

Interview:**Bence Nanay**

Bence Nanay is Professor of Philosophy and BOF Research Professor at the University of Antwerp, where he is also co-director of the Centre for Philosophical Psychology and Senior Research Associate at Peterhouse, Cambridge University.

Professor Nanay recently presented in the interdisciplinary conference “Exploring the Mind’s Eye” at Bilkent in October 2019. During his stay at Bilkent, he also gave a separate talk named “The Fragmented Mind”. We met with him and asked some questions about himself, his impressions about Bilkent, his work, and his thoughts on some philosophical problems related to his work.

1. *As far as we know, you’ve traveled to Turkey before but this is your first time at Bilkent. How do you like Bilkent so far?*

Yes, I’ve traveled to Turkey for almost three months in my 20s. I’ve also been to Ankara actually, but I’ve never visited Bilkent before. Everything is really good so far, but the campus could be a little closer to the center; it seems to be a little cut-off from the city. I’d like to experience more of Ankara.

2. *As you know very well, in Turkey, perhaps mostly outside of academia, people are interested in you because of your name rather than your work. Do you find this annoying in any way?*

No, I don’t mind this. I think it’s a funny thing. I’m amused by many of the comments I get. Maybe some of the people would come to this public lecture only because of my name, but I hope they will learn something.

3. *Regarding your academic work, you seem quite productive. You have published over a hundred articles in top journals. This is quite puzzling for us, as undergraduate students have often been told that publishing is a tiresome process that takes lots of time. What is your approach toward this process?*

One thing I have to say is that I was a journalist before I became a philosopher. So I know how to write quickly and I know how to deal with deadlines. I think I learned to tailor what I say to the specific audience I am writing for as a journalist and I am benefitting from this skill in the academic world. I hope it does not sound like my academic publications are journalistic. What I mean is

that, in terms of the working method and the way of dealing with deadlines, I learned what to do from being a journalist. Yet, I don't think I am special in any way; there are many philosophers out there who are incredibly productive.

4. *Speaking of writing, we could also talk about one of the main problems undergraduate students face when trying to meet deadlines: procrastination. Do you also procrastinate? Or do you have a solution to this problem that might be useful to the students as well?*

Of course, I procrastinate sometimes. But I think there are ways to help you do your work in hand. My main advice is that just stay far away from the internet. Avoid any shade of it. All kinds of social media and most things you can do online are set up in such a way that they can drain up your energy and time. It is important to work farther away from temptations. Trying to resist temptations does not really work as much as turning off their source in the first place. Also, if you know that you just have to write something, when not doing it isn't an option, you just do it. So strict deadlines might also be useful in this sense. Another thing I learned from being a journalist is that you sometimes have to write an article and just let go of it. This applies to academic publishing. There is always a way of improving an academic paper, so at some point, you just need to let go of it. Perfectionism doesn't help much in most cases.

5. *In some of your work, you seem to argue that "motivation" does not have to play an important role in our actions. For example, we needn't be "motivated" to stop procrastinating and begin working. This seems to be against the intuition of many procrastinating students and, more importantly, some dominant theories in the philosophy of action. Could you elaborate on your thoughts about this?*

I find the concept of motivation confusing. I don't think many theories of action clarify what they mean by "motivation". However, I agree with this idea that arose in the '80s in the philosophy of action: There's a distinction between a representation that allows us to act and a trigger that moves us to act. What is meant by "representation" for, say, my action of drinking could be the physical features of the cup in my hand. With such a representation it becomes possible for me to initiate the action of drinking. So the distinction comes from the idea that you can have a fully-fledged representation of the features of your environment that would be necessary for the performance of the action that are available to you but you can decide not to act. What moves that "trigger" we mentioned is something different. My crazy view is that this trigger doesn't have to be representational. Regardless, I don't really understand what should count as "motivation" in this picture. I think many of our actions, including the

automatic ones, don't even require beliefs and desires. We've been talking and eating for a while, for instance, but not once my actions are explicitly initiated by my desires. They're goal-directed for sure, but they are guided by what I call pragmatic representations and not by explicit desires and beliefs.

6. *Some philosophers take procrastination as an instance of the phenomenon known as weakness of the will. Namely, you know what to do but fail to do it. In your talk here at Bilkent, The Fragmented Mind, you suggested that the more fragmented our minds are the more prone we are to be distracted from what we know we should do. The more distracted we are the less self-control we have over actions we need to perform. So do you think that the fragmented mind analogy can be used to further analyze weakness of will?*

I am not sure. I just find the concept of weakness of will a mess. So many people mean so many different things by it and this does more harm than good for understanding the phenomenon. But something like weakness of will is very closely related to self-control. And, of course, I would agree that the whole fragmented mind analogy has a lot to do with weakness of will at least in some understanding of the term.

7. *Do you think that your philosophical interests come from what you find objectively meaningful to discuss? Is there a reason why you are especially interested in the philosophy of perception?*

I think the most important lesson I have learned in my philosophical career is that our philosophical commitments are not the results of rational arguments. I think it's more likely that they come from the fictional works we read as a child or teenager. Similarly, our deeply held philosophical convictions are not things we arrive at through philosophical reasoning, but they are things that settle in our heads in the early years of our lives. So, we are interested in lots of things because these somehow affected us during our childhood or teenage years. However, I think there're a couple of reasons why my current interests are mostly in the philosophy of perception. What's going on in the mind is incredibly complex and there are lots of things we haven't even begun to understand. Perception is a relatively less messy part of the mind. Empirical evidence regarding perception is a lot less messier than evidence regarding, say, decision-making, reasoning, etc. We have a fairly good understanding of the psychology and neuroscience of perceptual processes. So I think the philosophy of perception as a subfield of the philosophy of mind has the best chance of learning a lot from empirical sciences. I find this link between philosophy and science quite attractive.

8. *Some philosophers (e.g. some metaphysicians) hesitate to use all sorts of scientific methods and empirical data in philosophy. This reluctance seems to stem from the idea that philosophy is somehow superior to science because there are always metaphysical assumptions lying beneath scientific inquiries. What would you think about such an attitude toward science in philosophy?*

Metaphysics is just one subfield of philosophy. I think that people working on these abstract subfields are absolutely justified in ignoring science. But if you are doing, say, the philosophy of perception, there's a lot of empirical stuff that is directly relevant to philosophizing about perception. If you're working in a philosophical subfield like that, then you should definitely not dismiss any empirical evidence. So sometimes you just need to look at scientific data. So I guess my answer to this question depends on the philosophical subfield you are working on.

9. *Do you think that philosophy "progresses" in the way science progresses? Are we better than, say, Plato in philosophizing?*

There are a lot of people in philosophy who are interested in progress, and thinking of "the progress of philosophy" seems to be a fashionable thing these days. But I am not sure whether this is really an interesting question. It first of all depends on what we mean by "progress". For instance, is there progress in art? In some sense, yes, there's now a wider range of possibilities of doing art. In some sense, not so much, as the great artists today are not so much better than the great artists of Renaissance. The term "progress" itself might also be problematic in itself. T. S. Eliot says that, for instance, "every great work of art changes the way you read other, earlier works of art". If this is the case, then progressing doesn't seem possible at all. I don't think this is exactly the case in philosophy, but I think that this idea generally problematizes the way of evaluating something in terms of the progress it makes.

10. *Lastly, do you have any general advice for undergraduate students who want to pursue philosophy as an academic career?*

I think they should take philosophy less seriously. Some undergrads tend to think that philosophy is somehow going to solve all their problems. That's something I've seen in undergrads. They often think philosophy is something that can make or break their life. I think if you devote your life only to philosophy, that'd be a pretty dull way of living life. It wouldn't spark much joy. I think you should do lots of other things like reading novels and making music. Doing other things, you are likely to become better philosophers. These influence your philosophizing immensely. Also, don't specialize in one field of philosophy very strongly and

ignore others. It's important to read widely to be able to connect separate issues in philosophy. So I would suggest you to broaden your field of vision in general. That's what I mean by taking philosophy less seriously. Of course, this doesn't mean that those students shouldn't pursue an academic career in philosophy. They should definitely do that if that's what they want, but I say that they should be open-minded about other things they could do besides philosophy.