

## Welcome

In the spirit of reconciliation, we the staff and students of Monash University recognise that the university is situated on country for which the Kulin Nations have been custodians for many centuries and on which they have performed *their* age-old ceremonies of celebration, initiation and renewal. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present and commend to them John Christopher Bigelow – one of the elders of our clan, whose contributions to our university and to philosophy we today celebrate in ceremonies of our own.

It is my pleasure to welcome you all to this celebration to honour Prof. John Bigelow on the event of his retirement from Monash University and – this very day – also his 62<sup>nd</sup> birthday. We have a number of people lined up to say something about John's many accomplishments and contributions and my first task will be to introduce them.

Deputy Vice-Chancellor Adam Shoemaker was originally scheduled to come and express the gratitude of the university's senior management to John for his years of service to Monash. However, we learnt only yesterday that Professor Shoemaker has been called away for an urgent meeting, which is unfortunate.

Tim Oakley is here from LaTrobe University. Tim is also a member of the Council of the Australasian Association for Philosophy and this affords him a certain national perspective on Philosophy in this country. I hope that Tim will tell us about John's long and fruitful association with the department at LaTrobe – since Tim was there right from the beginning. The story of Philosophy at LaTrobe is intimately interwoven with the wider history of Philosophy in Australia since so many of Australia's most prominent philosophers have been graduates of their PhD programme (including Frank Jackson, and our own Justin Oakley) or held jobs there (e.g. Brian Ellis, Peter Singer, Frank Jackson, the late Robert Pargetter and, of course, John Bigelow).

We also have Frank Jackson to bring us an even wider perspective on John Bigelow's contributions to Philosophy. This should be easily enough done, since Frank has been everywhere and done everything. Frank worked briefly at Adelaide, followed by several years at LaTrobe. Following this, Frank was professor here at Monash from 1978 to 1986, and then at the Research School of the ANU. He now divides his time between Princeton University and LaTrobe. Frank is one of the most prominent representatives of the Australian school in metaphysics – a highly influential trend in Philosophy that originated and was perpetuated among philosophers in Australia, as well as by frequent visitors to our shores such as David Lewis and John Heil. John Bigelow is, of course, another of the prominent representatives of the Australian school in metaphysics and I anticipate that Frank will have some things to say about the significance and impact of John's work internationally.

## The Bigger-Low Effect

Monash Philosophy and Bioethics is today a vibrant and friendly community of inquiry. The academic staff who work here value their day-to-day interactions with one another and we especially value our Friday afternoon staff seminars. Visitors to these seminars enjoy presenting new work and benefit from the discussion that follows. Our postgraduate students flourish and go forth, bearing the productive and collegial atmosphere of Monash philosophy to new places. Our undergraduates bail up members of staff in the union to talk about things they've read or films they've seen that made them think about philosophical ideas they'd been exposed to in classes. It is, in short, a really great place to *do philosophy*.

Many things make Monash a great place to do philosophy, but surely one of the most important causes stands before us in the person of our guest of honour. Philosophers love theories and I will not forego the opportunity to propound one to you now. It's a theory of what I'll call the Bigger-Low effect.

Sometimes when you are in the presence of a towering intellect, it makes you feel small and insignificant. 'What', you ask, 'have I to add to this discussion? This person is so well read and so insightful that the mere act of opening my mouth lowers the tone.' Some very gifted people, and especially academics, seem to positively cultivate this feeling of intellectual diminution in others. Other people – better people perhaps – simply don't know realise when its happening and thus take no steps to counter it.

The effect runs backwards in conversation with John Bigelow. You are aware that you are in the presence of a towering intellect, but somehow the Bigelowian alchemy makes you feel *smarter and more insightful* – not relatively stupid and insignificant. Instead of being brought Low, you are somehow made Bigger. Hence, I call it the Bigger-Low effect. Moreover, this feeling of being smarter and more insightful in the presence of John is, I think, no illusion. How can this be?

Unlike many people, John Bigelow really listens to what others have to say and thinks about it. Moreover, he listens sympathetically. Ask yourself: in how many conversations is your first comment one intended to establish that the proposition under discussion is improbable or unclear? John's intellectual reflex, by contrast, is not to find reasons *Why Not*, but to ask, 'Well, what if ...'. As a consequence, he finds the really clever insight that is mixed in with your conversational dross. He picks it up, wipes the less worthwhile accretions off it and hands it back to you: 'See – here's what *you* came up with. It's *yours*. I just helped you remember where you put it.'

Part of the reason that John is able to do this is because he is a bold adventurer. Confronted with a seemingly implausible thesis or an odd set of concepts, John sets out to explore. And he does this in a leisurely way, from the inside. He puts on ideas the way other people try on suits. He'll

dress up in the idea and walk around, feeling for where it may pinch, appreciating the freedom of movement that it may afford in other areas. If John cared about cars the way he cares about ideas, he's the person who would test drive something for a whole week.

So the Bigger-Low effect occurs when in conversation with John Bigelow you feel that you are – and often genuinely are – a better philosopher than you might otherwise be in a Biggles-less condition. Rather than feeling Low and inadequate in the presence of a Bigger Bigelow Brain, you instead feel smarter and more insightful.

The Bigger-Low effect has had beneficial results for many academics who have worked at Monash during John's time here. Some of them, like me, have remained here. It is in no small part through the Bigger-Low effect, and through John's conscientious and careful mentoring of my research careers that I have achieved such success as I have been afforded. I suspect that this is true to some degree in the case of my colleagues as well.

Philosophy had 13 continuing members of staff when I joined in 1994. (The Centre for Human Bioethics was then a separate unit.) The sum of the two units now has 10 full-time academic staff – 7 in Philosophy and 3 in Bioethics. Of my 13 colleagues in Philosophy in 1994, 3 now remain at Monash – all at the level of associate professor or reader; all Fellows of the Academy of Humanities. Graham Oppy, who joined in 1995, made the transition from senior lecturer to full professor in a mere 9 years. I can't speak for them, but I know that the Bigger-Low effect has had a positive effect on me and my prospects.

I think it wholly possible that other members of the 13 who left Monash have benefited from the Bigger-Low effect. Certainly many of them have gone on to outstanding academic careers. These include Rae Langton and Richard Holton, who are now both full professors at MIT. Michael Smith, who was another of my colleagues in 1994, left Monash to become professor at ANU and subsequently at Princeton. Jeanette Kennett, whom John also hired to a lecturer's position in 1994, is now research professor at Macquarie. You would have ask them, but my guess is that they would readily acknowledge the existence and practical utility of the Bigger-Low effect.

Younger academics subsequently hired to Monash Philosophy have all risen quickly to senior lecturer – back of the envelope calculations suggest an average of about 3–4 years. All of them will – in my judgment – soon be ripe for further promotion. Again, I cannot speak for them, but I suspect many of them have benefited from the Bigger-Low effect.

John's Bigger-Low field has irradiated countless MA and PhD students across the years. It would take too long to go through them all. The initiative to nominate John for the Arts Faculty's PhD supervisor of the Year award arose from them. I was then serving as HDR coordinator and I was unsurprised that John won the award on the basis of the letters from the research students that

were included in the portfolio – such was the passion and intensity with which they expressed their respect and admiration for their supervisor. One of John's PhD students, Prof. Konrad Talmont-Kaminski, who now teaches at Marie Curie-Sklodowska University in Poland, writes as follows:

I still very fondly recall my supervision meetings with John, always constructive yet wide-ranging. I particularly remember the feeling of excitement with my research and the renewed energy that each meeting left me with. Even now, over ten years later, I aim at retaining such an attitude to my own work and instilling it in the students I supervise.

This experimental data on the Bigger-Low effect in PhD students opens a possible new avenue of research: Could prolonged exposure to Bigelow make the Bigger-Low effect *transmissible*? Could Konrad instil it in his own PhD students? Is standing in the ancestral of the graduate student relation to John Bigelow implicated in writing better philosophy? I think we need a really big ARC grant to explore this!

The Bigger-Low effect is not confined to professionals or PhD students. Even people who have little knowledge of philosophy bask in the Bigger-Low effect. Here is a first-hand account of the operation of the Bigger-Low effect on one of our undergraduate students. Not an ordinary one, perhaps. Simon Keller did undergraduate Philosophy, followed by an Honours degree at Monash. He was awarded a scholarship for his PhD at Princeton and subsequently taught at Boston University. He is now associate professor at Victoria University in New Zealand. Simon writes:

I first saw you in action when I was a student in a huge first-year Psychology class. You came in at the beginning of a lecture to give a brief advertisement for a course in semantics that you were teaching in Philosophy. You only spoke for a few minutes, but in that time I was struck by three qualities with which you are still closely associated in my mind. First, you were out bringing philosophy to non-philosophers, encouraging us to explore the links between philosophical issues and our interest in psychology; second, your love of philosophy and your enthusiasm for your topic were obvious and infectious; and third, I didn't have a clue what you were talking about. But I wanted to take your course anyway.

I came to know you better during my year as an Honours student in Philosophy. In an era of cutbacks and overworked academics, you always made time for us Honours students. Along with the other Monash philosophers, you made sure that we were taken seriously, were drawn into the department's life, and always had opportunities to present and discuss our work. We were the envy of Honours students in other programmes.

I know I can speak for many of us who were taught by you as undergraduates at Monash: you are a gifted, committed and inspiring teacher, who taught us that doing philosophy well is possible, worthwhile, and, most of all, fun.

As is clear from Simon's evidence of the Bigger-Low effect, it can even lead to *fun*. Best not tell anyone in Government. I'm not sure Julia Gillard would approve. Fun is far too hard to quantify.

In all seriousness, I believe that there is something to the Bigger-Low effect. John has many traits that make him an outstanding philosopher and an exemplary colleague. I do sincerely believe that one of his many gifts is to find what is good in an idea and to make that discovery part of a shared enterprise of inquiry – an enterprise that makes the participants feel valued and valuable. The practical question, I suppose, is how we can honour John for this gift, as well as his many other contributions. We have a few trinkets for him, but I suspect that each of us has it within his or her power to bestow a gift that John will enjoy even more. In my own view, those in the room blessed with towering intellects of their own would best honour John's contributions and celebrate his achievements by seeking to replicate the Bigger-Low effect in their interactions with peers and students. Ask yourself: do my interactions with students and peers seek to make them Bigger or to lay them Low? Are you a positive force in establishing the same kind of vibrant and pleasant community of inquiry? Gifted Philosopher? Bigelise thyself! ... Superstar Academic? Get thyself to a Bigelunnery!

Not being possessed of such a towering intellect myself, I will simply seek to emulate John's positive and adventuresome spirit of inquiry. I will aim to respond to new ideas by first thinking, 'OK, what then would follow?' rather than 'Here are 5 good reasons why not-P'. I will seek to demonstrate by example that doing philosophy well is possible, worthwhile and fun. I will seek – to the best of my ability – to be the kind of resource to my community of inquiry that John has been to Monash. That's my present for John, and knowing his generous nature I suspect it is one that he will enjoy as much as any other that he receives today.