Itinerant Philosophy: On Alphonso Lingis

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Interview with Alphonso Lingis

by Jonas Skačkauskas

Vilnius, Lithuania — February 2010

INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHY

JS: You graduated from the Jesuit Loyola University in Chicago, you defended a dissertation at the University of Leuven, where the Husserl Archives were founded. During your time in Europe you seem to have attended lectures by Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Lacan and maybe other Parisian figures. What was to you most important during these formative years?

AL: Leuven was where I really learnt philosophy. When I was an undergraduate, I did not have a good education. At Leuven it was a historical program, so we had to study each period. But it had an emphasis on contemporary philosophy. And students were mostly interested in contemporary philosophy. And I was also. I wrote my dissertation on Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. For me that was the beginning. When I wrote my dissertation, then I started really to understand something.
JS: And how about your undergraduate studies at Loyola?

AL: I forgot everything from there. That was not very good.

JS: It seems that you visited Paris for philosophy during your studies in Europe.

AL: After the studies at Leuven a few times I spent some summer time in Paris. And I heard there some lectures by Lacan, and Merleau-Ponty one time, Sartre two times.

JS: What was the impression of encountering these figures?

AL: Well, I had no real personal encounter. But I think it’s true that all the great philosophers, that I had some idea what kind of men they are, I admired them. In my first year in America, when I came back to teach, Paul Ricoeur came and spoke at my university. And he stayed three or four days. I spent time with him. And I admired him very much; he was a marvellous man. And, you know, I heard stories about Sartre. And every story was pretty admirable. Sartre was very generous. He would easily give money to students and so on. I have an admiration for the big thinkers.

JS: Were you influenced in any way by the events of May ’68?

AL: Definitely. In the United States. And I was in Paris in that summer, although it was already going down. To me it was a very intoxicating time.

JS: Did you have any clear vision of the philosophy you wanted to engage in after your bachelor or even doctoral studies? How did you discover Merleau-Ponty and Levinas?
AL: For a long time I concentrated on educating. I devoted myself to teaching, and every class I tried to teach different new books and so on. For a long time I thought I had no ideas of my own. And then, after a while, I began to realize that sometimes you can have, you know, small ideas. And I began to write an article after finishing a course, putting together a few small ideas. I thought I had no big system. And then, I think, I was influenced by Henri Birault from Paris, who came to Penn State while I was teaching. He would take these little sections from Nietzsche and just spend two or three hours talking about this one section. And he did not want students to talk about other sections or connections with other sections. And then the other influence I had was from British philosophy: Wittgenstein, Austin, and Bernard Williams—I liked them very much. Then I got the idea after a while that that was the kind of philosophy I really liked—that you take some concrete issue and try to see it in a new way. And for a long time that was what I did. I think that’s what I still do. And then sometimes, after you had two or three of these things, you can see that they are connected and make a bigger idea out of that. That to me is the most valuable philosophy. The most valuable philosophy is not the philosophy that is some big principles and abstract generalizations, but when you study some concrete thing and see it in a new way or see it more deeply. I think that is what Foucault did and also Merleau-Ponty.

JS: But don’t you get lost in empirical details having no abstract orientation? Is not there a danger of naïve empiricism?

AL: Right, you are certainly right. Well, we have in philosophies, like in phenomenology, we do have some general concepts. I guess the ideas about method and general concepts that I learned from phenomenologists, little by little I criticized them more and more. Just take one concept: In phe-
nomenology you have the position that here is consciousness and here is everything else. And this is the fundamental division. And when you think about it, that’s a very strange view of the universe. All the sciences are completely different. In biology and evolution the human mind is immersed in nature. So more and more I criticized this phenomenological division. And the other side of it is that phenomenology just starts with my own consciousness and what I can myself be aware of in my own mind. But you know, then I studied Whitehead. I think the thought I got was that consciousness depends on all kinds of other things in the body. There is a kind of response in the nervous system, in the cells, in the bloodstream, and so on. And some consciousness is just the top of many levels. I would like to see philosophy approach more in that way.

Going back to your question concerning how I discovered the philosophy of Levinas. The first year I came back from graduate school and started to teach in the United States, Ricoeur visited. And I asked him what is new in philosophy. And he said, the most important thing was the book of Levinas. So immediately I bought it. And then a publisher invited me to translate it. That’s how I discovered him. I was very enthusiastic.

JS: And how did the philosophy of Nietzsche become important to you?

AL: I have liked Nietzsche from the beginning, but he was not an important philosopher for me until later. So, this tradition of Nietzsche, Bataille, and Deleuze—that was a kind of continuation there. And that became very important to me. I became very, very interested in Bataille, maybe about fifteen or twenty years ago. I read some Bataille when I was a graduate student, but later I read the complete works and I was very enthusiastic and talked about it in a class. So it be-
came very important. For me, these three thinkers are interconnected—Nietzsche, Bataille, and Deleuze. I suppose that the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger and then these other three were for me the richest, the ones who gave me most.

**NATURE**

**JS:** I would like to ask about your conception of nature. It seems that nature is one of the most important themes in your philosophy (although most often you address it indirectly). It seems that you conceive the universe, nature, life itself in purely positive terms—as fullness, as abundance that lacks nothing. It seems that the ontology which makes negativity important or even fundamental is unacceptable to you. Am I right?

**AL:** On the last concept, that of negativity, I suppose I was influenced by Deleuze and then later by some thoughts from Bataille. But this is not only a specific theoretical point, but it’s sort of my practice that I began to realize.

We could take this idea that’s Nietzschean and Deleuzian. That throughout the history of philosophy one could say that life was conceived negatively. Naturally, it reaches its strongest development in Hegel. This is the idea that a living thing is a material system that develops lacks—there’s evaporation, the system becomes hungry and thirsty. And it’s these lacks that agitate the system. The reason that an organism moves and is released to the environment is that it is driven by needs and lacks. I think that the concept of an organism has pretty much dominated from the beginning. I suppose an alternative idea I found originally in Bataille, but it seems to me it is everywhere in science: that, on the contrary, a living organism is a dynamo that produces energy. It produces more energy than it needs to survive. And then later I began to
think that most of our lacks are produced because we spend so much energy releasing excess energy. And most of us get hungry because we’ve gone walking in the mountains all day. And we did that because we had excess energy, we had energy to burn, to discharge. I think that the lacks are intermittent and superficial. The only reason that there is hunger is that there is a full organism that exists, and that the need is intermittent; it depends on the fullness of the organism.

And then I began to realize that, when I try to talk about things, I always try to find some very strong and very clear example. For example, when I talk about honour, people want me to talk about dishonour and disgrace. I always instinctively felt that you first have to understand honour. And it is only if we could get very clear about what honour is that we can begin to speak about dishonourable activities and so on. So I think in my practice I always tried to look at positive cases. And very often, when I finished talking about it, I was not interested in negative cases. It happens from time to time that people want to know about dishonour and, I guess, I never thought about it because I was not very interested in it. It was so interesting to talk about the sense of honour. Deleuze somewhere wrote that Nietzsche wanted to have totally positive and affirmative philosophy.

**JS:** You write in *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common* that there is also an alienation from the elements. How does this happen?

**AL:** I don’t think I have very many general ideas about it. There are probably a multitude of different ways and reasons for that. Last night there was a sort of thought in the air. Say, on the one hand, sometimes I get such a sense that the human race is so bellicose, so warlike. I mentioned that in Spain every little town had a wall around it. It was amazing. Especially now, you know, when we’re accustomed to driving
in the United States from one end to the other without barriers, without custodies. But on the other hand, I am much more impressed by the fact that people do get along with one another, and people really take pleasure in just being together. So the affirmative fact seems much more fundamental. I said this a little bit last night, too. It seems to me that a war is a kind of artificial construction. First, you have to have the whole bureaucracy and industry and then you have to have certain leaders who can create war. Wars don’t happen just because people feel antagonistic to one another. Even if you have two different ethnic groups—say French and Germans—even if they hate one another, there is no war, unless you have this machine that’s constructed to build the weapons and the factories, and the army. That seems to me kind of an artificial thing. Even to build an army—there’s something sort of puzzling to me.

I remember, years ago I went to a museum, I think it was in Czechoslovakia. And I discovered that somewhere two thousand years ago, there was a great Moravian empire that had conquered a large area there. They waged wars, they expanded their territory, and then history covered them over and they were pretty much forgotten, until it was rediscovered recently that they even existed. And I remember standing in this museum and thinking to myself that these thousands of Moravians decided to go and kill people and a lot of them were killed. For what? For the Moravian Empire? It always seems to me such an artificial thing.

You know, at the beginning of my career there was the Vietnam War. And that occupied everybody and that occupied me very much. I tried to argue against this war in any possible way. And that’s all we talked about for ten years. Fifty thousand American soldiers were killed. And something like two or three million Vietnamese people were killed. And I went to Vietnam, maybe about ten years after the war. It was very difficult, because on my passport the
U.S. government forbade me to go there. And so I went with a little group from Australia. And when I went there, I realised that nobody talked about Vietnam anymore. For ten years this was the most important issue in the United States. And we lost, and fifty thousand American soldiers died. And then, ten years later it’s like it does not matter, Vietnam isn’t that important. Finally, the United States says okay, you just do whatever you want to do and it does not matter to us. And then later there was a war again in Nicaragua. That was the big issue. And in the last ten years you never see in the paper anything about Nicaragua. So it is unimportant. Just in those two examples these wars depend on somebody constructing a very artificial machine. First of all, someone decides that this is strategically important for the United States. And then, secondly, someone constructs this whole ideology that they are terrible enemies. This was what happened in Iraq—the idea that Saddam Hussein was like Hitler and that he had to be destroyed. There was a whole artificial construction.

**JS:** Let us return to your phenomenology of nature, that you exposed most systematically in your book *The Imperative*.

**AL:** I was very impressed with Levinas. So there were two sides. On the one side, there was this phenomenological analysis of what it means to be faced by someone and the dimension of appeal and demand that is there. The theme of the face is original and a completely new contribution to philosophy. But I think the other side is what he says about the elements and substances and so on. And it was also completely interesting. I just recently have gone back to these issues.

But I think that more and more as years passed I became more and more critical about the theoretical framework of Levinas. On the one hand, he does a kind of constitutive
phenomenology that says things are in some way constituted by manipulation and detaching them and taking them into the home and all that. This is what makes them into curious things. So that is a kind of leftover of Husserl, this idea of constitution of objects. So nature is quite absent in his philosophy. And then, he wants to find ethical experience only in the face of his confrontation with another human being. Anyhow, all this seems to me so limited. If it’s true that I feel that hunger and need of another human being is a demand put on me, then it is also about other species. If I come upon an injured bird or deer in a path, it is exactly the same thing, it seems to me.

And then this theme of religion in there, of God in there—I had real theoretical problems with it. The simplest way I can say it is that for Levinas what is distinctive about the human being that looks at me is that the needs and demands are unending. He says that the more responsible you are, the more responsibilities you discover. There is a sort of infinite, unending succession of demands that are made on me by anyone who faces me. On the one hand, it’s simply false. I mean, take a simple example. It’s true that I have a responsibility for my child to take care of his needs that he cannot take care of himself. But the child wants to be independent. I mean, all the others in the universe are not dependent on me. They don’t want to be. My child doesn’t want me to be taking care of his needs all his life. And that goes back to the idea that we talked about earlier, the idea that a living organism is a dynamo that produces excess energy gratuitously.

And then the other part, that is theoretically incoherent, is that he wants to say that it is God, that it is the monotheist God, that it is one God who speaks, who is the source of demands on me in every face that looks at me. That concept reduces the singularity and the diversity of people, who face me with each time singular and distinctive needs and appeals.
That dimension I did not like.

Just to say it in a very general way, these two things I didn’t like. I didn’t like the constitutive phenomenology. Actually, this is the new thought I had a couple of weeks ago. It goes back to what I said of Merleau-Ponty a little bit and Whitehead. I mean, for constitutive phenomenology, and later for Derrida, the issue is that the world of my experience is in some way constituted by me. It’s me who outlines and circumscribes things into things, makes them into things and then gives them meaning. And of course for Derrida it goes through the grid of language. But to me, you know, I have this very simple-minded objection from evolutionary psychology, that my experiences, my eyes are essentially similar to the eyes of other mammals. A cat or a fox sees the world as real things that exist in themselves, that are independent of them. That seems to me a very fundamental objection to every kind of idealism.

**ETHICS**

JS: It seems that your conception of ethics is closely linked or even deeply intertwined with the realm of nature. In *Dangerous Emotions* you talk about human animals being in a fundamental relationship with living and non-living nature. You write about our affinity with animals, describing how movements of our bodies, our emotions, pleasures, sexuality, and even virtues mimic theirs. Can you comment on your conception of ethics? Which philosophers were sources of inspiration for this conception?

AL: I suppose I came from two directions. From Levinas starting with the idea that I see the needs and wants of someone who faces me and that puts an imperative on me and demand on me. And then I began to think—isn’t that also true, when I see other species, even plants, if I see a
cherry tree that is broken by the wind, for example. I mean, I had this kind of simple statement, that I came upon a couple of years ago, that to see something is to see what it requires to exist. If I see a tree, I also see that it requires earth and sunlight. That’s true of anything. If I see an object of furniture, I see that it requires a stable position in order to exist. We do see needs and wants directly. And then to see what it requires is to sense the kind of action that would supply this requirement. For example, if I see a deer, which has been caught in branches in the flooding river, I see that it needs to be freed from these branches or it will drown. And at the same time I see that I could do that. Or somebody could do that, if not me, maybe somebody else. I experience myself as different motor possibilities to rescue something or protect it, or restore, or repair it. That’s true just of our ordinary perception. Just when we walk around, what we see are not just shapes and forms and colours. There are distinct and independent beings, that we see what they require. And if we get active, we sense the sorts of actions that could supply their needs. So, I always started from thinking about Levinas’s idea that we see the other face as needy and putting demands on us and extending that across nature.

Then, I guess, on the other side, I began thinking more and more about Kant and this idea of ethics being equated with conscious and rational actions. And once I began thinking this way, it seemed to me very clear that we don’t admire people who always act out of rationality. I think of some examples from literature, but I can take this example from diving. You know, I went diving in the ocean a number of times. And when you dive, on the board there is a dive master. And every dive master I ever went with, you know, you instinctually trusted. You saw that this is a man who is calm and collected. And if you are in trouble, he will save you. Maybe even at the risk of his own life. And then, you know, sometimes I’ve gone diving with people that, you know, cer-
tainly, not a big contribution to the world, you know, people who are obese and lazy and egotistical and so on. And you see this strong young man would actually risk his life to save this person. And you can ask: Is it rational? I mean, whose life is worth more? But then you realise that the dive master doesn’t ask this question, “Is this person worth risking my life to save?” Because he acts instinctually. His bravery is something that we think is in his nature. This is a sort of thought we have. That some people are strong and brave and their acts are with clarity, they see what’s to be done at once. I mean, it is like the same person who sees somebody fallen into a river and instinctually jumps into frozen water to save that person.

And then the other example I had is of some women who just simply seem to have a big heart. They’re just drawn to caring for children, and caring for animals. I think of some young farmer who I see at the pet store. She has, I don’t know, six or seven children, most of them are adopted. But at the same time, every time you see her at the store, you know, there are baby rabbits over here and the birds, and cats, and dogs. She just takes care of everything. She is a person who has a big heart. It’s like natural for her to take care of creatures of all size. So, those are the sorts of people we admire and trust. If we have an orphan, we don’t want to give it to a woman who’s so rational and has to think out rationally the motivations for everything she does. We give to people whose goodness and caring nature is instinctual. There is a lot of that in Nietzsche—the idea that there are noble instincts. And that people who are noble act by instinct. You know, these people are not very intelligent, they are not very calculating in that way. And as a result, sometimes they don’t survive so well, because they don’t calculate everything. They do generous and noble actions that may, you know, bring risks to themselves and loss to themselves, but this kind of noble generosity is instinctual and not calculating.
JS: Is there a relation to animals here?

AL: Almost every day I walk in the backyard and I see things that just blow my mind. You know, I live with a lot of birds. And you could see out in nature every day how these little birds attack cats and hawks and so on to save their nest. I mean, if you want to understand what is maternal instinct and mother love, you can see it in the very pure form in birds and other species. A lot of the virtues that we admire are virtues that we share with other species. Like generosity and courage and caring.

THE SACRED

JS: Your books and essays often end with the themes of beauty, death, sacrifice, or the sacred. And such themes are articulated in close proximity to the realm of religion. It seems that via Bataille you link the realm of nature and bestiality with that of the sacred. Why do you think it is relevant to reflect on the realms of the sacred or the transcendent? Isn’t it because our ethical orientations and highest causes would be impossible to ground without such experiences and encounters?

AL: Considering the last question, I can say that I have not gone in that direction. The thing that was for me so extraordinary in Levinas is that there is an ethical experience. That direct perception of someone facing me is an experience of being obligated. So it is an immediate experience. Yeah, I was profoundly convinced of that.

JS: And how do you distinguish it from just ordinary experiences?

AL: By the fact that I feel obligated. Levinas himself says
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It— I don’t remember where he wrote this, I think, I had some conversations with him—you walk by the street and somebody greets you and you already feel obliged to answer. It’s a demand. That’s very striking. And I think everybody feels that, I mean, it’s a direct experience, it’s not some, you know, hypothetical idea.

Speaking about the influences on my understanding of the sacred, I think I was very influenced here by Bataille. I’ve got from him the idea that the sacred is not only the heavenly, celestial, but is also in the realm of death and corruption, and blood, and sex, and so on. Bataille got it out of anthropology, and that seems to me very true of real religions, religions that have existed in humanity. You know, when I spoke the other night about sacrilege. I feel that the word sacrilege can disappear from modern discourse, even from modern religious discourse, but I think that the sense of sacrilege is very strong, even in non-believers. To the idea that somebody would go in some sacred place and desecrate it, our first reaction is horror. I mean, to see what they did to the Egyptian pharaohs—to put them on display for tourists—it’s just shocking. And you don’t have to believe in Egyptian religion to be shocked. We sense that there are things that are outside of the profane world, that are not just for use, and calculation and appropriation. And that there is a sort of sense of power in it. At that talk I emphasised this idea that death is power. There are corpses that are sacred in that way. There’s power there. There’s violence in a corpse. If we just take the word sacred in the etymological sense, “sacrum” in Latin is “separated.” It’s what is separated from the world of work and reason. I started to think in this way, inspired by Bataille, but then the more I thought of concrete cases, when I had reason to think about certain religious events and so on, it confirmed this thought.

JS: But to you this experience does not work as a motivation
for ethical actions? Or does it?

**AL:** I think it does for a people who have a strong sense of the sacred. To some measure it would, but not in a kind of rationalistic way. You know, people say that we need religion as a kind of guarantee of the seriousness of ethical laws. That I don’t think is the case. That seems to me a kind of empty concept of religion. That God is a kind of super policeman. And it seems to me that most people don’t seriously believe that anyhow. I mean, the very fact that so many people who don’t believe and don’t have any religion, who are atheist, are often more irreproachably ethical and moral. We all know many such people. People are generous and truthful, and honest, and so on. And they have no idea that there is a policeman in the sky watching them.

**STYLE**

**JS:** I would like to put forward a question concerning your philosophy’s style or its form of expression. Your philosophical language is extremely figurative, personal, impressive, emotional, and even passionate. You do not avoid literari-ness.

**AL:** I guess I have two thoughts. First of all, I don’t like to think about how I write. Because, I think, I write naively. And, you know, if I have something that I want to communicate, sometimes I try it in one way, the other and then I find something that seems to work. But I don’t like to think about it. Because it seems to me that if one would think about it too much, one would make it into a kind of recipe. And that’s what I want to avoid.

But on the other hand, I discovered this in teaching, in teaching like Heidegger. When I was trying to explain Heidegger to students, I often found that using the resources
of the English language and English idiom, you know, I could actually say things that are clearer than Heidegger said. Can you grab this distinction between “existenzial” and “existenziell,” or even “ontic” and “ontological”? This is very bad terminology, because “ontological” should mean the logos, the discourse about the ontic. And that’s not what he means. He means the dimension of Being and not beings. He chooses these technical words that often aren’t very good. Then I discovered that using English, for example, the translation they have of “Zuhandenheit” and “Vorhandenheit”—“readiness to hand” and “presence at hand.” That’s not English at all. It’s a verbal invention. It occurred to me one day—we have the ordinary English expression “within reach.” “Within reach” are the things that are available to the hand, and that’s the much better term for translation of “Zuhandenheit”. I began to think in that way, and I began to see that to really communicate clearly philosophical insights I want to use all the resources of language. And the real masters of language are literary writers. They are the ones who master the vocabulary, and the grammar, and the rhetoric. I got further and further away from technical jargon. And then the other idea I have is very simple—I want to write well. I don’t see any virtue in writing bad English, confused, pompous, academic English. So these are very simple ideas.

JS: When giving lectures you use music, photos, and other artistic elements, mixing them together into somewhat a unified performance. You read your texts rhythmically, and it sounds as if you narrate a poem. It seems that you try to create an atmosphere of the ritual. Isn’t it?

AL: Yeah, that too. I have a very simple idea—instead of a professor just standing behind the lectern and looking down and turning the pages, I play a little music, just a few minutes before and sometimes after. Because after the talk, usually
you invite questions, but sometimes people need a few minutes to come up with a question. I would play a few minutes of music instead. It is things like that, very simple little ideas. So why not have photographs, images that would be helpful? You know, philosophers, of course, have always used images, sometimes as illustrations, but they don’t necessarily have to be direct illustration—sometimes an image just gives you a general sense of an atmosphere or a level, or dimension, or a mood. It doesn’t really have to be an illustration of something in your philosophical text. A few times I did a kind of complex performance bringing costume and make-up, and images, and music, and it was much more theatrical. But to me it is always hard to know how well they work, because I can’t see what the audience sees. I just thought that these things communicate more vividly, more forcefully, sometimes more clearly than just reading the text.

JS: Is it based on your assumption that philosophy can’t be expressed fully within the realm of the concept alone?

AL: In a certain way that’s true. And a kind of thought I had about it was this: A long time ago I had a colleague that I admired very much. He was very broadly read. He read everything. And he was not dogmatic, and he was open to things. And I was just a young guy at that time. And I was very devoted to Merleau-Ponty. And one day I thought he should read Merleau-Ponty. And I should give him the book. And then I began to think, if I gave him a book, he would read it, because he really read everything. But I thought that he didn’t have the kind of sensibility for it. And then you go to philosophy meetings, you see some people have a real Nietzschean sensibility. They perceive and feel, and discern things in a kind of Nietzschean way. And other people have a much more sort of logical and structured sensibility. That time I thought that the reason that some people
are very devoted to Merleau-Ponty, or others to Heidegger, or others to Kant is not simply that they are convinced intellectually by certain ideas. But also that a thinker thinks with his or her perceptions and sensibility too. I used to go to these little meetings. There was a Husserl circle, and a Merleau-Ponty circle. And really there were different kinds of people there. And there was a different mood, a different tone of voice—people spoke differently. So in Merleau-Ponty’s circle people had a kind of a soft voice, and subtlety. Whereas, in Husserl’s circle it was much more black and white. People were different.

**The Sense of Philosophy**

**JS:** It seems that your philosophy is somehow deeply connected with your practice of travelling. You travel to encounter uncultivated nature and often to non-Western regions, countries, places, communities, or persons. Am I right thinking that the aim of such travels, experiences, and encounters is to find an actual alternative to Western modernity, which was criticised by Nietzsche, Heidegger, and others?

**AL:** Again, my attitude is very simple. I always wanted to see the world. I’ve never got tired of it. It seems that most people get tired of the world after a while. They don’t want to go to Spain or Africa, just stay home. I never get tired of it. When I went to other places, I certainly was interested in the thought of these cultures as much as I could make contact with it. And I more and more respected the thought outside of this Western modern rationality.

Somebody said yesterday that maybe philosophy will come to an end. For Heidegger philosophy is a Greek rationality. He says philosophy is Greek and German. But maybe that will come to an end, at least in your lifetime. In this global world very soon, China will be the biggest economy
and the dominant economy in the world. I wouldn’t be surprised if this sort of characteristically Greek and German tradition of thinking comes to an end. Right now nothing is happening in philosophy anywhere: in Germany or France, or Scandinavia, or Japan, or in England—nowhere. But I don’t think we should see very much in that. Because it seems that in every realm of culture there aren’t great thinkers in every generation. For a while it just looked like the West was imposing itself on everything. But now as the West is doing so badly economically, militarily, and so on, the other parts of the world are becoming much more affirmative. It may well be that strands of thought that are leftover from the past—in Africa, in Asia, and so on—will become more important. There was a woman who was applying for the position in ethics at my university. And she pointed to the four most important ethical thinkers. I think they were British names. And she said they were all white males. She was suggesting that the ethics that we have is really constructed for white, male, middle-class academics. But for a long time what I always thought is that, if you read ethics books, it was so many of these examples that are so typically middle class, there are issues that come up only in this prosperous little bourgeois economy. And so it seemed to me that it was said that, if we talk about ethics, we shouldn’t talk about the situation of postcolonial Africa and Australian aboriginals, and Native Americans, and so on. So at least it seems to me that in the area of ethics we are beginning to get more diverse and global kinds of thinking. I imagine that in the future philosophy will be much more diverse.

**JS:** Do you see something that is definitively worth saving in the Western tradition of philosophy, something that is uniquely from European sources?

**AL:** Certainly. Absolutely. If we look at the bookshelf of the
main thinkers of philosophy from ancient Greece to today—it’s an astonishing treasury of deep and enlightening thought. So many people outside philosophy feel that. I’m thinking of someone like Feyerabend who often read even ancient and medieval philosophers, because he found there such extraordinary insights. As you know, Einstein was quite interested in Bergson—they had an exchange, and so on. It’s a marvelous treasury of thought, this tradition of philosophy. And it seems to me that all of us who have some kind of conversation with people in another field (like in my university sometimes I am an outside reader for a dissertation in some other fields, in psychology, or history, or even in physics), you notice that these people are always terribly interested in what philosophers have to say about it. Because they do find it very striking and often very helpful. It’s very precious not only for philosophers but for humanity.