

On Not Being Influenced by Barry Smith's Ontologism

RUDOLF LÜTHE

Philosophisches Institut
Aachen University (RWTH Aachen)
Eilfschornsteinstr. 16
52062 Aachen
Germany

Email: rluethe@gmx.net

Web: <http://www.philosophie.rwth-aachen.de/aw/cms/home/themen/praktische-philosophie/copy-of-personen/~ttn/rudolf-lueth/?lang=de>

Keywords: Barry Smith, Kant, idealism, skepticism, realist phenomenology, ontology

Barry Smith is an honourable man. And I must add: he was—and probably still is—ambitious. It is this ambition that made him travel from England to continental Europe each summer, when he was still a young scholar of philosophy. On these occasions he soon developed the habit of having his first stop on the continent at our house in Aachen before he went on to meet more important and influential phenomenologists in Eastern Europe, particularly in Poland and Hungary. Then on his way back to England, our home generally was his last stop on the continent.

This is how we met, and how we started our discussions on many different subjects, only to find that we disagreed about nearly every issue. Strangely enough, this structural disagreement became the basis of a longstanding friendship that was, at least for me, inspiring in a very special way: the more Barry attacked my philosophical positions and my political views, the more I was convinced that I was right, for even his brilliant mind could not convincingly prove that I was wrong. Barry has probably felt somewhat similar. Therefore, neither of us changed our views in spite of all these discussions and arguments. He remained a realistic phenomenologist and a formal ontologist, while I stayed what I had been before he entered my intellectual life: a transcendental philosopher in the Kantian tradition and a skeptic.

I know that Barry regarded some of the convictions he (wrongly) attributed to Kant's idealism as proof of some mental disease, while I thought of his realism as an instance of an astonishing naivety. I never really understood the fundamental value of formal ontology, but I was deeply im-

pressed by how successfully Barry operated in this area of research. I always thought of him as a dogmatic realist, while he regarded me as a skeptical idealist. On this basis we got along very well with each other.

Although we did not live and work together in a very close way during the first years of our friendship, we met regularly at small conferences that Barry (in cooperation with Peter Simons and Kevin Mulligan) organized in England, Scotland, and all over Western and middle Europe. I was grateful for the chance to participate in these lively intellectual endeavors, and also for the opportunity to practice my English. Indeed, on some of our common travels, I spoke in English to Barry while he answered in German.

There have been, however, two occasions in which we worked together at the same academic institutions. The first of these was the two years we spent together at the very small and very special International Academy for Philosophy in the Principality of Liechtenstein (July 1991–June 1993). The director of this (not officially) Catholic institution, the Austrian scholar Josef Seifert, defended the most questionable positions of Catholic theology by making specific use of Husserl's realistic phenomenology. So during those two years in Liechtenstein, the friendship between Barry and I proved vital to our academic and intellectual survival. Only a few months after my arrival we were both under attack, though for very different reasons: I was branded as a dangerous skeptic, while Barry was regarded as too ambitious, striving towards a higher position within the hierarchy of the "Academy." In our not-chosen roles as academic warriors, we helped each other in our different fights. Here

Barry proved (as he would in other situations as well) to be a very good friend, reliable and supportive. In the end we both left Liechtenstein in the middle of the year 1993. I accepted visiting professorships in Zurich (Switzerland) and at Emory University in Atlanta (Georgia) before going back to Germany for a full professorship at the University of Koblenz. Barry, however, did not go back to England. Instead, he accepted a full professorship at SUNY Buffalo, where he still teaches today.

Some years after this forced separation, we used our new power to invite each other to visiting professorships at our respective universities. So Barry came to Koblenz for the spring term of 2000, while I spent the fall term of 2001 at SUNY Buffalo. On several other occasions Barry has also invited me to give talks at Buffalo. He came to visit us at our private home when he was traveling through Western Europe as well.

Despite our longstanding friendship, however, there is not a single book in which essays from both Barry and I are published together. Philosophically, we do not fit together easily. Barry nonetheless managed to place two of my early essays into the *British Journal for Phenomenology*; he was and still is a very gifted organizer.

Meanwhile, I somewhat lost track of his recent work. From my specific point of view some of it seems far from what my traditional conception of philosophy expects a philosopher to do. But as Barry once told me, by giving formal ontology a pragmatist turn, his work has become influential in areas like medical information and geography (and maybe many others). So, Barry obviously has found his specific position in our modern times in general and in the academic world in particular. I am convinced that he deserves his success, and I hope that it will finally satisfy his ambition.

I cannot, however, finish this short essay in honor of Professor Barry Smith without mentioning that, according to my own theory of friendship, Barry—in spite of being a very good friend—is at the same time a very difficult one. On the one hand he is absolutely reliable, trustworthy and supportive. On the other hand, he does not have much time for cultivating friendships; there are always more important things that urgently need to be done, all of them parts of his work. In general, “work” seems to be the key word in Barry’s life. He has achieved a lot by being such a diligent and dedicated scholar. Nonetheless, as a friend, I truly look forward to a possible period of time when Dr. Barry Smith will feel important enough without hopping from conference to talk and back again, before flying home only to place himself in

his private or his official office to start with even more important work.

I know for sure how entertaining Barry can be when he takes the time to socialize. On one occasion during his stay in Koblenz, we were having a party, probably his farewell party. In its course we started a competition in the spontaneous creation of limericks in English. Here Barry very quickly came up with a “prize winning” poem that surprised everybody with both its comical strength and its daring rhymes. Please allow me to quote this masterpiece of stand-up comical rhyming by heart:

There was a young man from Koblenz
Who fell into the Rhine in a frenzy
They dragged him out fine
He was full of red wine
And drove home in his Mercedes Benzy.

I could cite many other examples of Barry’s talent for comical entertainment. They would convincingly prove that he is not a man with only one sort of competence. It would be so good if Barry, at some stage in his life, used more of his time to cultivate all of his other non-academic talents. But then again, every human being has his one specific road to happiness. And in this respect, too, our personalities and convictions are widely different.