
Biography of Barry Smith

SANDRA SMITH

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The eldest of three children, Barry Smith was born on June 4, 1952 in Bury, England to Reg and Jean Smith. His early education began at a primary school in Chesham before transferring to Bolton Boys' School for the balance of his schooling. While growing up, he and his two sisters enjoyed family holidays to Southport, the Lake District, or camping in Cornwall each summer, but it was Barry's love of reading and his inquisitive mind that stand out most vividly amongst his childhood memories. While the other kids were off playing football or a game of rounders, it would not be unusual to find Barry surrounded by a stack of books in the library. It was this deep desire to learn from a very young age that would ultimately shape his future.

Barry's early interests focused greatly on pure mathematics, rather than applied mathematics or physics; he "enjoyed the possibilities for manipulating abstract structures which math provided." After expressing an interest to read for Oxford University's newly established joint degree in Mathematics and Philosophy, one of his grammar school teachers at Bolton lent him copies of Russell's *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. He did not, at that stage, "have the foggiest idea about what studying philosophy might involve, but was immediately taken by *Tractatus*." It was this that in large part led to the notion—and to his ultimate decision—to enrol in Oxford University in 1970.

Prior to beginning his studies at Oxford, Barry spent 3 months hitching his way around Europe. In addition to picking up odd jobs along the way, his travels were funded by savings acquired from Saturday afternoon outings with his father, purchasing books from area second-hand bookshops and then reselling them for a profit to other used book stores down the road.

Upon receiving a First Class Honours Degree of BA in Mathematics and Philosophy from Oxford in 1973 (which was later converted to MA in 1977), Barry continued his studies at the University of Manchester. Under the supervision of Wolfe Mays, he successfully defended his dissertation titled *The Ontology of Reference: Studies in Logic and Phenomenology*, and was awarded a PhD in Philosophy in 1976.

From 1976 to 1994, Barry held appointments in the philosophy departments of the University of Sheffield, England (1976–1979), the University of Manchester, England (1979–1989) and the International Academy for Philosophy, Liechtenstein (1989–1994). In 1994 he moved to the United States and began teaching at the University at Buffalo, where he is currently SUNY Distinguished Professor and Julian Park Chair of Philosophy as well as an Affiliate Professor in the departments of Neurology, Computer Science and Engineering, Biomedical Informatics, and the university's Division of Biomedical Ontology. The latter, which he helped to found, is the first academic unit in the world with the word "ontology" in its title.

During his career, Smith has directed over 30 PhD dissertations, supervised more than 30 postdoctoral researchers, organized in excess of 130 workshops and conferences, collaborated with hundreds of individuals, delivered upwards of a thousand presentations at various department colloquia, professional meetings, and symposia, and formed scores and scores of professional bonds with people in a multitude of disciplines throughout the world.

Barry is a prominent contributor to both theoretical and applied research in ontology, a multidisciplinary field concerned with the creation of interoperability between information systems both within and between different organizations, and with the institutional and technical strate-

gies for achieving such interoperability. His pioneering work on the science of ontology led to the establishment of Basic Formal Ontology (BFO) as the most commonly adopted upper-level ontology development framework, used by over 200 ontology development groups. His work led also to the formation of the OBO (Open Biomedical Ontologies) Foundry, a suite of interoperable ontology modules designed to support information-driven research in biology and biomedicine. The methodology underlying BFO and the OBO Foundry is now being applied in a range of different domains, including military intelligence, defense logistics, industrial engineering, and sustainable development.

When asked to describe Barry, one of his colleagues replied, “There are people who work in applied philosophy, and then there is Barry Smith who applies philosophy to everything.” To Barry, philosophy is not a discipline, but a way of life.

Throughout the past 30+ years, Barry’s varied career has been filled with an overwhelming number of honors, accolades and accomplishments. To support his research, he has received combined funding in excess of \$13 million from a number of organizations including the National Institutes of Health, the US, Swiss, and Austrian National Science Foundations, the Humboldt and Volkswagen Foundations, the European Union, and the US Department of Defense. He is the author of some 500+ peer-reviewed publications, including 19 authored or edited books on ontology and related topics. To date, his publications have earned nearly 24,000 citations and a current h-index of 76. He served as editor of *The Monist: An International Quarterly Journal of General Philosophical Inquiry* for 25 years (from 1991 to 2016), and he is the Associate Editor of *Applied Ontology* and the *Journal of Biomedical Semantics*. In addition, he is a member of the Editorial Board of 22 other journals and 5 book series.

Since 2000 he has served as consultant to Hernando de Soto, Director of the Institute for Liberty and Democracy in Lima, Peru, on projects relating to the advancement of property and business rights among the poor in developing countries. Barry often tells the story of sitting in de Soto’s office when de Soto received a telephone call from former US president Bill Clinton. Explaining that he was in a meeting, de Soto told Clinton that “everyone should have their own personal ontologist.”

In recognition of his scientific achievements, Smith received a €2 million Wolfgang Paul Award of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation in 2001. Utilizing this prize money, he founded the Institute for Formal Ontology and Medical Information Science (IFOMIS) in Leipzig, Germany. At the

time, this was the most valuable award ever given in the academic history of Germany. It also is believed to be the largest single prize ever awarded to a philosopher. In order to take advantage of the greater opportunities for cross-disciplinary collaboration at the forefront of information-based research, the Institute was relocated to Saarbrücken, Germany in 2004. Smith served as IFOMIS’ Director until 2006, and currently serves as its Scientific Director.

In 2005 Smith founded the National Center for Ontological Research (NCOR), under the auspices of which he initiated the Ontology for the Intelligence Community (OIC) annual conference series in 2006. (This conference has since been renamed Semantic Technology for Intelligence, Defense, and Security (STIDS).) Smith was also responsible for initiating the annual International Conference on Biomedical Ontology (ICBO) series in 2009.

Smith was awarded the first Paolo Bozzi Prize in Ontology from the University of Turin, Italy in 2011, and was elected Fellow of the American College of Medical Informatics (FACMI) in 2013.

The Best Schools, a leading resource for campus and online education, named Smith as one of the 50 most influential living philosophers in 2016. When interviewed shortly after receiving this recognition, Smith humbly said, “Most of my work now is in collaboration with people outside of philosophy...I sometimes tell people I’m not a philosopher anymore; I’m just an ontologist.”

Fluent in English and German (and able to speak French, Spanish and Italian “restaurant talk”), Barry’s invited speaking engagements throughout his career have spanned the globe. He has traveled to every continent sans Antarctica, has taught seminars in dozens of countries, and has delivered papers to the most diverse audiences. Whether addressing marine biologists at Oxford, plant scientists at the New York Botanical Gardens, the Space and Naval Warfare Systems Command (SPAWAR) in San Diego, the Department of Defense at the Pentagon, CIA agents at Langley, attendees of a vast number of conferences or members of various organizations such as the International Association for Dental Research, American Society of Mechanical Engineers, American Philosophical Association, and National Association of Scholars—to name just a few—Barry’s plate is overflowing. And he would want it no other way.

As Barry continues to rack up frequent flyer miles (which he is keeping in reserve should he ever decide to retire), he is enjoying the challenge of achieving the goal that he set out to accomplish more than 30 years ago: to change the world, one ontology at a time.