit or center.

–Can the moon survive the cessation of all sentience ?

–Excellent question. If we hypothesize the cessation of sentience (all life is wiped out), then what could we even *mean* by saying the moon would still somehow exist ?

–It would just still be there, even if no one was there to look at it.

–Right. But what if the meaning of it being there has always been its possibility of being experienced?

–But why make that assumption ?

–Let me reverse that. I think I’ve offered a plausible unfolding of what it means for something to be. You, on the other hand, are trying to float some infinitely elusive meaning of being that has nothing to do with experience, not even possible experience. You say that it is there, just there. But I suggest you continue to imagine the same old moon, the way its looked to you.

–OK. Fair. Perhaps I agree with you. To say the moon still exists if all of us are dead still tacitly imagines as being experienceable –in theory if not in practice.

–For me that’s enough. That’s how far my correlationism goes. I’m not desperate for the universe to die with us. I just try to not talk nonsense. Personally I think this was already Berkeley’s insight, but he muddied it up with God and lots of other things. Nevertheless I too am denying that some kind of updated version of matter is hidden infinitely behind experience.

–Because you think it’s nonsense.

–It’s the smell of the color brown.

–Assuming that I’m beginning to understand you, do you ever find it an anticlimax ?

–Sure. I mean it can be a joyful thing for something to click. It’s like breaking through a net. But the more I explain it, the more familiar it is to me, the less exciting it is to talk about. And in general existential stuff (like Schopenhauer) is going to be much sexier and more relevant to just about everyone.

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–And here, existentially, you are something like a bitter comedian.

–Not bitter, but black gallows humor, yes. An absurdist or a nihilist or something, some might say. But, with my friend Kleiss, I believe in science. And I believe in art, which I don’t think is at all far from science. Honesty. Stupid pointless honesty. For its own sake.

–You’ve joked that it’s all anality.

–Right. *The Denial of Death*. Great book, tho still too “sentimental.”

–To me, that may sum you up. A psychoanalytic existentialist, but



without the healer pose.

–Right. I’m out there in the gray, undecidable. I mean I’m a good guy in the dimension of “pure science,” but this dimension of pure science is itself *beyond good and evil*. Which means beyond other continuums of good and evil. The (mad) scientist is a man of principle, not really a nihilist, despite my playing with the word.

–Hence your emphasis on honesty.

–Right. And that means self-honesty. Which might be extended with the sense of self to other scientists. And I mean radical ontologists, not those who only work on this or that surface.

–So the philosopher or ontologist digs. And I presume he or she will end up wrestling with the issue of good and evil.

–Right. Let’s take Freud as a symbol. He can’t be subjugated by the sexual morality of his time and still cast a theoretical eye on that sexuality. He needs a “demonic” or criminal perspective, that refuses to judge where others judge, that even tries to understand what should never be understood.

–It should never be understood by standard clean decent folks.

–Exactly. I also like the shaman metaphor for this. It’s the “evil” eye, but really it’s the alien eye or the transcendent eye or the divine eye. This is the hero of the story, which most would call an anti-hero if not simply a monster.

–This reminds me of Stumpf’s work.

–Yeah. Stumpf and Duffenhauer. And Jung’s writing on the “shadow.” This is the disturbing sexy stuff which is emotionally most difficult. You can imagine sickly sweet philosophers on one side obsessing with dry problems of reference on one side. Then there are the dark, literary existential types on the other side. Who might write a novel along the lines of *Blood Meridian*. Now Kleiss and I will get in a “mathematical” mood and discuss what you call ontological cubism. But who we are is best approach in these existential or psychoanalytic terms. We’ve seen the wheel, the flowerfuck deathwheel, the horny self-destructing generations that come and go, the grim truth of the Moloch system.

–A tragic view of the life and the kosmos.

–Yeah. But the point is to laugh with the gods. And to face death without shitting your pants. Just because. Just because it's more beautiful noble or whatever to (almost ) never panic. To (almost) never descend into resentment.

–Stoicism ?

–Like that, but without the sentimentality, for lack of better word. Or *with* an infinite sense of humor.