

Philosophy at Cambridge

Newsletter of the Faculty of Philosophy

Issue 7
May 2010



UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE

From the Chairman

Simon Blackburn

Three splendid lectures enlivened the year. Roger Scruton gave a talk on music and human values to a packed audience at the Alumni Weekend, bravely overcoming a distracting balletic performance by the technician who was apparently needed to cope with the innovation of showing slides and music together. As compensation, the subsequent dinner in Roger's honour was ravished by an impromptu performance of songs from Russia and Kazakhstan, by the very talented partner of one of our guests.

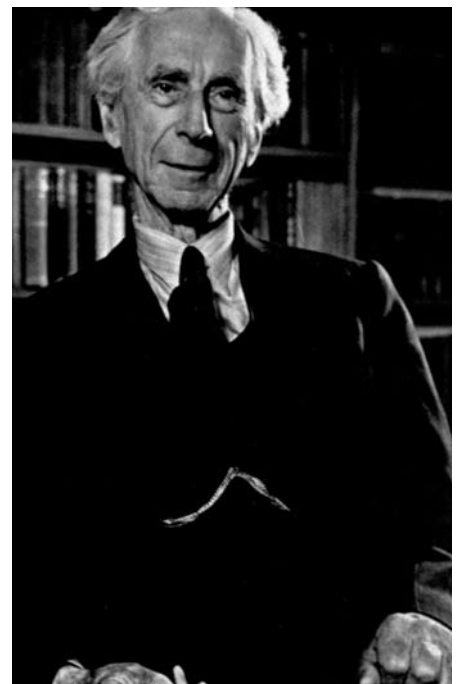
Barry Smith's lecture on the philosophy of wine-tasting at the Cambridge Festival of Ideas also saw academic delight mingled with more sensual pleasure as the audience thoughtfully reflected upon the importance of *terroir* and knowingly compared Pinot Noirs. Philip Pettit gave the Routledge Lecture in Philosophy, offering us a lucid and illuminating account of rival conceptions of liberty, elegantly juxtaposing such heavyweights as Hobbes, Berlin, Rawls, Skinner and Ibsen. We owe thanks to all these speakers, and to Routledge for their continued support.

However, the great news this year, is that thanks to some very generous gifts the Faculty is now on the point

of meeting the target of £2 million required to fund the 1896 Chair of Philosophy. As I write this, the School of Arts and Humanities has passed our request for the position to be formally named the *Bertrand Russell Professorship of Philosophy* up to the General Board, where we expect it to be approved. We decided that Russell deserved the honour not only for his intellectual eminence, but also for his visibility as a public face of philosophy.

Meeting the goal of this appeal is a terrific achievement, and one of which we in the Faculty, and our alumni, can be very proud. It is particularly gratifying that almost one hundred people gave their support to the cause. The Chair is now independent of the bitter financial winds blowing around many posts in academe, even in Cambridge. Particular thanks are due to Hugh Mellor and Jane Heal, who have worked tirelessly on behalf of the appeal, and to CUDO and Cambridge in America, who have ably supported us. We are planning to announce a celebratory event when all the formalities are complete.

Of course, needs continue. At present we are encouraging donors to think of supporting graduate students by endowing bursaries and grants. This is urgent, because there is so little public funding for graduate studies in the humanities. The subjects that the Government likes — science, technology, engineering and medicine—do not include literature, history, languages or philosophy. Thanks to one fine gift this year we have been able to offer two David Bayless studentships. And thanks to one extremely generous anonymous gift, we shall be able to continue to help some of the best and most deserving students for another ten years. But more



Bertrand Russell

is always needed if enough of them are going to be able to pass the torch to another generation. One of Trinity College's alumnus benefactors once wrote "I should have as a memorial the kind thoughts and gratitude of those who had been helped by an unknown friend" and we firmly believe that many readers would like to share that sentiment.

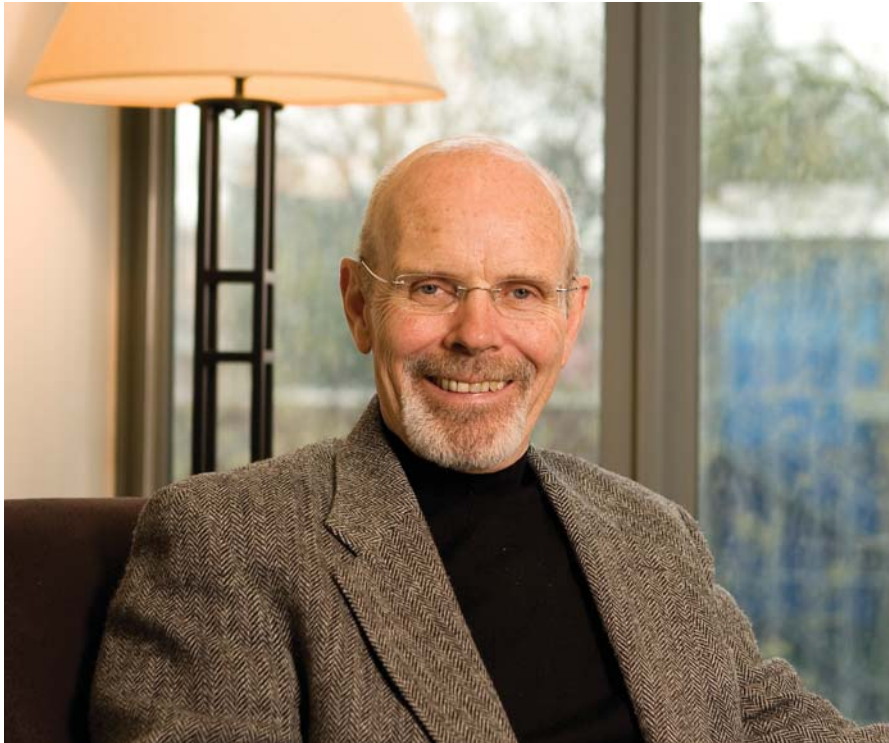
Last year in this column, Alex Oliver talked of the booming demand for places in philosophy and expressed gratitude to colleagues, students, and staff for their role in sustaining our Rolls-Royce education. I am pleased to say that the demand continues. I also want to end by affirming that with ever-increasing pressures, the gratitude is ever more appropriate.

If you have any comments or suggestions, please send them to the Editor:

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Hobbes, Berlin and Freedom

Philip Pettit



Philip Pettit

Suppose you are wondering whether to play a game of tennis and decide in the end against the idea. Did you make a free decision? Yes, you think, of course you did. But now I point out that the gate to the tennis court was locked: perhaps even locked by someone who wanted to make sure you couldn't play. Are you still sure that you made a free decision?

Most of us will respond by distinguishing. Yes, you freely made a choice between the options you thought you had. But those options weren't all available and so you did not actually have a free choice between playing and not playing tennis.

This very example was discussed in an exchange between Thomas Hobbes and Bishop Bramhall in the seventeenth century. Hobbes's extraordinary view was that you really have a free choice if you are not interfered with in the option you actually choose. And so he says, presumably with 'real' tennis in mind, that 'it is no impediment...that the door is shut' if you have not 'a will to play'.

The Hobbesian way of thinking about free choice may continue in the theme, sounded with particular brio by Isaiah Berlin, that to be free in a choice is not to suffer interference there. On at least one reading of this idea you do not suffer

interference in the choice between playing and not playing tennis if you are not impeded in the option you actually take.

In his 1958 essay 'Two Concepts of Liberty' Berlin may have gone along with this thought but, to his credit, he explicitly renounced it later, drawing on a metaphor of open doors. In order to enjoy a free choice between certain options, each option must be an open door, he said. It is not enough that the actual door you push on happens to be open; the counterfactual door you might have pushed on must have been open too. You must not be exposed either to actual or to counterfactual interference.

Berlin made an interesting case for this position. Suppose you are faced with two options or doors, A and B, and only A is open. If you can adapt your preferences so as to want A, not B, then on the view under question you will have ensured that you have a free choice. But this is absurd. You cannot make yourself free; you cannot ensure the freedom of a choice, just by adapting your preferences appropriately.

I like Berlin's metaphor and I like this argument. One attractive feature is that the metaphor has resources not actually exploited by Berlin. It argues not just for

requiring that each option in a choice should escape interference, but also for adopting a more radical position. This is the republican claim that even a robustly unimpeded choice will be unfree if it is subject to the permission or will of any other.

Suppose that there is a doorkeeper guarding the two doors, A and B, but that they are each open because the keeper happens to like you. Would you have a free choice in such a case? An argument rather like Berlin's adaptation argument suggests that you would not.

Suppose you want A, not B, but door A is closed because the door-keeper does not like you. Now imagine that you can secure the goodwill of the door-keeper if you toady or fawn or kowtow appropriately. And imagine that you do ingratiate yourself by such means and that door A becomes as open as door B. Does that mean that you now have a free choice between A and B?

Surely not. As freedom cannot be achieved just by adaptation, so it cannot plausibly be achieved by ingratiation. Where choice requires the 'indulgence' of another, as Richard Price put it in the eighteenth century, it is not properly free choice. The thought experiment argues for the republican view that a choice is not free if its exercise requires the permission and goodwill of another. Freedom consists in not being subject to the will of another: not being dominated by another, as by a master.

It is a nice irony that though Berlin took Hobbes to be a forerunner of his views, his arguments go in an extreme non-Hobbesian direction. Not only does his open-doors metaphor undermine Hobbes's explicit claim, making counterfactual as well as actual interference hostile to freedom. It also provides support for the view that the freedom of a choice requires full independence from the will of another, thereby sustaining the very ancient, republican 'wisdom' that Hobbes took to be too 'dearly bought'.

Philip Pettit is the Laurance S. Rockefeller Professor of Politics and Human Values at Princeton University. In October 2009 he gave the fourth Routledge Lecture in Philosophy on the uses of Berlin's open-doors metaphor. He also gave the Seeley Lectures on a republican conception of democracy on 26–30 April 2010.

What is Legal Philosophy?

Matthew H. Kramer

Although I teach in the Law Faculty at Cambridge, most of my degrees and all of my lecturing, supervisions and research are philosophical. Two of my areas of specialization, moral philosophy and political philosophy are well covered by the Philosophy Faculty; but my third area of specialization, legal philosophy, has largely been left to the Law Faculty (so far as I am aware, Ross Harrison is the only member of the Philosophy Faculty in recent decades who has worked on topics in legal philosophy). In this respect, Cambridge is similar to most other British and American universities. Though there are a few exceptions, most universities in the English-speaking world consign the philosophy of law predominantly to law faculties.

Ironically, the situation just recounted is due not least to the similarities between law and philosophy. Like philosophy, law as an academic discipline is highly self-reflective and concerned with its own history. In addition, it sets a premium on rigorously articulated argumentation and on the elaboration of subtle distinctions. Moreover, major philosophical issues arise in many areas of the law. For example, the law of evidence involves many of the problems with which epistemologists grapple, and quite a few of the distinctions drawn in that area of law are parallel to those drawn in the epistemological literature (although admittedly there are also some salient differences). It is not surprising then, that some distinguished epistemologists such as Larry Laudan and Susan Haack have produced important work on general topics in the law of evidence.

Because of these affinities between law and philosophy, the location of legal philosophy in law faculties is quite sensible. Given that both the methods of reasoning and the substantive issues in the philosophy of law are far from unfamiliar to jurists, the major British and American law faculties are natural homes for the Jurisprudence courses that are offered under their auspices.

Nonetheless, the philosophy of law is indeed a branch of philosophy. It overlaps substantially with political philosophy and moral philosophy –

and, to a lesser extent, with most other domains of philosophy – but it addresses a number of distinctive topics and concerns.

Very roughly, the field can be divided into two main components: the conceptual or theoretical-explanatory side, and the normative or prescriptive side. Although there is a considerable amount of interweaving between those two categories, they can usefully be separated for heuristic purposes.

When legal philosophers pursue a conceptual or theoretical-explanatory enquiry, they seek to explicate the nature of some major entity or property that is involved in the operations of legal systems. Perhaps the most famous such enquiry concerns the nature of law itself. Legal positivists (including me) have long insisted on the separability of law and morality. That is, they maintain that there are no significant *necessary* connections between the legal domain and the moral domain – though there are typically any number of *contingent* connections between those domains. In opposition to legal positivists are natural-law philosophers of many stripes, who contend that law and morality are necessarily linked in important ways. Debates between positivists and natural-law thinkers have loomed large in the philosophy of law for centuries, partly because the specific foci of those debates are multifarious. (The precise tenor of any claim about the relationship between law and morality depends upon the relevant contrast class for the moral realm: morality vs. immorality, morality vs. prudence, morality vs. descriptive factuality).

Countless further conceptual or theoretical-explanatory enquiries in legal philosophy pertain to other major entities or properties that are operative in legal systems: rights, liberties, authority, duties, and so forth. However, we should move on to the normative or prescriptive matters that engross legal philosophers. These matters belong to the domain of political philosophy, but, because they centrally involve legal institutions, they are frequently addressed by legal philosophers as well. Among the issues of this sort are the following: To what

extent are human activities properly subject to legal regulation? Who – legislatures or courts – should have the final say in determining whether people hold fundamental legal rights to be treated in certain ways? Is there any comprehensively applicable moral obligation to comply with legal requirements? What is the appropriate general basis for the imposition of punishments? When can adjudicators and administrators legitimately deviate from the requirements of procedural justice in order to promote the attainment of substantive justice?

Though some of these questions can be construed as jurisdiction-specific inquiries, philosophers construe them in abstraction from any particular jurisdiction (even if the philosophers ultimately conclude that the answers to several of these questions can legitimately vary to some degree across jurisdictions). The question about punishment illustrates the complexities of the normative matters that are pondered by legal philosophers. I have space to mention only the three most commonly propounded positions. Some philosophers take the view that a punishment is morally justified insofar as it deters future criminal activity more effectively than would any less severe sanction. Other philosophers contend that punishments are morally justified insofar as they are deserved, or insofar as they are necessary, to reaffirm the rights and dignity of victims. Still others maintain that punishments are morally justified insofar as they express a community's revulsion toward various modes of misconduct.

Several additional positions and combinations of positions have been championed over the years, but the preceding paragraph suffices to convey a sense of the multi-facetedness of the normative topics that are the foci in many of the quarrels among legal philosophers. To the extent that any progress is made in tackling those topics, it occurs through wide-ranging disputation. Given that most legal philosophers have been trained both as philosophers and as lawyers, the numerousness and persistence of the disagreements among them are amply predictable!

Matthew Kramer is Professor of Legal & Political Philosophy, and a Fellow of Churchill College.

A Conversation with Tim Crane

Interviewed by Simon Blackburn



Tim Crane and Simon Blackburn

Tim Crane joined the Faculty in October 2009 as the Knightbridge Professor of Philosophy. He previously taught at UCL where he was also Head of Department.

SB: Let's start by asking what your connection with Cambridge has been over the years?

TC: My connection with Cambridge goes back to when I was a graduate student here in the 80s. And then I worked in London for 20 years, but I always kept in touch with the Faculty here and it's very exciting to be back and working here as professor.

SB: How about your own research interests: Where do they centre?

TC: Well most of my work so far has been in the philosophy of mind. At the moment I've been working on the idea of intentionality, the mind's representation of the world, or the mind's direction upon its objects. I've written about different aspects of this phenomenon of intentionality. In my first book, I wrote about the intentionality of mind, and reductive accounts of it, particularly accounts in terms of computation and causal processes.

I've become more interested as the years have gone on in phenomenology

and the relationship between intentionality and consciousness, which has taken me towards the theory of consciousness, but also towards Phenomenology with a capital P, as it were, especially towards Husserl and some of his ideas.

So one thing I'm working on at the moment is a book on thinking about the non-existent. This is incredibly important for the theory of intentionality because on the face of it, it looks as if the general phenomenon of thinking about something ought to be a relation between the thinking mind and the thing thought about, but if relations only hold between existing things, then how is it possible to think about something that doesn't exist?

SB: Yes the old trouble of non-existence. That is in a sense, a very Cambridge topic, because it obsessed Russell and I suppose it was part of the motivation for the theory of descriptions.

TC: That's right I think, and also I suppose Russell and Moore didn't talk about their ideas in terms of intentionality – they didn't use those categories, but the fundamental starting point of their philosophy was the idea of judgement. What you

judged was something independent of your mind and this was a central part of their rejection of idealism. I suppose I'm so interested in the idea of intentionality because I see it everywhere in philosophy.

SB: Do you think that the study of consciousness especially is undergoing changes, with its fMRI scanners and so on, which tell us about the way the brain works? Do you think this is going to affect your own work or the direction of the subject?

TC: I definitely see this as something that would affect my own work and it already has affected the subject in lots of ways. I think one of the roles for philosophy here is to pin down exactly what it is that we're talking about when we talk about 'consciousness'. There are so many things that we bring under the heading of consciousness and it's a serious question whether they have anything interesting in common.

We talk about thoughts being conscious we talk about sensations being conscious, and about conscious emotions, moods and reasoning, but are these in any way the same phenomenon? If they are, it doesn't seem that what's going to explain these phenomena or bring them together is one simple quality. There's no simple quality common between thought and conscious thought and sensation. So I think that's what philosophy needs to work on. And that is definitely illuminated I think, by what's going on in neuroscience on understanding the actual functional architecture of the brain. Let alone more spectacular discoveries like the recent discovery by neuroscientists in Cambridge about the presence of consciousness in patients in a persistent vegetative state, which is an extraordinary discovery which no philosopher should ignore.

SB: No you can't go on being a simple-minded behaviourist if consciousness is apparently there in people whose capacity for behaviour has vanished. What about your interests in other areas of philosophy?

TC: My interests have started to move in slightly different directions. One is my interest in animal cognition and the philosophical questions that that raises. That's something I find very exciting at the moment and there's very interesting research going on in psychology on animal thought and communication. Another side of my

interests is metaphysics of perhaps a more Aristotelian form. A lot of metaphysics is dominated by a certain kind of unbridled speculation at the moment as if you can just say anything as long as no one's ever said it before and it's vaguely coherent. Whereas I think that if there is such a thing as metaphysics at all, it has to be related to other things we know from science and other sources, and to things that make sense. It's for that reason that I'm interested in the Aristotelian idea of substance as a kind of fundamental unity in things, and I would like to develop that further and think about questions of persistence in identity over time in relation to these more old fashioned categories.

SB: Cambridge, certainly in my young day, was never a historically orientated department. Jonathan Bennett was thought to be slightly eccentric for being so keen on the history of philosophy and yet it's surprising how again and again it turns out that the contemporary problems are somehow echoing the history of the subject.

TC: That's true. I was not originally interested in the question of substance, but when I had to teach Leibniz at UCL

some years ago, I started thinking about his idea of substance as something simple which is a fundamental unity, and there seemed something deeply right about this. Of course it's a very unusual view of reality and no one thinks that Leibniz's view could be true, but nonetheless in thinking about it you face questions about the sorts of things that might be true – and you avoid errors and you get inspiration from engaging with the great thinkers of the past. We also learn about why we have the problems that we do. So I'm all for reading the great thinkers of the past – and even the less great thinkers!

SB: Absolutely. Is there anything else you would like to talk about?

TC: I'd just like to say how great it is to be back in Cambridge and what a wonderful academic, intellectual and pedagogical environment it is. It's a great privilege to be here and I look forward to being here for many years.

A podcast of the full conversation is available at www.phil.cam.ac.uk.

Future Events

Alumni Weekend 2010

Saturday 25th September
Dr Fraser MacBride will deliver a talk on **'The Dark Matter of Cambridge Philosophy'**. Please see the Alumni Weekend website (www.alumni.cam.ac.uk/weekend) for further details.

Festival of Ideas 2010

'Fiction, Emotion, and Imagination'
Friday 29th October 2010
Dr Cain Todd from Lancaster University will give a talk on emotional response to fictional artworks.

Inaugural Lecture: 'What is Distinctive about Human Thought?'

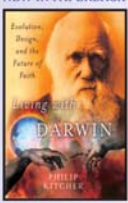
Wednesday 1st December 2010
Professor Tim Crane will give his inaugural lecture as Knightbridge Professor.

Routledge Lecture in Philosophy

Tuesday 15th March 2011
Professor Tim Scanlon from Harvard University will give a lecture entitled **'Value in Morality and Politics'**.


Further details about these lectures will be available on the Faculty website.

NEW IN PAPERBACK



Living with Darwin
EVOLUTION, DESIGN, AND THE FUTURE OF FAITH
Philip Kitcher,
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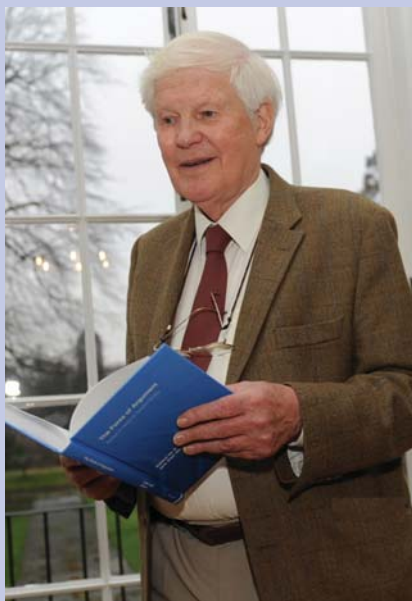
PHILOSOPHY

The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy

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please go to:
journals.cambridge.org/edspick/phi



People



Professor Timothy Smiley at the presentation of his *Festschrift* in Clare College, 15 January 2010. Photo: Geoff Durrant.

"Throughout the second half of the twentieth century Timothy Smiley gave lectures on logic at Cambridge University. It is not an exaggeration to say that the lectures are a life-time memory for many who heard them. A remarkably large number of those students decided to pursue philosophy as a profession and have gone on to distinguished careers of their own: when asked, they cite Smiley's lectures as an inspiration. ... Smiley has displayed unplumbable generosity towards students and colleagues. Whether he is pointing a student towards a fruitful area of research, or helping him see that his current conceptualization is not yet quite right; whether he is spurring on a colleague with a unique blend of serious challenge, honest encouragement and teasing; whether he is meticulously correcting draft after draft of a student's paper (literally dotting the i's and

crossing the t's), Smiley has done the best he can to bring out the best in all around him. For five decades he and his wife Benita have opened their home to students who in a weary moment, or a moment of insecurity, could use a home-cooked meal and a laugh. A small sample of those who are grateful have put together this volume on the many ways that good arguments actually work".

So says the Preface to Professor Smiley's *Festschrift*, *The Force of Argument* (Routledge, 2010), which celebrated his groundbreaking achievements in logic. Readers will know many of the contributors: Jonathan Lear and Alex Oliver, who also co-edited the volume, and Kwame Anthony Appiah, Tom Baldwin, Jim Cargile, James Doyle, Ian Hacking, Lloyd Humberstone, Rosanna Keefe, Michael Potter, Graham Priest and Neil Tennant.

Awards and Honours

Medieval philosophy scholar **Dr John Marenbon** (Trinity College, Cambridge) was elected a Fellow of the British Academy.

Dr Hallvard Lillehammer has won a Pilkington Teaching Prize in recognition of his excellence in teaching at the University.

Professor Onora O'Neill received an honorary degree from the University of York.

Arrivals

Dr Richard Woodward from the University of Leeds joined the Faculty as temporary lecturer in October 2009, while Dr Arif Ahmed is on research leave.

Dr Niklas Moller (from Sweden) began a two year EC Marie Curie Intra-European Research Fellowship in July 2009, working on the Philosophy of Risk with Simon Blackburn.

Research Awards

Dr Michael Potter and **Dr Peter Smith** were each awarded research leave from the AHRC for a three month period for 1st Oct 2009 and 1st April 2010 respectively.

Dr Arif Ahmed was awarded a Research Fellowship from the Leverhulme Trust for the 2009–10 academic year.

Dr Clare Chambers was awarded a CRASSH Early Career Research Fellowship for Easter term 2010.

Dr Lubomira Radoilska was awarded a six month Dissemination Grant by the Wellcome Trust for her current research on conceptions of autonomy and equality in public health.

Dr Mark Sprevak, was awarded a two year Leverhulme Early Career Research Fellowship.

Tom Simpson was awarded a three year sponsorship from Microsoft Research Ltd for a postgraduate research studentship.

Appointments

An impressive number of our graduate students and Research Fellows have recently secured jobs in academia. Among them, **Ben Colburn** has been appointed to a lectureship at Glasgow University. **Tom Stern** and **Jenny Bryan** have been appointed to lectureships at UCL, **Charlotte Werndl** at the London School of Economics, **Mark Sprevak** at Edinburgh and **Jules Holroyd** at Cardiff. **Sacha Golob** was awarded a Junior Research Fellowship at Peterhouse, Cambridge; **Laura Biron** at Queen's, Cambridge; and **Tim Button** at St John's, Cambridge.

Special Lectures

A large audience came to hear alumnus **Professor Roger Scruton** (Jesus College 1962–5) give a lively talk on 'Music, Meaning and Morality' at last year's alumni weekend. Professor Scruton argued for the moral significance of music, its place in our culture, and the need for taste and discrimination in listening to it. A podcast and slides of the lecture are available from the Faculty website.

Last October **Professor Simon Blackburn** gave the Presidential Address to the Aristotelian Society.

On 2nd March 2010 **Baroness Onora O'Neill** delivered the prestigious Rede Lecture for 2009–10 on *The Two Cultures Fifty Years On*.

Student Prizes

The Matthew Buncombe prize for best overall performance in the MPhil degree was awarded to **Robert Trueman** (Fitzwilliam). The Craig Taylor prize for best performance in Part IB was shared between **Zoe Johnson King** (Fitzwilliam) and **Benjamin Gregory** (St John's). The Part II prize went to **Matthew Hasler** (Girton).

Events

Festival of Ideas 2009

The Philosophy of Wine – From Science to Subjectivity

Alexis J. Papazoglou, PhD student

Pre-empting, perhaps, the audience's scepticism, Professor Barry Smith (Institute of Philosophy) assured us that one can enjoy one's passion for wine while profiting philosophically "at least until the second bottle".

What prompted Smith's philosophical interest in wine was a paradox – wine critics claim that taste is subjective, yet the industry of wine-making seems to rely on this not being so. On the one hand, tasting wine involves a subjective experience; one cannot know how the wine tastes just by analysing its chemical composition. Novices and experts also widely disagree about what they can taste in a wine. On the other hand, producing wine involves a number of choices (grape variety, location, harvesting time, aging process etc.) all with the aim of producing a *particular* result.

It is the accuracy with which wine producers can make predictions about what people will taste in the wine that makes Smith believe that taste is objective. The possibility of a wine's taste being a secondary quality, however, was not considered despite it being seemingly plausible.

On the disagreement between experts and novices, Smith argued that this is due to the evaluative nature of taste. We form judgements about whether we like a taste, as well as about what the taste is like. Experts learn to focus their attention on the latter, novices focus on the former. Taste then, for Smith, is subjective with regard to its evaluative aspects, but not with regard to its descriptive aspects. Apart from solving the initial paradox, Smith claimed that thinking about wine-tasting can have philosophical value, for it brings out the multimodal nature of the object of taste: namely smell, touch and taste are all involved in judging a flavour. This makes it an interesting case-study for philosophers of perception who tend to focus on one sense at a time, such as vision. By the end, the audience seemed convinced that, as Voltaire put it, "taste invites reflection".



Visitors enjoyed wine and philosophy at the Festival of Ideas

Autonomy and Mental Health Conference

Lubomira Radoilska, Research Fellow

Autonomy is the focus of several major philosophical inquiries. One of these aims to establish the defining features of autonomous motivational states, such as proper formation and reflective endorsement. It relates autonomy to the concepts of rational agency and freedom of will. Another approach explores the question of whether autonomous choices ought to accord with particular values, e.g. self-respect. It identifies covert forms of oppression and elaborates on corrective initiatives. A third inquiry concentrates on the links between responsiveness to moral reasons and effective control over one's life. It looks at fully developed agency and clarifies its relationship to moral responsibility. Furthermore, autonomy is a fundamental topic in medical ethics. Yet its links to two related key concepts, decisional capacity and mental disorder are rarely given full consideration.

A conference on "Autonomy and Mental Health" (7–8 January 2010, University of Cambridge) provided a forum for constructive dialogue between philosophers, psychiatrists, lawyers, and practitioners whose work relates to these intricate concepts. The questions we addressed included: Does the notion of capacity necessarily involve evaluation? How does it relate to the notion of autonomy? What are the defining features of mental disorder?

Invited speakers included: Derek Bolton (KCL & Maudsley Trust), Lisa Bortolotti (Birmingham), Bill Fulford (Oxford & Warwick), Jules Holroyd (Cardiff), Agnieszka Jawoska (California Riverside), Jennifer Radden (Massachusetts), Jens Timmermann (St. Andrews), and Elizabeth Fistein, Jane Heal, Hallvard Lillehammer, and Lubomira Radoilska (Cambridge).

The conference was very well attended, with participants from the USA, Japan, South Africa, and many European countries. The constructive spirit of the event and the diverse background of the participants contributed to fruitful and stimulating discussions which not only broadened our respective intellectual horizons, but equally strengthened the conceptual and methodological grounds of our work.

I would like to thank the conference speakers, chairpersons, and delegates whose valuable contributions were instrumental to the success of this event. I would also like to acknowledge the financial and administrative support I received from the Wellcome Trust and CRASH.

The conference is part of an ongoing collaborative project at the Faculty of Philosophy. Further information and related resources are available at: www.phil.cam.ac.uk/news_events/autonomy_mental_health.html.

The Meaning of Harpic

Winston Fletcher



Winston Fletcher

On leaving Cambridge, after dithering about a bit – aspiring to be both an exalted novelist and the next prime minister but five, I joined the humble world of advertising. Many will find the word ‘humble’ conjoined with ‘advertising’ oxymoronic, but in my experience advertising folk are much more humble than novelists or politicians. With good reason you may say.

I had read philosophy (then Moral Sciences) but had no wish to become a philosopher. Doubtless the Philosophy Faculty felt the same way about me. Nor, on the other hand, did I wish to squander all my hard won philosophical learning. But I faced a grim reality. Advertising is not a business where I would be likely to find epistemology immensely useful.

How wrong I was! I soon learned that advertising provides its practitioners with a philosophically-based privilege unknown to others. Advertising people are blessed with the power to coin new words which swiftly pass into everyday usage: brand names. Poets, writers and philosophers seldom invent new words. Scientists do, but nobody uses their words except other scientists. When did you last hear people gossiping about D’Alembert’s Principle at a cocktail party? Whereas people use brand names all the time.

Not all brand names are invented, but many are. Names like Panasonic,

Persil and Palmolive. Others, like Birds Eye, Gillette and Mars are the personal names of the originators of the products. Yes, there was indeed a Clarence Birdseye, a King Gillette, and a Forrest Mars. They branded their products with their names in much the same way as a cowboy brands his cattle, but for the opposite reason.

The cowboy brands his cattle to deter rustlers. In contrast, brand owners want, as it were, to encourage rustlers. Brand owners want people to recognise their brands instantly, so they can easily choose them, and then choose them again and again – confident they will always get the same quality and style of product for their money. Only the daftest business people put their brand names on shoddy goods, as branding helps customers recognise inferior products as easily as it helps them recognise good ones.

Brand names are a curious breed of noun, placed somewhere between common nouns and proper nouns. A common noun, say ‘soap’, identifies a multiplicity of roughly similar things. A proper noun, or name, say ‘Ludwig Wittgenstein’, identifies a specific, singular entity. Yet ‘Palmolive’ is absolutely specific – no other soaps are Palmolive, but it identifies a multiplicity of soap bars. A proper noun refers to something unique; a common noun refers to innumerable similar things; a brand name refers to innumerable things which are uniquely similar.

The late John Wisdom showed that nouns are predictive. If I say “Here is a bar of soap” you’ll know roughly what to expect. But brand names are more than predictive: they are promissory. They promise the purchaser the particular experiences their meanings encompass. And woe betide the brand name which doesn’t deliver what is expected of it. It will soon perish.

In addition to invented names and manufacturers’ names, there is a third category of brand names: Vanish, Fairy, Old Spice et al. These were existing words with well-established meanings before opportunistic marketing men hijacked them. So that nowadays ‘Vanish’ means a washing product,

but you will not find it so defined in any dictionary.

Once a brand name has been launched the advertiser will go to strenuous efforts to control its meaning, to ensure it continues to mean what he wants it to mean. This too is unique to brands. Nobody controls the meanings of other kinds of word, nor would they even try. This is one reason etymologists and lexicographers have little interest in brand names. If we want to know what a brand name means we must ask the public through market research, rather than the lexicographers. No lexicographer would seek to establish the meaning of a word via market research.

Most astonishing of all, once a brand name has been launched into the public domain it acquires value. Brand names are absolutely the only words worth loads of lolly. They can be, and are, bought and sold. Have you ever tried to sell a word? Try selling ‘obfuscation’, or ‘prestidigitation’, or ‘bottoms’. No way. Nobody will buy ‘prestidigitation’ from you. Anyway it’s not yours to sell. On the other hand, if you owned ‘Heineken’, ‘Harrods’, ‘Hovis’ or even ‘Harpic’, you’d be sitting on a fortune.

Would I have understood the peculiarities of brand names – and there are many more – without studying philosophy? Almost certainly not. Has this esoteric knowledge made me a pile of money? Almost certainly not.

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