

Harry Frankfurt, "Reflections on My Career in Philosophy"
Section on Philosophy at Rockefeller University

and precision of his reasoning; and I was also attracted to research on Descartes's work by the fact that his books are short.

I left Ohio State in 1962, for a promotion and tenure at what was then the State University of New York (SUNY) at Binghamton—what is now, I believe, Binghamton University. I lasted only one year at Binghamton, which turned out to be a rather dismal place, in an extremely unappealing location. Then I was rescued, quite unexpectedly, by someone whose graduate seminar on Plato's thought I had attended at Johns Hopkins: Professor Ludwig Edelstein. Edelstein had left Hopkins for a position at The Rockefeller Institute—later, The Rockefeller University—in New York City. Rockefeller was a very remarkable academic institution, originally dedicated exclusively to advanced research in the biomedical sciences. Its president at the time was a man named Detlev Bronk, who had earlier been president of Johns Hopkins. He had known and admired Edelstein there, and had persuaded him to come to Rockefeller. Bronk had recently established a program of graduate studies at Rockefeller, which had previously had no students at any level at all. It was his notion that the best scientists could not be trained in an exclusively scientific environment, but that some presence of the humanities was essential. For this reason, he wanted Edelstein to create a group of philosophers, who would interact with the students at Rockefeller, and with the Rockefeller faculty as well, thereby (presumably) broadening everyone's perspectives and, in particular, somehow providing the scientists with a more humanistic understanding of their work.

Bronk dreamed of turning The Rockefeller Institute from purely a research institution into what he conceived would be a true university. Not only philosophers, but also physicists and mathematicians—and, in time, behavioral scientists of various kinds—were to be added to the core group of biomedical people. There were to be no undergraduates; just graduate students in the several disciplines represented on the campus. The idea was to create a rich scholarly environment in which, according to Bronk's views, it would be possible to develop genuinely deep and creative biologists.

Edelstein was quite successful personally in establishing significant relationships with a number of Rockefeller students. He was very reluctant to implement Bronk's idea of forming a *group* of philosophers, however, because he anticipated that the members of such a group would be strongly inclined to talk only to each other, and so to have no especially productive intellectual relationships with the scientists. Thus, they would not fulfill the conception of a genuine scholarly community which Bronk and he shared. Accordingly, Edelstein agreed to bring philosophers to Rockefeller just one at a time, and only as temporary visitors. I had studied Plato with Edelstein at Hopkins, he liked me, and he evidently thought I might fit in appropriately at Rockefeller. Largely as a concession to Bronk, he arranged my appointment to the Rockefeller faculty as a Research Associate for the year 1963-64.

Thus, I left Binghamton and moved to New York. At that time, Rockefeller was still almost exclusively a research institution, though it did already have a few graduate students in biology. The location of the institution, and its facilities, were ideal; and I was eager to remain there beyond the one year for which I had been appointed. So I made a special effort to integrate myself into the life of the campus. I attended a course designed for new graduate students who had previously not had much exposure to biological thought; and I also made a point of cultivating a few friendships with biologists, in particular with certain members of the laboratories of cell biology and of evolution (whose leading figures were, respectively, the Nobel laureate George Palade, and the eminent theorist of evolution Theodosius Dobzhansky). In these ways, I became acquainted to a certain extent with advanced biological thinking. I cannot say, however, that this affected my philosophical work in any way.

It so happened that not very long after I arrived at Rockefeller, Edelstein suddenly died. Shortly after that, President Bronk called me into his office and told me that he wanted *me* to pursue the ambition which Edelstein had declined to carry out. He wanted me to recommend a number of philosophers for appointment, and—in keeping with his intention to make Rockefeller a real university—to help in fashioning a program of graduate studies in philosophy.

As I have already indicated, Rockefeller was in many ways an extremely attractive place: it had a lovely campus on the Manhattan bank of the East River in New York City; it had no undergraduate students, and no intention to have any; and it paid well. As might be expected, then, it was not terribly difficult to persuade very good people to accept positions there. Over the course of several years, a considerable number of quite well-known and distinguished philosophers joined the Rockefeller group. At one time or another, the group included Ernest Nagel, Margaret Wilson, Marshall Cohen, Joel Feinberg, Donald Davidson, Sidney Shoemaker, Robert Nozick, and others. In addition, there was a separate group of logicians, that included Hao Wang, Tony Martin, Lester Tharpe, and Saul Kripke; and, of course, there were also occasional visitors—like Willard van Orman Quine, Thomas Nagel, and Joseph Raz.

As it turned out, Edelstein was only half-right in his anxieties concerning what was likely to happen if a sizeable number of philosophers came to Rockefeller. On the one hand, it was *true*, as he had feared it would be, that we did not talk much to the scientists. But, on the other hand, it was also true, *contrary* to his expectation, that we did not talk much to each other *either*. We got along well enough together; but each of us tended to focus on taking personal advantage of the rare opportunity for comfortably undisturbed scholarly research and writing. And so each of us, more or less single-mindedly, went his or her own way.

For my own part, I continued to work mainly on Descartes; and late in the 1960s I completed writing a book entitled *Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen*, that dealt with what I characterized as Descartes's defense of reason. I recall that Quine was visiting Rockefeller at the time, and that

he advised me against giving the book that title, which he regarded as too light-hearted or frivolous for what purported to be a serious scholarly work. Needless to say, I resisted the appeal of this mature and wisely sober recommendation.

In due course, my colleagues and I did admit a few students to do graduate work in philosophy at Rockefeller. However, in keeping with what we took to be the spirit of the place, we did not concern ourselves with them very intently. *They* naturally expected that they had come to Rockefeller to earn advanced degrees; on the other hand, *we* remained rather casually indifferent to their intellectual needs. I am not at all sure now how any of them actually managed to get along under our rather presumptuous and persistent neglect. The fact is that we drove some of them crazy (I believe that we would have driven even more of them crazy, except that some of them were already crazy when they came to us). In any case, some of our students did in fact receive their doctorates, and quite a few of them have gone on to do very well: for instance, Norton Batkin, Michael Bratman, Jules Coleman, Daniel Farrell, Michael Jubien, Jonathan Lear, David Malamant, and Scott Weinstein.

The Rockefeller idyll did not last. In 1976, the University decided that it was undergoing such serious financial difficulties that it could no longer afford to support the philosophers or the logicians. Now while experimental scientists—such as, research biologists—require expensively equipped laboratories, philosophers and logicians can of course get along quite nicely without any special facilities. However, scientists are generally supported very largely by grants from the government, or from other sources outside the university. Although philosophers and logicians need very little support, they generally do have to be supported entirely from the university's own funds. So it is perhaps understandable that they may actually constitute a greater financial burden to the university than the scientists do.

In any case, we philosophers were at Rockefeller in the first place for no real reason other than to satisfy Bronk's romantic whim about creating a great center of humanistically enriched scientific education and research. The scientific faculty had not really wanted us there to begin with, and they rightly did not feel that they had benefitted much from our having been brought to the campus. Moreover, Bronk himself had died a few years earlier; and the president then current, a physicist named Frederick Seitz, had no particular commitment to Bronk's vision.

Thus, they closed us down: despite the fact that all of us were tenured, the philosophy and logic groups were disbanded and dispersed. The University made it as comfortable for us to leave as was reasonable, and all of us left—except for Hao Wang, who stayed on for a number of years until he, too, died. Apart from him, in those final days there were five of us. Kripke went to Princeton, Martin went to UCLA, I went to Yale, Davidson went first to Illinois at Chicago and soon afterwards to Princeton, and Feinberg went to Arizona. That was the end of what I suppose was a somewhat spectacular, but not really a very successful, episode in the history of American philosophy.