

War and Paradise, An Interview with Marcus Rossberg

INTERVIEWERS: VERA SCHOELLER AND DANIEL PAFFENHOLZ

Marcus Rossberg has been in St Andrews since 2001, finished his PhD in March 2006, and is now a postdoctoral research fellow here. His interests lie in philosophy of mathematics, philosophical logic and metaphysics. Thanks to this, he had some illuminating advice on career prospects, as well as sharing his insight on the differences between continental and analytical philosophy and other battlefronts. For more information about Marcus Rossberg, check his website at:
<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~mr30/>

Vera Schoeller: We looked on your website and saw that you've studied art history. When, how and why did you make the switch to philosophy?

Marcus Rossberg: I did a double major in philosophy and art history, so I studied both right from the beginning. I wrote my master thesis in art history, and after finishing it I knew that I wanted to philosophy. (laughs)

V: What was it about philosophy that inspired the switch?

M: Art History just wasn't the right thing for me. I discovered that what I like about philosophy is the rigorous thinking. I don't want to say that you can't practise art history in this way. It is just that at the time in Germany art history wasn't often done with analytic rigour. I thought that if I want to have a career in academia then I want colleagues who have more or less the same idea about how to do research that I have. This, basically, means adopting a good and rigorous methodology, like in the sciences, also in the humanities.

Daniel Paffenholz: Did you face any challenges when you told your

friends and family that you want to do philosophy?

M: That had already happened when I said I wanted to do art history! After that, I guess, everyone thought I was lost anyway, so it didn't really matter anymore.

V: So you had no problems answering the questions about what philosophy would do for your future?

M: I wanted a career in academia. Nobody in my family is an academic, so they didn't really know what to think about all this, and just took my word for it.

V: So why St Andrews?

M: Towards the end of my undergraduate studies I became interested in the philosophy of mathematics. I started my PhD in Düsseldorf, where I did my undergraduate degree. Then the Arché Research Centre announced scholarships for PhDs in that area of research, the philosophy of mathematics. So I thought, ok, there are lots of people there working in philosophy of mathematics, and there are next to none in Germany, or at least none in Düsseldorf. Moreover, I've got five or six books on the philosophy of mathematics in my bookshelf, and the names on their covers are names that you also see on the staff list in St Andrews. So I thought this would be a good thing to try: it can't hurt to apply.

D: Is that also how you chose the department in St Andrews?

M: Yes. I thought they're offering scholarships and all the people who have got big names in the philosophy of mathematics are here, or are regular visitors, so it's a really good department. It's practically the place in Europe where you want to be if you want to do philosophy of mathematics! So I tried it and got lucky.

V: Did you notice a huge change between the way philosophy is done here and the way it is done in Germany, in terms of analytical versus continental philosophy?

M: Oh yes! (laughs) In Germany there is an ongoing struggle between continental and analytical philosophy. It's really a bit like war. Here, it is just natural that if you do philosophy you do analytic philosophy. It was like coming to paradise!

V: In Germany, is there a lot of interaction between the two approaches, or is it like two different languages?

M: Well, I tend to think that there is only one school of philosophy, and then there is something else, which is called continental philosophy.

D: You've been in St Andrews too long!

M: No, I thought that before I came here. And I actually observed that I and some of my German friends, who are also analytic philosophers, are probably a bit more radical concerning analytical philosophy, just because we were in the war. We fought that battle, and you don't have to do that here. To many people in the UK and the US it seems acceptable to do a little bit of postmodern philosophy on the side. I just don't think so, because it is all rubbish.

D: Coming back to the career topic, can you give any good advice for undergrad philosophy students when they're making career choices?

M: It is hard to get a career in philosophy; it is very difficult. You have to be pretty determined, and know that this is really what you want, that this is really what you enjoy doing. Because if you are clever enough for philosophy you are probably also clever enough for most other things – obviously, because philosophy is one of the hardest subjects. And if you are successful in philosophy then you can be successful in most other jobs, where you would earn much more money. Way more money than you will ever earn in philosophy. So, beyond your undergraduate or second degree, you have to be pretty sure that philosophy is really where your passion lies.

V: Do you miss your undergrad days?

M: No.

V: What are the benefits of going for a PhD?

M: You mean besides it being necessary for an academic career? If you start doing a research degree, that is, an M.Phil or PhD, then you don't have to take any courses anymore, so you can really concentrate on the area that you are interested in. The system is different in Germany and I didn't do my undergrad here, so I'm probably not the best person to judge, but there are a lot of courses in undergrad that you have to do – and that's a good thing because you need the background. But you need to study areas that you're not really interested in and that can be tedious, as you know. That's all behind you once you start a research degree, and that feels great! Obviously if you're doing a research degree you're just doing research, and only in the area that interests you. Then you do your PhD for three, four, five years, and towards the end you get really sick of the subject, but a couple of months after you handed it in everything is fine again, and you love your subject again.

D: And the social side of undergrad studies compared to postgrad studies?

M: The PhD group in St Andrews is fantastically close. So, socially it has been much better than my undergraduate. On the other hand, I don't know what it is like to be an undergraduate in St Andrews. But the postgraduate student community is good, and PhDs and a lot of the M.Litts spend their free time together. It's a really a fantastic community – so, that was great. But I hear it's not like that everywhere, that St Andrews is special. Probably because there's nothing else to do around here.

V: On that note, what does your philosophical day look like?

M: (laughs) I have got this research postdoc, which means that I don't have any teaching obligations, and most of my time is supposed to be dedicated to my own research: writing my own papers, which of course after finishing a PhD will most likely be taking chapters out of your PhD thesis and turning them into papers, sending them off to journals. This is what I do at the moment. Now, the job that I have concerns the translation of Frege's *Basics Laws of Arithmetic*, so it's not your typical

philosophical research. Philip (Ebert) and I spend a lot of time on the translation, of course, since this is our job. Say 50 % has to do with translation and 50% with our own research. Now there is quite a lot of administration that needs to be done as well: correspondence with people, getting research seminars running, organising conferences. That sort of stuff. You always think that you can do that on the side, but it actually takes a lot of time out of your day. So I guess probably almost 50% of my time is administration at the moment, mainly due to the conference that Philip and I are organising.

D: Do you need to be in a certain mood to do philosophy?

M: I find it hard to do philosophy in the morning. Its not that I have problems to concentrate in the morning; I can do other productive things, like all the admin. I quite often do philosophy at night. In the morning I'm probably too energetic to sit down and think carefully.

V: Do you have something that inspires you if you're not in the mood?

M: No. (laughs) Its really not so much a mood thing, its just in the morning I'm not patient enough.

V: Does it have anything to do with certain philosophers?

D: Are there any philosophers you hate most?

M: Yeah, but I don't deal with them. They are all the continental philosophers! I can give you an alphabetic listing! French poststructuralists are pretty high up on my hate list. Like Lacan and Derrida and these people. More famous people on my hate list are Heidegger and Hegel.

V: Have you changed any of your moral stances and codes since studying philosophy?

M: No. Well I'm not doing moral philosophy, that's one thing. Well, I don't know..(laughs)

D: Do you ever have any existential doubts?

M: No It is also difficult to come across something like that if you're doing philosophy of mathematics!

V: Do you think a career in philosophy should come with any warning tags?

M: Well yes. As I said earlier, if you're good enough to do philosophy you're probably good enough to earn loads of money doing something else. So you really have to be dedicated. Its going to be pretty hard and you will have to work pretty hard. You probably have to spend more hours doing philosophy than you would spend in an ordinary nine-to-five job. And if you're absolutely sure this is where your heart lies, then you should do it.

D: We heard that there's a football game between Logic and Metaphysics, and Moral Philosophy in the department. Did you participate in the last game?

M: The Edgecliffe Cup! I'm on the logic and metaphysics side, and I really want logic and metaphysics to win, so I decided not to play. It has always been the case that moral philosophy won, in the past however-many years, except for one rare occasion, I think five years ago. But this year logic and metaphysics won for the first time in many years. It was a quite high score as well. I am not quite sure, something like 11 to 2.

D: Who scored?

M: I don't recall, but I suppose Philip was pretty good. Actually, we should go over to Philip's office after we're done here. I'm sure you can get that information out of him! (laughs)

(Actually, the score was 8:1 for Logic & Metaphysics. On the Moral Philosophy side Brian McElwee scored a penalty; for Logic & Metaphysics, Philip Ebert scored 4 goals, Paul McCallion scored 2, and Geoff Wright (one of Crispin Wright's sons) and Doug Edwards score one goal each.)

V: Any pubs around St Andrews you highly recommend?

M: The Cellar! That is, Aikman's, I think it's now the only place really I like. We also used to go to the Castle before it was refurbished. There's a philosophy postgraduate research seminar every Friday, from 4 to 6, and we always went to the Castle together immediately afterwards. They had a happy hour and it was great! There was also always enough place for all of us. And now it has been refurbished, it's horrible, so we can't go there anymore. I suppose this is an opportunity for the new postgraduates to find a new place to hang out. I'm a big fan of the Cellar, personally.