


ARTICLE

Special Issue: ARPA Symposium: A Celebration of Steven Burns

The Art of Being with Steven Burns: A Celebration of a Life in Philosophy

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Abstract

The articles in this volume celebrate the work of Steven Burns. Versions of the articles were presented originally at two sessions organized in Burns's honour at the 2022 meeting of the Atlantic Regional Philosophers' Association (ARPA), held at Dalhousie University in Halifax. This introduction presents a brief academic biography and summarizes each of the contributions. The articles, by Michael Hymers, Robbie Moser and Darren Bifford, Alice MacLachlan, Jason Holt, and Warren Heiti, address perennial themes in philosophy, such as self-knowledge, attention, friendship, interpretation, and judgement. The collection concludes with some last words by Burns himself.

Résumé

Les articles de ce volume célèbrent le travail de Steven Burns. Des versions de ces articles ont été présentées à l'origine lors de deux séances organisées en l'honneur de Burns lors de la réunion 2022 de l'Association régionale des philosophes de l'Atlantique (ARPA), tenue à l'Université Dalhousie à Halifax. Cette introduction présente une brève biographie universitaire et résume chacune des contributions. Les articles, rédigés par Michael Hymers, Robbie Moser et Darren Bifford, Alice MacLachlan, Jason Holt et Warren Heiti, abordent des thèmes éternels en philosophie, tels que la connaissance de soi, l'attention, l'amitié, l'interprétation et le jugement. Le recueil se termine par quelques derniers mots de Burns lui-même.

Keywords: Steven Burns; biography; Atlantic Region Philosophers' Association (ARPA); self-deception; Wittgenstein

1. Introduction

The articles in this volume celebrate the work of Steven Burns. The authors not only engage Burns's philosophical work but reflect upon the ways that Burns as a friend,

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mentor, and philosophical interlocutor has influenced them. As a collection, it is at once deeply personal but still universal, addressing perennial themes in philosophy, such as self-knowledge, attention, friendship, interpretation, and judgement. The special issue concludes with Burns's responses to these articles as well as his reflections on "The Last Judgement," recounting his own philosophical journey. The tensions and continuities between Burns's *auto*-biography and the biographical sketch below exemplify themes in the articles — the challenges of deep understanding, the question of first-person authority, the mutually self-constructing aspects of friendship, the importance of listening to others, and questions of what constitutes a "best reading."

2. In Celebration of ARPA Regent, Steven Burns

There is no professional philosophical organization that owes more to Steven Burns than the Atlantic Region Philosophers' Association (ARPA). He has not only been the treasurer (for decades) — the only position on the executive and grounded (in the metaphysical sense) on the need of a bank account — but he is the memory of the organization. Will Sweet, perhaps the only member who could vie with Burns for his unfailing commitment to the association, dubbed Burns "Regent of ARPA" — a title that has stuck.

Burns joined the Dalhousie Philosophy Department in 1969, shortly before receiving his DPhil from Birkbeck College, University of London for a dissertation on self-deception, under the supervision of Peter Winch, and a little less than a year after seeing Jean-Luc Godard punch Iain Quarrier in the nose at a screening of Godard's film *One Plus One* at the British Film Institute. (For some unfathomable reason, this is not in his CV. Nor is the fact that he once played a game of Monopoly with the great Australian guitarist John Williams and the great Israeli pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim.)

Burns was born in Toronto but attended Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, before travelling west to the University of Alberta for his MA and "down under" to the University of Western Australia as a visiting fellow. While in Australia, he also worked as a jackeroo, righting merino sheep who had fallen on their backs — an experience that later was to stand him in good stead as a teacher and academic advisor.

During his time working at Dalhousie, Burns taught courses on the Philosophy of Art, Marxist Theory, Plato, and various thinkers whose last names — he likes to joke — begin with the letter "W": Wagner, Weil, Weininger, Winch, and Wittgenstein. He served as Chair of the Dalhousie Philosophy Department from 1988 to 1992 and, for 13 years, as coordinator of its graduate program. He was cross-appointed to the Contemporary Studies Program at the University of King's College, Halifax, and served as Director of that program for two years. He left in his wake many admiring students, who were charmed by his wit, edified by his lectures, and helped back on to their feet by his calm advice. He has supervised or examined 80 graduate theses, including five that were written by our contributors.

Burns retired in 2006 but continued to lecture in Contemporary Studies at King's until 2013, and he has remained an active presence as an Adjunct Professor in Dalhousie's Philosophy Department.

Burns's dozens of publications traverse a wide field of interests: Political Philosophy, Aesthetics, Philosophy of Mind, Feminist Philosophy, Environmental Ethics, Wittgenstein, Plato, the History of Canadian Philosophy, and Simone Weil, as well as translations from the German of works by Otto Weininger and Peter Winch.

He has served as Associate Secretary and Secretary of the Canadian Philosophical Association/Association canadienne de philosophie (CPA/ACP), as well as Chair of the program committee for the annual CPA/ACP congress, and he has a long-standing association with, and commitment to, ARPA, which — as we know it — was conceived about the time of Burns's return to Nova Scotia. He is also the founder of the Atlantic Canada Wittgenstein Reading Group.

3. The Contributed Articles

The articles collected here were written in Burns's honour and presented at the 2022 meetings of ARPA, which took place at Dalhousie University in Halifax. There were two sessions dedicated to Burns. The first was the annual meeting of the Atlantic Canada Wittgenstein Reading Group. This group, Burns's own brainchild, commits itself to a theme each year to focus the contributions. Much like the rest of ARPA, the theme is typically honoured in the breach as much as the observance. In 2022, the theme was Burns on Wittgenstein. The second session was a celebration of the rest of Burns's work.

The first contribution from the Wittgenstein session was written by Dalhousie's Michael Hymers, "Beetles and Nothingness: Sartre, Wittgenstein, and First-Person Authority." Taking inspiration from Burns's interests in Wittgenstein and self-deception, Hymers puts Sartre and Wittgenstein in conversation with each other as both share a scepticism about the epistemic treatment of first-person authority. While he remains sceptical of Sartre's voluntarism in his treatment of agency and emotions, Hymers finds common ground with Wittgenstein's account of the mind. Both Sartre and Wittgenstein offer alternatives to treating consciousness as a kind of container for mental states that we discover. This approach, argues Hymers, treats sensations and other mental phenomena as if they were like physical objects in physical space. Such an approach inevitably treats the mental as private and, concomitantly, presupposes an epistemic understanding of first-person authority about the mental. Both Sartre and Wittgenstein point to familiar experiences that show that this view, which dominated mid-twentieth century philosophy, is not obligatory. The accounts of mental states that they offer are more embodied, relational, and vulnerable to self-deception. The themes of relationality, self-knowledge, and attention and questions about authority raised by Hymers reverberate through the articles that follow.

Robbie Moser and Darren Bifford engage Burns's discussion of Wittgenstein's remarks on misunderstanding through an exposition of Burns's 1994 article, "If A Lion Could Talk." In "Talking Lions," their discussion begins with an anecdote describing a conversational confusion arising from what we can sensibly say about what domestic dogs can expect. The confusion revolves around mistaking claims about understanding another through differences in forms of life, or ways of living, with empirical claims about minds or "hidden subjectivities." As they proceed,

Moser and Bifford explore misunderstanding as it can arise in a number of contexts, again with the help of Burns. To those familiar with Wittgenstein, it will come as no surprise that, as Moser and Bifford discuss, misunderstanding can arise from not attending to connections as well as differences between forms of life, what we say about ourselves and others, and unexamined (misleading) pictures of meaning and subjectivity. As the article comes to a close, Moser and Bifford draw some lessons from Burns and Winch about how to cultivate understanding, better recognize the grounds of misunderstanding, and do the work for which philosophy is particularly fit. Through this, we learn what it is to take up argument, reject certain theses, and escape certain confusions.

The second session of ARPA 2022 was simply dedicated to Burns and included articles by former students and mentees. They address Burns's work beyond Wittgenstein, particularly, his work on Leonard Cohen, Alice Munro, and Simone Weil. These articles are at once academic and intensely personal. They not only engage Burns's scholarly contributions to philosophy, but, at a meta-level, they explore friendship and mentorship and how they shape us.

Alice MacLachlan's contribution, "Who Do You Think You Are? The Epistemic Intimacies of Friendship," is a deeply personal piece of philosophy dedicated to Burns, her philosophical mentor and dear friend. Engaging in dialogue with Burns's 2006 Vienna Lecture Series on short stories written by Alice Munro, MacLachlan articulates the role of friendships in constituting (or harming) our identities and the ways we understand ourselves. Good friends, MacLachlan argues, are more capable of making sense of us than we are of ourselves. "Epistemic intimacy" — the exclusive and unique epistemic perspectives our friends have of us and we have of them — and the risk that accompanies it are revealed by the intricate nuances and tensions of the friendships described in Munro's stories. Friendships do not simply allow for us to better understand ourselves but also enable our self-growth and self-becoming. MacLachlan argues that the mutual attention present in friendships that allows for this epistemic intimacy is what makes our philosophical friendships so rewarding, such as her friendship with Burns.

In his article, "Nothing I Could Teach Him': Good Burns and Best Readings," Jason Holt engages with Burns's claim that rich works of art tend to produce unique best readings, as it is their richness that undermines the feasibility of ambiguous interpretations. Contrary to Burns, Holt argues that rich works of art are compatible with ambiguity. Rather than undermine the richness of a given work of art, ambiguity adds to this richness by broadening the range of legitimate interpretations the work supports. Furthermore, Holt contends that adding detail to works of art — typically understood as a method of reducing ambiguity — may in fact serve to *increase* ambiguity. Holt concludes his article by reflecting on a remark Burns made regarding his teacher-student relationship with Holt, having supervised his Master's thesis years earlier — "There was nothing I could teach him." With this quip, Holt takes Burns to have made his point for him.

In "Silence and Listening: An Essay in Honour of Steven Burns," Warren Heiti examines the relationship between listening and one's ability to perceive and attend to injustice through a critical engagement with some of Simone Weil's work, Burns's reflections on it, as well as Burns's reflections on what Heiti calls "the

dialectical ethical agent.” Weil’s distinction between cries of affliction and cries of personal protest frames crucial elements of Heiti’s article. As conditions of oppression silence testimonies of injustice, one must seek to, through a dialectical exercise with others of the sort advocated by Burns in his work on the subject, train oneself to both better recognize injustice and, to the extent that is possible, overcome the effects of one’s own prejudices, which frustrate attempts to properly perceive and attend to said injustice. Thus, Heiti claims that, in critically reflectively listening in the socially embedded manner Burns has modelled in both his philosophy and life, one is better able to hear the cry of injustice, however unexpected its source may be.

The special issue concludes with both Burns’s reflections on his life in philosophy and his replies to each of the articles. His “One (More) Last Thing” is a story of the role of community and conversation both with the philosophers and artists in our canons and those at our conferences and in our lives more generally. The very last words from Burns (in this article) are his responses to each of the authors. Each response appears separately in an appendix to facilitate those readers who prefer to read the responses directly after reading the respective articles.

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Competing interests. The authors of this article and the others in the volume are all members of the Atlantic Region Philosophers’ Association, of which Steven Burns is a most eminent member. We are also all friends, acquaintances, colleagues, and students of Steven Burns. Other than that, the authors declare no competing interests.

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