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Introduction

Explanation, inference, testimony, and truth: essays dedicated to the memory of Peter Lipton

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This special issue of *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* is dedicated to the memory of a long-serving and most assiduous Advisory Editor of the journal: Peter Lipton (1954–2007), first Hans Rausing Professor of the History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Cambridge, and cherished friend and mentor to a large proportion of those who had the good fortune to meet him, in academia, and in many communities beyond.

Lipton's scholarly interests were largely grounded in the philosophy of science and epistemology, focusing on central issues at the intersection of these fields, including the nature of inductive inference, causal models of explanation, the epistemology of testimony, the analysis of laws of nature and, not least—always in the background and sometimes the foreground—arguments for and against scientific realism. Several of these themes are woven together masterfully in his celebrated book *Inference to the Best Explanation* (1991; second edition 2004). Impressively, Lipton's philosophical pursuits also extended to topics well beyond the intersection of theories of science and knowledge to those including issues in the philosophy of mind, free will, medical ethics, and science and religion. His favourite philosopher, so often a foil for his own work, was David Hume. The extraordinary respect he accorded (and inspiration he derived from) Hume, a philosopher whose scepticism in various domains he worked hard to overcome, encapsulated his contagious approach towards his vocation. For Lipton, philosophy was an utterly constructive enterprise, and this issue of *Studies* is a celebration of his academic legacy and vision.

Born in New York City and educated in his childhood at the Ethical Culture Fieldston School, Lipton went on to major in philosophy and physics at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, after which he completed a BPhil and a DPhil on explanation and evidence at New College, Oxford, under the tutelage of A. J. Ayer, Rom Harré, and William Newton-Smith. Following a research position at Clark University, he was appointed Assistant Professor at Williams College (both in Massachusetts), before his appointment as Assistant Lecturer in the Department of History and Philosophy of Science at Cambridge in 1991. In short order he was Head of

Department in 1996, ascended to the Departmental Chair in 1997, and became the Hans Rausing Professor in 1998. He was a Fellow of King's College, Cambridge, and a Medawar Prize Lecturer at the Royal Society. He was an extraordinary presence, warm and welcoming to new Fellows and students, and worked tirelessly to enhance the intellectual culture of the Department, College and University, all with disarming good humour. No detail fell beneath his attention, as the espresso machine in the Department attests. Some will recall his tremendous satisfaction on successfully effecting the long-overdue renovation of the Departmental lavatory. In the face of significant obstacles, his resolute insistence on a properly functioning mixer tap impressed me greatly.

At the time of his death following a heart attack at the age of 53, Lipton had published some forty journal articles and book chapters, an edited collection, and had seen *Inference to the Best Explanation* take on the status of a recent classic. The impact of his foreshortened career cannot be measured, however, without appreciating the indelible contributions he made, not merely in print, but in person. Lipton was an educator of the highest order, and his efforts and successes in this regard were the stuff of local legend—whether bringing philosophy to children in his countless visits to schools, or to a wider public through his lectures during events such as National Science Week, or through more specialized work with bodies such as the Nuffield Council on Bioethics (for whom he chaired a working party on ethical issues in pharmacogenetics), or through the staggeringly heavy PhD supervision and undergraduate teaching loads he happily and routinely carried. His ability to see straight through to the heart of an argument and identify its strengths and weaknesses, no matter how badly expressed in the original, were inspirational. Students in the Department would often attempt to help one another by 'Liptonating' (or 'Liptonising'): expressing the content of one's interlocutor's garbled thoughts in far superior terms of clarity, precision, and concision. The eponymous inspiration for this practice was its supreme practitioner.

In one of countless examples of his dedication to pedagogy, Lipton was a regular contributor to the Ask Philosophers website, on

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which professional philosophers respond to questions posed by the public. In one response (23 November 2005) to a query about the meaning of life, he answered by elaborating on his conviction that ‘The meaning of life comes from what you do in your life’. Those who knew him and in particular those taught by him might recognise this as a slogan beautifully exemplified in his philosophical exchanges, which were marked by a very conspicuous style. His focus on ideas rather than personalities—on *what* is right, as opposed to *who*—was striking and unwavering. To participate in a philosophical discussion with Lipton was to feel as though all parties were working towards the same goal, no matter how much they might disagree. Negative arguments were always and only a means towards motivating constructive arguments. This irrepressible positivity permeated his conduct as a philosopher and I am delighted to note that the contributions to this issue exhibit, in various ways, directly and indirectly, marks of association with the content and spirit of Lipton’s central philosophical interests and style. The contributors are but a small sample of his former students, colleagues, and friends, but collectively manage nonetheless to engage with an impressive range of his fondest preoccupations.

Stephen Grimm examines the nature of explanation in terms of the putative explanatory goal of understanding, a goal for which Lipton himself advocated. Alexander Bird argues for a particular version of inductive inference, which he calls ‘Holmesian inference’, in connection with one of Lipton’s central examples of inference to the best explanation. Mark Sprevak explores the efficacy of such inferences in the context of the hypothesis of extended cognition in the philosophy of mind, and Arash Pessian uses Lipton’s account of these inferences as a model for an account of natural kind reference. The theme of reference—or in this case, the lack thereof—continues in David Papineau’s defence of scientific realism, a cause with which Lipton was deeply sympathetic. Axel Gelfert develops Lipton’s account of the relationship between inference

to the best explanation and the justification of testimony as a source of knowledge, and Katherine Hawley investigates the question of whether and how the very concept of testimonial knowledge might extend to skills, or knowledge *how*. My own contribution defends a Liptonian conception of ‘objective’ knowledge in the face of arguments for scientific ‘perspectivism’, taking inspiration from his work on contrastive explanation. Echoing Lipton’s interest in sceptical arguments, Jonathan Vogel considers whether inference to the best explanation might provide a response to external world scepticism by means of Laurence Bonjour’s efforts to this end, and Anandi Hattiangadi tackles realism writ large, engaging the question of whether the epistemic aim of belief is truth, or rather, as she argues, *knowledge*.

I am grateful to Marina Frasca-Spada and Nick Jardine for suggesting that I edit this special issue of *Studies*, and for their unfailing support. I am also indebted to the contributors for their excellent work, and for their wonderful responsiveness. I am gratified that the quality of their contributions to this collection has rendered it more than simply a heartfelt dedication: it is also in my view a genuinely fitting tribute, which is, remembering the philosopher that Lipton was, no small accomplishment. Each author has added some remarks to the acknowledgements following his or her paper, indicating something of his or her own personal relationship to Peter. My only regret is that he is not here to read this work in his honour, for I know that no one would have been more pleased or appreciative. I miss him very much, and in this I know I have a great deal of good company.

Reference

- Lipton, P. (2004). *Inference to the best explanation* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge (First ed. 1991).