

Philosophy at Cambridge

Newsletter of the Faculty of Philosophy

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From the Chair

Tim Crane

I took over as Chair of the Faculty from Simon Blackburn on his retirement last year. We said goodbye formally to Simon – shown on the right appreciating one of his retirement gifts – at a lovely party at Trinity in the summer. Fortunately, Simon will still be living in Cambridge for most of the year, so we haven't lost him altogether.

Since then it's been a busy year. Huw Price has stepped into Simon's chair (if that is what one does with a chair) and is already making his mark on the Faculty with workshops, conferences and new initiatives, like the new cross-Cambridge Philosophy of Science group (which Huw has named with the catchy acronym 'CAMPOS': see our interview on p. 4). But all members of the Faculty have been busy too this year, with what seems to be a record number of conferences on ethics, logic and the philosophy of mind. Details of these events can be found on our website; and of course, Cambridge Philosophy alumni are always very welcome to attend these.

Richard Holton and Rae Langton from MIT have been our Faculty Visitors this year, and have made a tremendous contribution in giving talks, attending seminars and just being around. Their visit coincides with a new collaboration we have set up with two philosophy departments – MIT and Harvard – in the 'other' Cambridge. Members of our Faculty share many philosophical interests with members of those departments. Our plan is to have joint meetings once a year with faculty members and graduate students in all three 'Cambridge' departments, possibly with an eye to faculty and graduate exchanges in the future. Our first discussions came up with the name 'Cambridge-Cambridge' but Alex Byrne from MIT invented 'Cambridge²', which seems to have stuck.

The main event of the year, though, has undoubtedly been the appointment of



Simon Blackburn at his retirement garden party, Trinity College

three new lecturers in February. We were looking to appoint a lecturer in the history of philosophy (an area where we have not been strong for a while) and to strengthen our profile in ethics, especially important since Simon Blackburn's departure. But we were fortunate that the University agreed to fund another post in addition, to replace one of our senior colleagues who will be retiring soon.

Our job advert delivered a daunting 338 applications. A long and complex process ended up with us appointing Paulina Sliwa to the position in ethics, Angela Breitenbach to the history of philosophy job, and Tim Button to the third position.

Paulina was an undergraduate in Oxford, and has just finished her PhD at MIT. She works on epistemology and ethics, and especially on the connections between them. Angela is an expert on Kant's

philosophy; she comes to Cambridge from a lectureship at the University of East Anglia. Tim is currently a research fellow at St John's, Cambridge, and did his PhD in the Faculty. He works on metaphysics, logic and the philosophy of language. We are delighted to welcome these three outstanding and energetic philosophers to the Faculty, and we hope they will be very happy here.

We are still a small Faculty, with only 12 permanent lecturers and professors. So together with Huw's appointment last year, these appointments represent the largest single change in the Faculty's overall composition for decades. Like all universities, we face an uncertain future with the current changes to university funding in the UK in the coming years. It is reassuring that we can enter this period as a powerful and dynamic group of philosophers.

Medieval Philosophy comes to Cambridge

John Marenbon



Jean Buridan by permission of the Jagiellonian Library

Jean Buridan discusses medieval philosophy at Cambridge.

"Will you write a piece for our newsletter?" the Cambridge Philosophy Faculty asked me. In my day – nearly 700 years ago, Paris, where I taught, was of course, the best place. We took Oxford seriously, but Cambridge – please readers, don't be offended – was a real backwater: a few discontented masters, camping out near the fens. It's all different now. On the banks of the Seine they talk nonsense when they are not on strike, while it was here in Cambridge, that people first started, nearly a century ago, doing again what I recognize as philosophy.

The problem is that Cambridge has asked me to write, not about philosophy in Cambridge, but *medieval* philosophy here. "Medieval philosophy – what is *that*?" I asked myself. Luckily, I could put the question to my translator, John Marenbon. "What they mean", John told me, "is the type of stuff *you* did". But, before I could reply he went on: "But it's really not so simple. I have just given an Inaugural Lecture" – he seemed very pleased with himself when he pronounced these words

– "called *When was Medieval Philosophy?*

I argued that, in one sense, it was now – because we have to make it comprehensible to us today, and in another sense, never, because the usual period boundaries – 500–1500 or thereabouts, don't make much sense".

"What was your main point?" I asked, sensing a danger that he would repeat the whole lecture verbatim. He answered: "Although a philosophical training is needed to understand and present philosophy from the past, history of philosophy is an *historical* exercise, from which philosophers must not expect to find arguments they can use now, but which teaches them about the nature and limitations of their discipline."

"Are you the only person here interested in what they call medieval philosophy?" I asked. He replied "Oh no – certainly not this year. We have Chris Martin from Auckland visiting, as Leverhulme Professor. He has been giving lectures on the greatest logician between Aristotle and Frege". I was beginning to feel flattered – to think, someone coming all those thousands of miles to talk about me! I was preparing a suitably modest

rejoinder, when John added: "Peter Abelard". Peter who? I had never heard of the man, but John assured me that Chris had shown how, nearly 800 years before Frege, Abelard had reached a refined understanding of propositional logic. Not only were there the lectures; John himself and Chris had been giving seminars on Abelard's metaphysics and his philosophy of language. John could see I was a bit crest-fallen. "But we've also been studying *you*" he reassured me, "in our medieval philosophy reading group. We meet weekly, throughout the year. Last term it was your *Sophisms*. This term it's Scotus on universals..." So John went on.

But, if medieval philosophy is 'the sort of stuff I used to do', then I beg to disagree with his account of medieval philosophy in Cambridge. To my mind, what John does is not *medieval* philosophy at all, because it is done in an historical spirit, which is characteristically modern. In our time, we read Aristotle, indeed – but we thought of him as our contemporary. What most separates a twenty-first century outlook from a medieval one is historical self-consciousness. But there is plenty of genuine medieval philosophy in Cambridge. It's what all of the the Faculty (except John and one or two others) do most of the time. They are all scholastics like me, delighting in the same sort of intricate problems, precise reasoning and technical language. Like me, they see a training in logic as the beginning of all good philosophizing and, like me too, nothing in the end fascinates most of them more than really difficult logical problems. At their lectures I feel completely at home (sometimes, indeed, I said the same things myself long ago). But please, please, don't make me go and read Scotus.

Jean Buridan was Professor of Philosophy at the University of Paris, from c. 1320 to c. 1360. His comments were translated into English by John Marenbon, Honorary Professor of Medieval Philosophy in the University of Cambridge. A podcast and typescript of John's inaugural lecture is also available from the Faculty website.

The Beautiful and the Good

Derek Matravers

Which is better – art or morality?

The dominant view amongst moral philosophers appears to be that morality is overriding. This view informs our ethical theories; paradigmatically, consequentialism which has at its heart the claim that we should always and everywhere maximise the good. The odd thing is that few if any of us really believe it! Take Parker's Piece (the large open space at the town end of Mill Road) lit only by 'reality checkpoint'; the lamppost at its centre. There is a good case to be made – and every now and then it *is* made – for better lighting. At night it is dark and, particularly for a young woman on her own, frightening to cross. However, we do not light it for the simple reason that that would spoil it. It is much more beautiful unlit.

This raises the time-honoured question of the relation between the good and the beautiful. I should say 'questions' as indeed there are many different relations. This issue is one that has hovered around the Philosophy Faculty for many years; it was something that bothered Bernard Williams a great deal and also Michael Tanner – and was at the heart of aesthetics teaching in Cambridge. Indeed, when I first came to the Faculty in the late 1980s 'Can a great work of art also be immoral?' was a standard Tripos question.

Recently there has been a flurry of papers published on the subject that have focussed on the rather narrow issue of whether a feature of a work of art that is a moral flaw is also an aesthetic flaw. The issues here are uncertain; as Hallvard Lillehammer has sensibly pointed out (*British Journal of Aesthetics*, 2008), the technical nature of the terms involved makes the whole matter indeterminate.

This literature contrasts with the rather broader line taken by Richard Wollheim who thought that our conception of value emerged from early in our psycho-sexual development and took broadly two forms. The first of these emerged in what Bernard Williams later called 'the morality system'; a structure heavy with notions of guilt and obligation. The second involves the projection of mental states onto the world and our subsequent perception of the world as valuable. Although these do not



General Gordon's Last Stand

correspond in any simple way to a division between morality and aesthetics, Wollheim none the less found the former 'baleful' in comparison to the latter – a thought he later expressed in one of my favourite lines in Philosophy: 'though good art is more likeable than bad art, virtuous people do not enjoy this same advantage...' (Preface, *The Mind and Its Depths*).

The various philosophical discussions, whether on the relation between moral flaws and aesthetic flaws or on the question of the relative merits of art and morality, are relevant to the way we understand particular works. The types of works in which these issues tend to become salient are those that depict the naked human form (in particular the female form) or works that in other ways, reflect doubtful social or political mores. For a while now, disciplines such as English and Art History have studied 'post-colonial' works of art, or reflected on colonial works of art from a post-colonial standpoint. Consider, for example, *General Gordon's Last Stand* (1893) by George Joy, which is now in the Leeds City Art Gallery. This depicts a supremely calm General Gordon facing the heathen hordes. Of course, we could simply say that we do not have to make judgements here: whether or not the picture has merit

as a picture is independent of whether the attitude evinced by the painter in painting the picture is dubious. We might be able to do this – simply judging the picture as pretty, or technically proficient. It is, however, difficult to have the experience the work demands of us without taking on in imagination attitudes concerning race and empire. If this is so, and these attitudes are morally beyond the pale, this detracts from the value of the painting.

The issues raised here are partly for critics – how exactly should the painting be understood? However, there are also philosophical issues: What is it to engage with a painting? How do the moral features relate to other features? It also raises an intriguing question first raised by Hume in 'On the Standard of Taste' as to why we don't seem able to leave our actual world morality behind when we engage with works of art – particularly works that are fictional. There is also the question – largely unexplored – as to what we should do with works that we find deficient because they are immoral. Answering these questions will edge us forward to understanding the good, the true, and the beautiful.

Derek Matravers gave the Alumni Weekend lecture in 2011. He did his PhD at Darwin College and was a postdoctoral lecturer in the Faculty from 1991–1994.

He is currently Professor of Philosophy at the Open University as well as Affiliated Lecturer in the Faculty and Bye-Fellow and Director of Studies at Emmanuel College.

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE



Missed one of our events?

You can listen and download recordings of philosophy talks from Cambridge University iTunesU www.cam.ac.uk/video/itunesu.html

Huw Price in conversation with Tim Crane

Huw Price (Darwin 1977–81) joined the Faculty of Philosophy in October 2011. He was previously ARC Federation Fellow and Challis Professor of Philosophy at the University of Sydney, where he had headed the Centre for Time since 2002.

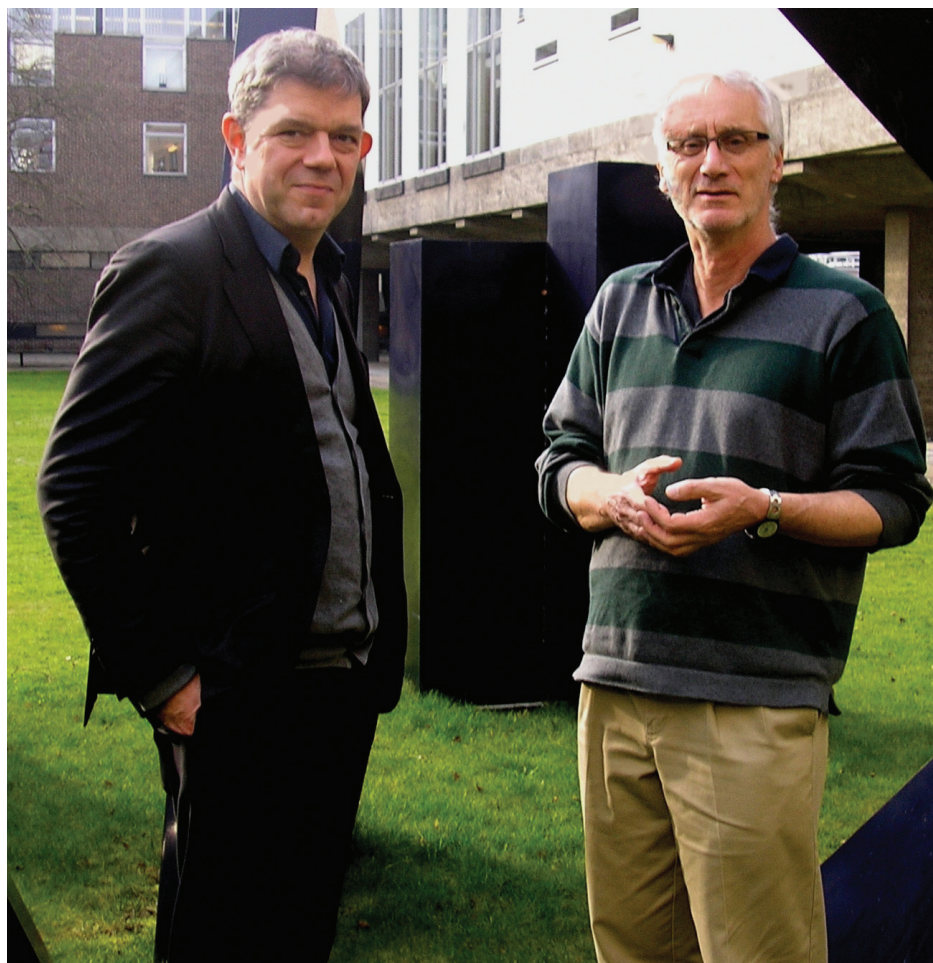
TC: Would you like to tell us a bit about your time at Cambridge and how it affected your philosophical development?

HP: I came here in the Autumn term in 1977. The reason I came here, really, was that I had the good fortune to bump into Hugh Mellor a couple of years before that, when I was still finishing my undergraduate degree in Australia. I was more or less set on going on in pure maths, and it was really some encouraging remarks from Hugh which convinced me that I should change my mind and do more philosophy. That's how a couple of years later I ended up coming to Cambridge to work under his supervision for a PhD. And that turned out to be very influential indeed, in that the main things I've worked on since then can all be traced back in one way or another to things that Hugh was interested in at that time, such as probability and time.

TC: Do you see other links with other parts of the Cambridge tradition in the 20th century or before?

HP: Yes, certainly, as my views developed after that. One person who was very influential was Peter Menzies. Through him, I think, I moved from an interest in probability to an interest in causation and problems of decision theory, and that led me into an approach to the philosophy of causation which is very much a Cambridge one, in terms of agency. That's an approach we can find in the very late work of Ramsey and then later in the 20th century in Cambridge figures or Cambridge trained figures such as von Wright and Gasking.

TC: You also have of course, a strong interest in philosophy of science. Your book on time: *Time's Arrow and Archimedes Point* has been very influential and well-received, and has



Tim Crane with the new Bertrand Russell Professor, Huw Price

been of interest to physicists and philosophers of physics too.

HP: Yes, and when it came out Jeremy Butterfield and Michael Redhead had their highly successful group in philosophy of physics, between Philosophy and HPS, here in Cambridge. They had a reading group on my book, and I came to Cambridge and talked to people here about it.

One of the attractions in coming back is that I can now work with people like Jeremy, who himself is back in Cambridge at Trinity, after some years at Oxford. Jeremy has strong links, and I have some in my own right, with some of the people in DAMTP (Department of Applied Mathematics and Theoretical Physics) – in Quantum Information and Foundations there, for example. One of the exciting things in coming back, is the opportunity to work with those people on issues in the philosophy of physics.

TC: Do you also see the Faculty building new links with other departments in the University?

HP: I think it's a really excellent time to build, or perhaps *reinforce*, the link with HPS in particular. There's a new professor in HPS as well, Hasok Chang. He and I and Jeremy and others have talked over the last year about trying to do something to raise the profile of philosophy of science in general at Cambridge. It's a rather Cambridge thing that there are these immense strengths, but they're rather diversely spread – some people in the faculty, some people in HPS, people like Jeremy in colleges, and lots of individuals within scientific departments who have an interests in the philosophy of their own subject.

What we'd like to do is to provide a webpage and a network structure which makes all of that vast strength in philosophy of science visible both

inside and outside the University, so that people who are interested in particular bits of the topic, or people interested in coming here as students to the Faculty or to HPS, can see just how rich what we have here is. We're going to call it CAMPOS (Cambridge Philosophy of Science) which conveniently means 'fields' in Spanish and Portuguese – so there's a nice little pun there. We're just working on getting our webpage together, and we have a conference coming up at the end of November in conjunction with a large European funded Philosophy of Science network. So that's a wonderful opportunity to do some things even better than has been done in the past, in part just by making them more visible than before.

TC: That's great to hear about your interests in philosophy of time and philosophy of science. Another major interest is pragmatism. You're organising a big workshop on Cambridge pragmatism in May aren't you?

HP: Yes, I mentioned earlier that some of the interests I've developed – in rather pragmatic approaches to causation, for example – fitted in with themes that existed in Cambridge philosophy over the last century or so. It occurred to me it was really broader than that. The case of causation was just one example of a certain kind of practical concern that you could find in all sorts of Cambridge figures, approaching a wide range of topics. For example, in Hugh Mellor's work on time and tense he's interested in explaining how creatures in our situation naturally come to *talk* in tensed terms, without tense being in any sense a kind of fundamental metaphysical feature of reality. You find similar themes in Elizabeth Anscombe's work on indexicality, for example.

These people are not, in a general sense, people that you would think of as philosophical pragmatists, but in particular parts of their work you find this way of approaching philosophical problems in terms of the practical role of the notions concerned in the lives of creatures like us. That has long seemed to me to be the most interesting way of characterising philosophical pragmatism and I was struck by how much it was a Cambridge tradition. I wanted to do something to call attention to that, and to one or two figures in the past century who get a little bit less attention than

they should, and I thought this would be a good way of celebrating some of those people.

TC: Excellent. Would you like to tell us about any other plans you have?

HP: Last summer, when I was on my way to Cambridge, I was thinking about other things I might be able to do here, which in some sense used the kind of background that I had in things like philosophy of time and pragmatism. I went to several conferences in Europe in September. At one of them, in Copenhagen, I met a man called Jaan Tallinn, who was one of the people who set up Skype. He turned out to be very interested in what he calls 'existential risk' – that is, cataclysmic risk arising from human technology (in particular in his case, from developments in Artificial Intelligence (AI)). I was very interested in what he had to say about those issues. But I also saw that there might be an opportunity for me to play a role as a kind of catalyst bringing him and his contacts and his interest in these issues into contact with Cambridge, in order to set up some kind of centre for research on these things here.

Since I arrived here in October, I've been following that up. Jaan came to Cambridge at the beginning of February and gave a very well received public lecture organised by CSaP (the Centre for Science and Policy). We are now working on trying to find funding for this project. I'm pretty sure we'll be able to do that, and the whole thing is starting to take shape. I regard it as a very interesting and potentially extremely important project, which draws on my kind of background in philosophy of time and so on, but also takes philosophy out to make connections with much broader issues.

TC: That's very exciting. Could you say in just a few sentences, what these issues about existential risk might be?

HP: The general idea is that it's possible that developments in human technology may lead to risks which are so serious that they could threaten the survival of the species. In the case of artificial intelligence, it's associated with the idea that developments in machine intelligence might get to the point where in some sense, the machines get out of control. The kinds of cases that Jaan Tallinn talks about, for example, are cases where you have a system which is basically set up

as a rather smart optimiser to run some particular process. If that goes to the stage where in effect, it can modify its own code then it's doubtful whether it would be controllable, and you get some runaway process. Jaan thinks it could lead in a very short time to what would, in effect, be a major species-threatening ecological catastrophe.

Now some people are sceptical about that. I'm not completely convinced myself, but I do think there's a strong case that some time over the next century or two we are going to encounter a major transition, when we do really have AI which is potentially, in some senses, a lot smarter than we are. That's a major transition for our species and it's one which we really do need to think about well in advance.

TC: One final question. What are your impressions of the Faculty after having come back after so long?

HP: Well, my main impressions have been what a congenial place it is to work, and what a pleasant bunch of new colleagues I now have!

TC: It's great to have you here and I look forward to us working together for many years.

A podcast of their full conversation is available from the Faculty website.

Future Events

Alumni Weekend

22 September 2012

Professor Tim Crane will give a talk entitled 'What do Animals Think?'. Further details will be available from the Alumni Weekend website (www.alumni.cam.ac.uk/weekend)

Routledge Lecture in Philosophy:

Professor Susan Wolf from the University of North Carolina will give the 7th Routledge Lecture. Details to be announced.

Further details about forthcoming events will be available on the Faculty website.

People

Awards, Honours and Promotions

Michael Potter was promoted to a Professorship and **Arif Ahmed** to a Senior Lectureship.

Alex Oliver has won the prestigious Mind Association Research Fellowship for 2012–13.

Jeremy Butterfield was elected President of the Mind Association for 2012–2013. He was also invited to give the 2012 Ernest Nagel memorial lecture at Columbia University. This is a triennial lecture to honour the memory of Ernest Nagel and to preserve the heritage of his contributions to Logic and the Philosophy of Science.

Arrivals

Sophia Connell, **Adam Stewart-Wallace** and **Sacha Golob** were appointed to temporary lectureships in the Faculty.

Christopher Martin (University of Auckland, New Zealand) spent two terms in the Faculty as Leverhulme Visiting Professor. He delivered a set of public

lectures on the development of logic in the twelfth century.

Richard Holton and **Rae Langton** (MIT) were Faculty Visitors for two terms.

Appointments

Tim Crane has been appointed as the Philosophy Editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*.

College Teaching Officer, **Nick Treanor** has been appointed to a Chancellor's Fellowship at the University of Edinburgh from August 2012.

Richard Child, Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in Social Justice and Criminal Justice has been appointed to a lectureship at Manchester University starting in September 2012.

Temporary lecturer **Sacha Golob** has been appointed to a lectureship at Kings College, London from October 2012.

We are delighted that a number of our recent graduates have been appointed to academic posts. Among them, **Nathan**

Wildman was appointed as a Research Associate at the University of Hamburg.

Christine Tiefensee has a 6 year research post at the University of Bamberg.

Emily Caddick has a part time Teaching Officer Post at the Institute of Continuing Education, Madingley Hall, and a Jacobsen Fellowship at the Institute of Philosophy.

Adrian Boutel has a post-doctoral research position in the Faculty of History and Philosophy of Science, starting Autumn 2012. **Steven Methven** has a 4-year JRF at Worcester College, Oxford, and **Tom Simpson** a JRF at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge for 3 years, from Sept 2012.

Student Prizes

The Matthew Buncombe prize for best overall achievement in the MPhil degree was awarded to **Max Hayward** (Trinity). The Craig Taylor prize for best performance in Part IB went to **Bastian Stern** (Trinity). The Part II prize went to **Katharine Jenkins** (Emmanuel).



The Ethics of Capital Punishment
A Philosophical Investigation of Evil and its Consequences
MATTHEW H. KRAMER
Develops a novel justification for capital punishment that will become an essential reference point for future arguments over the practice.



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G. E. R. Lloyd explores the amazing diversity of views that humans have held on being, humanity, and understanding. In a cross-cultural study that ranges from ancient to modern times, he asks how far we are bound by the conceptual systems to which we belong.

Dec 2011 | 368pp.
978-0-19-964218-2 | Hardback | £50.00

July 2012 | 160pp.
978-0-19-965472-7 | Hardback | £25.00

Philosophy from Oxford



Naturalism Without Mirrors
HUW PRICE
This collection is essential reading for anyone interested in naturalism, pragmatism, truth, expressivism, pluralism and representationalism, or in deep questions about the direction and foundations of contemporary philosophy.



NEW IN PAPERBACK
Wittgenstein's Notes on Logic
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Using a challenging blend of biography and philosophy, it draws new conclusions about the nature of the *Notes*, about the genesis of the *Tractatus* (which draws on material from them), and about Wittgenstein's highly individualistic working methods.

May 2011 | 360pp.
978-0-19-508433-7 | Hardback | £32.50

Jan 2011 | 326pp.
978-0-19-959635-5 | Paperback | £19.99

Order online: www.oup.com/uk
For more information please contact philosophy.uk@oup.com

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Other News

Fundraising

The Faculty has initiated a new fund to help support graduate students in the future. The fund was kick-started by a generous donation from Professor Emeritus Hugh Mellor. As ever, we are grateful to the Development Office for their help in our fund-raising efforts.

Faculty ranking

In the 2011 Philosophical Gourmet Report, Cambridge is now ranked second in the UK, after Oxford (the Faculty in Oxford is at least five times the size of Cambridge's).

Your comments and contributions are always welcome. Please send them to the Editor at:

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Public Philosophy

Harry Adamson



Harry Adamson

Mental health problems can prompt a search for meaning and a range of questions which, ostensibly at least, fall into the purview of philosophers. In the broadest terms,

what's it all about and what's it all for? More specifically perhaps, what is happiness, and am I equipped to get it? What makes me "me", and do "I" survive through incoherence, through changes of character or mood brought on by illness or prescriptions? Even, what is the world like, and how do I know whether it accords with my perception of it?

If it's right that those who suffer mental distress are particularly prone to ask abstract and fundamental questions, and to require an answer to them with a particular urgency, should philosophy strike a special chord with those who have had the hardest lives? Should philosophy help people by giving them the tools to

answer those questions, or at least provide the comfort of knowing they're not alone in asking them?

The Stuart Low Trust is a London-based mental health charity set up to provide non-medical, community support to promote wellbeing. A short while after I had finished my doctorate at Cambridge I was asked to speak at one of their events on the views of philosophers on happiness. Much to my surprise there was enough positive response for them to suggest a weekly talk. I thought an interactive approach would work best, and together with Rachel Paine, another philosopher who had worked with the Trust, began the Philosophy Forum: www.slt.org.uk/philosophy-forum.

A different speaker comes in every week, and introduces a question: What is happiness? What is a person? What can you know for certain? etc. The audience subdivides into groups of four or so, and volunteers then run mini-seminars where those participating get to talk through their own thoughts and hear those of

others. The group then gets back together and the main speaker will take people through a bit of the philosophical literature before introducing a second question, which is a logical development of the first. The whole process then repeats, with tea and talk in the middle.

The numbers have been high, and the feedback amazingly positive from an engaged and appreciative audience. Running the mini-seminars has been a joy for the volunteers – full of interesting and moving moments. We have received sufficient donations to expand a little into other groups that can provide philosophy to vulnerable people.

Current or former students would be more than welcome to volunteer – please do! For details and donations contact stuartlowphilosophy@gmail.com.



Mellon Seminars on Ethics, Philosophy and Anthropology

Hallvard Lillehammer

During Lent Term 2012, the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH) hosted a series of eight interdisciplinary seminars entitled 'Ethics at the Intersection of Philosophy and Anthropology'. Led by Mellon Teaching Fellows James Laidlaw (Social Anthropology/King's College) and Hallvard Lillehammer (Philosophy/Churchill College), this pilot project brought together graduate students and senior members from Biological Anthropology, Divinity, Education, Development Studies, Family Research, History, Philosophy, Public Health, and Social Anthropology in Cambridge; as well as visiting scholars from Manchester and MIT, to explore common themes in recent philosophical and anthropological work on the nature of ethical thought and practice.

Over the last decade or so, there has been a growing trend among philosophers and anthropologists to draw on the work of scholars in each other's discipline. Yet until now, this trend has yet to result in any systematic dialogue across the disciplinary divide, either in Cambridge or elsewhere. This fact was clearly visible during the course of the seminars, where anthropologically trained participants would sometimes be puzzled by the choices made by philosophers of anthropological sources, and philosophically trained participants would equally be surprised at some of the philosophical sources used by anthropologists. Rather than being an obstacle to constructive discussion, however, these moments of puzzlement and surprise functioned as creative

spurs to the exploration of mutually recognisable themes; from theoretical discussions of ethical relativism, virtue or social explanation on the one hand, to ethnographic discussions of spirit possession in Madagascar, Islamic revival in Egypt, or 'criminal castes' in south India on the other.

During the course of the term, there was inevitably a certain amount of disagreement among the seminar participants. Yet there was also a significant amount of agreement – perhaps more so than some of us had expected. There was also a decent amount of laughter. Those of us who came with a desire to learn something new definitely did so – enough to convince the organisers to continue the conversation.

Becoming more thoughtful

Carlene Firman



Carlene Firman

If I could say one thing about my time at Cambridge, it would be that I left there more thoughtful than when I arrived – and in more ways than one. Studying Philosophy for three years definitely improved my ability to answer questions and to question answers, through an analytical lens that I wasn't always aware I was developing. When I opted to study Philosophy it was because I wasn't clear about my career direction, and I wanted to study something that could sustain my interest for an extended period of time. I found Philosophy interesting because I liked an argument, and learning lots of new ways to argue was obviously appealing to me. In addition, I found it fascinating to learn that people had been asking the same questions and having the same arguments for centuries.

Aside from formal study, Cambridge introduced me to people from a range of backgrounds who taught me about difference, and about myself. Learning how to live, study and socialise with people from around the country was a life-informing experience for this London girl, and prepared me for a career working with a mosaic of personalities. Whether it's meeting with politicians, doing press interviews, or building bridges with a range of activists, since leaving University

I have always worked in a landscape of difference. But being accepted into a world that was so different to the one I had grown up in was as profound as the friends I made over the three years of my degree. Following my interview for my place, I was convinced that I hadn't got into Cambridge, and I was beyond stunned when I realised I had. Getting into, and staying in, an environment as academically and socially challenging as Cambridge gave me a greater sense of self-belief and a desire to be a barrier breaker.

Becoming more thoughtful has informed my entire career. The success of my research into girls affected by gang violence was born out of an ability to ask questions about serious youth violence in a different way. While people had spent years focused on boys involved in gangs, few had considered girls, and even fewer had interviewed them. My current role advising the Office of the Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups requires me to develop and challenge questions and answers to ensure the Inquiry provides the findings and recommendations to change children's lives. And each month when I write my column for Society Guardian I have to come up with a new question about a current issue and explore it in a way that a wide audience can engage with.

Embedding my academic journey in Philosophy has also kept me interested in studying as a means of questioning and learning. Having worked at social policy charity Race on the Agenda for a year, I began seeking greater knowledge and understanding than my workplace alone could afford me. This led me to complete a Masters Degree in Social Policy and Planning at the London School of Economics. I often found myself having heated debates with my fellow students about whether or not there was a 'social underclass' and what was the actual purpose of criminal justice system. I would always retreat to my philosophical roots to form and change my position, intent

on pursuing debates in a thoughtful manner. In addition to such group-based thinking, I am now one year into a Professional Doctorate. Having the space for personal thought, and to develop and challenge my positions on social issues, is crucial for me to be confident in the recommendations I make professionally. A challenge of social policy is its weakness to knee-jerk development. Working on policy with a backdrop of considered thought increases the likelihood that my conclusions are holistic; and that is important to me.

During my Cambridge interview I remember stereotypically quoting Descartes' 'I think therefore I am'. While I cringe at that memory now, I can also smile to myself and think that a change may be in order: when it comes to me, 'I question therefore I am' and I can't imagine a time when I won't be.

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