

Face 2 Face with Mark Kingwell

David Peck Live

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Episode 18

Mark talks about vigorous debate, the keystone to intellectual life, polemics, the problem with ideology and why he still enjoys James Bond movies.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Abtgd5R98Bg>

<https://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/face2face-with/mark-kingwell-bzfp3j1vXdr/>

David: Welcome to Face to Face. This is a show about change and about what's next. It's a show that wants to ask questions, peel back the layers of our average, everyday experience, and go beyond scratching the surface. We interview amazing people with incredible ideas and stories who have done wild, weird, and wonderful things. Remember that imagination shared create collaboration, and collaboration creates community, and community. inspires social change. I'm David Peck, and this is Face to Face. Welcome to Face to Face, and today's guest is Mark Kingwell from the University of Toronto. He's a Canadian professor of philosophy and he's been working at U of T for well, I'm not exactly sure how many years, but I know he's published quite a few books including a civil tongue dreams of millennium better living the world we want articles with interesting and wonderful titles like Interpretation dialogue and the just citizen mad people and I don't idealogues the plain truth about common sense Which I definitely want to talk with about so thank you for joining me here today Mark.

Mark: My pleasure. Thanks for having me on.

David: Yeah, I was thrilled that you responded to my e-mail so quickly, so thanks for that.

Mark: It's one of my perverse incentives is to try to get to inbox zero, which I have actually done a few times, but I realize that it's futile. It's kind of pathology.

David: It's a bit of a pox e-mail on society, isn't it?

Mark: Well, you know, I was just reading a little passage by Douglas Rushkoff, who's been a friend of mine for many years, and he published a book last year called Present Shock. And he said the reason people have this problem with e-mail is that they see it as storage rather than flow. And he said his solution to e-mail is to see it as a kind of stream of things that are going by and you respond to certain things and pick up on others and you let others ride. I can't do, I guess I'm just too task oriented. I see my inbox as a kind of to-do list.

David: Well, that's, yeah.

Mark: Everyone says that's the road to madness, but, well, if you're mad, what are you gonna do? You can't do that.

David: Well, if that's your starting point, why not, right? Yeah. I have a friend who probably has, and I'd have to double check on this with a phone call later, but I bet you he's in the 12 to 13,000 range of emails in his inbox. And speaking of a pathway to map, I'd go out of my mind. I would jump off the old Islington Bridge.

Mark: Yeah, I think that's not flow anymore. That's drowned or being drowned or something.

David: That's right. That's right. Well, Mark, so I'm gonna just, what grabbed my interest for this podcast interview was a review that you recently wrote on a new book by Curtis White. And I'm hoping we can chat a little bit about it. But it was an article out of the Globe and Mail on July, sorry, June 14th, wow, June 14th, so over a month ago. Taking on scientism's big bullies, Hitchens, Dawkins, and Pinker. So, I mean, for those of you out there listening, it's a great review. Try to grab it. It's still online. Sometimes the Globe will pull these things down, but it's wonderful. It's funny. It's very funny, actually, and insightful, but so can you tell me a little bit more, Mark, about why are these guys, or why are you viewing these guys as bullies?

Mark: Well, I don't, and I, that's really White's idea that they're bullies. And I didn't write that headline. This is one of the things that you constantly have to tell people is that headlines are written by people you never meet and don't even know. Right.

David: Very good.

Mark: I reviewed the book sympathetically, but not uncritically. And that in itself seemed like too much attention or approval because there was a maelstrom of... vile anonymous comments attacking me, attacking White. It's really kind of amazing. Those are the bullies. I mean, those are the online anonymous commenters are the real bullies. I think of all those, the cases that White brings together are actually quite distinct, and I didn't have time to go into this. So, you know, Christopher Hitchens, who I knew slightly, He was a polemicist, not a polemic. He wanted to argue. But he also knew that he wasn't a philosopher either. He wasn't trying to defend a consistent and clear position at every moment. He was going after what he saw as depredation. And his kind of aggressive argumentative atheism, I don't really have a problem with. I had more of a problem with his stance on the Iraq war. With Dawkins, I think now that he has moved on from the earliest stuff, which, you know, the meme book, *Self as James*, which I think is brilliant, has now moved into, I think, a more kind of untenable position where he seems to see himself as always right about everything, and that's a problem. Pinker is, I think, probably a good popularizer, and he's a target of whites because he stands for the sort of world-devouring neuroscience. neuroscience is the explanation of everything from creativity to monogamy to lack of monogamy and so on and so on. So White's book is itself a polemic and I wanted to give it the proper due, which is that... There should be some pushback on this, and not just from people who are religious believers.

David: Well, I was going to say, is white an evangelical? Is he a Catholic?

Mark: No, he's an atheist. He's an atheist, and so am I. And I think what happens when you have these debates is you try to not stake out middle ground, but just have a nuanced position where you say, I'm an atheist, but I don't think that it's true to say that religion has brought no value to the world. I mean, that's just a crazy claim. Or I'm somebody who's worried about scientism in the form, say, of big pharma, but I'm not against science. You know, I mean, that's crazy, right? But you try to say those kind of... two-step things, and you get immediately boxed into one side or the other because this is the rhetorical world in which we currently live.

David: So that's an interesting comment. I want to come back to this whole atheist and science sort of dialogue here, but why do we seem to lean towards this polarization of everything?

Mark: Yeah. Well, I'm tempted to offer neuroscientific explanation.

David: Which is very funny, yes.

Mark: You know, when I think of the particular pathologies of debate, which has really been my concern for a long time, from my earliest work trying to defend political dialogue and political virtues like civility and respect. I really think that there's something key to the diffusion of responsibility that comes with anonymity. And that's why I think comments boards are by and large a blight, because they encourage costless attack. there's nothing wrong with vigorous debate, absolutely nothing. It's a keystone to intellectual life in many ways. But you have to take responsibility. You have to be accountable for the things you do. And if you launch an attack, you have to be prepared to defend the fact that you launched it. This is why I find it bizarre that the rhetoric immediately heats up because there's this diffusion of responsibility plus the usual incentive to get the better of the other side. So I talked about this in my last collection of essays about how Incivility is a kind of what economists would call a collective action problem. Everybody's behaving from a narrow sense of what makes rational sense to them, self-interested, rational sense. And then everybody ends up losing because in pursuing their own individual advantage, the whole scene of dialogue or discourse becomes a kind of cesspool. So that's a different kind of non-neuroscientific explanation. I guess the neuroscientific explanation would be something like, you know, people really like to vent their violence, and if they can convince themselves that they're sounding smart when they do it, then even more so.

David: Right. Why do you think scientists, or some of these types of scientists, are so dogmatic in their approach to this, I guess, what some are calling new atheism?

Mark: Yeah, I want to be clear on this, that Unlike White, I don't think that this is a problem of science. I think this is a problem of ideology. And when that ideology gets allied with things like cultural interest or financial interest or both, then that's when you get the bullying. And moreover, this is something that Curtis White just barely touches on, though he does mention it, you get a kind of political and social power, which is disproportionate to the intellectual contribution. This is not helped by the fact that, say, in my own discipline of philosophy, a lot of people would like to sort

of see themselves as scientists and they think of their work in those terms. Whereas I come from a philosophical tradition that's more, you might say, text-based or even literary. I mean, I see this as a conversation which is ongoing. And it's inherently anti-ideological because it has no endpoint, it has no final sense of being right. It's constantly bringing its own existence into question.

David: So do you see all of this? And I'm kind of embracing, you know, we're on radio here, but do you see all of this as I embrace the room here as a conversation?

Mark: I mean, are you asking me if I'm a kind of radical anti-realist? Is that the question? I won't be sure what you're asking.

David: I don't think that is the question. I think, you know, is it Is it relational? Is it, at the risk of sounding trite, is it all about relationships? Is it about community? Is it about dialogue? Is it about working through the issues together rather than standing on one side of the debate and saying, here we are and planting my epistemological flag in the ground?

Mark: Right, yes, I do think that. And the best scientists I know, all the good scientists I know, think the same kind of thing. They say, there's a reason there's a difference between doing physics and doing chemistry. It might be the same object in some general philosophical sense, but if you look at how it reacts to forces in motion versus its composition based on the periodic table, you're looking at it in different ways. There's nothing wrong with doing both. In fact, we need to do both. and all of it and and we can we could I could add you know an ontologist from my discipline would say well you know the fact that there is an object at all is kind of interesting let's talk about that you know right right so these are ways of going on these are ways of deepening the human experience relating to each other as you say exploring the you know the profound and mysterious gift of linguisticity that we are suspended in language in this this kind of I don't know, language itself fails when you try to talk about it.

David: Well, that's, yeah, it's a pretty marvelous thought, actually.

Mark: And inescapable, and from our own position, a priori. You know, we are thrown into language. As Martin Heidegger put it, language speaks to us rather than the other way around. You know, we sometimes delude ourselves, or for short periods of time, for efficiency's sake, we think of language as a tool. You know, I'm going to issue an order perform an utterance that does something. But for the most part, and in fact, always, it's language that is really sort of throwing us around the world rather than the other way around.

David: Right, right. I remember quite a few years ago reading a piece by Dawkins, and I think it was in the *Skeptical Inquirer* or something along those lines, and I believe it was called *The Improbability of God*, and he just went on this emotive attack, basically, And I remember finishing it and thinking, wow, and this guy is considered to be one of the most important thinkers of our time. Now maybe I'm overstating it, but I was really quite stunned by that. And I just, I remember thinking then, wow, did this guy go to some sort of parochial school where he was beaten with a bamboo

nick? Like, where does this anger come from? Where does this... And even Hitchens, I've in the past watched him and a few others, and there's just this deep anger there that is I find perplexing.

Mark: Well there there are good reasons for some of it certainly you know their great wickedness has been wrought in the name of God well indeed yeah yeah no doubt yeah absolutely and and maybe more specifically institutional pathologies that created the opportunity for you know priests to abuse children over many years these these are things that have to be openly faced I don't think I don't think anybody gets much out of one level of fervor or immunity from challenge, from rational challenge, which is another way to define an ideology, something which cannot be falsified. You don't get any traction by meeting one ideology with another. And I think that's what has happened to at least part of the atheism debate. I want to say part of because, you know, I still think Sam Harris, for example, is a thoughtful guy. But I'm just, you know, just to put it on the other side, for a variety of reasons. Among them, I was at a conference at a Catholic university in Australia recently, and we got talking about G.K. Chesterton.

David: Yes.

Mark: Most people probably know as the author of the Father Brown mystery stories, or maybe there's his political thriller called *The Man Who Was Thursday*. But he was, in his own time, best known as a Christian apologist. And I'm reading his book called *Orthodoxy*.

David: Oh, yeah, yeah.

Mark: Which is a bracing, I mean, you know, as a philosopher and an atheist, I'm reading it and I'm silently finding what I think are the weak spots in his many arguments, but it's an ingenious and witty and very, very persuasive book. And it has the right tone, I think, which is, yes, there's some mockery. There's a lot of paradox, which is Chesterton style. There's a lot of... appeals to common sense and to things that we can all recognize as the best parts of ourselves. And it just, you realize it comes from another age, that he could have a polemic, an ongoing polemic with George Bernard Shaw, who was an unbeliever, and that yet the two of them were good friends and that they could engage in these ways. witty, high-spirited and very, very serious but playful debates and everybody wins.

David: Everybody wins. Yeah, that's a great way to look at it actually, everybody wins. I saw about 15 years ago at the Shaw Festival two actors, Chesterton and Shaw on stage and basically having an argument and it was part of their lunchtime series, which I don't think they do anymore and it was absolutely marvelous. It was about 45 minutes long and it was and I wish I could recommend it to others. Anyway, I'm glad to hear you're reading that, that's awesome. He's an incredibly quotable guy, isn't he? Yeah, absolutely. He's up there with Oscar Wilde in my opinion.

Mark: I know, and he's got great lines about Oscar Wilde, originally Wilde in style. So yeah, every other sentence practically could be an epigram.

David: Can I ask you one more question about atheism and so on? Do you think, and I'm gonna ask you it either way, you can choose to answer it a few. if you want to, but do you think that nihilism follows from atheism? I did read a review of, hmm, that was a review, an article in Harper's, now I'm just going from memory, not long ago, and the writer of this particular piece suggested that what he, as an atheist, he was an atheist, but his trouble with some of these guys that were railing against religion, they were left with nothing. And where do you go from there? Do you go to mind-altering drugs? Do you go to some other kind of addiction? Where do you find meaning? And I think his answer was film, art, and literature. Have you reflected on that at all?

Mark: A lot. I think I recall the piece, it was actually a review essay of, among other books, Alain de Botton's recent book about religion, which was sort of shallow defensive secular nothingness so he's he's another guy who's not doing the unbelieving cause any favors um for different reasons uh I think we have to be careful to define what nihilism is I I have always been persuaded by Nietzsche's definition which is roughly that nihilism isn't the absence of meaning it's just the fact not just it is the fact that all the meaning there is is of human creation and um That really links up to my earlier point about the language upgrade, if you like. I mean, that's where meaning resides. Meaning resides in the exchanges that we make discursively in every form that we've contrived to make them. So there's no lack of meaning. I mean, that's not our problem. Our problem is that there may be... some of us are persuaded that unfortunately there is no absolute meaning, no supernatural meaning. Right. So what that means is at once very, very chastening, very humbling, and on the other hand, very, very awesome, because it's decisively up to us and only us to make the meanings and to make good ones and interesting ones rather than bad ones and dumb ones. So I take it as a challenge rather than as something to be despairing over. And the aesthetic answer is right, but it's only partly right, because there are other things that we need to do with meaning besides, say, divert ourselves or entertain ourselves. And the greatest art, of course, points to this. We need to question and deepen our self-understanding. We need to think about what kinds of gifts we have received from the past and what kinds of legacies we want to bestow on the future. We have to think of the direction and purpose of what is within our control, our singular lives. I mean, these are traditional philosophical questions, but they gain a kind of urgency, I think, a really important urgency from the sense that There is just this life, and whatever we make, we have to make ourselves and take responsibility.

David: I want to get to your essay, Building, Dwelling, Acting, before we end the podcast, because I want to talk a little bit about that idea of freedom, choice, and responsibility, and about what you just commented on about how we need to think about these things. We need to sort of draw this meaning out of, I guess, life. And so I'm yesterday with a friend at The Light Box watching The Act of Killing, Joshua Oppenheimer's new film. And it's a difficult, difficult piece. Second time I've seen it, actually, I saw it at the film festival last year. So you've got this very dark, comical, macabre film about genocide, and you walk out of it thinking, Okay, that's gonna

be seen by about 100 people. You know, when you, you know, gifted in hyperbole, Mark. But it's going to be seen by quite a few people, but is it only really going to be preaching to the converted? And so Eden and I, on the ride home on the train, we're thinking and reflecting on this, thinking, how do you get people engaged? How do you get people to think about these things? I noticed online you were speaking recently on the true value and purpose of post-secondary education. You've written an essay on common sense. I think all of these things are connected. I guess my question to you is, and I've got a dozen or so around this idea, but how do you get people to care about this stuff? How do you get folks to start thinking through these issues and saying, I'm not going to go to James Bond tonight, but I'm actually going to go see Oppenheimer's film, *The Act of Killing*?

Mark: Right. Well, first of all, I guess I want to say that doesn't have to be an either/or choice. Okay, fair enough. I will certainly go see the new James Bond movie. Even the Punishing Roger Moore ones, I've been to them all. So there's that. I mean, we are eccentric and varied creatures. And I sometimes get strange looks from my colleagues, especially, who have maybe more traditional clusters of interests around academic life, you know, classical music, for example, because I like I like pro football. I like baseball. I like fishing. I like, you know, I wrote a book about cocktails. It's a rich life. I mean, the gift of being here is so amazing that it would be crazy. I mean, to use the religious language that I was brought up in, it would be a sin not to take advantage of every single possible good thing. And the good things sometimes include the painful things, so the things that stretch us. But to answer your question, I guess as a teacher. Basically, the answer is any technique that works is a good one. You know, it's the part of philosophical life where I'm a total pragmatist. If you can lever something with a technique, then it's good. And I mean everything from jokes and YouTube videos and sort of standard lectures, you know, entertainment value to Sometimes the personal narrative is the thing that hooks people, just like it is in politics, often, maybe too often. But if you have your eye on the prize, if you know that what you're trying to do is get someone to not necessarily think differently, but just think through, then you can use all kinds of techniques. And that's just in the classroom. I mean, you mentioned some of my range of written stuff. I try to write wherever they'll have me, if it's a newspaper or a magazine. or if it's doing this kind of thing that'll be on the internet, then that's all good because it's all about the ideas that I think are important and the ways of thinking, you know, critical thinking that I think are important.

David: Is that what the true value of post-secondary education is, kind of in a cracked nutshell? It's about thinking, it's about asking questions.

Mark: Yes, I mean, it's such a truistic kind of answer that I hesitate sometimes to make it, but it is the right answer, and it's the right answer for a reason, not because you know, so-called critical thinking skills will help you achieve career success. Right, that may be true, right?

David: Sure, sure.

Mark: But that's not the reason that it's valuable. It's valuable because it's part of the human experience. It's the conversation with, you know, as the other cliché goes, the best that has been sought and written. And disputing itself, the idea of best as part of that, right? Say, this canon versus that canon, these are all the questions that education raises. One thing I sometimes say, and this is a very, it's not original to me by at least 2 1/2 millennia. One of the ways that you get people out of their comfort zone or their patterns, their comfortable patterns of thinking is by sly mechanisms. You know, it's almost a kind of seduction. where you just take something and maybe twist it into a new light, or you get them thinking that they're learning one thing and it turns out that you wanted them to learn something else all together.

David: And that's what's so brilliant, isn't it, about a well thought out question?

Mark: Yes, I mean the Socratic is...

David: Dialogue, yeah.

Mark: That's what we call it, and Socrates... At least as portrayed by Plato, which is, you know, more invented than real, but.

David: Yes, yes.

Mark: What comes down to us. That Socrates, not always, you know, he's pretty declarative a lot of the time, and a lot of his questions are feigned, but it's that process, you know, it's that I'm leading you along, and not because I necessarily know the answer myself, but maybe precisely because I don't either, you know? True devotion to the doctrine of ignorantia.

David: Well, and being comfortable with uncertainty on some level.

Mark: Yeah, oh yeah.

David: I watched Religulous recently, Bill Maher's film. Have you seen it?

Mark: No, I haven't seen it.

David: So Bill Maher's a pretty... I mean, he's a polemicist, I suppose. He's an entertainer. He's a funny guy, I mean, all of those things, but again, there's this anger that seems to come out in the film as he rails against Christianity and Catholicism for about 50 minutes and then starts to take other religions apart. What I find, or at least one of the thoughts I had while I was watching is, again, where does this anger come from? And is he really ***** *** about the fact that he doesn't know and just wishes religious folk would say the same damn thing? I don't know either. Instead of this, again, saying, Hey, you just got to go here to this text or you've got to look here for the evidence. You know, is that really what we're quibbling about here?

Mark: I mean, this is the problem with a lot of the recent atheist material, I think, is that it takes too easy a target. I mean, it's very easy to target biblical literalism or fundamentalism of various kinds, very easy to target people who believe that you know if you disagree with them you're going to hell and so on. These are not the religious people I know. I mean I'll tell you frankly I was raised in a Catholic family and that's not my parents you know even though they are still believers and I went to this conference recently which was quite interesting because I think I was the only unbeliever among the speakers and and it was it was genuine rigorous intellectual

exchange. Now of course there were a couple of wackos there and you're going to get them. But I, see actually a lot more thoughtfulness. People are not, this is in a way, it's the same mistake that demagogues make or people who think that they should, they can manipulate democratic politics. They don't take people seriously enough. They think somehow that people are just voters who can be manipulated. And then every time they manage to manipulate them, they get reinforced. But people come to believe things for all kinds of complicated reasons. And unless you start from there, from a kind of fundamental respect, then I think you're always going to be making mistakes. You may win. You may win the election. You may win the argument. But you're going to win for losing because you haven't respected the other.

David: Years ago when I started at York, I was seeing a specialist, a doctor, and she was asking me all these questions, what are you doing with your life, stress, what do you drink and what do you smoke and all these different things. Oh, I just started to study philosophy, kind of part-time while I'm working. Oh, well that in the quarter is going to get you a phone call.

Mark: Nice.

David: Exactly.

Mark: From your doctor.

David: This was a doctor. And I mean, I guess she thought she was being funny at the time. And I have to tell you, I probably laughed. But Mark, I've told this story a hundred times. I've written about it in a small article I had published a while, about five, six years ago at a university newspaper. Why in the heck did you get into philosophy? Clearly, you thought it was going to give you more than a phone call, as did I.

Mark: Yeah, by the way, it takes 50 cents to make a paper.

David: That's right.

Mark: If you can even find a payphone there. That's right. Disappearing urban. You know, of course I've had my share of those encounters and I've written about them too. I wrote about one recently that's also the collection I mentioned published last fall called *Unruly Voices*. And it was a judge at a dinner party. And she asked me what I did and I told her and I thought, you know, Perhaps at this stage in my career, when I've published a number of books and won some prizes and done these things, and I seem to be in some sense a success, I won't have to deal with this. And she deflected it one generation. She said, you teach philosophy. Do you ever tell your students what the hell they're going to do with that? So now it's my fault, right? And I realized, oh yeah, so you're never not to blame. If you choose to study it, you're to blame for being foolish. If you choose to teach it, you're to blame for being somehow an enabler of foolishness.

David: That's right, misleading others.

Mark: Yeah. You know, the only answer to that question is, it goes back to the one about liberal education in general. I mean, I got into philosophy because I loved it, and I continue to love it, and I made my practical choices they were still practical

choices, but they're like practical choices when you're married and in love. You make them and you have to force an encounter with realities like mortgage rates and things like that, but you make them in a context of love. You make them out of your desire to keep the beloved, you know, in a place of love. And I use this language sometimes when people are like, you're talking about all these dusty texts. But to me, it's a living thing. The philosophical tradition is a living tradition. It lives and breathes in all of us who, and I don't just mean academic. It's anybody who picks up, anybody who thinks a question through, it joins us together. Now I'm sounding like Obi-Wan Kenobi.

David: A little more like Yoda, I say.

Mark: I got my words in the wrong order if I was trying to be Yoda. So that's the answer. I mean, I kept doing it for as long as I reasonably could without going into debt. And unfortunately, most of my students... are going to be in debt, whether they like it or not. And then by stages, I was able to, I feel very blessed. I was able to keep up.

David: Well, I think just doing it because you love it, I think is marvelous. I think that's a great response. Just, I want to chat with you about, I swear we're going to talk about the essay *Billy Dwelling and Acting* in a second, but can you tell, just... Can you tell me what the plain truth about common sense really is? I mean, I laughed out loud when I saw that title on your online CV, and I just thought, oh, that's great. He's going to wrap it up for me.

Mark: Well, the plain truth about common sense, to sweep away all the subtlety of my analysis, just to the conclusion, the plain truth about common sense is that there isn't any. So it's a kind of, you know, G.E. Moore has this famous defense of common sense, which was very convincing to a certain kind of philosopher. And that was the thing I attacked in that. And I took up what you might call, if it's not pejorative, a sort of postmodern position on common sense. Common sense is a kind of rhetorical move. It's not something that's sort of lying out there waiting for us to access it. It's not as funny as the title. That's right, that's right.

David: So when we say, well, you know, come on, Mark, it's just common sense. I mean, are we talking in a practical, I mean, I guess that's a moral sense, but are we talking about some sort of misunderstanding about morality?

Mark: Often, often indeed we are. And in fact, sometimes worse, we're committing ourselves to a kind of ideological move because You're not just making a claim with the idea that it might be a defensible one. You're making a claim in a way that puts it beyond any further challenge. It's what everybody believes or what we all know to be the case, the taken for granted. And so that that notion of common sense is actually the great ideological enemy of philosophy because it's it's that all those ways of thinking that think that they're done thinking. And, you know, a philosopher's job is to really puncture that certainty, that we all know what we think about this. So, that, you know, the article itself had a narrow focus, but as a kind of way of going on, going after the presumptions of common sense, I think that's philosophy's job always.

David: In 2000, you wrote, or maybe you wrote it much earlier than in 2000, but it's published in *Queen's Quarterly*, an essay called *Building, Dwelling, and Acting*. I'm just going to quote your opening line, which I think is so wonderful, quote, Our urban surroundings cannot help but reflect the kind of society we live in, and affect profoundly the mental architecture of our consciousness as citizens. Could you tell me what you're referring to as mental architecture, and then maybe comment a little bit on what our current mental architecture is?

Mark: Yeah, I mean, first of all, I'd like to say that article from 2000, probably one of the earliest Well, let's see, I'm trying to get the dates straight, but certainly one of the earliest of my turns from what you might call purely abstract political theory to what I sometimes think of as concrete political theory with a focus on urban and especially architecture. And so I've written a lot in that vein since then, including a book just about the Empire State Building in New York, and a kind of series of investigations or um I don't even know what they call the meditations I guess uh that I called concrete reveries which is about um what I the subtitle is *Consciousness in the city* so um that article was kind of a promissory note for the books that came later oh I see okay yeah and uh what I thought what I what I meant there and what I found since is uh among other things getting to know um really interesting Architects and Urban theorists who uh obviously know way more about how buildings and cities work than most of us do. And that's just fascinating to be around those people. But also to see just how invigorating, reinvigorating this is for political theory to think of it in terms of what we all experience every day. Right. Sidewalks, walls, concrete, traffic flow, you know, stores, offices, homes, rooms, corridors, chairs, tables, I mean, really basic stuff, concrete stuff. and to think about how that might be part of our political conversation or political consciousness. So that's the idea of the mental architecture. I was playing on the word architecture, of course. And I don't mean architecture in the strict cognitive science sense. I should be clear. I'm not talking about how the brain functions. I'm talking about the contours of thought and how we imagine ourselves.

David: And sort of implying ultimately, I think, that these things, these pieces that we encounter each and every day are in fact affecting the way we do things, how we interact with others, how we make decisions about politics for instance, or as you call it a phrase, beautiful phrase, civic optimism. You've got wonderful phrases throughout this essay. So did you draw from Foucault on for some of this?

Mark: Oh yeah, I mean, among many others. In fact, I'd say the The richest, the deepest influences is one of the oldest, Aristotle. I mean, Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics* is already thinking about this. He's thinking about how the specifics, he doesn't talk about architecture as such, but how the specifics of the way we live, you know, the concrete details of the way we live are politics. That is politics. Not institutional or electoral politics, but what we would today call the political, right? And so when you start mining that insight, you find this really rich vein of thought that runs through all kinds of people in the early modern period. You know, I talk a lot about Descartes in my book, *Concrete Reveries*. And then through into the

20th century, you mentioned Foucault. Bachelor Arts, the Poetics of Space is probably known to a lot of your listeners as a high watermark of this kind of thinking. And then a lot of more recent stuff, it's really, really rich. And And you can keep going back to it because there's, you know, philosophers, especially political philosophers, have by and large paid very little attention to this kind of concrete approach.

David: So to root it really maybe simply, well maybe not simply, but a manager who, you know, is in charge of say 10 or 15 or 20 people in an office could actually speak volumes by installing glass in the walls and leaving his or her doors open more often than not.

Mark: It's a perfect kind of example, and we all know these things 'cause we witnessed them, right? We saw the growth of cubicle farms and, yes, cubicle farmers. We've seen other things in the workplace, which is a particular area of recent study, I should say. I've been thinking a lot about work and idleness. But we've seen how leisure things are kind of folded into the work scene. So you have slides at the Google office, for example, and video games you can play any time, and it's always casual Friday. And all of these things are part of the fabric of everyday life, but they all have meanings in terms of how we choose to spend our time or sell our time, sell our labor. You don't have to be an orthodox Marxist to see that there's all kinds of things going on that are not just choices, they are environments that we are reacting to. So if you expand that notion to think about, say, democratic politics, it's a really good question to ask of any city, you know, what does the actual fabric of the city do to the democratic politics there? You know, the public spaces, the transaction spaces, the various systems of circulation, you know, traffic and air and food and money and life and death for that matter. So I find this just kind of endlessly fascinating.

David: Well, I would agree. I remember reading Discipline and Punish, and it's a tough book to get through. I seem to remember that. It's quite a few years ago, and I've gone back to it a few times since, but it's it changed my life in some regards. From, I guess, an ideological perspective, just looking at the, panopticism and looking at the implications of things and how we're being watched and all this, and you're just going, Wow, this has to do with geometry. This has to do with, you know, how bizarre. And as I started to unpack it, you kind of can see it everywhere.

Mark: Yeah, and that's, the way Foucault uses Bentham's panopticon, which is really, as you say, it's geometry, it's a polygon. Polygonal design will give us this ability to have one person watch many, and then eventually have no people watch many because they watch themselves. And it's rightly celebrated as an important intellectual moment when Foucault sort of nails that idea. You can quibble with the details, but he was right about a lot of stuff. There's more CCTV cameras.

David: That's right, yep.

Mark: Not so much in Toronto yet, but go to London. London has highest per capita, a number of them.

David: I was reading Adbusters recently, and I got this great quote, and I just wanted to, we're gonna have to wrap it up soon, I think, but Mondrian believed that

if you made a picture that was without hierarchy, without foreground and background, center and periphery, that that picture could be a model for a better world. It sounds to me like that's what you're saying in this essay, that this is about being better people, this is about giving back, this is about making the right choices and the right decisions.

Mark: It's exactly right and I guess the one thing I would add to that is that for lots of good reasons, and this includes looking at what happens in urban design, people are skeptical of utopian schemes of large plans, you know, and everywhere from say Plato's Republic and Thomas Moore to Le Corbusier's new modernism. But it's important not to lose the spirit of the utopian moment. So you might describe my politics as anti-anti-utopian. I want to keep that spirit. You know, it's really the, it's the thing that you see in kind of neo-situationism of the Occupy movement, that regardless of what the lasting impact will be, we don't know what the lasting impact will be because it's a kind of gesture in the first instance. And that's where all of the best aspects of the political start. They start with that insistence on things being better, that we can do better.

David: Can I ask you one question about one of my favorite topics that I would love to chat with you at some other point down the road, and that's the key to all philosophy, wonder. I came across an essay that you wrote a little while back on Husserl's approach to wonder as this phenomenology of wonder, as you call it. Is it really the key to philosophy? And if so, what else do you think it can lead to? And the reason I ask the question is because I'm a new dad. I have a daughter that's five and a son that's seven. That just **** ** away with the questions they ask. are, you know, one of the greatest gifts they're giving me is, and it sounds really trite in a way and cliché, but they're allowing me to see the world in a new way, in a new light. And I've practiced sleight of hand magic for years, so this fascination with wonder, I just, I love this moment that we seem to somehow lose somewhere along the way, you know, violated by the education of our youth or something. Anyway, is it the key, and what else do you think it might lead to?

Mark: Well, I do believe it's the key, and I always like to quote, there's a passage from one of Plato's dialogues where Socrates says that he's referring to the fact that the Greek word for wonder is thalmazine, and he says, it was a good etymologist who made thalmos the father of Iris. And thalmos was one of the demigods, and that's where thalmazine comes from. Gives us our word, thalmaturge, which is, you know, a kind of fancy word for magician. Dungeons and Dragons geeks out there. I don't know that one. But that he gives rise to Iris, who is the bringer of life and the source of color. And so there's this nice idea that in its best possible form, that moment of wonder, which is actually kind of scary, right? I mean, we tend to focus on the pleasant notion of wonder, but wonder is unsettling because precisely it shows something we didn't expect to see. And then in Philosophers want to say, Well, we take that and we try to move it to wisdom or to enlightenment, but there's, and Bacon famously said, Wonder was broken science. He thought that wonder could get stalled, you know, so that you get... sort of trapped in the wondrous and you don't do the hard work. Right.

David: Well, that's kind of what Descartes actually thought at Wonder was dangerous, didn't he?

Mark: Did, and it's an interesting thing, partly because his focus was on trying to find the proper method for the new age. So he associated with befuddlement and manipulation and superstition and so on. And those are possible misuses, I want to say, of wonder. You know, we all know the, take the magician example, we all know the magician who's actually a charlatan, who's, you know, duping people, rather than in a kind of honest way, we want to say honestly— That's right, yeah, yeah. Where we're in on the joke because we take pleasure in not knowing how the illusion was created. So those are all different possible outcomes of wonder. But in the philosophical way, yeah, we, I mean, it's seeing some part of the world in a new way. And it's, I like to think it's what joins philosophy in that spirit with the best of art, you know, which can, as Arthur Dante put it, can transfigure the commonplace. That's wonderful. Take anything, including, of course, a, you know, a urinal or a Brillo box, and you can just... get people to look at it in a new way. And I think that's what genius is, the ability to get people to experience that kind of wonder.

David: Really poor segue here, but I'm going to close with a quote from your essay, Building, Dwelling, and Acting, just because I love it so much. This is a time to act as well as to think, or perhaps more accurately, it is a time to act in order that thought should come once more become possible. to uncover an activist discursive politics that is, as I shall put it, grimly utopian. That's just so wonderful, Mark. I love everything we've talked about here today. Thanks so much for being a guest. I've often felt doing these interviews that, wow, we've just barely scratched the surface. And that's something kind of offensive about that, but also something really quite wonderful about it. So thanks so much for your time. I really appreciate it.

Mark: It's been my pleasure, and I feel family. I always feel like, you know, we're just getting started when we haven't finished.

Episode 137

Professor Mark Kingwell talks about sharing your space, walking, why children are good philosophers and how all philosophical reflection begins in wonder.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1TKXD0Hrp-o>

<https://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/face2face-with/mark-kingwell-cblJ5DPo1Wg/>

David: Welcome to Face to Face. This is a show about change and about what's next. It's a show that wants to ask questions, peel back the layers of our average, everyday experience, and go beyond scratching the surface. We interview amazing people with incredible ideas and stories who have done wild, weird, and wonderful things. Remember that imagination shared create collaboration, and collaboration creates community, and community inspires social change. I'm David Peck, and this is Face to Face. Welcome to Face to Face, and today's guest is Mark Kingwell from the University of Toronto. He's a Canadian professor of philosophy, and he's been working at U of T for, well, I'm not exactly sure how many years, but I know he's published quite a few books, including *A Civil Tongue*, *Dreams of Millennium*, *Better Living*, *The World We Want*, articles with interesting and wonderful titles like *Interpretation*, *Dialogue*, and the *Just Citizen*, *Mad People*, and *Idealogues*, *The Plain Truth About Common Sense*, which I definitely want to talk with them about. So thank you for joining me here today, Mark.

Mark: Oh, my pleasure. Thanks for having me on.

David: Yeah, I was thrilled that you responded to my e-mail so quickly, so thanks for that.

Mark: It's one of my perverse incentives is to try to get to inbox zero, which I have actually done a few times, but I realize that it's futile. It's kind of pathology.

David: It's a bit of a pox e-mail on society, isn't it?

Mark: Well, you know, I was just reading a little passage by Douglas Rushkoff, who's been a friend of mine for many years, and he published a book last year called *Present Shock*. And he said the reason people have this A problem with e-mail is that they see it as storage rather than flow. And he said his solution to e-mail is to see it as a kind of stream of things that are going by and you respond to certain things and pick up on others and you let others ride. And I can't do that. I guess I'm just too task oriented. I see my inbox as a kind of to do list.

David: Well, that's yeah.

Mark: Everyone says that's the road to madness, but. If you're mad, what are you gonna do?

David: Well, if that's your starting point, why not, right? Yeah. I have a friend who probably has, and I'd have to double check on this with a phone call later, but I bet you he's in the 12 to 13,000 range of emails in his inbox. And speaking of a pathway to mad, I'd go out of my mind. I would jump off the old Islington Bridge.

Mark: Yeah, I think that's not slow anymore, that's drowned or being drowned or something.

David: That's right. Well, Mark, so I'm going to just— what grabbed my interest for this podcast interview was a review that you recently wrote on a new book by Curtis White. And I'm hoping we can chat a little bit about it. But it was an article out of the *Globe and Mail* on July— sorry, June 14th. Wow, June 14th, so over a month ago, *Taking on Scientism's Big Bullies*, Hitchens, Dawkins, and Pinker. So, I mean, for those of you out there listening, it's a great review. Try to grab it. It's still online.

Sometimes the globe will pull these things down, but it's wonderful. It's funny. It's very funny, actually, and insightful. So can you tell me a little bit more, Marco, about why are these guys, or why are you viewing these guys as bullies?

Mark: Well, I don't, and that's really White's idea, that they're bullies. And I didn't write that headline. This is one of the things that you constantly have to tell people is that headlines are written by people you never meet and don't even know. Right.

David: Very good.

Mark: I reviewed the book sympathetically, but not uncritically. And that in itself seemed like too much attention or approval because there was a maelstrom of... vile, anonymous comments attacking me, attacking White. It's really kind of amazing. Those are the bullies. I mean, those are the online anonymous commenters are the real bullies. I think of all those, the cases that White brings together are actually quite distinct, and I didn't have time to go into this. So, you know, Christopher Hitchens, who I knew slightly, He was a polemicist, not a bully. He wanted to argue. But he also knew that he wasn't a philosopher either. He wasn't trying to defend a consistent and clear position at every moment. He was going after what he saw as depredation. And his kind of aggressive argumentative atheism, I don't really have a problem with it. I had more of a problem with his stance on the Iraq war. Right. With Dawkins, I think now that he has moved on from the earliest stuff, which, you know, the meme book, *The Selfish Gene*, I think is brilliant, has now moved into, I think, a more kind of untenable position where he seems to see himself as always right about everything. And that's a problem. Pinker is, I think, probably a good popularizer, and he's a target of whites because he stands for the sort of world-devouring neuroscience. You know, neuroscience is the explanation of everything from creativity to monogamy to lack of monogamy and so on and so on. So White's book is itself a polemic and I wanted to give it the proper due, which is that... There should be some pushback on this, and not just from people who are religious believers.

David: Well, I was going to say, is white an evangelical? Is he a Catholic?

Mark: No, he's an atheist. He's an atheist, and so am I. And I think what happens when you have these debates is you try to not stake out middle ground, but just have a nuanced position where you say... I'm an atheist, but I don't think that it's true to say that religion has brought no value to the world. I mean, that's just a crazy claim. Or I'm somebody who's worried about scientism in the form, say, of big pharma, but I'm not against science, you know? I mean, that's crazy, right? But you try to say those kind of... two-step things, and you get immediately boxed into one side or the other because this is the rhetorical world in which we currently live.

David: So that's an interesting comment. I want to come back to this whole atheist and science sort of dialogue here, but why do we seem to lean towards this polarization of everything?

Mark: Yeah. Well, I'm tempted to offer a neuroscientific experience.

David: Which is very funny, yes.

Mark: You know, when I think of the particular pathologies of debate, which has really been my concern for a long time from my earliest work trying to defend political dialogue and political virtues like civility and respect. I really think that there's something key to the diffusion of responsibility that comes with anonymity. And that's why I think comments boards are by and large a blight, because they encourage costless attack. You know, there's nothing wrong with vigorous debate, absolutely nothing. It's the keystone to intellectual life in many ways. But you have to take responsibility. You have to be accountable for the things you do. And if you launch an attack, you have to be prepared to defend the fact that you launched it. This is why I find it bizarre that, you know, the rhetoric immediately heats up because there's this diffusion of responsibility plus the usual incentive to get the better of the other side. So I talk about this in my last collection of essays about how incivility is a kind of what economists would call a collective action problem. Everybody's behaving from a narrow sense of what makes rational sense to them, self-interested rational sense. And then everybody ends up losing because in pursuing their own individual advantage, the whole scene of dialogue or discourse becomes a kind of cesspool. So that's, you know, a different kind of non-neuroscientific explanation. I guess the neuroscientific explanation would be something like, you know, people really like to vent their violence. And if they can convince themselves that they're sounding smart when they do it, then even more so.

David: Right. Why do you think scientists, or some of these types of scientists, are so dogmatic in their approach to this, I guess, what some are calling new atheism?

Mark: Yeah, I want to be clear on this, that unlike White, I don't think that this is a problem of science. I think this is a problem of ideology. And when that ideology gets allied with things like cultural interest or financial interest or both, then that's when you get the bullying. And moreover, this is something that Curtis White just barely touches on, though he does mention it, you get a kind of political and social power, which is disproportionate to the intellectual contribution. This is not helped by the fact that, say, in my own discipline of philosophy, a lot of people would like to sort of see themselves as scientists and they think of their work in those terms. Whereas I come from a philosophical tradition that's more, you might say, text-based or even literary. I mean I see this as a conversation which is ongoing and it's inherently anti-ideological because it has no end point, it has no final sense of being right. It's constantly bringing its own existence into question.

David: So do you see all of this? And I'm kind of embracing, you know, we're on radio here, but do you see all of this as I embrace the room here as a conversation?

Mark: I mean, are you asking me if I'm a kind of radical anti-realist? Is that the question? I won't be sure what you're asking.

David: I don't think that is the question. I think, you know, is it Is it relational? Is it, you know, at the risk of sounding trite, you know, is it all about relationships? Is it about community? Is it about dialogue? Is it about working through the issues

together rather than, you know, standing on one side of the debate and saying, Here we are and planting my, you know, my epistemological flag in the ground?

Mark: Right. Yes, I do think that. And the best scientists I know, all the good scientists I know, think the same kind of thing. You know, they say, There's a reason there's a difference between doing physics and doing chemistry. It might be the same object in some general philosophical sense, but if you look at how it reacts to forces in motion versus its composition based on the periodic table, you're looking at it in different ways. There's nothing wrong with doing both. In fact, we need to do both.

David: Right.

Mark: And all of it, and we could, I could add, you know an ontologist from my discipline would say well you know the fact that there is an object at all is kind of interesting let's talk about that you know right right so these are ways of going on these are ways of deepening the human experience relating to each other as you say exploring the you know the profound and mysterious gift of linguisticity that we are suspended in language in this this kind of I don't know, you know, language itself fails when you try to talk about it.

David: Well, that's, yeah, it's a pretty marvelous thought actually.

Mark: And inescapable and from our own position, a priori. You know, we are thrown into language. As Martin Heidegger put it, language speaks to us rather than the other way around. You know, we sometimes delude ourselves, or for short periods of time, for efficiency's sake, we think of language as a tool. You know, I'm going to issue an order perform an utterance that does something. But for the most part, and in fact, always, it's language that is really sort of throwing us around the world rather than the other way around.

David: Right. I remember quite a few years ago reading a piece by Dawkins, and I think it was in the *Skeptical Inquirer* or something along those lines, and I believe it was called *The Improbability of God*, and he just went on this emotive attack, basically, And I remember finishing it and thinking, Wow, and this guy is considered to be one of the most important thinkers of our time. Now, maybe I'm overstating it, but I was really quite stunned by that. And I remember thinking, Wow, did this guy go to some sort of parochial school where he was beaten with a bamboo thick? Like, where does this anger come from? Where does this emotion... And even Hitchens, in the past, watched him and a few others, and there's just this deep anger there. is I find perplexing.

Mark: Well, there are good reasons for some of it, certainly. You know, great wickedness has been wrought in the name of God.

David: Well, indeed. Yeah, no doubt. Yeah, absolutely.

Mark: And maybe more specifically, institutional pathologies that created the opportunity for, you know, priests to abuse children over many years. These are things that have to be openly faced. I don't think anybody gets much out of one level of fervor or immunity from challenge, from rational challenge, which is another way to define an ideology, something which cannot be falsified. You don't get any traction by

meeting one ideology with another. And I think that's what has happened to at least part of the atheism debate. I want to say part of, because, you know, I still think Sam Harris, for example, is a thoughtful guy. But I'm just, you know, just to put it on the other side, for a variety of reasons. Among them, I was at a conference at a Catholic university in Australia recently, and we got talking about G.K. Chesterton.

David: Yes.

Mark: Most people probably know as the author of the Father Brown mystery stories, or maybe there's his political thriller called *The Man Who Was Thursday*. But he was, in his own time, best known as a Christian apologist. And I'm reading his book called *Orthodoxy*.

David: Oh, yeah, yeah.

Mark: Which is a bracing, I mean, you know, as a philosopher and an atheist, I'm reading it and I'm silently finding what I think are the weak spots in his many arguments, but it's an ingenious and witty and very, very persuasive book. And it has the right tone, I think, which is, yes, there's some mockery. There's a lot of paradox, which is Chesterton style. There's a lot of... appeals to common sense and to things that we can all recognize as the best parts of ourselves. And it just, you realize it comes from another age, that he could have a polemic, an ongoing polemic with George Bernard Shaw, who was an unbeliever, and that yet the two of them were good friends and that they could engage in these witty, high-spirited and very, very serious but playful debates and everybody wins.

David: Everybody wins. Yeah, that's a great way to look at it, actually. Everybody wins. I saw about 15 years ago at the Shaw Festival two actors, Chesterton and Shaw on stage and basically having an argument and it was part of their lunchtime series, which I don't think they do anymore and it was absolutely marvelous. It was about 45 minutes long and it was and I wish I could recommend it to others. Anyway, I'm glad to hear you're reading that. That's awesome. He's an incredibly quotable guy, isn't he?

Mark: Yeah, absolutely.

David: He's up there with Oscar Wilde in my opinion.

Mark: I know, and he's got great lines about Oscar Wilde, originally Wilde in style. So yeah, every other sentence practically could be an epigram.

David: Can I ask you one more question about atheism and so on? Do you think, and I'm going to ask you it either way, you can choose to answer it a few. if you want to, but do you think that nihilism follows from atheism? I did read a review of, hmm, that was a review, an article in *Harper's*, now I'm just going from memory, not long ago, and the writer of this particular piece suggested that what he, as an atheist, he was an atheist, but his trouble with some of these guys that were railing against religion, they were left with nothing. And where do you go from there? Do you go to mind-altering drugs? Do you go to some other kind of addiction? Or where do you find meaning? And I think his answer was film, art, and literature. Have you reflected on that at all?

Mark: A lot. I think I recall the piece, it was actually a review essay of, among other books, Alain de Botton's recent book about religion, which was sort of shallow

defensive secular nothingness so he's he's another guy who's not doing the unbelieving cause any favors for different reasons I think we have to be careful to define what nihilism is I have always been persuaded by Nietzsche's definition which is roughly that nihilism isn't the absence of meaning it's just the fact not just it is the fact that all the meaning there is is of human creation and That really links up to my earlier point about the language upgrade, if you like. I mean, that's where meaning resides. Meaning resides in the exchanges that we make discursively in every form that we've contrived to make them. So there's no lack of meaning. I mean, that's not our problem. Our problem is that there may be... Some of us are persuaded that unfortunately there is no absolute meaning, no supernatural meaning. Right. So what that means is at once very, very chastening, very humbling, and on the other hand, very, very awesome, because it's decisively up to us and only us to make the meanings and to make good ones and interesting ones rather than bad ones and dumb ones. So I take it as a challenge rather than as something to be despairing over. And the aesthetic answer is right, but it's only partly right, because there are other things that we need to do with meaning besides, say, divert ourselves or entertain ourselves. And the greatest art, of course, points to this. We need to question and deepen our self-understanding. We need to think about what kinds of gifts we have received from the past and what kinds of legacies we want to bestow on the future. We have to think of the direction and purpose of what is within our control, our singular lives. I mean, these are traditional philosophical questions, but they gain a kind of urgency, I think, a really important urgency from the sense that There is just this life, and whatever we make, we have to make ourselves and take responsibility.

David: I want to get to your essay, Building, Dwelling, Acting, before we end the podcast, because I want to talk a little bit about that idea of freedom, choice, and responsibility, and about what you just commented on about how we need to think about these things. We need to sort of draw this meaning out of, I guess, life. And so I'm yesterday with a friend at The Light Box watching The Act of Killing, Joshua Oppenheimer's new film. And it's a difficult, difficult piece. Second time I've seen it, actually, I saw it at the film festival last year. So you've got this very dark, comical, macabre film about genocide, and you walk out of it thinking, Okay, that's gonna be seen by about 100 people. You know, when you, you know, skipped it in hyperbole, Mark. But it's going to be seen by quite a few people, but is it only really going to be preaching to the converted? And so Eden and I, on the ride home on the train, we're thinking and reflecting on this, thinking, how do you get people engaged? How do you get people to think about these things? I noticed online you were speaking recently on the true value and purpose of post-secondary education. You've written an essay on common sense. I think all of these things are connected. I guess my question to you is, and I've got a dozen or so around this idea, but how do you get people to care about this stuff? How do you get folks to start thinking through these issues and saying, I'm not going to go to James Bond tonight, but I'm actually going to go see Oppenheimer's film, The Act of Killing?

Mark: Well, first of all, I guess I want to say that doesn't have to be an either/or choice. Okay, fair enough. I will certainly go see the new James Bond movie. Even the Punishing Roger Moore ones, I've been to them all. So there's that. I mean, we are eccentric and varied creatures. And I sometimes get strange looks from my colleagues, especially, who have maybe more traditional clusters of interest around academic life, you know, classical music, for example, because I like I like pro football. I like baseball. I like fishing. I like, you know, I wrote a book about cocktails. It's a rich life. I mean, the gift of being here is so amazing that it would be crazy. I mean, to use the religious language that I was brought up in, it would be a sin not to take advantage of every single possible good thing. And the good things sometimes include the painful things, so the things that stretch us. But to answer your question, I guess as a teacher, you... Basically the answer is any technique that works is a good one. You know, it's the part of philosophical life where I'm a total pragmatist. If you can lever something with a technique, then it's good. And I mean everything from jokes and YouTube videos and sort of standard lectures, you know, entertainment value to sometimes the personal narrative is the thing that hooks people just like it is in politics. often, maybe too often. But if you have your eye on the prize, you know, if you know that what you're trying to do is get someone to not necessarily think differently, but just think through, then you can use all kinds of techniques. And that's just in the classroom. I mean, you mentioned some of my range of written stuff. I try to write wherever they'll have me, you know, if it's a newspaper or a magazine, or if it's doing, you know, this kind of thing, it'll be on the internet, then that's all good, because it's all about the ideas that I think are important and the ways of thinking, critical thinking that I think are important.

David: Is that what the true value of post-secondary education is, kind of in a cracked nutshell? It's about thinking, it's about asking questions.

Mark: Yes, I mean, it's such a truistic kind of answer that I hesitate sometimes to make it, but it is the right answer, and it's the right answer for a reason, not because you know, so-called critical thinking skills will help you achieve career success. Right, that may be true, right?

David: Sure, sure.

Mark: But that's not the reason that it's valuable. It's valuable because it's part of the human experience. It's the conversation with, you know, as the other cliché goes, the best that has been sought and written. And disputing itself, the idea of best as part of that, right? Say, this canon versus that canon, these are all the questions that education raises. One thing I sometimes say is, and this is a very, it's not original to me by at least 2 1/2 millennia. One of the ways that you get people out of their comfort zone, their patterns, their... comfortable patterns of thinking is by fly mechanisms. It's almost a kind of seduction where you just take something and maybe twist it into a new light or you get them thinking that they're learning one thing and it turns out that you wanted them to learn something else altogether.

David: And that's what's so brilliant, isn't it, about a well-thought-out question?

Mark: Yes, I mean the Socratic is what we call it, and Socrates at least as portrayed by Plato, which is more invented than real, but what comes down to us, that Socrates, not always, he's pretty declarative a lot of the time, and a lot of his questions are faint, but it's that process. It's that I'm leading you along, and not because I necessarily know the answer myself, but maybe precisely because I don't either. True devotion to the dark kind of ignorant, yeah.

David: Well, and being comfortable with uncertainty on some level.

Mark: Yeah, oh yeah.

David: I watched Religulous recently, Bill Maher's film. Have you seen it?

Mark: No, I haven't seen it.

David: So Bill Maher's pretty, you know, I mean, he's a polemicist, I suppose. He's an entertainer. He's a funny guy, I mean, all of those things, but again, there's this anger that seems to come out in the film as he rails against Christianity and Catholicism for about 50 minutes and then starts to take other religions apart. What I find, or at least one of the thoughts I had while I was watching is, again, where does this anger come from? And is he really ***** *** about the fact that he doesn't know and just wishes religious folk would say the same damn thing? I don't know either. Instead of this, again, saying, Hey, you just gotta go here to this text or you've gotta look here for the evidence. You know, is that really what we're quibbling about here?

Mark: I mean, this is the problem with a lot of the recent atheist material, I think, is that it takes too easy a target. I mean, it's very easy to target biblical literalism or fundamentalism of various kinds, very easy to target people who believe that, you know, if you disagree with them, you're going to hell and so on. These are not the religious people I know. I mean, I'll tell you frankly, I was raised in a Catholic family and that's not my parents, you know, even though they are still believers. And I went to this conference recently, which was quite interesting because I think I was the only unbeliever among the speakers and it was genuine, rigorous, intellectual exchange. And of course there were a couple of wackos there and you're going to get them. But I see actually a lot more thoughtfulness. People are not, this is in a way, it's the same mistake that demagogues make or people who think that they should, they can manipulate democratic politics. They don't take people seriously enough. They think somehow that people are just voters who can be manipulated. And then every time they manage to manipulate some, they get reinforced. But people come to believe things for all kinds of complicated reasons. And unless you start from there, from a kind of fundamental respect, then I think you're always going to be making mistakes. You may win. You may win the election. You may win the argument. But you're going to win for losing because you haven't respected the other.

David: Years ago when I started at York, I was seeing a specialist, a doctor, and she was asking me all these questions, what are you doing with your life, stress, what do you drink and what do you smoke and all these different things. Oh, I just started

to study philosophy kind of part-time while I'm working. Oh, well that in the quarter is going to get you a phone call.

Mark: Nice.

David: Exactly.

Mark: From your doctor.

David: This was a doctor. And I mean, I guess she thought she was being funny at the time. And I have to tell you, I probably laughed. But Mark, I've told this story a hundred times. I've written about it in a small article I had published a while, about five, six years ago at a university newspaper. Why in the heck did you get into philosophy? Clearly, you thought it was going to give you more than a phone call, as did I.

Mark: Yeah, by the way, it takes 50 cents to make a paper.

David: That's right.

Mark: If you can even find a payphone there. That's right. Disappearing urban. Yes. You know, of course, I've had my share of those encounters, and I've written about them too. I wrote about one recently that's also in the collection I mentioned published last fall called *Unruly Voices*, and it was a judge at a dinner party. And she asked me what I did, and I told her, and I thought, you know, Perhaps at this stage in my career, when I've published a number of books and won some prizes and done these things, and I seem to be in some sense a success, I won't have to deal with this. And she deflected it one generation. She said, you teach philosophy. Do you ever tell your students what the hell they're going to do with that? So now it's my fault, right? And I realized, oh yeah, so you're never not to blame. If you choose to study it, you're to blame for being foolish. If you choose to teach it, you're to blame for being somehow an enabler of foolishness.

David: That's right, misleading others.

Mark: Yeah. You know, the only answer to that question is, it goes back to the one about liberal education in general. I mean, I got into philosophy because I loved it, and I continue to love it, and I made my practical choices. They were still practical choices, but they're like practical choices when you're married and in love. You make them and you have to force an encounter with reality, like mortgage rates and things like that, but you make them in a context of love. You make them out of your desire to keep the beloved in a place of love. And I use this language sometimes when people are like, you're talking about all these dusty texts, But to me, it's a living thing. the philosophical tradition is a living tradition. It lives and breathes in all of us who, and I don't just mean academic, you know, it's anybody who picks up, anybody who thinks a question through, joins us together. Now I'm sounding like Obi-Wan Kenobi.

David: But it's a little more like Yoda, I say.

Mark: I got my words in the wrong order if I was trying to be Yoda. So that's the answer. I mean, I kept doing it for as long as I reasonably could without going into debt. And unfortunately, most of my students... are gonna be in debt, whether they

like it or not. And then by stages, I was able to, I feel very blessed. I was able to keep up.

David: Well, I think just doing it because you love it, I think is marvelous. I think that's a great response. I wanna chat with you about, I swear we're gonna talk about the essay *Billy Dwelling and Acting* in a second, but can you tell, just... Can you tell me what the plain truth about common sense really is? I mean, I laughed out loud when I saw that title on your online CP, and I just thought, oh, that's great. He's going to wrap it up for me.

Mark: Well, the plain truth about common sense, to sweep away all the subtlety of my analysis, just to the conclusion, the plain truth about common sense is that there isn't any. So it's a kind of... G.E. Moore has this famous defense of common sense, which was very convincing to a certain kind of philosopher. And that was the thing I attacked in that. And I took up what you might call, if it's not pejorative, a sort of postmodern position on common sense. Common sense is a kind of rhetorical move. It's not something that's sort of lying out there waiting for us to access it. So it's not as funny as the title of it. That's right, that's right.

David: So when we say, well, you know, come on, Mark, it's just common sense. I mean, are we talking in a practical, I mean, I guess that's a moral sense, but are we talking about some sort of misunderstanding about morality or?

Mark: Often, often indeed we are. And in fact, sometimes worse, we're committing ourselves to a kind of ideological move because you're not just making a claim with the idea that it might be a defensible one, you're making a claim in a way that puts it beyond any further challenge. It's what everybody believes or what we all know to be the case that taken for granted and so that that notion of common sense is actually the great ideological enemy of philosophy because it's it's that all those ways of thinking that think that they're done thinking and you know a philosopher's job is to really puncture that certainty that we all know what we think about this so that that You know, the article itself had a narrow focus, but as a kind of way of going on, going after the presumptions of common sense, I think that's philosophy's job always.

David: In 2000, you wrote, or maybe you wrote it much earlier than in 2000, but it's published in *Queen's Quarterly*, an essay called *Building, Dwelling, and Acting*. I'm just going to quote your opening line, which I think is so wonderful, quote, Our urban surroundings cannot help but reflect the kind of society we live in, and affect profoundly the mental architecture of our consciousness as citizens. What, close quote, could you tell me what you're referring to as mental architecture and then maybe comment a little bit on what our current, maybe mental architecture is?

Mark: Yeah, I mean, first of all, I'd like to say that article from 2000, probably one of the earliest, well, let's see, I'm trying to get the date straight, but it was certainly one of the earliest of my turns from to what you might call purely abstract political theory to what I sometimes think of as concrete political theory, with a focus on urban and especially architecture. And so I've written a lot in that vein since then, including a book just about the Empire State Building in New York.

David: Oh, wow, okay.

Mark: And a kind of series of investigations or I don't even know what to call the meditations, I guess, that I call concrete reveries, which is about um what I subtitle is Consciousness in the city so um that article was kind of a promissory note for the books that came.

David: Later oh I see okay yeah.

Mark: And uh what I what I what I meant there and what I found since is uh among other things getting to know um really interesting Architects and urban theorists who uh obviously know way more about how buildings and cities work than most of us do and that's just fascinating to be around those people but also to see just how invigorating, reinvigorating this is for political theory to think of it in terms of what we all experience every day. Sidewalks, walls, concrete, traffic flow, stores, offices, homes, rooms, corridors, chairs, tables. I mean, really basic stuff, concrete stuff. And to think about how that might be part of our political conversation or political consciousness. So that's the idea of the mental architecture. I was playing on the word architecture, of course. And I don't mean architecture in the strict cognitive science sense. I should be clear. I'm not talking about how the brain functions. I'm talking about the contours of thought and how we imagine ourselves.

David: And sort of implying, ultimately, I think, that these things, these pieces that we encounter each and every day are, in fact, Affecting the way we do things how we interact with others how we make decisions about Politics for instance or as you call a phrase beautiful phrases civic civic optimism, you know got wonderful phrases throughout this essay So so did you draw from Foucault on some for some of this?

Mark: Oh, yeah, I mean among many others in fact the I take that The richest, the deepest influences is one of the oldest, Aristotle. I mean, Aristotle in the Nicomachean Ethics and the Politics is already thinking about this. He's thinking about how the specifics, he doesn't talk about architecture as such, but how the specifics of the way we live, you know, the concrete details of the way we live are politics. That is politics. Not institutional or electoral politics, but what we would today call the political, right? And so when you start mining that insight, you find this really rich vein of thought that runs through all kinds of people in the early modern period. You know, I talk a lot about Descartes in my book, Concrete Reveries. And then through into the 20th century, you mentioned Foucault. Bachelor Arts, the Poetics of Space is probably known to a lot of your listeners as a high watermark of this kind of thinking. And then a lot of more recent stuff. It's really, really rich. And And you can keep going back to it because there's, you know, philosophers, especially political philosophers, have by and large paid very little attention to this kind of concrete approach.

David: So to root it really maybe simply, well maybe not simply, but a manager who, you know, is in charge of say 10 or 15 or 20 people in an office could actually speak volumes by installing glass in the walls and leaving his or her doors open more often than not.

Mark: It's a perfect kind of example, and we all know these things 'cause we witnessed them, right? We saw the growth of cubicle farms, and we've seen other things in the workplace, which is a particular area of recent study, I should say. I've been thinking a lot about work and idleness. But we've seen how leisure things are kind of folded into the work scene. So you have slides at the Google office, for example, and video games you can play anytime, and it's always casual Friday. And all of these things are part of the fabric of everyday life, but they all have meanings in terms of how we choose to spend our time or sell our time, sell our labor. You don't have to be an orthodox Marxist to see that there are all kinds of things going on that are not just choices. They are environments that we are reacting to. So if you expand that notion to think about, say, democratic politics, it's a really good question to ask of any city. You know, what does the actual fabric of the city do to the democratic politics there? You know, the public spaces, the transaction spaces, the various systems of circulation, you know, traffic and air and food and money and life and death for that matter. So I find this just kind of endlessly fascinating.

David: Well, I would agree. I remember reading *Discipline and Punish*, and it's a tough book to get through. I seem to remember that. It's quite a few years ago, and I've gone back to it a few times since, but it's it changed my life in some regards. From, I guess, an ideological perspective, just looking at the, panopticism and looking at the implications of things and how we're being watched and all this, and you're just going, Wow, this has to do with geometry. This has to do with, you know, how bizarre. And as I started to unpack it, you kind of can see it everywhere.

Mark: Yeah, and that's, the way Foucault uses Bentham's panopticon, which is really, as you say, it's geometry, it's a polygon. Polygonal design will give us this ability to have one person watch many, and then eventually have no people watch many because they watch themselves.

David: That's right.

Mark: And it's rightly celebrated as an important intellectual moment when Foucault sort of nails that idea. You can quibble with the details, but he was right about a lot of stuff. There's more CCTV cameras.

David: That's right.

Mark: Not so much in Toronto yet, but go to London. London has highest per capita, a number of them.

David: I was reading *Adbusters* recently, and I got this great quote, and I just wanted to, we're gonna have to wrap it up soon, I think, but Mondrian believed that if you made a picture that was without hierarchy, without foreground and background, center and periphery, that that picture could be a model for a better world. It sounds to me like that's what you're saying in this essay, that this is about being better people, this is about giving back, this is about making the right choices and the right decisions.

Mark: That's exactly right, and I guess the one thing I would add to that is that for lots of good reasons, and this includes looking at what happens in urban design, people are skeptical of utopian schemes of large plans, you know, and everywhere from,

say, Plato's Republic and Thomas Moore to Le Corbusier's New Modernism. But it's important not to lose the spirit of the utopian moment. So you might describe my politics as anti-anti-utopian. I want to keep that spirit. You know, it's really the thing that you see in kind of neo-situationism of the Occupy movement, that regardless of what the lasting impact will be, we don't know what the lasting impact will be because it's a kind of gesture in the first instance. And that's where all of the best aspects of the political start. They start with that insistence on things being better, that we can do better.

David: Can I ask you one question about one of my favorite topics that I would love to chat with you at some other point down the road, and that's the key to all philosophy, wonder. I came across an essay that you wrote a little while back on Husserl's approach to wonder as this phenomenology of wonder, as you call it. Is it really the key to philosophy? And if so, what else do you think it can lead to? And the reason I ask the question is because I'm a new dad. I have a daughter that's five and a son that's seven. That just **** away with the questions they ask. are, you know, one of the greatest gifts they're giving me is, and it sounds really trite in a way and cliché, but they're allowing me to see the world in a new way, in a new light. And I've practiced sleight-of-hand magic for years, so this fascination with wonder, I just, I love this moment that we seem to somehow lose somewhere along the way, you know, violated by the education of our youth or something. Anyway, is it the key, and what else do you think it might lead to?

Mark: I do believe it's the key. And I always like to quote, there's a passage from one of Plato's dialogues where Socrates says that he's referring to the fact that the Greek word for wonder is thalmazine. And he says, it was a good etymologist who made thalmos the father of Iris. And thalmos was one of the demigods. And that's where thalmazine comes from. Gives us our word thalmaturge, which is, you know, a kind of fancy word for magician. Dungeons and Dragons geeks out there. I don't know that one. But that he gives rise to Iris, who is the bringer of light and the source of color. And so there's this nice idea that in its best possible form, that moment of wonder, which is actually kind of scary, right? I mean, we tend to focus on the pleasant notion of wonder, but wonder is unsettling because precisely it shows something we didn't expect to see. And then in Philosophers want to say, Well, we take that and we try to move it to wisdom or to enlightenment, but there's, and Bacon famously said, Wonder was broken science. He thought that wonder could get stalled, you know, so that you get... sort of trapped in the wondrous and you don't do the hard work.

David: Right. Well, that's kind of what Descartes actually thought at Wonder was dangerous, didn't he?

Mark: Did, and it's an interesting thing, partly because his focus was on trying to find the proper method for the new age. So he associated with befuddlement and manipulation and superstition and so on. And those are possible misuses, I want to say, of wonder. You know, we all know the, take the magician example, we all know

the magician who's actually a charlatan, who's, you know, duping people rather than in a kind of honest way, we want to say honestly. That's right.

David: Yeah, yeah.

Mark: Where we're in on the joke because we take pleasure in not knowing how the illusion was created. So those are all different possible outcomes of wonder. But in the philosophical way, yeah, we, I mean, it's seeing some part of the world in a new way. And it's, I like to think it's what joins philosophy in that spirit with the best of art, you know, which can, as Arthur Danto put it, can transfigure the commonplace. That's wonderful. Take anything, including, of course, a, you know, a urinal or a Brillo box, and you can just... get people to look at it in a new way. I think that's what genius is, the ability to get people to experience that kind of wonder.

David: Really poor segue here, but I'm going to close with a quote from your essay, *Building, Dwelling, and Acting*, just because I love it so much. This is a time to act as well as to think, or perhaps more accurately, it is a time to act in order that thought should come once more become possible. to uncover an activist discursive politics that is, as I shall put it, grimly utopian. That's just so wonderful, Mark. I love everything we've talked about here today. Thanks so much for being a guest. I've often felt doing these interviews that, wow, we've just barely scratched the surface. And that's something kind of offensive about that, but also something really quite wonderful about it. So thanks so much for your time. I really appreciate it.

Mark: It's been my pleasure and I feel family. I always feel like, you know, we're just getting started when we haven't finished.

Biography

Mark Kingwell, M.Litt, M.Phil, PhD, D.F.A. (born March 1, 1963) is a Canadian professor of philosophy and associate chair at the University of Toronto's Department of Philosophy. Kingwell is a fellow of Trinity College. He specialises in theories of politics and culture.

Kingwell has published twelve books, most notably, *A Civil Tongue: Justice, Dialogue, and the Politics of Pluralism*, which was awarded the Spitz Prize for political theory in 1997. In 2000 Kingwell received an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, for contributions to theory and criticism. He has held visiting posts at institutions including: University of Cambridge, University of California at Berkeley, and City University of New York where he held the title of Weissman Distinguished Professor of Humanities.

His books have included, *A Civil Tongue* (1995); *Dreams of Millennium* (1997); *Better Living* (1998); *The World We Want* (2000); *Practical Judgments* (2002); *Catch and Release* (2003); *Opening Gambits* (2008) and a sample of his articles with wonderful titles like, "Is It Rational To Be Polite?" (1993); "Interpretation, Dialogue, and the Just

Citizen” (1993); “Madpeople and Ideologues” (1994); “The Plain Truth About Common Sense” (1995); “Defending Political Virtue” (1996); “Two Concepts of Pluralism”.

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