

Title: The Life and Philosophy of John Tomasi

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Transcript

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Welcome to a special episode of Heterodox Out Loud. We're going deep on matters of faith and philosophy. On today's show, we're sharing excerpts from a personal and wide-ranging interview between Heterodox Academy President John Tomasi and philosopher turned podcast host Zohar Atkins. In this episode, we hear Tomasi discuss his deep interest in philosophy, how skepticism and faith can be friends, and the challenges he's faced as an academic and now at Heterodox Academy. You can hear the full 70 minute interview on Zohar's podcast, [Meditations with Zohar](#). Here, with his permission, we share some edited extracts. We begin with Zohar's first question.

Zohar Atkins

How and why did you become a philosopher or a political philosopher? An academic? And how has the reality sort of met with that initial desire, that initial expectation?

John Tomasi

Yes, so you ask how I became a philosopher and an academic as though those two things were the same. I saw them from the beginning as very different things. And, in fact, when I was in my early twenties, I was militantly opposed to becoming a professor or being involved in the academy in any way precisely because I was so committed to philosophy. I thought that being a philosopher was actually incompatible with being an academic. I really felt that philosophy was something that one has to have wisdom to do. And I had the belief then that wisdom was more important than skillsets. And I was concerned that if I ever ended up going to graduate school, I would fall into "skillset world." And "skillset world" comes with criteria world in which you have to start hitting targets to keep moving. And I was aware of that. And I've been kind of I don't know if this is even a coherent phrase, habitually allergic to "criteria world." All my life, I was a terrible, intentionally terrible, student in middle school, and especially in high school. I love sports. And so what I really cared about in high school was trying to get ten varsity letters.

That's why I went to high school and sort of why I stayed in. And along the way, I had many meetings with my coaches and guidance counselors and principals and teachers to see whether there was any way to get my D pushed up to a C so I could retain my athletic eligibility. I went to a really intellectually backwards public high school in rural Northern Vermont, and it was painful, intellectually, literally painful, for me to be there. My mother, in her wisdom, let me skip. We made a deal that if I stayed in, she'd let me skip one day every week. So one day the week, religiously, so to speak, I would skip school. I'd often skip school to do things that I cared about, which were to do with learning often. So along with the sports, which I was very fanatically committed to in those days, I also was a really serious reader. My grandparents had moved to this farmhouse in rural Northern Vermont in the 1940s, and it was a pretty backward place back then intellectually, but my grandfather had this thing you may have heard of, it's called the Harvard Five Foot Shelf of Books.

I don't know if you know about that, but you can find them in the used bookstore sometimes still. And he had this small case of books, 50 books, all these great classics, speeches, wonderful things. And a key little bit was that there was this little thin volume that was my, it's still an important part of my life. And it was called 15 Minutes a Day. And then that little thin volume which I've gone through God knows how many times now in my life. It's a calendar every day of the year, and you look up some day and you'll see a little reading there. It could be something from Sophocles it could be a 50 minutes selection of reading from one of Lincoln's speeches. It could be a bit of a logic from someone or other. And I would read that almost every day when I was in high school. I read 15 minutes of kind of interesting stuff, but never the stuff that they told me to do in high school. But that was kind of my attitude when I went to college, too. And I had some friends who had financially stronger financial groundings than I did in my family.

My father died when I was very young, and my mother raised me and my three sisters on her salary as a middle school art teacher. So we didn't have a lot of money. We lived in a beautiful old beat up farmhouse, and we had five foot shelf of books, but we didn't have a lot of money. And some of my friends early in high school headed off to elite private schools, St. Paul's, Deerfield, a few others. And with all do respect to my wonderful friends, I saw all the things they had to do to get into those places. And I saw them sort of get the values they learned there about getting into the next level of great places. And in my pride, I hope, also in my sincerity, I just turned my back on that whole world. It was probably self-destructive, who knows? But I intentionally went about not believing in the system. So I did terribly in high school, in College, I started doing better, but I jumped around a lot. I was in and out of, I think, four different colleges and universities for various reasons. But I was always interested in learning.

I guess I was kind of skeptical about the institutions of learning and what they can do for a person. To make a long story short, I actually decided that to do philosophy, I actually needed more time than I could get in the world or I had to work. And that realization came to me painfully when I was living in Redwood City, California. I was working at a fence building company. Eventually became a Foreman, which was a big deal for me. And I'd routinely go out in the morning, pretty early in the morning. I'd ride my bike over there. I lived in East Palo Alto. I'd ride my bike over there. I dropped out of college. I'd been in four different colleges. I haven't graduated, but I was totally fine. I was learning and very confident in the world. This is now my early getting latish 20s. And I'd head off every morning in my truck with my team. And we had the whole back of the truck loaded up with our fence building gear loaded up so that when you unloaded, it would all lay out across this fence. We chainsaw it up, put the old fence on our truck, build a new fence, and then pull all of the tools back, put them back on the truck in the same order so we could take them off.

It's a really great system they'd worked out. We basically knocked down a long fence every day, build a new one in its place, and drive home at the end of the day really tired, but really excited about having finished the project. It was a really fabulous thing. As you would drive back, me and my kind of rough friends, they dropped me off. We drive onto the main street, heading towards our garage where all the trucks were. And they dropped me off at the public library. And they'd go off to a bar and have a beer or two and then go. But I'd go to the public library and do my philosophy. And I vividly remember sitting in that public library in Redwood City and working through John Rawls "A Theory of Justice," 587 pages, a classic, technical philosophy, trying to understand it and having lots of will to learn this theory, to understand what this theory is about. But after an hour or two of studying it, just feeling fatigued and feeling tired. I've been through so much already, and I knew my friends were off at the bar. I didn't want to be there with them.

But I came to realize sort of slowly through the months of trying to do philosophy on my own that I couldn't do philosophy without energy and time. It sounds strange and it's kind of embarrassing to say out loud, but I compromised and agreed to go to graduate school. That's actually how I saw it. So I applied to graduate school in philosophy. And anyway, they rejected me. Every single place I applied to sent back, basically in the return mail, "No." So I was like, "Oh, the world won't let me in, because I haven't played by the rules." And that was kind of a shock to me.

Zach Rausch

Eventually, John did get enough credits to graduate from college with an undergraduate degree. He applied again for postgraduate courses in philosophy and was accepted at the University of Arizona.

John Tomasi

And when I got there, everything changed, because in grad school, they say to you, what they say to you in Arizona at least was, "Write something interesting and get it published." I tried to carry this stuff over into my life when I became a professor. I mean, bizarrely became a professor. I had this idea that I had since I was in high school, that exam, the students should never be evaluated on an exam, for example, by the degree to which what they wrote was a response to the question that the professor had written. Who cares about that? I always thought that people should be evaluated on the quality of what they write, the quality of their ideas. Now, if you take that attitude when you're in high school and College, you're going to do sometimes really well and sometimes really badly, which is exactly what I did. But in graduate school, if you take that attitude really serious about the ideas, you get recognized. So my first course, I took a course in political philosophy my first year in graduate school, and I wrote a paper about an idea about rights and virtues. I was fascinated by it.

And basically there's this big debate about humanitarians who are for virtue versus the Liberals who are for rights. And I thought, well, these concepts are actually connected at the base. Many of them are at least. So, for example, generosity. It's hard to know that someone is being generous when they hand something to someone else unless you have a prior understanding publicly of who owns what. So property rights, for example, are conceptually prior to virtues, such as generosity, at least in many areas. So I wrote a short paper for my professor that this big division between these two things is actually one is conceptually parasitic on the other. And he said, "This is a pretty good short paper. You should write it into your term paper." So I wrote this paper on this idea about rights and virtues. And I was so fanatical about it. I wanted to talk to people all the time. My then girlfriend, now wife Amy, was living in Santa Fe. And we would sometimes meet some places in between just for a weekend together. But every time we would meet, all I would want to do is talk about rights and virtues.

And this idea basically driving her batty, because she wants to talk about other things like our relationship or whatever. And all I want to talk about is rights and virtues, and I wrote this term paper for it, and the professors liked it. And they said, "You should send it off to Amy Gutmann, this professor at Princeton who would went on to be on a big influence in my life. And so I just sent, some random first year grad student at Arizona, and I sent this paper off to this well known professor at Princeton and got no reply. But the next summer, I was shocked to get a three-page

single space letter from her, responding to my piece at length and saying, "Hey, you should come to Princeton sometime. I'd love to talk to you." And I just couldn't believe that some Princeton Professor was saying to me, "I'd like to talk ideas with you." And my professors at Arizona, they thought my work was good, so they encouraged me to apply to go to Oxford, to do a BPhil, which is a two year, pretty hardcore degree in philosophy. So I applied to that. And shockingly, I got in and I got a scholarship, and they're paying for it all.

When I got to Oxford, that paper I'd written, I think when I was applying, it got published by this journal called Ethics, which is the top journal in political philosophy. The rejection rate is 97%. So it's a journal that all the top philosophers are trying to get into. And I'd written something at graduate school that got published there. I published another one in there, too, while I was still in grad school. So I started having success. And a lot of the papers I wrote, like, I wrote a paper about just different things that interested me. I wrote a paper about the birth of fiction. I was very interested in some of Plato's dialogues as being better described as falling within the genre of fiction than a philosophy. And that got published. Basically, almost everything I wrote, every term paper in grad school actually got published somewhere. Anyway, brief version was after being a disaster academically, institutionally, I got this chance to go to Oxford, where I was able to accelerate my learning there. That person from Princeton had been following me, and had seen my publications pop up on her radar screen. So she invited me to go to Princeton to spend a postdoc year there after Oxford.

Then I went to Stanford, where I had my first job, and then got recruited to come back east, where I'm from.

Zach Rausch

John Tomasi spent 25 years at Brown University as a highly distinguished academic and professor before becoming inaugural President of Heterodox Academy. Part of the conversation we include here also dealt with philosophy and matters of faith. John is Catholic. Zohar is Jewish.

John Tomasi

When I was in grad school, I left Catholicism entirely as a superstitious sub-moronic belief system that whatever people who hadn't become educated would know. My professors at Oxford and other places, they weren't serious Catholics. And it was only later in my life that I came to realize that those deep things that the philosophers that I thought the philosophers were studying were not deep things at all. That in fact, becoming a philosopher for me, in many ways was a turning away from the

things that actually were the deep questions in life. And when, some years ago, when my wife Amy, became very ill, she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer when we had young children, and she almost died several times. But when Amy first became ill, we happened to be walking by a Carmelite monastery, just women, just nuns, and we went in and started going there on a regular basis to sit in. And I started to meet these nuns, and I eventually became very close to them. And when I returned to my faith primarily because of them. But the little bit that I wanted to mention is that these Carmelite nuns, they're very involved in the community that is the world of action, the world that we're in right now, the world that I'm in, for example, trying to change a difficult set of institutions.

And yet for them, they would receive prayer cards from people who are sick or in need of help in various ways, but they would never venture out from the monastery to be involved in the communities. Instead, as they put it, they interacted with the world on the level of prayer. So they would collect these prayer cards, for example, the one for Amy and her ovarian cancer and the pain my family and I were going through. And they would react to that by and they would attend to that by going to their cells and simply praying for us. That's my religious faith, my sense of Catholicism is very tied to their worldview and the way they act. It's not reason, it's not individuality, it's nothing to do with Liberty, I don't think. What they do in that cell is something deeply mystical, deeply lonely. Often, they would tell me often that they would go and try to pray for Amy, but God would not come to them, and they would sit there like in a desert waiting for God to come, so they could try to help Amy on the level of prayer, but God would deny them even that.

And still they would wait and sit for God to come, to give them a chance to try to pray. And that's just a fascinating way to think about agency in the world. And it's so different than the world we live in. I'm in a world now, with Heterodox Academy, where I'm trying to help our organization improve the quality of universities that are desperately in need of help. I know they are, but I can't just sit in my library and beam good attentions, wait for the God of the University system to come to me and listen to me and hear my prayer, that we start listening to each other better and speaking more bravely and more openly and become a real community of learners like we should be. I have to actually pack up my bags and go back down to New York and meet with people and start trying to change the organization and activate people to do and take on certain battles, battles which are in themselves often very difficult, but ones that need to be waged. I think if we care about things in this world.

Zohar Atkins

That was very deep and very moving. I think there's like sort of an activist culture, and generally like a capitalist culture, of trying to make things better, more efficient, more productive. A lot of emphasis on victory. And if you don't succeed, you're a failure. And I think there's a certain religious or mystical tradition. You might accuse it of being quietist, which is, in some sense the opposite view that you're not going to succeed. Life is fundamentally frail, vulnerable. It's suffering. But there's something to be learned from that experience.

John Tomasi

You know, after my father died, I remember my mother, maybe I made this up, but I just think it's true and it motivates so much of what I do in my life. I remember her saying to me at nighttime that, "Life is short, johnny, what difference are you going to make in this world?" And what I remembered was that for years when she would say that to me at nighttime sitting on my bed I would just hear the first part, "Life is short," that reminded me that my father had died and it was an icy dagger in my heart. But later on, as I grew a little older, I started to hear the second part of that. "What difference are you going to make in this world" given that life is short? And I really feel that way, and that's very much how I live. But I do try to think that part of the mystery of life does involve the fact, crucially, that here we are now with a short period of time with the whole world that we can visibly see out there with problems that we know are real, that are identifiable issues that we could, if you wanted to work on, address and apply ourselves to.

To try to improve the world a little bit.

Zach Rausch

John Tomasi speaking with Zohar Atkins on the podcast Meditations with Zohar. If you enjoyed this special episode, subscribe, and listen to more thought-provoking ideas on [Heterodox Out Loud](#). To hear more from John Tomasi, join us at our 2022 Heterodox Academy Conference in Denver this June. We'll be joined by hundreds of members and friends and fantastic speakers. Get details at [HeterodoxAcademy.org](#). Thanks to Davies content for producing this podcast and to the wonderful Kara Boyer on our communications team. I'm Zach Rausch. Until next time.