

Philosophy at Cambridge

Newsletter of the Faculty of Philosophy

Issue 4
May 2007



UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE

From the Chair

A few facts to welcome you to the fourth issue of the Faculty's Newsletter.

In 1953 there were 13 candidates for Part II of the Moral Sciences Tripos (among them Pat Crossman, as she tells us on p.6). In 1957 there were 19 (among them Michael Frayn, who writes opposite about how the subject gripped him). By 1968 (when the present author sat Part II) there were 24, and in 2006 the number was 56. And in the 1950s the Faculty had a mere handful of graduate students. Today we have 40.

The number of those teaching in the Faculty has risen over the same period from 5 in 1953 (Broad, Wisdom, Braithwaite, Ewing and Lewy) to today's 12. In 1953 the library was housed in one room in the north-west corner of the Old Schools, the Faculty had no office base of its own and lectures took place in Mill Lane or the Music School. The move to the Sidgwick site in 1961 initiated changes in the Faculty's accommodation, the latest stage in which is recorded on p.8.

It would be good to put some life on these dry bones. What shifts of content and style have there been in lectures over the decades? How do supervisions compare? Are meetings of the Moral Sciences Club now the same in atmosphere as they were half a century ago? The memories of our alumni cover from the Second World War to the present. So perhaps we will be able to bring you answers to these questions, and other similarly intriguing ones, in future issues.

Jane Heal FBA
Professor of Philosophy
Chair of the Faculty Board

The Human Touch

Michael Frayn

Most of the books I've written have been fiction. The *Human Touch*, though, is something else. It's an exploration of what seems to me to be the central oddity of the universe we live in, and of our relations with it. The oddity is an obvious one — so obvious that you might go through a whole lifetime without even registering it, just as you might without ever consciously taking in the staggering complexity of what you see when you look at the back of your own hand.

It's this simple paradox. The universe is very large and very old. Humankind, by comparison, is only a tiny disturbance in one small corner of it — and a very recent one. Yet the universe is only very large and very old because we are here to say that it is. Without us to see it from our one tiny viewpoint, and to talk about it and attempt to measure it and formulate the principles on which it works, it isn't large and it isn't old. It doesn't have a size. There are no principles on which it works. It isn't anything.

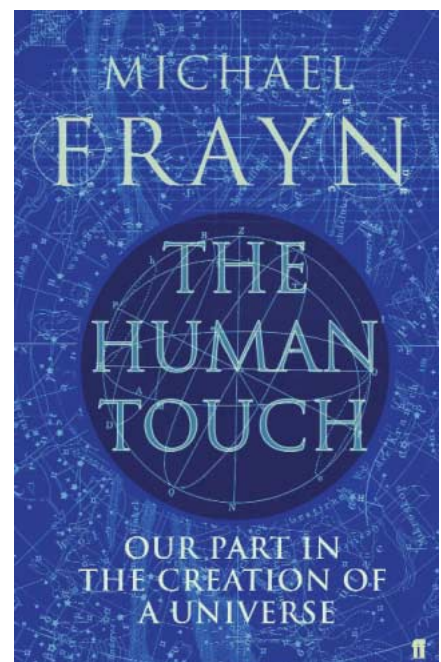
And yet, of course, we all know perfectly well that it is what it is whether we are here or not. It was here long before we were, and it will go on being here long after we have all departed.

This paradox (it seems to me) is at the root of all philosophy. It's at the heart of all the problems that have been puzzling philosophers for at least two thousand years now — about the nature of perception and ethics, of language and mathematics, and of man himself. It's the central puzzle of life.

So is this book philosophy? Well, I read philosophy at Cambridge, and it was one of the most formative experiences of my life. A lot of the

book takes its rise from what I first learned and discussed there, and I remain immensely indebted to the people who taught me (especially to Jonathan Bennett, my supervisor in my last year). Some slight acquaintance with the subject, though, makes me wary of claiming to be practising it (particularly in a publication issued by my old Faculty itself). I know enough to understand that professional philosophy these days is a very specialised and often highly technical subject, and to understand how little I know about it.

It seems to me, though, that there is still sometimes — sometimes — a place for philosophy in a more old-fashioned and non-specialised sense of the word, as a quite general speculation about the nature of the universe, and about the nature of human beings and their place in it.



There is still sometimes an opportunity for some idiot who doesn't know too much about anything in particular to put his head above the parapet for a moment, and risk getting it shot off while he takes a look around at the battlefield. Stupidity and ignorance aren't qualities to boast about, but they do occasionally have their point. Not knowing what everyone else knows might just offer the chance to look at things as if they'd never been looked at before, and to be astonished at the sheer strangeness of them. If you don't know what's already been said about the world, and you have to try to look

at it itself, you discover what a bizarrely confused place it is. And if you manage to stand back far enough to get a glimpse of your own interactions with it — and with all the other people around you who are also trying to relate to it — you might see how elusive they are. You might even come to understand something about the elusiveness of your own self.

I suppose that questions like this have formed the background to most of the fiction I've written over the last forty or fifty years. On and off, though, for all that time, I've also been struggling to confront them directly. Every time I thought I could

glimpse some small corner of the battlefield through the smoke, I've written down what I thought I could see. And in the last few years I began to think that perhaps the time had come, before I got any older and found it even harder to think straight, to set out all this material in some sort of ordered form. This book, for better or for worse, is the result.

Michael Frayn (Emmanuel) is an author, playwright and honorary member of the Faculty. *The Human Touch* is published by Faber and Faber, 2006. ISBN 0571232175.

The First Routledge Lecture



Jane Heal and Thomas Pogge

On a rainy afternoon in November, Thomas Pogge (Columbia and ANU) inaugurated the new annual lecture series sponsored by Routledge. Professor Pogge is known for his fine work on Kant and Rawls, but perhaps more famous for his tireless efforts to make us realise the extent of the deprivation faced by the poor in developing countries and the gravity of our moral responsibility for their plight. According to Pogge, we are obliged to eradicate this poverty not so much because of our positive duty to assist, but because of our negative duty not to harm. He argues that the root causes of global poverty are the international institutions and legal frameworks that our governments impose in our

name on developing countries. Pogge has put forward a host of 'feasible and politically realistic' proposals to reform these institutions and frameworks, so that we no longer cause harm to people in these countries; see e.g. his book *World Poverty and Human Rights* (Polity, 2002).

In the lecture Pogge demonstrated once more his imagination and ingenuity in tackling the difficult question of how to implement our moral obligations within the framework of real life politics. His topic was specifically the international intellectual property rights system as it applies to pharmaceutical companies. He proposed to supplement the current patent

system with an alternative one, which would align the incentives of the pharmaceutical industry more closely with the interests of the global poor. Under this alternative system, pharmaceutical companies would receive extra benefits for the first twenty years of the product life of their new drugs, but not by giving them monopoly power over these drugs, as is the case with the current patent system. Rather, they would be paid economic rent in proportion to the reduction in the global disease burden achieved by their new drugs. Pogge argued that this new system would (a) incentivize the development of drugs for neglected diseases, such as malaria, that account for one third of global deaths, (b) encourage generic drug manufacturers to drive down prices so that new drugs become affordable to the poor, and (c) smoothen the delivery of drugs to the poor by using well-oiled corporate machines.

In the lively discussion following his lecture, Professor Pogge fleshed out his proposal — how it will be financed and implemented. He admitted that there are still some issues that need to be addressed, especially with respect to measurement and administration. The lecture and subsequent discussion proved to be a stimulating and timely reminder of our obligations to distant others in need.

Fabian Freyenhagen
Temporary Lecturer in Philosophy

Metaethics Conference

On 18 November 2006, a one-day conference was held in King's College on Metaethics, organised by Fabian Freyenhagen. Six talks were given by philosophers at the forefront of this vast and vibrant area. The day started with a debate on moral realism between Russ Shafer-Landau (Wisconsin) and Michael Ridge (Edinburgh). After lunch, practical reason was discussed by John Broome and Alison Hills (both Oxford). Onora O'Neill (Cambridge) and Thomas Pink (King's London) concluded the day by examining the phenomenon of normativity. The sessions were chaired by three members of the Faculty who also work in metaethics: Simon Blackburn, Hallvard Lillehammer and Fabian Freyenhagen himself. The conference was deemed to be a great success, attracting some 80 participants from across the globe.

Ben Colburn, PhD student in the Faculty of Philosophy

Faculty News

This year the Faculty welcomed **Quassim Cassam**, appointed as Knightbridge Professor of Philosophy, and **Clare Chambers** as University Lecturer. In October 2007 **Ciara Fairley** will join the Faculty as a post-doctoral Research Fellow.

Ross Harrison and **Jeremy Butterfield** re-joined the Cambridge Philosophy community, taking on posts in 'high places'. **Ross Harrison** is now Provost of King's College and **Jeremy Butterfield** is a Senior Research Fellow at Trinity College.

This year **Dominic Scott** leaves the Faculty to become Professor of Philosophy at the University of Virginia at Charlottesville, and in the summer **Fabian Freyenhagen** will join the Department of Philosophy, University of Essex, as a Lecturer in Moral and Political Philosophy. **Vela Mitova** is now an Andrew Mellon post-doctoral fellow in the Philosophy Department at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, and in September 2006 **Johannes Smit** started as a Lecturer in Philosophy at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. The Faculty wishes them all the very best for the future.

Lubomira Radoilska has been awarded a Wellcome Trust Research Fellowship in Biomedical Ethics for a project on 'Needs, Rights and Preferences in Pharmaceutical Ethics'.

Several of our philosophers have been invited to give lectures around the world. **Hugh Mellor** was a Keynote Speaker at the 'Truth and Reality' conference at the University of Otago, New Zealand. **Michael Potter** gave the William Reinhardt Lecture in the Philosophy of Mathematics at the University of Colorado at Boulder. **Simon Blackburn** was the 2007 Ryle Lecturer at Trent University, Ontario in Canada. **Alex Oliver** spoke at the UK-España conference on Innovation, held in Valencia.

Exaggerated Reports of My Death

Philosophy is supposed to reconcile us to death, and even to reported death. It is nice to confirm that it can indeed do so. This message was sent in January to the *Trinity Record* by Moral Scientist Jonathan Agnew (1960).

Subject: Exaggerated reports of my death

To the Editor of the Trinity Record

Dear Sir,

I have been informed that the latest issue of the Trinity Record reports that I died last August. I am unable to verify this information directly since, with a certain internal consistency, you are no longer sending me a copy of the Record. I am pleased to tell you (and I hope that you will be pleased to learn) that I am alive and well and assure you that, within the limits of my powers, I will inform you if the situation changes. I should be most grateful if you would publish a correction before reality catches up with your report and send me a copy of the latest issue of the Record so that I can read and, if necessary, correct my obituary. Without parapsychological means, I remain a devoted reader of your Record and give you my permission to publish this email.

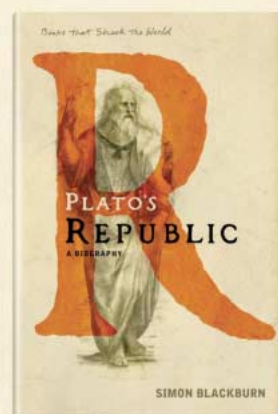
Yours faithfully, Jonathan Agnew

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An Interview with Quassim Cassam



Hallvard Lillehammer and Quassim Cassam

Quassim Cassam joined the Faculty in January 2007 as the Knightbridge Professor of Philosophy. Before coming to Cambridge, he was Professor in the Department of Philosophy at University College London. From 1986 to 2004 he was a Fellow and Tutor in Philosophy at Wadham College, Oxford. He has also held visiting positions at University of California, Berkeley and at Northwestern University, where he was the John Evans Distinguished Visiting Professor in Moral and Intellectual Philosophy in 2004. He was born in Mombasa, Kenya, and came to live in the United Kingdom in his mid-teens. Like his immediate predecessor in the Knightbridge Chair, Edward Craig, Quassim Cassam includes epistemology as one of his major research interests.

The study of epistemology is as old as philosophy itself. Have the basic tools of the epistemologist changed?

Philosophy at Cambridge page 4 May 2007

Cassam: The tools are fundamentally the same, thinking hard being the main one, but it's now a tremendously interesting and fast-moving area of philosophy. When I was a graduate student, philosophy of mind was seen as the sexiest branch of philosophy. Nowadays epistemology seems to have taken over from philosophy of mind as the area in which the most interesting work is being done.

Your new book is entitled 'The Possibility of Knowledge' (Oxford, 2007). According to the OUP website, this book offers a distinctive approach to basic questions in epistemology. How would you characterize that approach?

Cassam: Well, that's a bit of publishers' hyperbole. The basic idea is very simple: a key question in epistemology is 'how is such and such knowledge (e.g. of the external world, or of other minds)

possible?' These are obstacle-dependent questions: we ask how a certain kind of knowledge is possible when we think that there are obstacles to its existence or acquisition. What we want to know, in other words, is how a certain kind of knowledge is possible given the various factors that make it look impossible.

Writers in the Kantian tradition sometimes give the impression that the way to answer a how-possible question is to come up with a transcendental argument. That's a mistake, and not one that Kant himself made. Explaining how something is possible is not a matter of identifying necessary conditions for its possibility. Rather, what we need to do is to identify means by which something is possible. Means aren't necessary conditions, nor are they enough. Obstacles to the acquisition of knowledge by the proposed means also need to be overcome or

dissipated. Finally, we might consider what makes it possible to acquire knowledge by the proposed means. So we now have the idea of a multi-levels response to a how-possible question, one that operates at three interconnected levels: the level of means, of obstacle-removal, and of enabling conditions. In my book, I spell out the idea of a multi-levels response to a how-possible question and use it to tackle three specific how-possible questions, about the external world, other minds and a priori knowledge. There is also a chapter on why the multi-levels response isn't a transcendental response and on why transcendental arguments are no good when it comes to finding an answer to a how-possible question.

The nature of transcendental arguments has been one of the recurring themes of your research ever since your DPhil work at Oxford. What first made you interested in this topic?

Cassam: I first became interested when, as a second year undergraduate at Oxford, I read chapter 3 of Peter Strawson's *Individuals*. I was fascinated not so much by the details of the argument but by the way of arguing. So when I did the BPhil and then the DPhil at Oxford I ended up writing theses on transcendental arguments. My supervisors were Strawson and David Wiggins. As it happens, Simon Blackburn was one of my examiners for the DPhil.

Your first book, 'Self and World' (Oxford 1997), is about the nature of self-consciousness and self-reference. How would you summarize its main conclusions?

Cassam: It's an exploration of what is necessary for self-consciousness. When I was working on this topic, lots of writers in the Strawsonian tradition — Strawson himself, Evans, McDowell — were arguing that in order to be self-conscious one must *conceive* of oneself as a physical thing, as a corporeal object among corporeal objects. I was sceptical about this requirement and was more interested in pursuing experiential rather than intellectual conditions for self-consciousness.

My idea was that in order to be self-conscious one must experience oneself as a physical object among

physical objects. Following Kant, my label for this kind of awareness was 'intuitive awareness' of oneself as a physical thing. This isn't just awareness of one's body as physical but awareness of oneself 'qua subject' as shaped, located and solid.

The suggestion that bodily self-awareness is important for self-consciousness is one that lots of writers in the continental tradition have developed. Even Descartes recognizes the importance of bodily self-awareness, though not its indispensability, in the passage in the *Meditations* where he says that he isn't in his body like a pilot in a ship. His point is that the connection is much more intimate than that, and I think that he was right about this.

Are there any issues on which you have come to change your mind over the ten years since you published that book?

Cassam: I'm much more sceptical now about the neo-Kantian project of establishing necessary conditions for self-consciousness or experience or whatever. Interesting claims of this type are extremely hard to establish. The important thing is to explore all the different ways in which self-consciousness is, for us, bound up with various forms of bodily self-awareness. It's a further question whether this is a matter of bodily self-awareness being a

strictly necessary condition for consciousness of self.

What projects do you see yourself working on over the coming years?

Cassam: A couple of years ago I was invited to contribute a paper to a volume called *Williamson on Knowledge*. That paper — 'Can the Concept of Knowledge be Analysed?' — sparked lots of new lines of thinking, ones that don't really figure in *The Possibility of Knowledge*. So it's possible that my third book will also end up being about knowledge. The provisional title is *Ways of Knowing*.


The institutional environment of academic philosophy has been subject to major change since you joined the profession in the 1980s. What do you see as the main challenges facing an incoming Knightbridge Professor in 2007?

Cassam: The main challenge is to help to maintain Cambridge's position as one of the best places to study Philosophy in the world. I'm delighted to be here and look forward to working with an excellent group of colleagues and some outstanding students.

This interview was conducted by
Hallvard Lillehammer
Senior Lecturer in Philosophy

Philosophy from Oxford

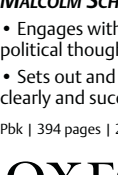
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A Girton Girl in Search of Meaning

Pat Crossman



The war came when I was 8 years old and “grown up”. Working class girls of that age had often been sent into service. The war came and went. Now there was peace and the miracle of the Welfare State arrived, and a glass ceiling was shattered. Working class kids were awarded scholarships to study at Oxford and Cambridge.

I was one of the lucky ones. In 1950 I went up to Cambridge to study English. My college was Girton, two miles away from the town, with strict rules about “men visitors”. Cambridge was still a segregated world, and the wounds of class were still hidden. I joined the Amateur Dramatic Club.

But by 1952 my world had become two-dimensional. The magic had gone. I poured out my unhappiness to my friend Thom Gunn who took me to see his favorite teacher in action, the iconoclastic Frankie Leavis of Downing. “Ladies and gentle men!”, he intoned, “Poetry must have real Meaning! Bad poetry is meaningless, look at Tennyson! Now John Donne on the other hand is a poet.” And then he recited *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, Donne’s exquisite metaphysical love song for his wife.

Language was alive again, the missing dimension returned. My tutors suggested that I read Moral Science Part II in my last year. That summer term was hazily hot. I laid in the grass and read Bishop Berkeley’s *Dialogues* pondering on “the meaning of it all”. I was introduced to a new language: Propositions and Premises

(prepositions or promises?), Inductive and Deductive Logic, Free Will versus Determinism, Probability, Uncertainty, and the Big Puzzle of Time. There were twelve young men in the school. I was the only girl. My teachers were impressive. Dr Broad was portly and spoke slowly, the salient points being repeated three times. And Dr Wisdom had a gremlin in his watch! I flirted with Logical Positivism, but found only the ghost of Wittgenstein.

But my guide through all this strangeness was my tutor Dr Alfred Ewing. Crouching by the gas fire in his small cluttered front room we would construct and then deconstruct the theories of the great epistemologists. He liked Leibniz and Berkeley. Philosophical enquiry was his passion, then ping-pong. He was a reserved, but kindly man, only stern about homework. Sometimes after my supervision he would say, “You may remove your gown Miss Amy [my maiden name]. Would you like to play ping-pong?” He was a skilful and cunning player. This was Applied Philosophy: the ping-pong ball was a monad, but a monad in action!

I attended all his Saturday morning lectures, only missing one in my last term when I was being auctioned in the market square together with other sporting Girton girls for some worthy cause. Returning from his lecture he had seen me, “So you missed my lecture?” I tearfully apologized, explaining “But it was fun!” “More fun than my lecture?” But as he thoughtfully told me later “Maybe I should have had more fun.”

Before I left I played the role of Gina in Ibsen’s *Wild Duck* and transformed that grim tragedy into a farce, to entertain a cheerful but inebriated audience. It was all about timing. And now it was time to go down and start working. I was sent to The London School of Economics, to become a social scientist. I became Generic Social Worker, to begin clearing up the rubble of the war, because this would be a new world. And the “meaning of it all” would be the story I would tell myself.

Pat Crossman (Girton) is a social worker living in Berkeley, California

An Old Cantabrigian Philosophical Ditty

(anon., trad.)

When losing a tussle
With Russell,
Or, heavens, bored
With Broad,
Just try chewing
A.C. Ewing.

When shook to the core
By Moore,
Try to abridge
Old Sidg
(A diligent few’ll
Go further, to Whewell).

When a history yen
Stalls on Whichcote (Ben),
Try making
The trip back to Bacon
Who dispersed the miasmas
Surrounding Erasmus.

When early Witters
Brings on jitters
Then reader, thank
Ramsey (Frank)
For quashing that working, then
Suggesting *Bemerkungen*.

From the Editor

We want to hear from you!
The Editor welcomes all comments and suggestions or material for future editions of the Newsletter.
Please contact:

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email: mp10004@cam.ac.uk

A downloadable version of the Newsletter is available from the Faculty website:
www.phil.cam.ac.uk

Future Events

ALUMNI WEEKEND
2007

Saturday 22 September

**‘Wittgenstein in Conflict:
how the *Tractatus* was born’**

[A Lecture](#)

Speaker:

Dr Michael Potter
Reader in the Philosophy of
Mathematics.

11:15am

Location tba

**‘Philosophy at Cambridge
through the years’**

[An Exhibition](#)

Faculty of Philosophy
Sidgwick Site
Sidgwick Avenue
Cambridge CB3 9DA

For more information please contact
Mrs Mariella Pellegrino
Faculty of Philosophy
email: mp10004@cam.ac.uk

A buffet lunch will be
served in the Faculty,
from 12:30pm to 1:30pm.
Please see the *Alumni Weekend 2007*
booklet for details about
booking and cost.

**ROUTLEDGE LECTURE
2007–8**

Professor Andy Clark of the
University of Edinburgh
will deliver the second
Routledge Lecture on
31 January 2008.

Further details will be available on
the Faculty website:

<http://www.phil.cam.ac.uk/>

Choice and Culture

Clare Chambers



Since arriving in Cambridge at the end of September 2006, I have been finishing a book, *Sex, Culture and Justice: The Limits of Choice* (Penn State University Press, forthcoming). It criticises the liberal focus on choice in the context of unequal or harmful practices, particularly those of sexual inequality. I discuss the examples mentioned above, which share the feature that they are mandated and encouraged by culture — be it wider Western liberal culture or the culture of minority groups.

Liberals in general know what to think about acts of gendered harm sanctioned by ‘other’ cultures. Practices such as female genital mutilation and foot binding

are unacceptable, even if they are consented to by the women in question (in Britain, genital mutilation is illegal even for adult women). But what about consensual practices such as cosmetic surgery situated in our own culture? Feminist philosophers value choice — indeed, one of the greatest triumphs of the feminist movement has been to ensure greater choice for women over their own lives. But choice is only part of the story. We need to understand the origins of the choices people make, the context in which they are being made, the pressures and constraints upon them. The fact that culture inevitably shapes both the *identities* and the *preferences* of individuals is problematic for an emphasis on choice. If cultures shape choices, it is not straightforward to use those choices as the measure of the justice of the culture.

Instead of relying on choice as the determinant of justice, we need to critically examine processes by which individuals are encouraged to choose to do things that harm them, or that undermine their equality. It is right to legally proscribe some such practices. For choice, though important to justice, does not guarantee it.

Should people be allowed to engage in practices which harm them? First thoughts suggest that they should. If liberal rights protect anything, we might say, they protect our ability to do what we want with our bodies. If we want to bungee jump from a crane, ski down a dangerous mountain slope, or go potholing in dangerous waters, then the rights enshrined by liberal democratic regimes tell us that we can, as long as we are willing to bear the consequences.

But self-inflicted harms are not always as obvious or exceptional as these. Sometimes they are made so acceptable by prevailing social norms that they do not even appear to be ‘harms’ at all. Individuals often choose to do things that harm them or undermine their equality. In particular, women often choose to participate in practices of sexual inequality: cosmetic surgery, gendered patterns of work and childcare, makeup, restrictive clothing, unequal laws and norms concerning marriage and divorce or religious leadership. In response to such practices, liberal political philosophers tend to rely on *choice* as the determinant of justice. If a practice is freely chosen, or if an individual is free to leave a group with unequal norms, most liberals are content to accept the situation as just.

Clare Chambers
University Lecturer in Philosophy

More Space for the Faculty



The 2000 refurbishment of the Raised Faculty Building saw the Faculty gaining its first dedicated space for graduate students, a common room, several offices for academic staff and an independent Faculty Library. The Library was named after Casimir Lewy (1919–1991) who had been an inspirational member of the Faculty.

More space became available in the building following the move of the English Library. The Philosophy Faculty successfully bid for enlargement and in September 2006 the Casimir Lewy Library re-opened in a much larger, self-contained area. The timetable for the building work was very tight but efficient management by the main contractor, ISG Dean & Bowes, ensured completion on time.

The new Library has a very welcoming, bright lobby area and provides a much needed quiet study space networked with the latest WiFi technology. The success of the new design has already resulted in an increased number of users studying in the Library. With what is now called the 'Old Library' reconfigured as an open and versatile space for general use as well as several additional offices, the Faculty's premises offer an ideal setting for its dynamic community.



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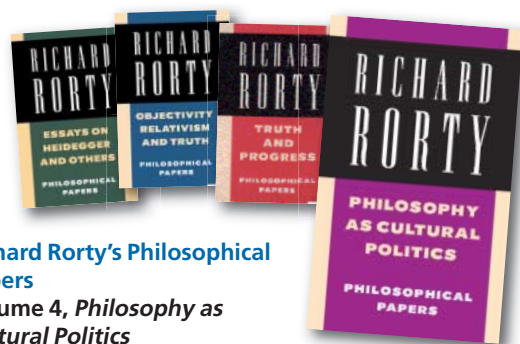
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