
Things Oughta Make Sense¹

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When I first started doing philosophy, I didn't really know what I was doing. Some will say that not much has changed. And it is true that I don't have a worked-out metaphilosophy. It's still the case that I'm flummoxed by innocent questions about what I do. (On airplanes, I used to sometimes lie and say that I was a nurse or a lawyer or something else people could recognize. But I eventually found that if all I want is for my neighbor to leave me alone, it's far more effective to tell him the truth: "I'm a philosopher. Let me explain my theory of mental causation: it all starts with Descartes. . . .") But even if there are many big questions about philosophy that I can't answer, I still do think that I've gained some insight into what philosophy is. Or, at least, what it could be. Or what it should be.

I had the enormous good fortune as a beginning student of philosophy to fall under the tutelage of some extraordinary philosophers (as well as some extraordinary teachers who were not philosophers—for example, the flutist John Oberbrunner.) My very first philosophy teacher, and perhaps my harshest critic even to this day, was/is Peter van Inwagen. He paid me the immense compliment of taking me—my questions, my objections, my arguments, and even my confusions—seriously. He validated my inchoate conviction that things ought to make sense, and that when they didn't, you had every right to ask questions. A lot of times in my early life I felt like a freak for asking questions no one else seemed to think needed answers: Why should unbaptized babies go to Limbo? Why does Santa Claus give more presents to rich kids than to poor kids? (My interest in this particular matter, I must admit, was not purely intellectual.) In graduate school, I was fortunate to have such luminaries as Hilary Putnam, Jerry Fodor, and Ned Block as interlocuters. These philosophers demonstrated to me the power of philosophical