

Nov-2015

# Continuing the Conversation: Scholarly Inspiration after Retirement. An Interview with Ed James

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## Recommended Citation

Dasti, Matthew R. (2015). Continuing the Conversation: Scholarly Inspiration after Retirement. An Interview with Ed James. *Bridgewater Review*, 34(2), 32-33.  
Available at: [http://vc.bridgew.edu/br\\_rev/vol34/iss2/10](http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol34/iss2/10)

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# Continuing the Conversation: Scholarly Inspiration after Retirement.

## An Interview with Ed James

Matthew R. Dasti

*Ed James is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Bridgewater State University. His research has been published in leading journals that include Mind and Ethics. His recent work includes two papers, “Too Soon to Say” (July 2012) and “Beyond the Magical Thinking Behind the Principal Principle” (July 2015). Ed taught at BSU 1976-2009. The interview was conducted in summer 2015.*

**MRD:** *The idea for this interview has been inspired by your robust research and scholarly agenda since your retirement. What is it that drives your continued scholarly work?*

**EJ:** Writing philosophy has always been one of my main ways of being alive, of being totally present. It’s like playing a team sport in that way, where for that time there is nothing other than the awareness of the activity - where the puck is, who has it, where the players are. So, too, with doing philosophy. That’s all there is: a focus on the idea itself, with the qualifications, the objections, the demands for clarity, consistency, and completeness - all those “players.” I still “keep up”—not as long as I once could but, I hazard, as well as I ever did. Teaching was that way, too, when a class really sang. Though I miss teaching, now I can focus my energy more on just the writing itself and the engagement with the best reasoners in the world.

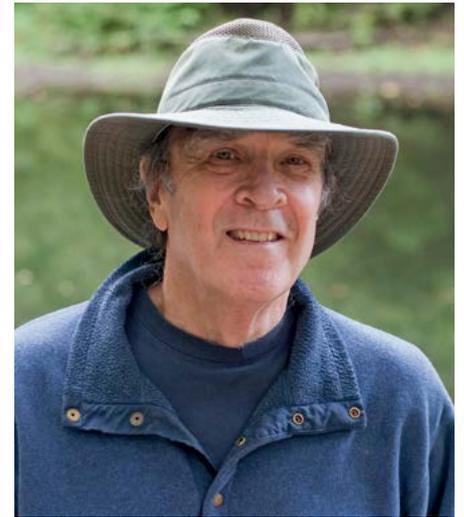
**MRD:** *I’m surprised with your answer. I was expecting you to identify some problems that have been your philosophical muse or ongoing public debates about which you hope to provide some clarity. But it seems that it is scholarly life itself that inspires you.*

**EJ:** My scholarly engagement is more the Platonic quest for a certain kind of sense-making or discovery. It is open-ended as I hope to follow the argument wherever it leads, seeking the sense of living in the immediacy of the intellectual quest.

**MRD:** *What I find striking is that the idea that what motivates you is the activity of philosophical writing, and getting lost in it, so to speak,*

*and not so much a result you are concerned to achieve. But insofar as there is inquiry there must be some goal, right? Playing sports, at our best we lose ourselves, but still there is usually a goal and there are rules which govern the sport in question. You’ve mentioned some of the “rules,” so to speak, which govern your work: concern with clarity, consistency, completeness. But what is the desideratum? Take your recent paper “Too Soon to Say” (Philosophy 2012), which starts as a defense of John Rawls from a certain line of criticism, but wonderfully—in my mind—contains a sustained argument that “disagreement does not entail moral epistemic deficiency.” What do you mean by this? Why is it important? What’s at stake?*

**EJ:** For me, philosophy should focus on the issues that we disagree on (for example, the existence of God, the meaning of life, the proper organization of society), the issues that put into question what a good reason is. Often when we disagree, what counts as good evidence or good reasons is itself part of the debate, and we have to critically examine our own perspective and assumptions. Because of this, philosophers through millennia have had logic and critical reasoning in general as a primary pursuit. In the essay, “Too Soon to Say,” I argue that the criteria we use to carry on any inquiry—clarity, consistency, coherence, completeness; call them “the Cs”—are internal to an inquiring conversation. But while reflective inquiry depends on all of these, just what those criteria mean, their “weight,” is itself open to question. For me, this is why the activity of philosophy is what



is central. Whatever arguments we make will always be open to serious critique; it will always be too soon to say the Last or Best Word. And so it is that we develop our ideas, taking account of the critiques of others, and knowing fully that what we come up with will be challenged. To be result oriented is to be unaware that we are perpetually engaged in a multi-perspective conversation. This is the profoundly enriching aspect of philosophy.

**MRD:** *So when you say “disagreement does not entail moral epistemic deficiency” you are recognizing that we can never be fully aware of all of the resources available in support of a given position. And we should thus avoid stigmatizing those who disagree with us.*

**EJ:** Sometimes when people disagree, it leads one party to conclude that the other is not just intellectually wrong, but so unreasonable that he is morally wrong. We often see this dynamic in political debates, ethical debates, and the like. I am concerned with the fact that we probably do this too much. *Moral epistemic deficiency* addresses when we should rightly criticize someone for being culpably wrongheaded in reasoning – e.g., in ignoring past arguments, making obvious fallacies – and when we should rather hold off and recognize the give and take we confront all the time in the criteria we use to judge what it means to be reasonable. To engage in reflective inquiry is to be committed to meeting what I called the Cs. That’s the good news. It’s what unites all scholars, from scientists to poets, in our work. But what is essential to note here, and now the bad news, is that

we are in tension, both among ourselves and often within ourselves, as individuals, as to how the Cs are to be understood and prioritized. In philosophy, we have in the field of political thought, say, the question of how best to evaluate a government or a society. Do we prioritize equality (as would liberals), liberty (libertarians), excellence (Aristotelians), harmony (Confucians), divine command, ecological or environmental balance? The list goes on. Each one of these, and indeed, each version of these, has strengths and weaknesses with respect to the Cs. For starters, each one is initially incomplete from the perspective of the others and seeks either to show the others how it can include their values or why it should exclude their values when considering political organization.

**MRD:** *Your two points blend together nicely. Philosophical inquiry focuses both on the activity of sense-making or discovery, and a concern to recognize that the criteria that govern inquiry are, to some degree, fluid. They seem to work together to hopefully produce both an epistemic humility and a willingness to continue the inquiry.*

**EJ:** And I would draw from this a radical conclusion. Too often, philosophers (myself included) have viewed philosophy as politics by other means. In this vein, philosophy has had an essentially combative side to it – a feeling that it is important to “win” the argument, to advance one’s cause. But if sense making is truly coupled with epistemic humility, then what is important is not to win the argument but to carry the discussion further in the light of that uncertainty. This might sound tame, but it is not, for it calls for a new view of *philosophic* citizenship, where philosophy has the political aim of keeping the inquiring conversation going and keeping the standards of reason, as ambiguous as they often are, in view. This view involves turning on its head the Platonic dictum that philosophers should be leaders and to claim instead that citizens should be philosophers in the sense that they all, we all, carry a commitment to reason together in the deep humility of inquiry. Until citizens are philosophic in this sense, our political decision-making will be doomed to a kind of power struggle. The aim of teaching philosophy should be that of working to a

new view of citizenship as an engagement in political inquiry.

**MRD:** *Thinking about philosophical citizenship, it seems that much of your work tries to navigate how we deal with those things that sit at the margins of public rationality (pseudoscience, moral evil, the inner voice of conscience, disagreement about the basic criteria for rationality itself, etc.). But in your latest work on probability (“Beyond the Magical Thinking Behind the Principal Principle”), you seem to be challenging a basic feature of rationality by showing that projecting probabilities based on past experience cannot be entirely justified in independent grounds. Could you explain what you are doing in this work, and how it connects to your broader concerns?*

**EJ:** My more recent work on applied probability continues my exploration of the strengths and limits of reason. The strength of probability is that it does (or should) guide us in our daily activities, but, and now a limit, it does not apply to any particular single case. At first glance this appears contradictory: probability guides us, it does not apply in the single case, and yet we act in the single case. A good deal of scholarly work has tried to show that probability does apply to the single case, work that I argue does not succeed. For probability is confirmed or disconfirmed by extended observations of sequences or aggregate. To claim, for example, that there is a 40% chance of rain under these conditions is an elliptical way of saying that in the long run it rains around 40% of the time in these conditions. Hence, to apply probability to the single case, to say that the 40% applies to this case is to infer a property of the part, the single case, from the property of the whole, the aggregate or sequence. In thinking this way, we fall prey to the fallacy of division, of mistakenly thinking that a property of the whole must be a property of its parts.

**MRD:** *How then should we use probability to guide us?*

**EJ:** First, we need to be very clear that when we speak of the probability of a single case we are really speaking of a long-range projection: all we know, if we’ve got the long-range distribution right, is that the type of event, in

this case rain, will hover around that distribution. Hence, when we make a bet on a probability distribution (that is, let probability guide us), our bet should be long-term, where we ask ourselves whether we can stay the course in the long run. Second, what of single cases that are “one offs,” that don’t repeat themselves? What of an operation, say, where we are told by the surgeon that we have very good chances of coming through it? Here, there is no staying the course for us, for we will, hopefully, meet this case but once. What we want is just what we don’t have: probability applying here and now, the gods of chance working on our behalf. Nor do we have what the surgeon has: a long-run projection that she lives through, knowing that most cases over the long haul will hover around these good odds. We, on the other hand, face “one offs.” All we can do in these circumstances, I argue, is bundle the many cases of similar probabilities - the “good odds” of crossing the street at a busy intersection, the good odds of it not raining on our picnic - into one long-run projection. What we know, then, is that the long-run projection, even if we’ve got it right, will come out bad in some of these cases and we can’t pick the cases.

**MRD:** *For me, one upshot of this critique is that we must confront the inevitable place of luck in our lives.*

**EJ:** Precisely! Those of us who have had “successful” lives, to my mind, too readily take more credit (and spread more blame) than is deserved. While we might have made all the right decisions, in the end, the fact that those decisions came out “right” was part and parcel of a bundled probabilistic distribution. All we can hope is that our good odds play out in the matters that really count and that when our plans do work out, we are more grateful than proud.



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