UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Philosophy at Cambridge

Newsletter of the Faculty of Philosophy

Issue No. 20 September 2026

ISSN 2046-9632

From the Chair

Alexander Bird

This is my last newsletter as Chair of the Faculty. When I took over, five years ago, we were still in the midst of the pandemic. My predecessor, Prof. Rae Langton, had taken the brunt of the burden of reorganising everything in the light of covid restrictions. As I had joined the Faculty only a year previously, at least I didn't have the disadvantage of knowing how things ought to be (although I did know they ought not to be like *this*). And as we emerged from the pandemic, we, like everyone else, had to decide what innovations to retain and which to jettison. Ad hoc meetings tend now to be held online, saving some back-and-forth between College and Faculty. And even some PhD examinations are online, allowing for external examiners from anywhere in the world. On the other hand, some students got used to being able to access lecture recordings in place of attending in person, a tendency we are resisting. The Moral Sciences Club continues to be offered in hybrid, though, I am pleased to say, online participation is taken up only by a few while in-person attendance is blooming. While the pandemic did provide us with the means of connecting with colleagues from far away in online workshops and conferences, it is also true that philosophy is a participation sport best enjoyed in the flesh. Mention of the Moral Sciences Club reminds me that a year ago Rae Langton stepped down from many years as President—many thanks to you, Rae, for all your work in that role too. I took over for a year, but will now pass this on to Sarah Fine, as I will be President of the Aristotelian Society, chairing their fortnightly meetings in London (do come along!). I'm also slowly starting a process of making information about the Moral Sciences Club's history more available online.

An enjoyable obligation came my way last November, when I was invited to unveil a blue plaque that would recognise Bertrand Russell by being placed on the house on Babraham Road where he lived on returning from the United States in 1944. Wisely, the unveiling did not take place at that location, but instead in the comfort of the Master's Lodge at Trinity. I was required also to give a short talk about Russell's life and work. I decided not to dwell for too long on the details of the theory of types, which I made palatable to the audience by leavening it with anecdotes about Russell's life. My favourite concerns a London cabbie, who, recognising T. S. Eliot as his passenger, went on to tell the poet of another famous fare he had taken. 'I had that Bertrand Russell in the back of my cab last week. I said to him, "Lord Russell, what's it all about then?" And do you know what? He couldn't tell me.' Many of us, like Russell, find ourselves lost for words—if only for a while—when faced with a tricky philosophical question. I am glad to say, though, that my colleagues have found their voices most effectively and persuasively in an outstanding array of publications, as well as conference presentations, invited lectures and the like. We are gearing up for the next REF ('Research Excellence Framework'). While this does not influence our activities, we are hoping that we will, with our colleagues in History and Philosophy of Science, have the excellence of our research demonstrated publicly yet again.

In just over a fortnight I will hand over to Prof. Michael Potter as Chair of the Faculty. We are all very grateful to Michael for taking this on. I'd like to extend my own thanks to my academic and professional services colleagues, for their hard work and support over the past five years, most especially the Faculty Managers, first Heather Sanderson and then her successor Jo Farmer. And I would like to thank our friends outside the Faculty for their encouragement and generosity. I believe that the Faculty is flourishing in many respects—showing exciting research, inspiring teaching, and productive and supportive collegiality. Long may that continue.

Unveiling of Bertrand Russell plaque at Trinity College, Nov. 2025 (photos by Cambridge Past, Present & Future)

Introducing: Thomas Byrne

Johannes Wagner

Thomas Byrne has been appointed as Assistant Professor.

Tell us a bit about yourself and your pathway into philosophy. I initially applied to do maths at university. At the last minute, I decided not to go and took four gap years. At the end of that, I wanted to go back to university but couldn't remember any maths. I didn't know anything about philosophy except that it was adjacent to maths in some ways. So I applied for philosophy, intending to just do a philosophy degree and then become a lawyer or something afterwards. In my first year, I did well but wasn't crazy about it. In my second year, I studied abroad at Georgetown in the US, and took a grad seminar on modal logic with Steve Kuhn. I have this clear memory of finally getting this sense of what philosophy is actually about—what its method is. I went, "Oh, I like this now." From then, I finished my BA at King's College London, and then stuck there to do the research master's, which was when I started working more seriously. I then did my PhD at MIT, and I've been going ever since.

So you started out with an interest in modal logic. How did your interests evolve? I didn't do much modal logic ever again [laughs]. My master's was focused on epistemology and I went into MIT thinking I'm an epistemologist. But I had written my writing sample for MIT on this metaethics question about whether there's any such thing as plain goodness: there are good lawnmowers, and there are good toasters, but is there just the *good*? This was a debate in which Judith Thomson played a big role. That got me reading her stuff, and by the time I got to MIT where Judy was emerita I, like most people, loved her work. I started meeting with her regularly, trying to do as much ethics with Judy or around Judy's topics as possible. From then on, I've basically been an ethicist with a bit of dabbling in philosophy of law and metaphysics, as it intersects.

How would you characterise the key themes and driving interests of your research? I think we can make a lot of progress on ethical questions by getting clearer about the underlying metaphysics of the case(s) at hand. A nice example of this is with something like carbon offsetting. Taylor Swift, for instance, emitted an enormous amount, hundreds of tons on her last tour, using her private jet. She said, "Don't worry, I offset it all." Now, most people that have written about this think that can't be right. You can't just do something bad and then do something good and have that cancel things out. However, what I think we need to ask is, "what actually are you doing when you emit carbon dioxide?" If I emit a bunch today, and then next year your house floods, what relationship do I bear to what happened to your house metaphysically, descriptively? Once we answer that, the idea is the actual ethical questions become a lot simpler.

How, then, would you parse the Taylor Swift case? Taylor Swift emitted an amount of carbon dioxide and there's just been this disaster in Nepal. So the question is, what relationship do Taylor Swift's actions last year have with this glacier collapse in Nepal this year? My view of this case is that the strongest thing we can say is that she increased the risk that it would happen. The more carbon dioxide in the air, the more heating; the more heating, the weather conditions are such that a glacier collapse becomes more likely. If that's right, then we ask, what does she do when she offsets? She decreases the risk of the thing happening, because there's less carbon dioxide in the air, etc. Hence, she first increased and then decreased the risk by the same amount. Even if later the flood happens, given the specific way action and outcome are metaphysically connected in this case, there's nothing left to complain about regarding what she did. Roughly.

Does it matter how the moral facts supervene on, or are connected with, the metaphysical facts? Not particularly. I focus on distinctions, such as the difference between killing someone and not killing someone. One of those is really bad to do, and the other one isn't bad to do. That's because there's a metaphysical difference between the two actions, not a difference of how the moral facts supervene.

It seems your work could be helpful to clarify legally relevant categories like killing in contrast to, say, manslaughter. How does your work intersect with the legal domain? My big picture ethical view is, roughly, that there are two primary ethically important relationships you can have to outcomes: either you can do the outcome (e.g. flood the house), or you can increase the risk that these outcomes would happen (increase the risk that the house would flood). And those descriptive relationships have very different normative upshots. For example, my view is you can offset the latter (as with carbon offsetting), but certainly not the former.

When it comes to the law (in various common law jurisdictions), there are also two main ways someone can be criminally liable for some bad result: so-called primary liability vs so-called secondary liability. If you ask what it is to be either of those things, the law books will give you very fiddly and piecemeal principles. My view is that all those principles are just getting at the very same ethical distinctions above: primary liability requires doing the thing (e.g. killing the victim), while secondary liability requires increasing the risk (e.g. that they'd die). If that's right, then the law is an awfully lot neater than it appears!

What about diffused responsibility, say for actions by a company? I think that it's natural to say that companies did things or increased the risk of things happening, and that this causal-esque part of the law translates nicely over from individuals to, say, corporations. If the company builds a toaster which explodes in a child's face because of some malfunction, it seems straightforward

to say that the company killed the child: they did the harm. In terms of pinning it on particular people, then yeah, that becomes tricky. That seems to come down to policy decisions about how exactly we want to hold employees or owners of companies accountable for things the company did, or vice versa—which you'd have to ask someone else about.

Shifting gears: Why Cambridge? They asked me this when I interviewed. I said then that it was because I'd been rejected when I applied to be an undergraduate and that I'd never gotten over it. That's partly a joke, but also … not really. It was a real setback! In any case, I'm here now, 20 years later. Another reason is historical (or at least at MIT it would count as such): I've always very much liked and read almost everything of G. E. Moore. I'm a long way from a consequentialist, so I don't really share his substantive ethical views, but I share his reluctance to getting too carried away with things that sound strange. Moore was quite happy to say, "Look, this is a datum, and I'm not going to talk about it any more." That is, for better or for worse, heavily infused throughout my work. So, my philosophical home, if it exists anywhere, is Cambridge. And then, in terms of the students, just to work with the best students around, who I'm told are generally very enthusiastic, on a daily basis, working one-on-one with them, chatting, rather than just big, impersonal lectures. I'm looking forward to that. I've also been in America for an awfully long time – 10 years – and it was time to come home.

You are originally from England? Yes, from Surrey: Farnham. I left here in 2016 for MIT. I was at MIT for six years, and then I did two years at UCLA as a postdoc, followed by two years at Texas Tech as an assistant professor. And now I'm back here.

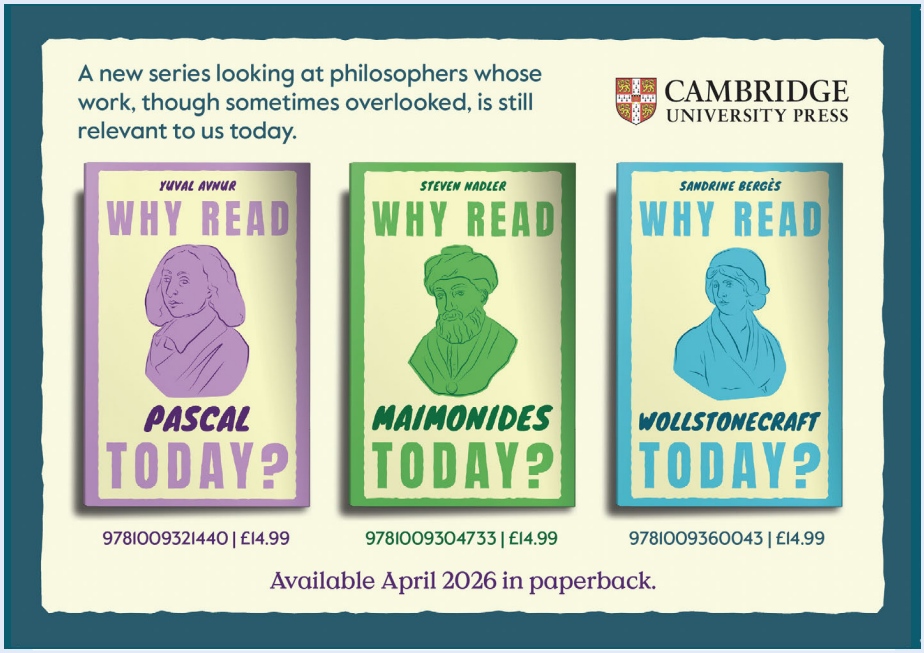
What's your first impression of Cambridge and the faculty? I'm currently living in Barrington, which is 10 minutes of set dressing away from a Jane Austen period drama. Cambridge is obviously completely beautiful. I'm excited to be riding my bike everywhere again. I've had some nice lunches at colleges with my new colleagues. Everyone seems very friendly.

Our faculty is quite small. What is your perspective on that? Compared to where I've previously been, it doesn't seem particularly small, certainly not once you take into account History and Philosophy of Science, and everyone in the colleges. Also, I have a pretty entrenched view in normative ethics against the idea that we have obligations to create more people. Largely because I'm suspicious of the underlying assumption that, basically, more is better. So, a small and good faculty seems fine to me.

What are your aims as assistant professor in ethics at Cambridge? I hope to be a good force, I hope to be a good teacher. I hope people learn things, I hope they enjoy learning things from me, and I hope I enjoy teaching them things. In terms of research, I've been talking about writing a book for an awfully long time, tying together five or six papers that all share the theme and methodology described at the beginning. I want to see how well they hang together, and if there is one coherent picture behind them all. While I now think that there is, until one actually sits down and writes it up and thinks it through… well, there might be crippling holes.

Why do you think it's worth doing philosophy today? I do it mostly because it's just wonderful fun. The bits of philosophy I'm drawn to normally have a bunch of things that on the face of it don't look like they can possibly fit together. And the puzzle is to try and figure out how the pieces do fit, or whether they simply can't—in which case you have to figure out which piece to ditch. I've tried selling it to students before by imagining Sherlock Holmes entering a crime scene, where the crime seems impossible. But the guy's dead! So it did happen, so there must be some way of tying the pieces together. And then the writing of philosophy is a big part of it for me. I enjoy the often-agonising challenge of crafting a sentence or a paragraph or a section, taking something that was very complicated in my head and getting it written out clearly and in a hopefully engaging way. I get great pleasure from looking back and thinking, "Yeah, I got that. I got on top of these ideas, I wrote them down, and they make sense, and other people can read them now" … should they want to.

More generally, it's very painful listening to politicians who either didn't take any philosophy classes or, if they did, ignored the lessons. When a politician says "This is the only possible way of achieving this goal…" Really, the only metaphysically possible way of achieving this is via the policy that you came up with last week, on the back of a packet of cigarettes? (I'd be a terrible politician.) The ability to readily see the basic fallacies in what people are saying all the time surely has an enormous role in democracy. There's also a lot of discussion about what can or can't be done, or about what's politically feasible, but very little discussion about what's right or wrong, fair or unjust. So I think surely philosophy has a big role in public life, if only to get people asking those normative questions.



Normative Theory and AI Group

Tom McClelland

Many staff and students from across the University are interested in the pressing normative questions raised by artificial intelligence. But as we all know, getting people with shared research interests into the same room can be difficult. The **Normative Theory and AI Group** was established to remedy this problem. Founded by Dr Jessie Munton (Philosophy), Dr Claire Benn (Centre for the Future of Intelligence) and Dr Tom McClelland (History and Philosophy of Science), the **NT & AI** group has enjoyed an exciting inaugural year.

The remit of the group is deliberately broad. The technologies we have discussed include search engine algorithms, Large Language Models, image-generating platforms, humanoid robots and more. And the normative questions we have explored encompass ethics, political philosophy, epistemology, legal theory and aesthetics. One of our biggest challenges has been to navigate the boundaries between different disciplines, and between different areas of philosophy. To confront this challenge, our first term of activities consisted of a series of 'explainer' sessions. Instead of presenting research papers, our speakers offered an overview of their respective areas of specialisation. Claire Benn started us off with an excellent guide to how ethics and normative theory intersect with issues in artificial intelligence. We then had a series of more focused explainer sessions, including a lucid introduction to machine learning from John Burden (CFI), an exciting survey of the aesthetic issues raised by AI-generated images from Joachim Nicolodi (Philosophy), and a wonderful overview of the challenges of AI law from Holli Sargeant (Law).

In Lent and Easter Term we moved on to some more specific topics. Murray Shanahan (CFI & DeepMind) led us in an exploration of the mind-bending topic of artificial selfhood. Mat Simpson (Philosophy) showed us what the philosophy of language can tell us about the meaning of AI-generated text. And Georgia Turner (Neuroscience) raised some timely questions regarding the impact of digital technologies on our autonomy. Ari Deller (Philosophy) reflected on the difficulties of applying human normative frameworks to AI, and Jonnie Penn (CFI) introduced his recent work on the 'intention economy'. The **NT & AI** organisers – Jessie, Claire, and Tom – also led the way with sessions on algorithmic bias, epistemology, synthetic media and AI consciousness.

The first year of the **NT & AI** group has exemplified many important assets of the Cambridge research community. First, our sessions have demonstrated that the community has considerable interest and expertise in these fascinating topics. The issues we discussed are among the most important faced by society today, so it is gratifying to see that Cambridge can lead the way in confronting those issues. That applies not just to the excellent members of staff who have participated in the group, but to the many outstanding students who will be grappling with these topics for years to come. Second, our sessions have shown how good the community is at talking across disciplinary boundaries. Participants from varied research backgrounds were able to learn from others, and to make themselves understood. Every session offered us the opportunity to broaden our horizons and to build relationships that we wouldn't otherwise have made. If we all stick to our lanes we're unlikely to make much headway on the questions that matter, so this is again encouraging to see. Finally, these sessions have shown the central role that philosophy can play in interdisciplinary AI research. Philosophers are uniquely positioned to articulate the big questions, co-ordinate the contributions of different disciplines and set the agenda for future research. Now more than ever, we need those with expertise in philosophy to play a hands-on role in AI research and AI policy.

Tom McClelland is Teaching Associate in Philosophy of Science in the HPS Department

Kate Vredenburgh at the Normative Theory and AI Group, June 2026

People

Faculty and Staff News

Welcome to **Thomas Byrne**, joining the Faculty as Assistant Professor of Philosophy, working in Ethics, Philosophy of Law, and Metaphysics.

Honours, Awards & Promotions

Congratulations to **Neil Dewar**, promoted to Associate Professor in Philosophy.

Transitions

Mat Simpson, appointed Lecturer in Philosophy at King's College London, and continuing as Director of Studies in Philosophy at Robinson College.

Alex Bryan, who will continue as College Lecturer at Magdalene, and as Director of Studies in Philosophy at Newnham and Magdalene Colleges.

Johannes Wagner, continuing as College Lecturer at Downing, and as Director of Studies in Philosophy at Downing and Selwyn Colleges.

Departures

Farewell and congratulations to:

Will Hornett, taking up a postdoc at FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg (Germany) to work on the philosophy of action and agency.

Lea Cantor, now Lecturer at King's College London, teaching Chinese Philosophy and (Global) Ancient Philosophy.

Chiara Martini, appointed as Associate Professor of Ancient Philosophy at the University of Oxford (Christ Church).

Kamil Majcherek, awarded a 4-year Ambizione Fellowship on "Medieval Metaphysics of Creation 1250-1400" by the Swiss National Science Foundation at the University of Fribourg.

The Faculty also welcomes **Oliver Healey** as Undergraduate Administrator.

Your comments and contributions are always welcome. Please send them to **Johannes Wagner**, Editor, at: Faculty of Philosophy, Sidgwick Avenue, CB3 9DA, Cambridge. Email: jmjw4@cam.ac.uk. The editor would like to thank **Joanne Wells** for her help with the newsletter.

Student News

Congratulations to:

Lia Nordmann, who has been awarded Bursaries by the Aristotelian Society and the Royal Institute of Philosophy.

Ari Deller, who undertook an ERA:AI fellowship this summer and won an 'AI for Truth-Seeking' grant from the Cosmos Institute.

Facundo Rodriguez, appointed as YTL Postdoctoral Research Fellow at King's College London (Dickson Poon School of Law).

Ina Jäntgen, appointed 2024 as Postdoctoral Fellow at the Munich Center for Mathematical Philosophy (Chair of Philosophy of Science) at the Ludwig Maximilian University.

Pablo Hubacher Haerle, fixed-term Assistant Professor at the University of Cologne 2025-26, and now Swiss National Science Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow in Philosophy at NYU.

Adham El Shazly, appointed as Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Lethbridge (Canada).

Samuel Cole, appointed as Junior Research Fellow in Law at Christ Church, University of Oxford.

Chris Benzenberg, Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Fribourg 2024-25, and since then Postdoctoral Research Associate at the History of Philosophy Forum at Notre Dame (US).

Alexander Hutterer, who has taken up an Early Career Research Fellowship at the University of Chicago.

Alex Fisher, now Society for Applied Philosophy Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Leeds.

Unsolicited Advice

Johannes Wagner interviews Joe Folley

Joe Folley graduated from the Philosophy Tripos in 2021 and completed an MPhil in Philosophy at Cambridge in 2022. Since then, he has been running Unsolicited Advice*, a philosophy YouTube channel which has gained close to a million subscribers.*

Looking back from where you are now, what do you think of your time as a philosophy student at Cambridge? There's no way that I could do what I do now without it. Having to write essays every week and then talk to an expert and attempt to defend them, you learn to read and parse a lot of information quickly. It was also nice to be able to interrogate those experts with lots of questions, no matter how silly my questions must have seemed. There are also definite observations that particular lecturers made that have shaped the way I think. The example I always use is Michael Potter's lectures on Ludwig Wittgenstein. Professor Potter mentioned that when Frege received the first draft of the *Tractatus*, the first question he sent back to Wittgenstein was asking whether the first proposition, "The world is all that is the case," was a definition or an empirical claim. That's an insight that you would never get just reading around these thinkers, and it shifted the way I think about both Wittgenstein and Frege. There are also particular thinkers that are just connected to the place, like Frank Ramsey, who influenced the way that I conceive of things like belief and my general meta-philosophical approach. So I look back on my time at Cambridge very fondly. I mean, it's a lovely place, isn't it?

When you graduated, how did the channel come about? I was tutoring philosophy at the time and had a few curious students. After our discussions I would write up a video and send it to them. It was originally just meant to be a private learning aid for those students to recap discussions. And then a couple of the videos took off, and I continued because I enjoyed it.

Why do you think so many people can relate to the content? A lot of people want to learn philosophy, or about particular philosophers or ideas, but don't necessarily know where to start. What I hope to do with the videos is to give people a first step such that they can then take the next ten steps themselves. When it comes to learning philosophy, like learning anything, there's no substitute for doing the work yourself, but sometimes having a little first push can be helpful.

Does it allow you to pursue your research interests? Yes, it does. In effect I have a very similar routine as when I was studying at Cambridge. Lots of reading, lots of note-taking, lots of writing, lots of trying to puzzle things through. It has a lot of freedom to it and I get to follow my curiosity, which I'm very lucky to be able to do.

Many of your videos pick up on widespread philosophical beliefs or takes. Do you see philosophy as something that has the power to transform people and society? Obviously the way somebody thinks about things is going to affect the way they subsequently act. Learning individual philosophers and questions is great fun, and what that's simultaneously doing, I hope, is allowing people to think more clearly. The general approach of interrogating why you have come to a particular belief, what the presuppositions of that belief are, or what would count as a counterexample, can be applied anywhere. We all have plenty of unexamined beliefs, and part of philosophy's utility, even outside of the field itself, is turning the mercilessness that you would treat a philosophical idea with to the rest of your beliefs, seeing what holds water.

Someone that has influenced my thinking an awful lot, David Hume, has an almost comically sharp mind, and is incredibly analytical and interrogative. That's a classic example of a thinker that can help you think more clearly. But there are also philosophers that might help you think, not necessarily more clearly, but just very differently. When I read Plotinus, what strikes me is his remarkable drive and talent for unification, and coming up with a very sophisticated and interesting and culturally distinct form of system-building than what we might be familiar with today. So I do believe philosophy helps people think about the world in different or more precise or more creative ways. Though I suppose I would say that, wouldn't I?

Is philosophy then a purely rational exercise, or is there a role for experience? You can't submit your emotion if you're trying to prove something in a formal logical system. But obviously there are fields of philosophy where experience and personal experience become very relevant. I tend to see some existential philosophy and philosophical novels as detailed attempts to make sense of someone's experience of the world, and that can be useful to the extent to which your own experience mirrors theirs.

You are currently also organising a reading group on Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*. In what sense do you see this novel as philosophically significant? Certainly for my first two years of undergrad, I was a pure "analytic head"; I wouldn't have considered a philosophical novel to be philosophy. There are a few things that have shifted my perspective. One is just recognising that actually people use the term "philosophical" in that sense, and if I'm trying to track ordinary usage, I ought to follow along. But also, when it comes to the kinds of questions that someone like Dostoevsky is trying to approach, they tend to have both an "analytic" and a more experiential component to them. There are scholars, like James P. Scanlan, who have looked at Dostoevsky's points as straightforward philosophical arguments, and while they are not flawless, they're not nonsense either. The novelistic presentation can appeal to our more affective side and dramatise philosophical problems in a way that makes them urgent and refuses to let us run away from them.

What philosophical insights does *The Brothers Karamazov* offer? A classic one is the conversation between Ivan and Alyosha on the problem of evil. As I read it, Ivan pitches the problem as a contradiction within Christian theology of the twin demands to love God and love thy neighbour. Ivan is saying that, "Well, I cannot do both these things at the same time, because in accepting my own salvation and loving God, I would also be accepting the suffering around me, and so I wouldn't be loving my neighbour." It's a way of framing the problem of evil that is specifically Christian but I think interestingly different from how one might frame the logical or the evidential problem of evil. It also clarifies the terms or the stakes of the discussion, at least for a Christian.

So does Alyosha's response to Ivan – the kiss – present a Dostoevskian solution to

the problem of evil? I don't really think it's an answer but something more like a coping mechanism (in a good way). An interesting aspect of Alyosha's character is brought out in contrast with Father Ferapont, the very devout and legalistic, almost pharisaic member of the monastery who displays a kind of spiritual pride. Father Ferapont places himself above others, whereas Alyosha's love for those around him involves him going out of his way, even with people who are far more morally wretched than him. That definitely comes across in the kiss from Alyosha to Ivan: Ivan has just tried to tear apart Alyosha's faith, and Alyosha's reply is to remind Ivan that he loves him. If you were to just chart the arguments out, you'd say it was a cop-out. And it's not not a cop-out, because there's an element of Christian mysticism to Dostoevsky's thought that means he often doesn't give straightforward answers to these kinds of existentially troubling theological questions. But I think it also illustrates a sophisticated emotional understanding of the situation, whereby Alyosha recognises that what Ivan needs is not a reply, but a reminder of love. There is also an honesty to Dostoevsky's approach there which I appreciate. He recognises that he doesn't have a perfect answer to the problem of evil, and could have run away from that fact, but chooses not to.

I see Alyosha as an evolution of the type that Dostoevsky inaugurated with Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*, who is very Christ-like and it goes very badly for him and almost everyone around him. Alyosha is in many ways not as perfect as Myshkin. There are references to this Karamazovian insect he feels inside, which makes him more human than the detached-from-the-world Prince Myshkin. There's a brilliant point made by Hubert Dreyfus that the characters in Dostoevsky that have the most positive effect on the world are the people who are mostly good but have enough knowledge and experience of temptation or evil or egoism that they are able to connect with the people around them. They don't merely stand as a contrast but also can step into the reality of those they are trying to help.

Where do you see yourself in the novel? Like a lot of philosophy students, I can relate to the analytic approach of Ivan. And I wish I could say that I relate to Alyosha, but I relate far more to all the people who are helped by Alyosha. Alyosha is almost too perfect to be relatable (at least for me), but it is far easier to see myself in the people he leaves a mark upon. Alyosha is a man who is eminently beautiful in the Christian sense, going around and demonstrating by sheer contrast the failings of all the people around him, yet he does it in such a loving way that you can't help feeling called out by it, and also feeling thankful for being called out.

Can you make sense of Alyosha without having a theistic commitment yourself? Mikhail Bakhtin famously describes Dostoevsky's novels as polyphonic, in that they give voice to loads of different perspectives, and that there's never a totally neat resolution of them all. I think that's most evident in *The Idiot*. It's a total disaster, and the key question left hanging in the air is, should Prince Myshkin have done anything differently? We sometimes file Dostoevsky as a Christian author and call it a day, but I think we should recognise that he was always wrestling with these challenges to his faith, chief among them the problem of evil. Looking at Dostoevsky's biography, I think he's someone who'd like to find rest in God, but throughout his life, he's a profoundly troubled man. For me as an agnostic, it makes the novels interesting to engage with precisely because I think Dostoevsky is a little agnostic himself.

Where will you go from here? Do you have a concrete mission and goals with your channel and also yourself as a philosopher? I'd like to do a part-time PhD at some point, hopefully in philosophy of science. I think there are really exciting things happening in that field. I'd like to continue doing the channel. But I'd also like to do more reading groups, direct engagement, where people are having discussions and I can facilitate that.

Joe Folley (right) and Johannes Wagner (left) in front of the Cambridge Philosophy Faculty

The Idea of 'Western Philosophy': A Critique

Lea Cantor and Josh Platzky Miller

What is 'Western Philosophy'? While the idea of 'the West' has been challenged for decades across the humanities and social sciences, 'Western Philosophy' has largely escaped critical scrutiny. The term is widely and uncritically used as a neutral, quasi-geographic descriptor. It has also entered wider cultural milieux through popular texts like Bertrand Russell's 1945 *History of Western Philosophy* and, more recently, histories of philosophy like Anthony Gottlieb's 2000 *The Dream of Reason: a History of Western Philosophy* or James Garvey's and Jeremy Stangroom's 2012 *The Story of Philosophy: a History of Western Thought*.

Although the term 'Western Philosophy' has become pervasive in academia and beyond, no direct investigation of the history or impact of the very idea of 'Western Philosophy' has been produced to date. We undertake this task in our new short **Cambridge Elements book**, *The Idea of 'Western Philosophy': A Critique* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming), which recently formed the basis of a keynote address at the Society for European Philosophy's annual conference, held at Manchester Metropolitan University in September 2026 (see image). This book is part of a broader project, for which we are also co-editing a Special Issue in the *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* on 'Eurocentrism and its Critics in the History of Philosophy' (forthcoming) as well as a volume titled *Questioning 'Western Philosophy': Philosophical, Historical, and Historiographical Challenges* (Routledge, under contract).

The point of departure for our Cambridge Elements book is that much of how philosophy and its history are understood is mediated by the rather nebulous category of 'Western Philosophy'. Sometimes 'Western Philosophy' is meant to pick out a historical tradition that has its origins in Greece and is supposedly continuous to present-day Euro-America. Sometimes it is taken to capture a kind of methodology, style, or set of concerns or values. It is also widely used in reference to divisions in contemporary academic philosophy, encompassing both 'analytic' and 'continental' philosophy, and as a mode of categorising in professional philosophy. It is not uncommon, for instance, for journals to specify general coverage in 'Western Philosophy', or for job adverts to list 'Non-Western Philosophy' (implicitly relying on some received conception of 'Western Philosophy' as its counterpoint) as desired Areas of Specialisation or Competence. Despite its popularity, institutional purchase, and apparent unassailability, the book exposes the shaky theoretical and historical foundations of the category of 'Western Philosophy'.

We consider, and argue against, a range of possible defences of the notion of 'Western Philosophy' (many of which have been assumed implicitly in the literature), based on claims about self-evidence, geography, traditionalism, uniformity, and exceptionality. We also consider—and criticise—more explicitly formulated arguments that appeal to family resemblance, nominalism, and pluralism.

Many of the specific debates in the background of this book have taken hold over the last decade across a variety of scattered forums and disciplines. There is thus limited literature that directly develops, or even entertains, a thoroughgoing critique of 'Western Philosophy'.

Given its ubiquity today, it is also easy to miss that, for most of history, the category of 'Western Philosophy' was simply not used as a way of making sense of philosophy and its history. The term emerged at the turn of the twentieth century, and only became widespread after the Second World War.

Beyond its conceptual and historical shakiness, we argue that the idea of 'Western Philosophy' is harmful. It perpetuates and risks sanitising Eurocentric narratives, distorts our understanding of the history of philosophy, and hampers engagement with philosophical thinking globally. We contend that these concerns apply whether 'Western Philosophy' is construed as the only form of philosophy, or just one tradition among many.

We conclude that we should stop appealing to the notion of 'Western Philosophy'.

Lea Cantor is a Lecturer in Philosophy at King's College, London, and was Blacker Loewe Research Fellow in Philosophy at Peterhouse, Cambridge

Josh Platzky Miller is a Lecturer in Sociology at the University of the Witwatersrand (South Africa), & holds a PhD from St John's College, Cambridge

Society for European Philosophy, keynote address by Lea & Josh (4th of September, 2026)

Faculty of Philosophy

Click here to support