

# OXFORD 2016-17 PHILOSOPHY





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## CONTACT US

**Oxford Philosophy**  
 Faculty of Philosophy  
 Radcliffe Humanities  
 Radcliffe Observatory Quarter  
 Woodstock Road  
 Oxford, OX2 6GG  
 UK

email: [news@philosophy.ox.ac.uk](mailto:news@philosophy.ox.ac.uk)  
 tel: +44 (0)1865 276926

For news, events and further information, please visit:  
[www.philosophy.ox.ac.uk](http://www.philosophy.ox.ac.uk)

## CREDITS

Editors James Knight  
 Paul Lodge

Art Direction & Design Keiko Ikeuchi  
[www.keikoikeuchi.co.uk](http://www.keikoikeuchi.co.uk)

Photography Keiko Ikeuchi

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 p23 Chris Field  
 pp24-25 supplied by the author

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A good first-year lecture should probably contain a few jokes to keep the audience on their toes. The great advantage of this mode of communication is that once the lecturer has thought up the jokes, they can be allowed to – how shall I put it? – mature: that is, one can tell the same jokes several years running and still raise a laugh, for the simple reason that no two first-year audiences are ever the same. Not so for the readership of *Oxford Philosophy*. So half way through year three of my tenure as Chair of the Faculty Board, colleagues feeling sorry for themselves at the prospect of delivering yet another set of undergraduate lectures might spare a thought for the author of this Introduction. In any case, we may soon be quits. If ‘lecture capture’ takes off, as it is set to do – for over 21s, that means recording the lectures and making them available online – audiences will be able to replay the same lecture over and over, jokes and all. So philosophers be warned: your jokes from now on may have to be very sharp indeed.

Some readers may have seen Andy Beckett’s highly critical, but partial, and ill-informed article in the *Guardian* about PPE (23<sup>rd</sup> February). As I say year in year out to audiences of sixth-formers thinking of applying to Oxford, there is a great deal more to Philosophy at Oxford than just PPE – no less than seven other joint schools, in fact, thanks to the recent addition of Computer Science and Philosophy. Anyone inclined to doubt the capacity of the philosophically trained to contribute to the contemporary world should note the deepening collaborations over the last twelve months between the Faculty and the Future of Humanity Institute, which thanks to successful funding bids and the generosity of donors now employs two core Faculty members – Hilary Greaves and Will MacAskill – full-time on projects related to population ethics and the philosophical foundations of effective altruism. Indeed doubters need

only to read ahead in this magazine: Dominic Scott on the World Humanities Report, John Foran on applied ethics and *Médecins Sans Frontières*; and, perhaps most importantly in the light of Beckett’s article, more or less the entirety of PPEist Evan Davis’s career – the tale tells itself.

This year the Faculty welcomed two new postholders (see page 3) and will also be losing no less than six of our number to retirement. Between now and the Faculty’s celebration of them in Trinity Term I may attempt to add up the dizzying number of Oxford years they account for between them, not only in distinguished service as Faculty members but also, in some cases, as graduates and indeed as undergraduates. In any case, we wish them all well and hope very much that our send-off will be no more than an *au revoir*.

This year also sees a reorganization by the government of the way in which the AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) awards graduate scholarships, which will lump Oxford together with Cambridge and the Open University, and force all three universities to provide matched funding to unlock any AHRC award. Funding for graduate students has been one of the Faculty’s biggest concerns for some time, and we are worried the new regime may make things even worse. Financial support from readers would of course be most welcome for any of the Faculty’s operations, but there is no worthier and at this moment no more urgent cause than the funding of graduate scholarships, essential as they are to ensure that the distinguished past and present of Oxford philosophy are matched by an equally bright future.

Edward Harcourt  
Fellow of Keble College

### A History of the Infinite

In September 2016 Adrian Moore presented a ten-part radio series on BBC Radio 4 entitled ‘A History of The Infinite’. Adrian told the story of evolving conceptions of the infinite over the past two and a half thousand years. All aspects of the topic were covered: the philosophical, the mathematical, the scientific, and the theological. Each programme included interviews with experts in the field. The first four programmes were concerned with the remarkable changes in the conception of the infinite between the time of the early Greeks and the early modern period. The next three covered some of the extraordinary mathematical results concerning the infinite, including the discovery that some infinities are bigger than others. In the final three programmes Adrian shifted his attention the cosmos and our place in it, turning to questions about the existential significance of our understanding of the infinite.



The broadcasts can be accessed on [bbc.in/2pAsOUI](http://bbc.in/2pAsOUI)

### Oxford Philosophy success in the QS world Rankings

The Faculty of Philosophy is delighted to have come first in the UK and Europe and second in the world in the QS World Rankings for 2017. The QS World University Rankings are an annual league table that comprehensively critique the world’s top universities in a wide range of subject areas, paying special attention to research and reputation. The rankings are based upon academic reputation, employer reputation and research impact.



### Derek Parfit (1942-2017)

Derek Parfit, who was a Fellow of All Souls College and a member of the Oxford Faculty of Philosophy for most of his adult life, died unexpectedly on 1 January 2017 at the age of 74. He had recently completed the third of the projected four volumes of *On What Matters*. On completing that third volume, he had returned to working on issues in population ethics, a branch of ethics that he developed almost single-handedly in the 1970s. Some of his new work in this area will appear in print within the year. Parfit’s first published paper, ‘Personal Identity,’ appeared in 1971 and instantly secured his reputation in philosophy. Throughout the remainder of that decade, the manuscripts of his work on progress, which formed the basis of his book, *Reasons and Persons* (1984), circulated widely among philosophers and helped to shape the way an entire generation of moral philosophers approached their work. At the time of his death, Parfit was generally regarded as one of two or three greatest living philosophers and was almost universally regarded as the greatest living moral philosopher.

### Pamela Sue Anderson (1955-2017)

Pamela Sue Anderson, Professor of Modern European Philosophy of Religion and Fellow of Regent’s Park College, lost her two year battle with cancer in March 2017, aged 61. In the philosophy of religion in general, and in feminist philosophy of religion in particular, Pamela was an international figure whose work broke important new ground. In her early writing she was concerned with the detection and correction of gender biases, both in the philosophy of religion and in religion itself. Her later work explored the idea of vulnerability, especially the vulnerability that is manifest in profoundly transformative experiences such as critical illness or bereavement. Among her many published works were two influential books, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (1997) and *Revisioning Gender in Philosophy of Religion* (2012). She also co-authored, with Jordan Bell, *Kant and Theology* (2010), and at the time of her death was working on a book on the French philosopher Michèle Le Dœuff.



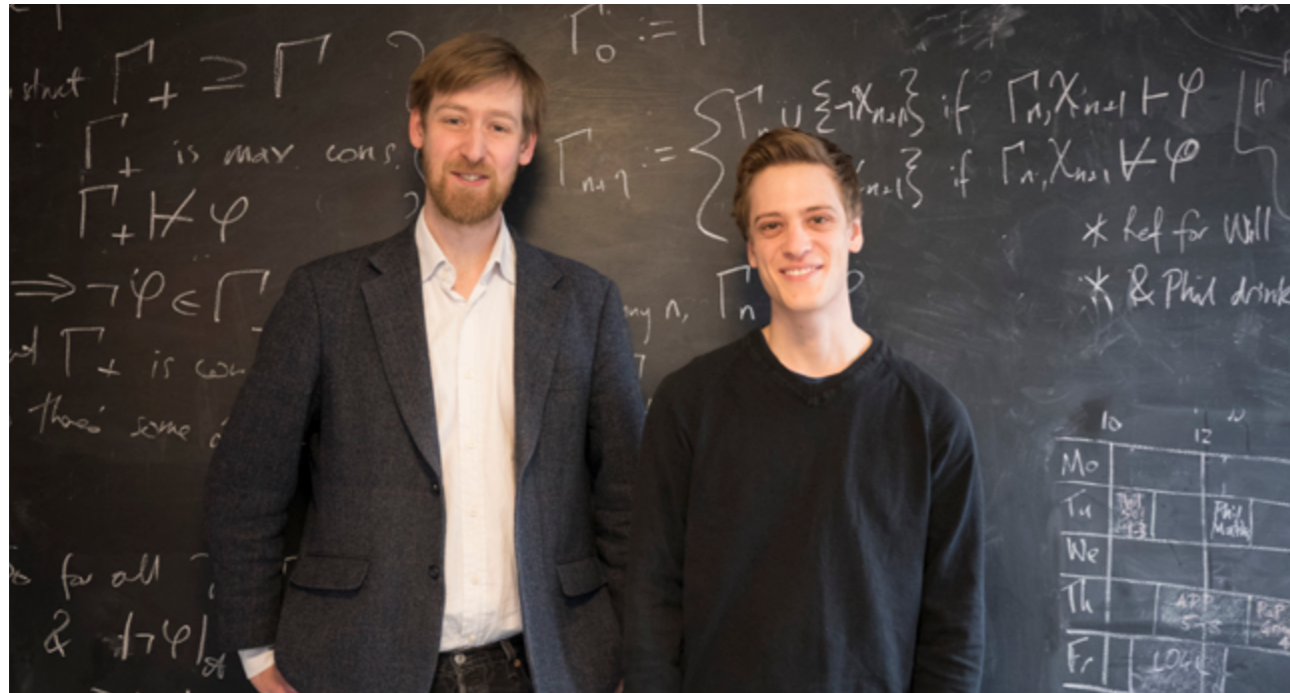
(This text is adapted from a longer obituary by Pamela’s friend and Oxford Faculty member Adrian Moore for the *Guardian* - <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2017/mar/24/pamela-sue-anderson-obituary>)

## APPOINTMENTS

### Waynefleete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy: Ofra Magidor

Ofra Magidor completed a BSc in Philosophy, Mathematics, and Computer Science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel. She moved to Oxford in 2002, where she completed a BPhil and DPhil in Philosophy. Between 2005 and 2007 she was Junior Research Fellow in Philosophy at Queen's College, Oxford and between 2007 and 2015 CUF lecturer at the University of Oxford and Fairfax Fellow and Tutor in Philosophy at Balliol College, Oxford.

Ofra's research interests are in Metaphysics, Epistemology, Philosophy of Language, and Philosophical Logic. Her published work covers a wide range of topics including: the metaphysics of persistence, category mistakes (on which she has published a book in 2013), vagueness, arbitrary reference, possible worlds semantics and two-dimensionality, the *de se*, Leibniz's Law and its applications, presuppositions, propositions, strict finitism in the philosophy of mathematics, the semantics of conditionals, the nature of reasons, and she has even published one paper on Aristotle. She is currently pursuing projects on co-predication, moral vagueness, the KK-principle in epistemology, and scepticism. She enjoys collaborative work, and has co-authored several of her papers. Ofra is delighted to take up the Waynefleete chair and is very much looking forward to playing a central role in the future of philosophy at Oxford.



### Tutorial Fellows at Balliol College

#### Adam Caulton

Adam joins the Faculty from LMU Munich, where he was an Assistant Professor. He studied Physics and Philosophy as an undergraduate at St Peter's College and took his PhD in Cambridge where he also held a British Academy Junior Research Fellowship - intermitting in 2014 to take up a position as Visiting Professor at the University of Pittsburgh. Adam's research is focussed on the philosophy of science, in particular the philosophy of physics, and neighbouring issues in metaphysics, logic and the philosophy of language. He has published a number of papers which reflect his particular interests in quantum mechanics, quantum field theory and the role that a variety of symmetries play in the interpretation of physical theories.

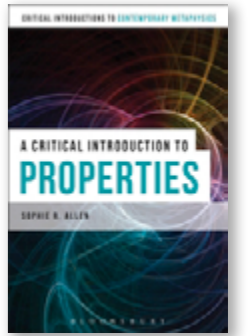
#### Alex Kaiserman

Alex completed his undergraduate degree in Physics and Philosophy at Balliol College in 2011, before hopping across the road to Jesus College to do a BPhil and DPhil in philosophy. He also spent the 2014-15 academic year in Princeton as a Procter Fellow. Alex's research focuses on the metaphysics of causation, freedom and responsibility, although he also has interests in philosophy of language and philosophy of mind. He is currently developing a theory of degrees of causal contribution and applying it to issues in tort law, criminal law and the ethics of war.

## NEW BOOKS

### A Critical Introduction to Properties (Bloomsbury, 2016) Sophie Allen (Harris Manchester College)

What do blue things have in common? Or electrons? Or planets? Distinct things appear to share properties; but what are properties and what is the best philosophical account of them? *A Critical Introduction to Properties* introduces different ontological accounts of properties, exploring how their formulation is shaped by the explanatory demands placed upon them. This accessible introduction begins with a discussion of universals, tropes, sets and resemblance classes. It then explores issues concerning the formulation and justification of property theories that get to the heart of why a coherent theory of properties is so important to metaphysics, and to philosophy more generally.



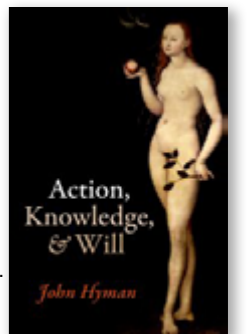
### Cosmopolitan Peace (OUP, 2016) Cecile Fabre (All Souls College)

This book articulates a cosmopolitan theory of the principles which ought to regulate belligerents' conduct in the aftermath of war. Throughout, it relies on the fundamental principle that all human beings, wherever they reside, have rights to the freedoms and resources which they need to lead a flourishing life, and that national and political borders are largely irrelevant to the conferral of those rights. With that principle in hand, the book provides a normative defence of such things as the punishment of war criminals and the deployment of peacekeeping and occupation forces. It also outlines reconciliatory and commemorative practices which might facilitate the emergence of trust amongst enemies and thereby improve prospects for peace.



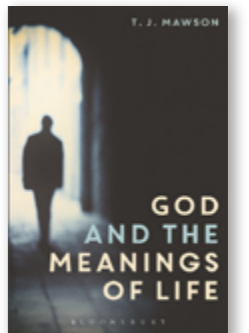
### Action, Knowledge, and Will (OUP, 2015) John Hyman (The Queen's College)

Human agency has four irreducibly different dimensions - psychological, ethical, intellectual, and physical - which the traditional idea of a will tended to conflate. Twentieth-century philosophers criticized the idea that acts are caused by 'willing' or 'volition', but the study of human action continued to be governed by a tendency to equate these dimensions of agency, or to reduce one to another. Cutting across the branches of philosophy, from logic and epistemology to ethics and jurisprudence, *Action, Knowledge, and Will* defends comprehensive theories of action and knowledge, and shows how thinking about agency in four dimensions deepens our understanding of human conduct and its causes.



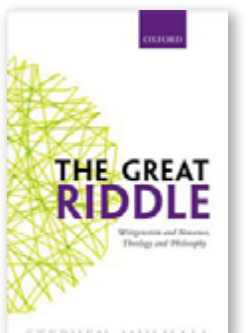
### God and the Meanings of Life (Bloomsbury, 2016) T. J. Mawson (St Peter's College)

Some philosophers have thought that life could only be meaningful if there is no God. Some philosophers, by contrast, have thought that life could only be meaningful if there is a God. This book explores the truth in both these schools of thought. According to Mawson, God, were he to exist, would help make life meaningful in some of these senses and hinder in some others. He argues that whilst there could be meaning in a Godless universe, there could be other sorts of meaning in a Godly one and that these would be deeper.



### The Great Riddle: Wittgenstein and Nonsense, Theology and Philosophy (OUP, 2015) Stephen Mulhall (New College)

Can we talk meaningfully about God? The theological movement known as Grammatical Thomism affirms that religious language is nonsensical, because the reality of God is beyond our capacity for expression. Stephen Mulhall critically evaluates the claims of this movement (as exemplified in the work of Herbert McCabe and David Burrell) to be a legitimate inheritor of Wittgenstein's philosophical methods as well as Aquinas's theological project. This results in a radical reconception of the role of analogous usage in language, and so in the relation between philosophy and theology.



## *Philosophy of Physics 1984-2017* *Revisited*

On the eve of his retirement, **Harvey Brown**, Professor of Philosophy of Physics and Fellow of Wolfson College, reflects on thirty years teaching in Oxford.

**M**y first attendance of a meeting of the then Sub-Faculty of Philosophy in Oxford, a little over thirty years ago, sticks in my memory. I had just arrived from a six-year teaching stint at a Brazilian university. There were no words of welcome at the meeting. This would not have happened in Brazil and would surely not in Oxford now. I watched the renowned Michael Dummett, on his feet, carefully articulate a proposal involving a change to one of our courses, leading to a hard-hitting rebuke by another colleague. Dummett lost the vote and shrugged it off. This insouciance would not have happened in Brazil, where in my time professional criticism was conflated with personal insult. I was a little depressed by the indifference of the meeting to my arrival and at the same time elated by its professionalism.

A little background: for nearly two decades after its inception in the late sixties, the Physics and Philosophy undergraduate degree course in Oxford lacked a local specialist to teach philosophy of physics — a subject

regarded as a key component in each year of the course. Philosophers Rom Harré and John Lucas, and physicists Ian Aitchison, David Brink and Christopher Watson would chip in to teach the subject, before Michael Redhead was borrowed from London. Finding people to give tutorials was a perennial problem. In 1984, a “New Blood” University Lectureship in Philosophy of Physics was awarded to the University, and I got the post.

For over a decade Ian Aitchison and I would alternate as chair of the interdepartmental committee running the course. Ian’s extraordinary dedication to the course was critical in allowing us to adapt to the changes that the Physics undergraduate program was itself undergoing and to new pedagogical ideas generally. When we organised a dinner honouring his retirement, I was able to obtain from a somewhat reluctant university an electronic template for a degree certificate; Ian was duly awarded a BA in University Decrees and Regulations over dessert.





*I could not have asked for better colleagues. We seem to have had a common vision, mutual respect and a rather unusual dose of affection.*



In my early years at Oxford I attended lectures by a few colleagues in philosophy; I must have had more time in those days! The most memorable were those of the polymath John Lucas, who was one of the first philosophers anywhere to use — to colourful effect — what he called the “shining machine”, or the overhead projector. These lectures were never too long as far as I was concerned. I also had the pleasure of teaching the Leibniz-Clarke correspondence on space and time with Rom Harré (University Lecturer in Philosophy of Science) until his retirement. Rom, another polymath and inspiration, taught with a lightness of touch and wit backed up by a deep love of the material. John Lucas once told me how grateful he was to the Oxford system that allowed him to spend a period of time researching a topic off the beaten philosophical path; it led to an interesting paper on the famous 1860 Oxford debate on Darwinian evolution involving Wilberforce and Huxley. I found myself following John’s footsteps many years later when working on a topic in the history of the plant sciences, only to discover that Rom Harré had, of course, already published on a closely related topic.

I was also lucky, early on in Oxford, to have regular contact with Michael Lockwood, in the then Department of Adult Education; his work in natural philosophy was bold and important — and I think under-appreciated in the Sub-

Faculty of Philosophy. The year 1996 saw the arrival of an old friend, Simon Saunders, Rom Harré’s successor at Linacre College, bringing new ideas and much vitality to the scene. The growth in the philosophy of physics group was further enhanced by the appointment of Jeremy Butterfield to a senior research fellowship at All Souls in 1988, followed by the appointments of Oliver Pooley (Oriol, 2004), David Wallace (Balliol, 2005), Christopher Timpson (Brasenose, 2007), Frank Arntzenius (University, 2007), and Hilary Greaves (Somerville, 2009). Jeremy left for Cambridge in 2006, and Frank and Hilary have more recently moved their primary research interest away from philosophy of physics, but Oxford still has the biggest group of active specialists in the area in the world. David Wallace moved in 2016 to the United States, but this serious blow was softened by his replacement at Balliol in the form of Adam Caulton.

I was initially skeptical about the likelihood of growth of teaching capacity in philosophy of physics in Oxford. So since 1996, I have watched the enlargement of our group with astonishment and delight. I could not have asked for better colleagues. We seem to have had a common vision, mutual respect and a rather unusual dose of affection. In 2013 in this magazine I wrote about the achievements of the group in the philosophy of quantum theory. The research interests have actually been much wider, extending to

relativity and spacetime, symmetry principles — including the metaphysics of identity — and thermal physics. Though it is not to everyone’s taste, some of us have even dabbled in the history of physics! Another satisfying memory for me was the privilege of teaming up with John Broome, then White’s Professor of Moral Philosophy, to organise on two occasions a term-long seminar series on the science and ethics of climate change.

On the eve of my retirement, the philosophy of physics scene in Oxford strikes me as being in rude health. Significant interactions with quantum researchers in the departments of Materials, and Computer Science, and to a lesser extent Physics, are taking place. Both the undergraduate program in Physics and Philosophy and the relatively new MSt course in Philosophy of Physics are thriving, and a gratifying number of our ex-students, from both our graduate and undergraduate programs, have over the years taken up significant posts in universities in Britain and the US. Wolfson College, where I have had a happy and rewarding Fellowship, has an interdisciplinary research cluster in the foundations of quantum mechanics, and more recently St Cross College has set up a Centre for the History and Philosophy of Physics, which every term organises a one-day conference open to the general public, invariably oversubscribed.

The name Oxford has double resonance for me. A small farming town in the Canterbury plains where I first lived when arriving in New Zealand at the age of ten is its namesake. I have been lucky and privileged to teach in the University of that name for over three decades. Yet I will leave my post with some lingering concerns. The number of graduate scholarships we can offer is dropping, and our ability to compete for the best students with North American doctoral programs — a long-term concern — is diminishing. The repercussions of the Brexit vote for academia are uncertain but it is hard to be optimistic. Perhaps most importantly, some (many?) of us at the end of our teaching careers cannot help compare the workloads for academics today with those at the start of our careers. I fear that the ever-growing demands related to publishing, teaching, supervision, examining, administration — and the rising expectation of research grant applications — have reached a point where our young colleagues must wonder why we call this a wonderful career. But a wonderful career it has been!

# The Future of the Humanities

**Dominic Scott**

Back in 2011, I found myself the recipient of an offer I couldn't refuse: to help run a project dauntingly entitled, *The Humanities World Report*. Conceived by two Scandinavian historians with extensive knowledge of international research policy, Poul Holm and Arne Jarrick, the aim of the project was to provide an overview of humanities research across the globe, focusing on themes close to the hearts of academics and Higher Education policy makers: e.g. the value and nature of the humanities, the challenges of bringing research to wider audiences, the internationalisation of scholarship, the importance of inter-disciplinary research, the digital humanities, and funding patterns.

Some three years later, after a great deal of globe-trotting, report-reading and interviewing, we published our findings in an open access book with Palgrave Macmillan: *The Humanities World Report 2015*. As authors, we tried to make it engaging to read, with as little jargon as possible; it is also the kind of book you can dip into: the chapters are relatively self-contained, and summaries are provided of them in the Introduction. I shall not attempt to provide a comprehensive overview here. Instead I'll offer some reflections on the project a year or so on, with a slant towards my philosophical readership.

Obviously, ours was an ambitious task, and I should start by saying something about how we approached it. Our method was to sift through the many humanities reports published (e.g. by national funding bodies), alongside op-ed pieces or books on the subject. But most of our time and energy went into conducting in-depth interviews with humanities researchers around the world. By the end we had almost 90 such interviews from about 40 countries. We also followed these up by holding (or co-hosting) regional workshops and conferences, e.g. with East Asian, Chinese, Indian, Russian and Latin American scholars.

In retrospect, it feels to me as if we were following in Aristotle's footsteps: gathering the *endoxa*, the 'reputable opinions', sifting through them, and finding tensions where they exist. Take inter-disciplinary research, for example: on one hand, the most interesting intellectual problems do

not always fall neatly into existing disciplinary boundaries, hence the need to be inter-disciplinary. On the other hand, the criteria for professional advancement often favour mono-disciplinary research, as if those who set the rules think, deep down, that it is more rigorous and less dilettante. Another example concerns the increasingly international nature of research, as evidenced by growing networks across regions and the increased provision of international funding.

On the face of it, international collaboration seems an unqualified good; such links also help to bolster individual researchers who feel isolated in their country or under the pressure of hostile political regimes. And yet along with internationalisation comes the danger that richer nations (who often supply the funding) will dominate research agendas elsewhere. Added to this is the problem that the English language is becoming increasingly dominant as the language of research. Maybe this is not such a problem for the sciences, but it is not as good for the humanities (for obvious reasons). Yet another tension concerns the digital humanities, a topic that generates a great deal of enthusiasm in some quarters, but leaves others cold. Although not explicitly Luddite in their attitudes, such researchers fail to see the intellectual dividends: technology certainly facilitates research, speeding it up, but has it yet brought any intellectual transformations, e.g. by raising entirely new kinds of research questions? Certainly, analytic philosophers do not appear among the vanguard of digital humanists.

One theme that came up several times was the social value of the humanities. The majority of our respondents saw this as an important justification for their research (though a large number also stressed its intrinsic value). Social value can take many forms. It could be something quite general: the ability of humanities disciplines to prepare its students as citizens (e.g. by making them more tolerant of different perspectives and traditions, but also by making them more critical); it can also apply to the specific contributions individual disciplines can make to public policy (e.g. in applied ethics). One interesting distinction that some interviewees



brought to our attention is between social and political value. Very often, the humanities are justified because they contribute to understanding a nation's cultural heritage. Sadly, this can all too often be used for political ends, as when nationalists try to use particular interpretations of history or culture to promote their own agenda. This was a theme that recurred across quite different regions, East and West, North and South. It is a problem that seems to be getting worse by the day.

In the UK, the social value of the humanities is bound up with the 'impact agenda', where departments are partly assessed on the impact their research has on the wider world. All this raises the question of how the commitment to social value should feed into an individual scholar's motivations. Should they, as they design their research projects, build in a commitment to social relevance and impact? (Should funding bodies require an 'impact statement' in the proposal?) Or is social impact best achieved not by being pursued directly, but by being allowed to fall out of research driven by intellectual curiosity? In our conclusion, we went with the second approach. Allowing scholars to pursue the topics that really fascinate them will unleash their energies, and produce the best research. In turn, and over the long-term, this will generate a good stock of socially relevant material. This is surely what the record shows.

We also discussed relation between the humanities and public policy in different parts of the world, especially the way researchers respond to agendas set by the state. In the light of recent events, readers might want to look at what we said about the EU, particularly its Horizon 2020 Programme, designed to pump billions of euros into research over the next few years. But for the humanities (and the social sciences), it has been something of a struggle to become properly integrated into the Programme, as opposed to being an add-on for funding themes that are basically

scientific or technological in character (e.g. health, climate, food or transport). As we concluded somewhat bleakly: 'it is clear that, despite some political goodwill, there is considerable resistance or lack of appreciation at many political and bureaucratic levels. The actual wording of work programmes and calls for funding is a battle ground that is still very often held by technocrats who have little appreciation of humanities research. While the humanities now have several important organisational voices, the European process requires follow-up and lobbying, which is still beyond the capacity of the humanities'. It is a pity that the UK will no longer be there to help.

Finally, I should mention one issue we took a conscious decision to duck (for fear of getting into a morass): the definition of the humanities. What holds all these different disciplines together? Do the humanities form a natural kind, or are they more of a contingent classification designed to help with the smooth administration of universities?

I shall not attempt to answer the question here. But as I start in Oxford, I cannot resist raising a related, though more specific, question: is philosophy, as studied here (predominantly in the Anglo-American analytic tradition) actually a humanities subject? Not if you think of philosophy of physics, or mathematics. And what about metaphysics? Interestingly, most of the joint schools involve non-humanities subjects: Psychology, Physiology, Mathematics, Computer Science and Physics. There are joint schools with Classics and Modern Languages, but not with two of the biggest players in the humanities, History and English. PPE represents a link with the Social Sciences. Of course, we should not forget the joint school with Theology. But this opens another can of worms: is Theology one of the humanities? The answer seems to depend on whether you're a theist or an atheist. (For an atheist, theology is concerned with a human construct, so appropriately classed with the humanities.) Anyway, food for thought. 'Is philosophy a humanities subject?' would make a nice question for an exam paper.

*The report, co-authored by Poul Holm, Arne Jarrick, and Dominic Scott, can be downloaded from the Palgrave Macmillan website. It has now been translated into Mandarin Chinese, courtesy of Institute of the Humanities and Social Sciences, Taiwan National University.*



*Dominic Scott is Professor of Philosophy and Fellow of Lady Margaret Hall*

*The Humanities World Report (2015)*

# How To Think Morally



**Alison Hills** tells us about her recent research on moral understanding

Suppose that you tell the truth, and I tell the truth. You give to charity, and I give to charity. You treat others with respect and so do I. We both do the right actions. Are we morally speaking, on a par? Is neither one of us better than the other?

Sometimes we judge people who have done the same action differently, on the basis of the reasons why they acted. Kant talks about two grocers, one who gives his customers the right change because that's the right thing to do; the other who is afraid of getting a reputation as a cheat and losing customers to his rival. They both do the right action, but one acts for moral reasons, the other for self-interest. What is the difference between acting for moral reasons or from reasons of self-interest? There are two aspects. One is motivation, the sort of desires on which you are acting. What do you care about fundamentally. The other is cognitive: how you think about what you are doing, and why you are doing it. My research in the last few years has been about this.

Consider the morally best person that you know, a truly good, virtuous person. How does that person think? One question is: does she think of her actions in explicitly moral terms? And is she aware why her action is right: could she, for instance, explain to you why she made her decision, and show that it was the morally right thing to do? Some people say: no. A morally good person doesn't have to be articulate, full of explanations and justifications. She doesn't have to have a fully worked out moral theory. She just needs to think: "this is the thing to do", and then act. As long as she ends up doing the right action, that's all that matters.

There are a few reasons why that might be wrong. Perhaps if you don't think of your action as morally right, and you are not aware of the reasons why it is right, you won't be

very good at working out what to do. Moral problems can be complicated. There can be lots of different factors you need to take into account and weigh up carefully. If you have no idea what they are, how can you possibly make the right decision? And if you don't, you won't end up doing the right action after all. Moreover, if you do make the right decision, but don't know why it's right, you are in a rather vulnerable position. You can't defend yourself from arguments that what you're doing is wrong after all. So you may end up changing your mind when you should have stuck to your first thought. So maybe if you can't explain why your action is right, you are less reliable at choosing the right thing, and less good at sticking to the right decision. That sounds plausible. But it's not necessarily correct. You can be responsive to what matters morally, without being aware of it: it just seems to you the right thing to do. And maybe you can be very good at responding without awareness. Practical experts in other fields (like nursing and firefighting) often make good decisions on the basis of "instinct": they don't know why their decision is right – but it is.

But I think there is a very different reason why it is better to be aware why your action is right. And that is, that being a moral person is not just about doing the right action. It is also about being responsive to morality in all the ways that are

available to you. One of those ways is doing the right action, another is having the right sort of motivation, but a third is responding to moral reasons in your thoughts: thinking "this is the right action" for instance, on the basis of your awareness of the moral reasons that make it right. It follows that a morally good person won't necessarily have a full moral theory, but she will at least be able to explain why her action is right.

The idea that part of being a morally good person is being responsive to moral reasons in your thoughts has some important implications. One of them is about moral testimony, that is, other people telling you what is the thing to do. A lot of our knowledge comes from testimony: if you want to know, you find a trustworthy person to ask, and they tell you the answer. There is nothing wrong with that, provided you asked the right person and trusted what they said. But in some domains, including morality, just asking "should I give the right change to my customers?" and trusting the answer you get in return ("yes") seems odd. Is that because we don't know who to trust about moral questions? Certainly it's not at all obvious whether there are any moral experts, or who they are. But that doesn't seem to get at the real issue, which is: it's important to make up your own mind about moral questions? This ought to seem quite

*When you make up your own mind, you are responsive to moral reasons: reasons why the action you choose is right.*

puzzling. Isn't the important thing to do the right action? And if you could find someone who could tell you what the right action is, isn't it obvious that you should do what they say? What's the value of making up your own mind?

The answer is, that when you make up your own mind, you are responsive to moral reasons: reasons why the action you choose is right. When you trust someone else, you are not. You are, hopefully, responsive to reasons for thinking them reliable and competent. But those are not reasons why your action is right: they are the wrong sort of reasons. It follows from this that if there are any moral experts, they are not people that you should trust. If moral experts want to pass on their expertise, they have to be more creative. They need to find ways to help you think about moral problems in the right way, without simply giving you the right answer. They might give you an argument; or an analogy to think about, so that you come to the right answer yourself, guided by the expert. If you have knowledge that you want to pass on, there is more than one way of doing it. Testimony is straightforward. But sometimes we have reasons to want something less direct. That is because knowledge is not the only thing we want. Sometimes we also (or instead) want to understand why. When we refuse to trust moral testimony and instead try to think things through for ourselves we are searching for, and then using, moral understanding. And it is this that is essential in ethics, the cognitive component of the best moral agent, the virtuous person.

*Alison Hills is Professor of Philosophy and Fellow in Philosophy at St John's College*



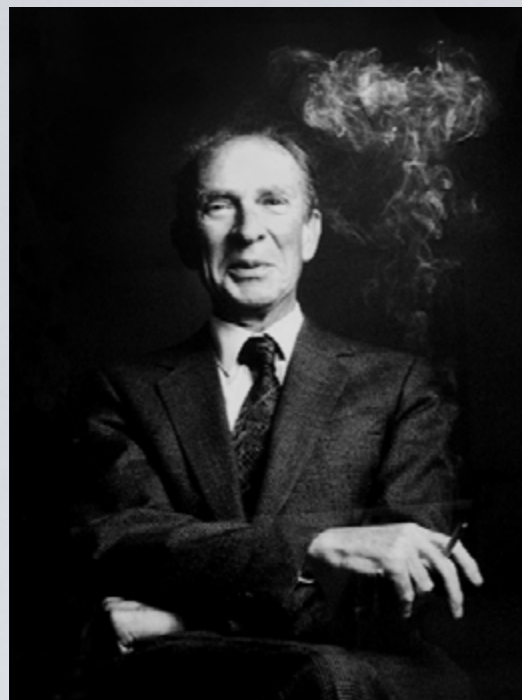
# THE BOUNDS OF SENSE: *Fifty Years On*

1966 saw a landmark in the reception of Kant in the English-speaking world: the publication of P F Strawson's *The Bounds of Sense*. The Faculty celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of Strawson's work with a conference in May 2016 at Trinity College. **Anil Gomes** tells us more.

P.F. Strawson (1919-2006) was one of the most significant philosophers of the twentieth century. His career centred around Oxford – first as Tutor and Fellow at University College, then as Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy at Magdalen College. His careful, thoughtful, and characteristically elegant written work was influential in moving Oxford philosophy from the anti-metaphysical leanings of A.J. Ayer and J.L. Austin to a renewed and rejuvenated era of traditional philosophical theorising, albeit domesticated in a distinctively Strawsonian fashion.

Strawson wrote primarily on a range of issues in the philosophy of language, metaphysics, and epistemology, but his work on all of these topics was informed by a close engagement with people and ideas from the history of philosophy. Chief amongst these was Immanuel Kant.

Strawson's introduction to Kant arose out of the historical peculiarities of the PPE degree. In Strawson's day, PPE students who wished to specialise in philosophy were obliged to take two special subjects: Logic and Kant. The latter was to be studied through the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and when studying the first *Critique*, Strawson tells us, he found 'a depth, a range, a boldness, and a power unlike anything [he] had previously encountered'.



The influence of Strawson's engagement with Kant can be seen in *Individuals* (1959), his pioneering study in descriptive metaphysics. But it was his ground-breaking and influential commentary on the *Critique of Pure Reason*, *The Bounds of Sense* (1966), which demonstrated the importance of Kantian ideas for contemporary philosophical discussions and, in the words of one philosopher, 'opened the way to a reception of Kant's philosophy by analytic philosophers'. Strawson's aim was to detach and defend what he saw as valuable in the first *Critique* from that which was dodgy and downright dubious, what Strawson called the 'imaginary subject of transcendental psychology'.

Strawson's crisp prose, philosophical insight and sheer intellectual achievement prompted a resurgence of interest in Kantian claims in theoretical philosophy. Three particular claims stand out. First, that there is a close link between our capacity to think of objective things and our capacity to think or perceive in spatiotemporal terms. Second, that there is a link between consciousness and self-consciousness, between our awareness of the objective world and our self-conscious conception of that world as objective. Third, that the limits of sense-experience set the limits on meaning and that this shows both the unintelligibility of and temptations to Cartesian Dualism. These three claims were incredibly influential in philosophy and, in this way, Strawson's engagement with Kant set the topics which achieved prominence in twentieth-century philosophy of mind and the way in which they were engaged with.

In May 2016, Oxford celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *The Bounds of Sense* with a workshop dedicated to Strawson's work. Ralph Walker (Oxford) and Paul Snowdon (UCL) combined reminiscences of Strawson as tutor and colleague with penetrating discussions of the content and methodology of *The Bounds of Sense*. Mike Martin (UCL) and I both talked about Strawson's striking argument in *The Bounds of Sense* that any subject who possesses a unified consciousness must thereby have experience of an objective world.

Strawson once quipped that the favourite occupation of philosophers is stabbing their benefactors in the back. Since *The Bounds of Sense* counts as a benefit given to the philosophical community, our workshop continued this philosophical practice, not by damning with faint praise but by acclaiming with loud criticism. This shouldn't mask the admiration that all of us who took part felt for Strawson's discussions. Strawson's arguments in *The Bounds of Sense*, like those of Kant before him, engage seriously and creatively with some of the deepest issues which arise when we think about ourselves as self-conscious subjects thrown into a world not of our making. The workshop gave us opportunity to think again what we should learn from that discussion.

*Anil Gomes is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Fellow of Trinity College*

Anil Gomes's own copy of the first edition *The Bounds of Sense*.

# The Philosophy of Iris Murdoch



Perhaps better known to many for her novels, Oxford's Iris Murdoch has recently started to take her rightful place as one of the most important moral philosophers of the 20th Century.

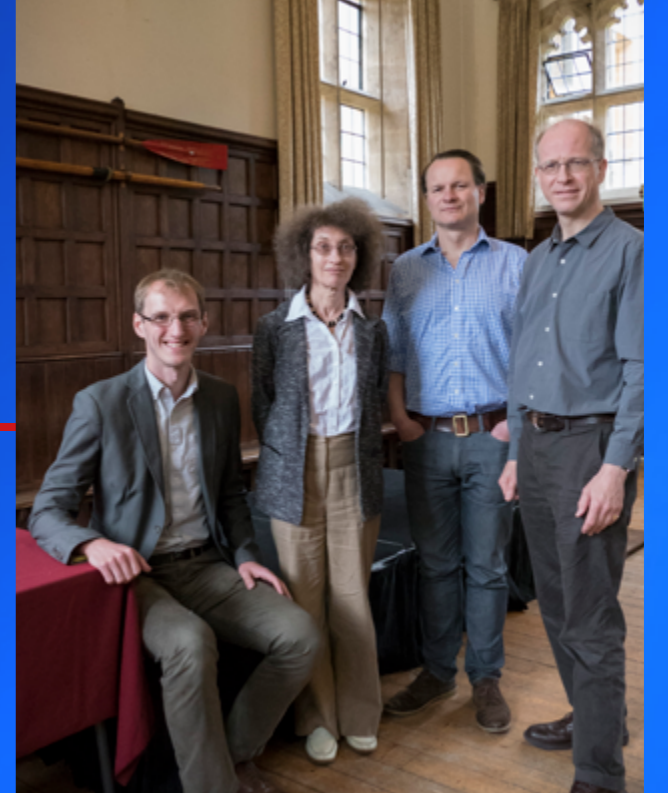
**Mark Hopwood** tells us about a recent conference at Mansfield College, which highlighted and contributed to the recent growth in Murdoch scholarship.

"Iris never minded being unfashionable," wrote Mary Midgley in her autobiography *The Owl of Minerva*. That, she added, "is what makes *The Sovereignty of Good* such a good book – what makes it, still, one of the very few books of modern philosophy that people outside universities find helpful."

Although she came to be much better known for her works of fiction, Iris Murdoch was a philosopher before she was a novelist. Having completed her degree in Greats at Somerville, she was a fellow at St Anne's from 1948 to 1963, publishing numerous articles and the first English language study of the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre. In the world of Oxford moral philosophy in the 1950s and 60s, Murdoch was indeed a unique voice. At a time when the primary business of the moral philosophy was taken (perhaps most notably by the likes of R.M. Hare) to be a kind of neutral analysis of moral language, Murdoch's embrace of Plato, her critical engagement with French existentialism, and her insistence that moral philosophy should concern itself with how to help us to lead better lives, made her an outlier in

a variety of different ways. Although she was a significant influence on a number of other moral philosophers, including John McDowell, Charles Taylor, and Martha Nussbaum, Murdoch's own work – perhaps because of its originality and perhaps also because of its undoubted difficulty – never really received its due. In the past few years, however, this situation has begun to change. A trickle of articles and monographs on her moral philosophy has given way to an increasing stream, with a collection of essays by well-known contemporary philosophers including Nussbaum, Roger Crisp, and Richard Moran leading the way. A great deal still remains to be done, however, to bring Murdoch back into the broader philosophical conversation.

The conference on Murdoch's philosophy aimed to capitalize on the recent growth in Murdoch scholarship by bringing together a range of perspectives on her work. Justin Broackes, the editor of the aforementioned collection of essays, gave a preview of his latest project, a commentary on Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good*. Part of Broakes's aim in writing this commentary is to counteract the unfortunate yet widespread misconception that Murdoch's writing lacks the characteristic argumentative rigor of analytical philosophy. Murdoch's dense prose is rich in allusions to a vast range of philosophy and literature – Broakes gave a particularly illuminating explanation of how we might understand a passing reference to "Kafka's struggle with the devil that ends up in bed" – but it is also forcefully and often compellingly argued. Other presenters at the conference paid tribute to these arguments both by defending them and by attacking them. Whilst acknowledging the appeal of Murdoch's claim that love ought to be "a central concept in morals," Edward Harcourt raised some significant difficulties for any attempt to extend the reach of love beyond the close personal relationships with which it is usually associated.



L to R Mark Hopwood, Sabina Lovibond, Edward Harcourt, Justin Broackes

My own paper, meanwhile, sought to defend Murdoch's argument for the rather surprising claim that there may be moral reasons that could be reasons only for a single individual. Finally, Sabina Lovibond – author of the recent book *Iris Murdoch, Gender, and Philosophy* – presented an exploration of one of Murdoch's signature themes, that in moral philosophy we ought to be paying less attention to the rightness or wrongness of acts and more to the "quality of consciousness" that is formed prior to any given moment of choice or decision.

For those looking for reasons to revisit Murdoch's work, this last point may be a good with which to start. Moral differences, on her view, are much more often differences of vision than differences of choice. As she puts it: "we differ not only because we select different objects out of the same world but because we see different worlds." In a society that is being forced to reckon with deep divisions along the lines of race, class, age, religion, and gender, Murdoch's characteristic questions may begin to appear rather timely. What are the obstacles to clear moral vision, and what are the techniques for overcoming those obstacles? How are we to deal with those whose understanding of the world differs dramatically from our own? Murdoch's philosophical work may not yet have become fashionable, but it has arguably never been more important.

*Mark Hopwood is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Sewanee, The University of the South. He read Philosophy and Modern Languages at Oxford (2000-4) and later took the BPhil (2005-7).*

# THE **TOOLS** OF METAPHYSICS

**Ted Sider**, Professor of Philosophy at Rutgers University, tells us about his 2016 John Locke Lectures.

**M**y lectures, “The Tools of Metaphysics and the Metaphysics of Science”, were about how the move from modal to “postmodal” conceptual tools affects first-order metaphysics. More specifically, they were about how this move affects the metaphysics of science and mathematics. Even more specifically, they were about how it affects the assessment of “structuralist” positions. There are a host of metaphysical questions about science. These are just questions about what science is telling us about the world.

It might seem perfectly clear what science tells us about the world: just pick up a textbook and read it! But even the most clearly written textbook leaves plenty of questions open. Texts on classical physics, for instance, give equations describing objects’ behavior in time and space, but do not address questions such as these: What are time and space? Are they genuinely existing “containers”, separate from the physical objects that are in time and space (as Newton thought), or are they just ways of talking about those physical objects (as Leibniz thought)? How do mathematical equations, which are about numbers, functions, and other abstract, nonphysical entities, make contact with the physical world? Questions like these don’t need to be answered before doing science (which is why the textbooks don’t address them), but they are nevertheless real questions at the foundations of scientific inquiry.



Questions about the metaphysics of science are intertwined with questions of general metaphysics. If we’re going to provide an account of what some scientific theory is telling us about the world, we need to know what “telling us about the world” amounts to in general, at the appropriate level of abstraction. This is where the “tools of metaphysics” come in.

The tools of metaphysics are the core concepts with which we articulate metaphysical problems and their solutions. They are a sort of lens through which we view metaphysical problems, and the very same problems look different when we change the lens. In the 1950s the tools of choice were those of conceptual analysis, which led to distinctive ways of framing metaphysical questions. For instance, the question of personal identity was put this way: what role does the concept of remaining identically the same person over time play in our conceptual scheme? And the mind-body problem was put thus: what are we saying when we talk about the mind? In the 1970s and 80s the conceptual tools of choice became modal—the concepts of possibility and necessity—and the questions of metaphysics were transformed: what criteria of re-identification of persons are valid in all possible worlds? Would it be possible for a person to be physically exactly the same, but be very different mentally? But in the past fifteen years or so, there has been a shift from modal to “postmodal” conceptual tools: concepts of ground, essence, and fundamentality. Now we ask: what grounds the facts of personal identity? What facts about the mind are fundamental?

**‘** *The tools of metaphysics are a sort of lens through which we view metaphysical problems, and the very same problems look different when we change the lens.* **’**

In my lectures I argued that this shift to postmodal tools transforms the debate over structuralism. Structuralist theses say, in one way or another, that “patterns” are prior to the “nodes” in the patterns. For example, structural realism in the philosophy of physics says that individual objects, such as particles or points of spacetime, are “secondary”, and the pattern of relationships between those objects is “primary”. But what exactly does this mean? What is a structuralist thesis “telling us about the world”? The precise answer depends on which tools of metaphysics we use to articulate the structuralist thesis. In modal terms, it’s easy to see what structuralism amounts to: some claim to the effect that independent variation of patterns and objects in patterns is impossible. For instance, a structural realist might say that it would be impossible for the very same network of geometric relationships between points of spacetime to involve different points. But it’s far less clear how to articulate structuralist theses in postmodal terms. To be sure, their rhetoric does suggest a claim about the nature of fundamental reality, something like this: “what is fundamental is the pattern; the entities in the pattern are derivative”. But what would a fundamental account of reality that speaks only of patterns and not objects in the patterns look like?

In my lectures I considered three structuralist positions, and argued that they look far less attractive when viewed through a postmodal lens. The first is nomic essentialism, which says that scientific properties like charge and mass are secondary and nomic or lawlike relationships amongst such properties are primary. Nomic essentialists have tended to articulate their position modally; they have said, for instance, that it would be impossible for the very same property, electric charge for instance, to have obeyed different laws of nature. But why is this impossible? There must surely be some deeper, postmodal, fact about the connection between the property of electric charge and the laws of nature that explains why that property couldn’t have obeyed different laws. But as it turns out, it’s hard to find an attractive account of this sort.

The second structuralist position is comparativism about quantities, which says that particular values of scientific quantities, such as having exactly 1000g mass, are secondary, and quantitative relationships, such as one object’s being twice as massive as another, are primary. Here it’s easier to formulate the position postmodally: it is the quantitative relationships rather than the particular values that are fundamental. But there are some difficult questions about the kinds of laws of nature that could govern such relationships.

The third position is structuralism about individuals, a general position of which mathematical structuralism and structural realism are instances. This view says that for scientific and mathematical objects, what is primary is the pattern of relations amongst those entities, and the particular objects in the pattern are secondary. Here it is very difficult indeed to formulate any attractive view about what reality is fundamentally like that answers to structuralist slogans. Structuralism about individuals is a position whose appeal vanishes when viewed through a postmodal lens.

The lectures concluded with a discussion of what it means to say that two theories are equivalent, that they say the same thing about the world. The theme of the preceding lectures was that structuralist positions resist formulation in postmodal terms. But a structuralist might resist the demand for such a formulation. Instead of trying to say something distinctive about what reality is ultimately like, a structuralist might say merely that structurally alike descriptions of the world—descriptions differing only over which nodes occupy which positions in a structure—are equivalent theories. That is, the structuralist could say: “The world is such as to be describable in ways X, Y, or Z, but there is no further way available to say what the world is ‘really like.’” Is it acceptable for a fundamental theory to take this form? Or must a fundamental theory always specify what the world is “really like”? The issue has far-reaching implications.

# Get Out of your Comfort Zone

**Evan Davis** spoke to co-editor James Knight about his memories of studying philosophy at Oxford, and the influence that study of philosophy has had on him since.

**Tell me about your memories of studying philosophy at Oxford.**

I have two particularly strong lasting memories of studying philosophy. The first was of Gordon Baker teaching seven or eight of us logic in a class. I really loved that course, I think because I was quite good at it. This was my first study at Oxford, and I thought to myself: "Oxford is fine, I can cope!" You get to Oxford, and you're never sure if you're going to completely sink. I'd come from a comprehensive school, not somewhere churning out twenty Oxbridge people a year, and so that experience in the logic class was a good start. My other great philosophy memory is of tutorials with Peter Hacker, who did critique our essays in what seemed an intellectually quite brutal way, but who was a lovely man from whom I picked up a great deal. He was intimidating in a good way, and made us raise our game. He could be wittily scathing about all sorts of topics we were interested in, such as psychology, and the social sciences.

**Did you study philosophy throughout the full three years of PPE?**

I did stick with philosophy throughout the course. I strongly took the view – and this is still advice I give to younger people asking about careers – that you should challenge yourself as much as possible. I was always most interested in economics and specialized in that, but reasoned that much of the then politics course could be studied anywhere, and Oxford offered this challenging opportunity in philosophy, so on top of economics I took papers in general philosophy, moral philosophy, and the philosophy of mind.

**Was there one area of philosophy you particularly enjoyed, or took something away from?**

That finals paper in moral philosophy actually evokes another fond memory: the day before the exam I had something of a brainwave about different types of wrong action, and I used my thoughts on this to draw a thread through all of my exam answers. I remember thinking at the time that it was a risk, but I got a very good mark on the paper! Philosophy of mind was the most challenging thing I studied in philosophy. I find myself remembering parts of it as I imagine what our dog, Mr Whippy, might be thinking. Peter Hacker would probably tell me that he isn't thinking, since he doesn't have language. Perhaps I should ask Hacker to analyse Mr Whippy and tell me what's going on in his head.

**Did you come away from PPE with particular views about the claims of the social sciences?**

I think I always respected all three subjects. Even at A-level, though, when I did Economics, I was just a tiny bit suspicious of its scientific credentials: the first chapter of our textbook went on an explanation of why economics was a science, which seemed to be a protest too much. I was aware quite early on that economics is full of implicit value judgements. Economics is not scientific in a way that physics is, but you do gather and evaluate evidence in a way that has something in common with it. At grad school I read Deirdre McCloskey's *The Rhetoric of Economics*, in which she describes economics as a story-telling kind of activity, and her treatment has influenced my views ever since. For McCloskey, an economist uses all sorts of things: theory, econometrics, data, introspection, anecdote, logic, to ask: what's the story here? That's not to disparage economics: this can be done very intelligently and dispassionately.

**So you still think of PPE as a worthwhile degree to study?**

I still think PPE is a really good combination of subjects. The only problem is if you don't challenge yourself. I definitely challenged myself: not just with the philosophy, but I also picked the hardest options I could find in economics. Like any course, the degree can be superficial if you don't delve deep enough into anything, and you won't develop any intellectual muscle if you don't lift any heavy weight.

**A lot of today's politicians are PPEists. Have most of them lifted enough weight?**

I'm going to be honest and say, yes, I think most of them have. There clearly are problems about diversity of background, and the "entry system" that leads to politics is flawed. Access to good schools and universities is not always on merit. But my experience of most politicians is that they are like the brighter students I met when I was college: they are well-read, and keen, and you can have very insightful conversations with them.

**Do you think that the study of philosophy can enrich political discussion and discourse?**

What philosophy can teach you, which would be useful in more advanced political discussion – "Newsnight and above", say – is that you must be disciplined in how you approach this discourse. You must know whether the parties are discussing the same thing. Ask: are we arguing about empirical fact? Or about something that is simply a matter of taste or preferences? Or is there some kind of philosophical principle at stake?

What philosophy teaches you is that it is important to be disciplined in how you argue, and if you want to do this sensibly, you have to break down arguments and work out what is going on. A lot of politics is about arbitration, and that involves deconstructing each side's objectives, aims, and the strength of their claims, and understanding what each side can give way on. And it can help in that arbitration to have behind you the belief that deconstructing arguments is an important thing to do. Philosophy gives you that belief, and practice in doing that too.

**Do you see a bright future for the BBC?**

I do! There was a period, when subscription TV started to appear, where the case for the BBC seemed diminished. But in the era of the internet, it seems very difficult to get people to pay for decent-quality content. In that kind of world, it seems compelling to me that you have some form of subsidized content. Whether that's the BBC is a further debate. But on the tube, in pubs, when I see people on their smartphones, they are very often looking at the BBC. It's amazing content. Maybe the BBC has made it impossible for people to pay for content like this, but in other countries where there's no equivalent, people don't want to pay for internet content either.

**Are there some books and thinkers that you would recommend to our readers?**

Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* – it had a huge effect on me and how I think, and also his *The Better Angels of Our Nature*. Jared Diamond is always fascinating, on how we got to be the species we are. John Adams' *Risk* completely changed how I think about certain things. It's about how our subjective feelings about risk dominate our rational feelings, and how subjectivity has a role to play in our supposedly rational decisions. I like Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. John Kay, my Economics professor at Oxford, writes for the FT now, and is really excellent. And I must mention Deirdre McCloskey again.

**Finally, what advice would you give to young people with aspirations of making a positive contribution in public life?**

Challenging yourself academically is a very good thing to do. In fact, get out of your comfort zone more generally. Do a few things that make you uncomfortable, which aren't routine, which aren't in your usual social circle. Recent political life shows we need people to mix more, to understand each other more. You can't be a good politician if you haven't talked to those who are different to you. Engage with your enemy!

“What philosophy teaches you is that it is important to be disciplined in how you argue.”



Evan Davis is a presenter of the BBC2 current affairs programme *Newsnight*, a role he began in September 2014, before which he was a presenter of the *Today Programme* on BBC Radio 4 for six years. He is also well-known as the presenter of the BBC2 business reality show *Dragon's Den*. Evan read PPE at St John's College Oxford from 1981 to 1984.

# Moral Decisions

## on the Front Line of Humanitarian Aid

**Dr John Foran** is a regular reader of *Oxford Philosophy* and visitor to the Philosophy Faculty. He reflects on his experiences bringing medical care and humanitarian assistance to troubled regions around the world, touching upon ethical issues addressed in the work of some of today's community of moral philosophers at Oxford.



Professor Jeff McMahan in the 2015 issue of *Oxford Philosophy* writes: “practical moral problems inevitably raise theoretical issues....but these issues cannot be adequately understood in abstraction from their application to practical problems”. I have perhaps had more sight of practical problems of a certain kind than most.

Since 1981 I have been involved as a doctor in humanitarian work in a number of regions including the Thai/Cambodian border, Eritrea, Iraq, Afghanistan and Greece. Some of the situations I experienced presented “bottom up” ethical dilemmas, though at the time Kant or Bentham were not foremost in my mind. The provision of medical and other services may, when dealing with complex political and practical realities in the field, involve a degree of moral compromise: in the face of uncertainty, or different value systems. It may involve choosing the lesser of two evils in seeking to deliver the core tenet of the humanitarian charter: that all people affected by disaster or conflict have a right to receive protection and assistance to assure the basic conditions for life with dignity.

Paradoxically, some aid workers, despite the known ethical difficulties that repeatedly surface in humanitarian work, may have had little training in practical ethics, nor may their organisation have proper ethical guidelines – despite the existence of the humanitarian code of conduct and technical guidelines aimed at improving humanitarian work, most recently summarised in the Sphere Standards.

Humanitarians often have to work with a wide range of actors national, international and non-state if they are to reach people in need. These associations can have an ethical dimension, as they may compromise one's neutrality or be perceived as support for oppressive actors. For example, in 1982 I was working in a Khmer refugee camp on the Thai/Cambodian border where the armed Khmer group in control of the camp was in conflict with the Vietnamese army on the other side of the border. The group was conscripting young men, siting artillery next to the hospital and treating its Vietnamese prisoners atrociously. It was evident that aid was being stolen from the intended civilian beneficiaries and diverted to the armed group. Nevertheless we had to work through this group - however that might have been criticised - to reach the civilian population.

Similarly, access during the civil war period in Afghanistan was negotiated with Mujahideen commanders who often were directly involved in killings and destruction. This situation, which characterises access in many conflicts where power is fragmented, can affect those you are working with or their community. They may find it hard to accept an agency's interaction with the very people that are abusing them. On the other hand the humanitarian agency is seldom in a position significantly to influence the behaviour of strongmen and their primary objective is to save lives and protect civilians trapped in a conflict.



In addition to the delivery of humanitarian assistance, Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) has the obligation of bearing witness (*témoignage*) to human rights violations. In 1985 they made the decision to leave the camp they were running for the many thousands of people internally displaced by the civil war in Ethiopia, after the government started to force people against their will to a camp in the south to undercut support for the rebels. MSF decided they would not be complicit in this. There was much discussion at the time as to whether MSF acted ethically by pulling out instead of adapting their programme to continue to help those outside the camp as Save The Children did. Working in Eritrea and knowing the extremely oppressive nature of the Ethiopian regime, I was inclined at the time to support the position MSF took. In reality however, MSF's withdrawal had limited effect on the behaviour of a regime which remained in place until its overthrow in 1989 with the ending of the Cold War.

The operating environment for the humanitarian sector has become more crowded as recent Western-led interventions involved a strong international military presence and 'for profit' contractors. In Afghanistan the humanitarian agencies sought to keep blue water between the sectors. Military protection for NGO operations was refused on the grounds that this would affect perceptions of their neutrality and result in NGO staff becoming targets of armed opposition groups. However, the assumption that neutrality conferred some protection - which obtained when I first started as an aid worker - is more questionable now. Over the last decade hundreds of aid workers have been killed, injured or kidnapped. This increased level of risk presents practical ethical issues for humanitarian organisations. As security worsens, should international NGO staff operate long distance, recruiting more local staff to maintain some level of programming on the ground despite the risks?

The financial independence of the humanitarian aid sector has declined since the 1980s, with increased dependency on government and other donor funding. This can affect the nature of engagement by reflecting donor priorities rather than principled programming and actual needs on the ground. Earlier this year I worked in Athens on social integration projects for Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi refugee youth trapped in Greece, bringing me face to face with a small part of the ongoing migration crisis directly affecting Europe. While public hostility throughout Europe to migration strengthens, this crisis is testing the ethical principles and human rights norms that are supposed to define the West. I hope I have given readers some inkling of the issues faced in tackling such crises.

Practical ethical issues are now in the forefront of public discourse on key challenges such as migration, refugees, terrorism and personal freedoms that confront civilisational assumptions. Professor McMahan states that we cannot understand ethical problems such as the morality of war without addressing a broad range of issues, both in normative ethics and in other areas of philosophy, there being an essential interdependency or symbiosis between practical and normative ethics. As an experienced diplomat memorably remarked to me “without principles we are in the mud, there is nowhere to go.”

## GRADUATE SCHOLARSHIPS

# Funding the Future

No other philosophy department can rival Oxford for size of faculty, and students here have the opportunity to undertake research with experts across a wide range of disciplines within philosophy. Oxford's strength in philosophy allows us to attract truly excellent students to the BPhil (our general Master's course) and our MSt courses in Ancient Philosophy and Philosophy of Physics. However, each year we are sorry to lose to other institutions some of our very best students, who find that they cannot afford to stay at Oxford for doctoral studies (the DPhil) after completion of the BPhil or MSt. We hope for a future where we can retain the best of our students by offering them funding for their DPhil.

We are pleased to introduce you to two of our current outstanding DPhil students, who will share with you an outline of their research work, and demonstrate the importance to this of having funding in place.



### James Matharu DPhil

I'm in the second year of my research, following completion of the BPhil. I chose Oxford as the best place to confront as many questions and approaches as possible. I was not disappointed: my mind was made to somersault. My BPhil thesis addressed the nature of pleasure and activity – a project whose ambition I'd not have thought possible when I arrived.

My current work is on the relation between our minds and objects which are conceivable but not yet real. Consider a "just society". If we want a just society, then presumably we lack one, and so what we desire, here, does not exist. But if there exists no just society to stand in relation to, then surely there's none to be thought of? This last idea drives many philosophers to deny that we can actually think of non-existent things. Faced with an apparent plethora of such 'thoughts', the popular response is: 'We merely *pretend* to think of such non-existent things'. But in that case most hopes, desires, and intentions look bizarre. For even if there exists a *kind* of thing we want (*just society*), we want an instantiation of that kind (*a just society*) – which may, as yet, be nothingness. So what are we really talking about, here, when we say 'the just society is wanted'? And if we

*pretend* to think of the just society, may we not *imagine* it too? But how is imagining of something possible when it's an attitude toward a mere nothingness?

I argue that thinking of something implies precisely nothing about its existence. What we really show is a distinctive capacity to ask and answer questions. I believe that we exhibit this same capacity when we understand what a sentence is about, independent of its truth or falsity. By implication, imaginings themselves, and desires, hopes and intentions should be understood *in terms of* queries within language. My work has repercussions for how we should understand the mind and its relationship to language and to truth. I was awarded a 1379 Old Members Scholarship by New College, for two years on the DPhil, following my BPhil thesis. When it expires, I will have to work from home, as I won't be able to afford to stay in Oxford. I'm deeply grateful for the time I have had to dwell permanently near the Faculty: this has been critical to the success of my work so far.

### Annina Loets DPhil

My DPhil research focuses on various issues about the structure of non-fundamental reality, and the language we use to talk about it. Here is what I am currently researching: We normally assume that it is possible to have different properties relative to different identities. For instance, someone may be qualified as a janitor and not qualified as a philosophy professor, a knife may be a good bread knife but a poor oyster knife, and a surgeon may be skilful as a surgeon, but not as a psychiatrist. We often find ourselves in morally difficult situations where we have such properties and they conflict. For instance, as a friend, I may have an obligation to always tell you the truth. But I may also have an obligation to not tell you certain things, if, for instance, I am your father's doctor and have to honour doctor-patient confidentiality. There may be political decisions dependent on properties we have relative to different identities. For instance, if you think that affirmative action is a good idea, it is crucial to identify the groups of people eligible to the relevant support. But it is well-known that you may be discriminated against relative to one identity, perhaps because

you are a woman, while being rather privileged relative to another identity, perhaps because you are wealthy. Are you, or are you not being discriminated against? Are you or are you not eligible to benefit from affirmative action? The difficulty in all those cases is that we normally assume that a single thing (whether it is a knife, or a person) either has certain properties, or it doesn't. So what is going on in the cases just described? My thesis aims at developing a unified theory which can account not just for the metaphysics of the above cases, but can also contribute to progress on the concrete moral and political issues they raise.

I have had the great privilege to be funded throughout my time at Oxford. For my Master's, I was awarded an Ertegun Graduate Scholarship, and for my DPhil I have been awarded the Cecil Lubbock Memorial Scholarship. Had it not been for the generosity of those who funded these scholarships, I would probably not have had the chance to do research at Oxford, so I am incredibly grateful and appreciative of their support of graduate research at Oxford. I hope that many others can enjoy such support in the future.



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