



Philosophy at Cambridge

Newsletter of the Faculty of Philosophy

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From the Chair

Alexander Bird

We live in extraordinary and very difficult times. When the last newsletter was produced, we were well into the pandemic, with no end in sight. As I write this, the pandemic is on the wane but there is war in Europe.

Philosophy—teaching philosophy especially—ought to be about dialogue, engagement, and interaction. These things are less easy to achieve over a Zoom call. Nonetheless, the Faculty worked hard to maintain a full range of philosophical activity from lectures and discussion groups to the Moral Sciences Club, online when necessary, in person when possible. One-to-one supervisions, even if online, and college support helped engage students even though many were studying under difficult circumstances. It is a relief to return pretty much to normality and to be able to give our students the very best of Cambridge, unmediated by a screen.

The war in Ukraine is of deep concern to us all. Jacob Stegenga, Philosophy Director of Studies for Hughes Hall and Emmanuel and a colleague in History and Philosophy of Science, was in Ukraine, where he has a home and family, at the time of the invasion. The war in Ukraine is directly related to a series of pre-existing problems: the future of liberal democracy, misinformation and free speech, rights of refugees, justice and war, with which Cambridge philosophers have been engaged in different ways. For example, many readers will remember Rae Langton's 'Post-truth as Post-democracy' talk at the Alumni Festival a few years ago. While more recently our new colleague Dr Sarah Fine has brought her academic work on refugees



Photo: Onur Pinar



Pilkington Prize winners Nikhil Krishnan and Owen Griffiths

and migration to a wider audience through collaboration with theatre and dance companies.

I would like to draw readers' attention to the 'People' page and to the remarkable list of prizes and awards that have recognised the outstanding contributions to Philosophy made by members of the Faculty. I was tempted to mention some special achievements among these, but then I realised I would just repeat the whole list. However, I would like to highlight the fact that in successive years Nikhil Krishnan and Owen Griffiths were awarded the University's Pilkington Prize for outstanding teaching. As a new member of the Faculty I am honoured to be surrounded by such talented colleagues, and as Chair of the Faculty I am delighted that these colleagues have been recognised for research and for teaching and for their contributions to wider society. I, of course, have only just taken on the role—these great successes are testament to the leadership shown by Rae Langton as Chair of the Faculty

since 2017. Rae has been tireless in her work on behalf of the Faculty from fighting our corner in the University, establishing strong links with the colleges, making connections with alumni, and representing the Faculty and its remarkable research on the global stage.

The 'People' page also lists recent arrivals in the Faculty, to which we can add the impending arrival of Sophia Dandelet in September. These appointments mean that more than 50% of the permanent academic staff of the Faculty will be women. I believe we may be unique among philosophy departments in research universities globally in this respect—certainly no U.S. university is in this position. This has been achieved, it must be emphasised, first by encouraging excellent candidates from across the world to apply for our posts and then by appointing in every case the very best candidate. It is no surprise that our academics have had the successes I have mentioned.

Remembering Hugh Mellor

Derek Matravers

Many readers of this newsletter could not help but have encountered D.H. (Hugh) Mellor, who was a member of the Faculty for 34 years. He originally studied Chemical Engineering but became fascinated with philosophy when he took a course at the University of Minnesota in 1962. He returned to Cambridge for a PhD under Mary Hesse, became a lecturer in 1968, and was appointed Knightbridge Professor in 1986. He retired in 1999, although continued to work on the things that interested him until his death.

Hugh saw himself, quite rightly, as continuing the legacy of 'serious metaphysics' that has been part of Cambridge philosophy since the days of Russell and Moore. In particular, he admired Frank Ramsey, who he happily acknowledged as an important influence. Particularly after he became Professor, Hugh was a dominant figure on the Cambridge philosophy scene. He left a legacy in several ways. First, there is his work, particularly on the philosophy of time and on causation. These are captured in his books *Real Time* (1980) (later heavily revised and republished as *Real Time II* (1998) and *The Facts of Causation* (1995). In an earlier edition of this newsletter (May 2009) Tim Crane described these as 'among the best works in metaphysics of the late twentieth century'. The best of his essays—again, mainly in metaphysics—were collected in his *Matters of Metaphysics* (1991) and *Mind, Meaning, and Reality* (2012). They will endure as reference points for anyone with a serious interest in the topics they treat.

His second legacy is his students. I did not attend his lectures as an undergraduate (I came to Cambridge to do a PhD) but, having been taught by him for three years, I can imagine what they might have been like. Amongst his graduate students, his roll call of those still in the profession is impressive—around a dozen people who earn their crust as philosophers (to those unfamiliar with the family trees of academe, that is a lot). To a greater or lesser extent, they carry with them the Mellorian traits of impatience with circumlocution, jargon, and cant of various sorts, and a commitment to being 'serious' about philosophy combined with an unforgiving attitude to pretentiousness. Being taught by Hugh was a very rewarding, if seldom contemplative, experience. It was intense; one had to devote one's full concentration if only not to be steamrollered. I recall once leaving Orchard Street (his wonderful house from which he taught) so wrapped up in thought that I immediately injured myself by running my bike into the back of a parked car.

A third legacy, perhaps less noted, is the way he contributed to a change in philosophy. Hugh was, in some ways, a revolutionary. He had been a Grammar School boy (Manchester Grammar School) and he worked, without show, to make philosophy a happier place for a wider selection of people. Along with Onora O'Neill and Martin Hollis he ran the 'Philosophy Triangle' which built links between Cambridge, Essex, and UEA. He travelled widely; particularly enjoying the no-nonsense approach to philosophy he found in Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. He expected his graduate students to find opportunities to give papers and talk to others (this sudden influx of assertive young scholars roaming around contributed to a renewal of some UK Philosophy conferences which had become rather sclerotic). Mindful of the difficulties people have in entering academia, he gave large sums of money to his college, Darwin, for studentships.



Hugh Mellor

This was greatly enhanced when he died, as the fund, which bears his name, received the bulk of his estate.

Hugh was devoid of self-importance and snobbery and had friends from all walks of life. He worked hard on behalf of the Faculty and University, raising funds and masterminding projects such as the refurbishment of the Raised Faculty Building and the establishment of CRASH. Throughout his life, he loved the theatre and was an accomplished actor. There was something rather child-like in his foibles and enthusiasms. He was a great organiser, not always attending to whether the objects of his plans wanted to be organised. He loved gadgets and was an early adopter of many bits of hardware and software—particularly if they emerged out of Apple. He was always interested in things and in people and happy to discuss philosophy; a tentative enquiry could find you invited to lunch at his local, The Free Press, or dinner at his raffish Soho club, Blacks. He faced the lymphoma that killed him with great fortitude. He was unusual in being both a world-renowned philosopher while at the same time being to many, both inside and outside academia, a close and much-loved friend.

Derek Matravers is Professor of Philosophy at the Open University and Fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge.

A memorial event for **Hugh Mellor** will be held at 5pm on Tuesday 5 July 2022, at Darwin College, Cambridge. All are welcome to attend. To assist us with catering arrangements, please book via <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/professor-d-h-hugh-mellor-commemoration-tickets-339964291347>.

People

Faculty and Staff News

Welcome to:

Sarah Fine, as Associate Professor. Sarah works mainly in Social and Political Philosophy and Ethics.

Neil Dewar, as Assistant Professor. Neil works mainly in the Philosophy of Science and Logic.

Welcome also to:

Farbod Akhlaghi, as Junior Research Fellow at Christ's College, Cambridge

Laura Caponetto as Sarah Smithson Research Fellow at Newnham College, Cambridge

Lukas Meier, as Junior Research Fellow at Churchill College, Cambridge

William Simpson, as Junior Research Fellow at Wolfson College, Cambridge

Welcome back to:

Matt Dougherty, as Affiliated Lecturer

Cathy Mason, as Leverhulme Early Career Fellow

Benjamin Marschall, as Junior Research Fellow at Trinity College, Cambridge

The Faculty Admin team welcomes:

Yuni Fan, as Finance Co-ordinator

Ellen Hammersley, as Senior Administrative Assistant

Joanne Wells, as Administrative Assistant

Congratulations to **Anna Simpson** who was appointed as Postgraduate Secretary in February. Anna took over the role from **Charlie Evans** who left in December to start a new life in Scotland with her family. Farewell and best wishes to her and to **Clare Dickinson** who retired from her role as Principal Secretary in 2021.

Honours, Awards and Promotions

Congratulations to:

Arif Ahmed, who was awarded an MBE in the Queen's 2021 Birthday Honours, for his services to education, and the Index on Censorship Trustees' Award 2021, for his work to protect free speech

Julia Borcharding, who was awarded the Leszek Kołakowski Honorary Fellowship 2021, by the Foundation for Polish Science

Daisy Dixon, who was awarded the American Society for Aesthetics Prize in Social Justice and the Arts for her paper 'Artistic (Counter)speech'

Owen Griffiths and **Nikhil Krishnan**, who were awarded a Pilkington Prize for outstanding teaching by the University of Cambridge's Centre for Teaching and Learning in 2022 and 2021 respectively

John Filling, who was appointed as Lecturer in Political Philosophy at University College, London in 2021

Richard Holton, who was elected as Fellow of the British Academy in 2021 for his contributions to the Humanities and Social Sciences

Lucy McDonald, who was awarded the Royal Institute of Philosophy 2021 essay prize for her paper 'Please Like This Paper'

Jessie Munton, for winning the 2020 Sanders Prize in the Philosophy of Mind, for her essay 'Prejudice as the Misattribution of Salience'

William Simpson, who won the Cardinal Mercier Prize 2021 for his doctoral thesis 'What's the matter? Toward a neo-Aristotelian Ontology of Nature'

Zoe Walker, who has been awarded the British Society for Aesthetics Prize 2022 for her paper 'A Sensibility of Humour'

Congratulations and farewell to:

Matt Bennett, who was appointed Senior Research Officer at the University of Essex in 2020

Peter Epstein, who was appointed as Assistant Professor in Philosophy at Brandeis University in 2020

Maeve McKeown, who was appointed as Assistant Professor in Political Theory at the University of Groningen in 2021

Alexander Roberts, who was awarded a Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship at the University of Oxford in 2022

Paulina Sliwa, who was appointed as Professor of Philosophy at the University of Vienna in 2021

Student News

Congratulations to:

Åke Gafvelin (King's) who was awarded the Craig Taylor Prize for best performance in the Tripos for Part IB in 2020–21

Frank Cudek (Trinity) who was awarded the Winifred Georgina Holgate-Pollard Prize for best performance in the Tripos for Part II in 2020–21

Pablo Hubacher (Pembroke) who was awarded the Buncombe prize for best overall achievement in the MPhil in 2020–21

Alex Fisher (Robinson), who was awarded a prize for the Outstanding Student Paper for the 79th Annual Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics for his paper 'In Defence of Fictional Cases' in 2021

Senthuran Bhuvanendra (Hughes Hall), who was awarded a Jacobsen Studentship by the Royal Institute of Philosophy in 2021

In Memoriam

We are extremely sad to report that **Magda Fletcher** passed away in March after a short illness. Magda worked as a Library Assistant in the Casimir Lewy Library for over ten years before retiring in December 2021. She is greatly missed by us all.

Your comments and suggestions are always welcome. Please send them to **Jo Marcus**, Editor, at: Faculty of Philosophy, Sidgwick Avenue, Cambridge CB3 9DA. Email: jmh225@cam.ac.uk.

In Conversation with Alexander Bird

Jessie Munton

Alexander talks to Jessie, Associate Professor in the Faculty, about his work, his time in Cambridge so far, and his priorities for the future.

My new book is called *Knowing Science*, and it can be summarised in four words: knowledge good, empiricism bad. It does two related things: it's an application of the knowledge first paradigm in epistemology to the case of science, but more importantly than that it's trying to give an epistemology of science that is a thorough rejection of empiricism, where I mean by empiricism an epistemology that gives a central place to perception and perceptual experience.

My philosophical projects are unified by anti-empiricism. It's philosophy of science throughout. What's interesting to me is how philosophy of science interacts with these central areas of philosophy, like metaphysics and like epistemology, and seeing how advances in metaphysics and epistemology can inform our philosophy of science and vice versa. I think philosophy of science is a good source of information about what our best metaphysics and epistemology ought to be. That leads on to an interest in things like imagination and creativity, because what I'm interested in really is what role these have had in generating scientific knowledge.

One factor that grounds my anti-empiricist program is looking closely at the concept of observation. The term 'observation' as philosophers use it has a dual role: one is its perceptual nature, the other is its evidential role—it's what we test our theories against. What's interesting is that scientists don't use it with this double function. They use it only with the evidential function. They're quite happy to talk about things that are utterly imperceptible as observations: observations of field strengths, observations of gravitational waves, observations of subatomic particles. The things the scientists regard as observable are paradigms of what philosophers of science call unobservable. That's more so as more of science becomes computerised: the observation of gravitational waves is something that has happened only with the results of lots of machinery and

computerisation and so it's very, very far removed from anything we might want to call a perceptual experience.

It's not a necessary requirement of a satisfactory philosophy of science that it tells scientists how to do science better. It can be a worthwhile enterprise to find out how this extraordinary institution works and why it works, independently of whether knowing those things will help it work better. That said I think there are examples where philosophers of science can make a difference to science. I'm interested in the replication crisis which affects certain areas of science, and there philosophers of science do have something useful to say because there's a set of problems which can't be solved just by doing more experiments or coming up with a new theory: it is a meta-problem in science.

I've changed my mind on details along the way. But the big picture stays the same. I've become more sympathetic to Bayesianism than I used to be. I used to think that Bayesianism was a red herring, because it seems to be inconsistent with an alternative to Inference to the Best Explanation. More recently I've been thinking that these two can be shown to be not only consistent but mutually supportive. Possibly that's the thing on which I've changed my mind most.

I don't set much store by the pessimistic meta-induction. Here's a little factoid that I like: of all the Noble prizes given in science since 1901, only one was given for something which we now think was flawed fundamentally. Everything else we think is basically right. We shouldn't measure the history of science in years, because the quantity of science being done grows exponentially and roughly doubles every twenty to twenty-five years. Fifty years ago, only one quarter of all science had been done, fifty years before that, only one sixteenth. So, all these examples that pessimists give, from the scientific revolution, or the nineteenth century, were from among the first few percent of all science done and that's not necessarily a good sample from which to make an induction.

What climate change and the pandemic have taught us is that the rhetoric that science is always provisional and tentative has downsides. Because you want to tell people that we really *know* that for almost everybody this vaccine is safe and will increase their protection against COVID-19. Or we really do *know* that if we don't do something the planet is in for a rough time. You don't want people asking why they should take action when our scientific claims are only provisional and tentative.

I hope I'm right about my philosophical views, and I tend to think I am. I think there's a role sometimes for seeing what a conceptual space looks like when mapped out as carefully as it can be, we can learn from that, but I'm slightly irritated by those bits of philosophy which not only try to map out a possible space but take pleasure in the fact that it's quite counterintuitive. Now there's a bit of a vogue for panpsychism. That, I think, is a crazy view.

My first impressions of the Philosophy Faculty at Cambridge are that I am extremely lucky to have such a nice range of colleagues who are not only great philosophers but also great people. That's the first and most important impression and the reason why I'm really glad to be here. I knew in advance that everyone was super clever and good at philosophy, but finding they're nice people makes it a worthwhile School.

The Chair has a number of roles, aside from the donkeywork that just has to happen in the background to keep the department running. The Chair represents the Faculty to the rest of the University and the colleges. We need someone to fight our corner in the School and in the University more broadly. As far as the Faculty itself is concerned one of the key roles of the Chair—as well as making sure everyone is happy, that their careers develop and that we're a harmonious bunch—is to come up with ideas to help us do what we do better: how we can teach more effectively, how we can improve the diversity, the range and depth of our offering to students, and



Alexander Bird and Jessie Munton

other things we might do for our students. It's to help people create an environment in which their research can thrive—teaching and research being the core elements of our mission.

Compared to other places I've been at we're small, there are not very many of us in terms of our University Teaching Officers. That leads to a couple of things that I think are disadvantageous. One is it just means that people work harder. Another is that we're unable to offer the students quite the range of material that a larger department is able to. Students are now asking for greater diversity in what they're taught. The fact is we couldn't easily offer standalone papers in more diverse topics—Chinese philosophy, Indian philosophy, feminist philosophy, philosophy of race—as other bigger departments do. I think we do a really good job at integrating those topics into our existing papers, I think that we're doing the very best that we can in the circumstances, but it would be nice to be able to give students a greater diversity of offerings.

It is one of my priorities to expand—this is going to be slow growth, we're not going to double overnight, which would change the character of the place. It won't all happen by one means. We might expand our MPhil programmes as one way of funding our expansion; philanthropy and donors will be another route, and talking to colleges about what they can do to help. There are a range of things we can try but none of them are magic bullets.

One thing I'm tentatively interested in is whether we are organising our teaching in the most efficient way possible. There is something very, very special about the supervision system at Cambridge and one doesn't want to change it without thinking about it very, very carefully (and when I say change it, I mean marginal changes not radical ones). But there is a question about whether it's the only effective way of teaching undergraduates. We do run classes and seminars for our undergraduates but perhaps more of those would be good. It's also a question in my head whether all organisation of supervisions has to be done

by Directors of Studies, or whether the Faculty office could take a greater role in facilitating that organisation which can for some people be very burdensome. I'm relatively new to Cambridge, and all I can offer are thoughts rather than plans that I want to drive through. This has got to be done consensually.

The three philosophers who have had the greatest influence on me are Tim Williamson, David Armstrong, possibly David Lewis, and David Papineau. Okay, that's four. I was a colleague of Tim Williamson when he was writing *Knowledge and Its Limits* so I feel I was in on the knowledge first project from the very beginning. To me it seemed exciting and productive. In contrast, there's very little I agree with in David Lewis, but there's something about the way he does philosophy that I admire: he wants to make a coherent system, he's willing to go where the arguments require but he does regard being plausible as a desideratum. And the lovely way in which he writes philosophy is a model for all of us.

Intact: A Defence of the Unmodified Body

Clare Chambers

What do you look like when you're in a meeting? Before the COVID-19 pandemic, you probably didn't know. But now more and more of our time is spent on videoconferencing platforms which show us exactly how we look while talking and listening, teaching and learning. We notice our hair, our skin, our expression. It's hard to look away. We are drawn to how we are displayed.

Our culture places enormous emphasis on how we look. Many of us live with a permanent sense of shame and inadequacy. One large study found that 70% of women feel media pressure to have a perfect body, and two thirds of men feel ashamed of their body.

In my recent book, *Intact: A Defence of the Unmodified Body*, I analyse all the ways in which our bodies are designated as *not good enough*, and all the pressures we face to change them. I discuss a wide range of examples, including hair and makeup, bodybuilding, disability, and 'getting your body back' after pregnancy. I introduce a deliberately unfamiliar phrase—the unmodified body—and argue that it needs actively defending.

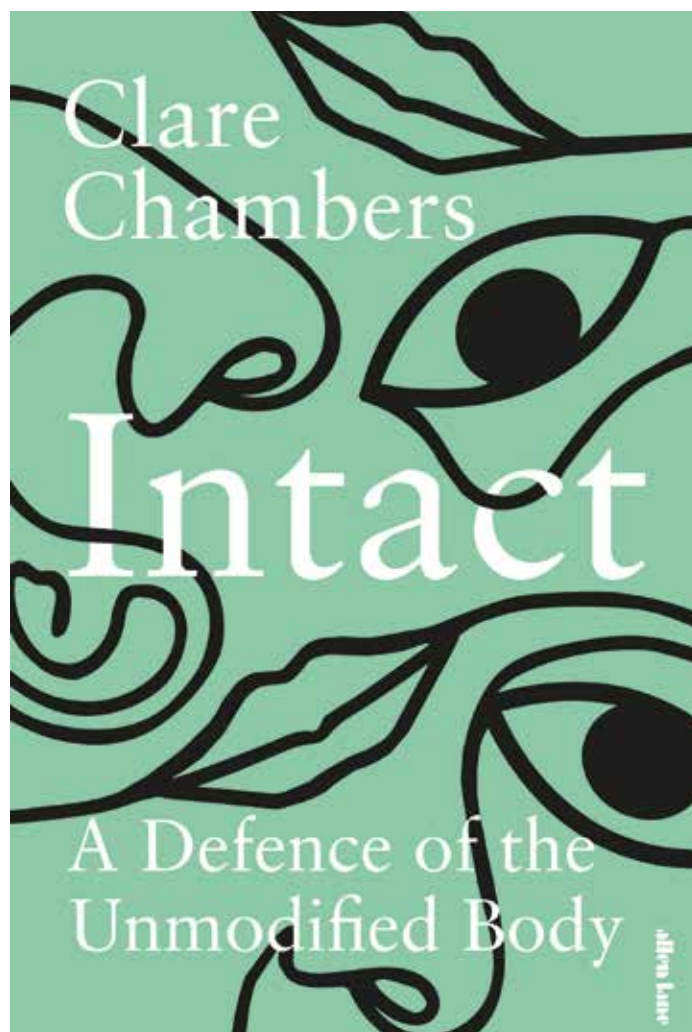
The unmodified body, as I use the term, is a political principle: it's *a body that is allowed to be good enough, just as it is*. Defending the unmodified body doesn't mean criticising all practices of modification. It means defending the idea that our bodies can be good enough. This is simple, but radical. It's a political principle because it resists the overwhelming social pressures that operate in the service of existing structures of power and inequality, such as sex, gender, race, class, disability, and age.

In *Intact* I analyse three concepts which are close to the idea of the unmodified body but are full of inconsistencies and complexity. They are the *natural* body, the *normal* body, and the *whole* body.

The idea of naturalness is very often applied to the body in a way that implies that it is good to be natural. We talk about 'natural health' but not 'natural disease'. But the way we use the idea of nature is inconsistent, and it is value-laden. Nature is a 'frenemy'—sometimes friend, sometimes enemy. Sometimes the concept of nature is used in the service of progress and liberation. In *Intact* I discuss the examples of natural hair (Afro-textured hair that has not been straightened) and the role of nature in ecofeminism. But, at other times, the concept of nature is used in the service of oppression or maintaining dominant values. Feminists have warned of the dangers of the concept of nature for centuries.

The *normal* body is also an idea that relies on value judgments, even when it is purportedly used in a neutral way. Ideas of normality are frequently deployed in the context of health care, as when the NHS offers plastic and reconstructive surgery to create what it calls a 'normal' appearance, but not cosmetic surgery understood as an enhancement. But what is a normal body? Do we mean a body that is like other bodies, or a body that is normal for us? The two can come apart quite significantly, as they often do in the case of disability. In *Intact* I argue that normality should be understood as what is normal for us.

Finally, consider the idea of the *whole* body and bodily integrity. Bodily integrity is a defensive principle, one that emphasises the value of leaving the body as it is. In the final



Part of *Intact* I analyse this concept in detail, considering what procedures and interventions should be permitted on children. There are many ways of fleshing out the idea of bodily integrity, such as autonomy, best interests, reversibility, or hypothetical consent. But I show that these understandings have difficulty dealing with complex cases, and it's the complex cases we need help with.

My aim is to identify how and why these arguments become difficult. I want to encourage a conversation about why it is so hard for our bodies to be good enough, just as they are. When everyone feels bad about their bodies, it's not the bodies that are the real problem. It's the social context. It's time to say *STOP*—not to all practices of body modification, but to a culture of pressure and shame.

Intact: A Defence of the Unmodified Body by Clare Chambers is published by Allen Lane and available now in print, ebook, and audiobook.

Clare Chambers is Professor of Political Philosophy in the Faculty.

Evidential Decision Theory

Arif Ahmed

We all make dozens, maybe hundreds of decisions per day. In view of all this practice it is alarming what a haphazard business it is. Many of us—even many philosophers—are irrational more often than any of us would admit.

Most people would drive 15 minutes to save \$5 on a \$15 jacket but not to save \$5 on a \$125 calculator. A recent US President based vital decisions on the advice of an astrologer. The Naskapi of Labrador decided where to hunt by the cracks and spots that appeared when they held caribou bones over fire. Rome was supposedly founded on the Palatine Hill because of how many birds one of its founders could see from there.

You'd probably call these choices 'irrational': but are they? And what is irrationality: what are we saying about a choice, or the person who makes it, when we call it or them 'irrational'? And after all, what makes irrationality so bad? Thanks to a generous grant from the Effective Altruism Foundation, I was able to spend all the academic year 2019-20 thinking, and the second half of it writing, about these questions.

The result—what we nowadays call the 'output'—was several articles and a short book setting out what rationality is and why it matters (according to me). I defend R. C. Jeffrey's *Evidential Decision Theory*, that being the title of the book. A choice, for Jeffrey, is rational when auspicious given your aims: do what you most want to *learn* you will do. If learning that you will bet on Tiger Roll for the Cheltenham Gold Cup is a good sign that you are about to get rich, then do it; if not, don't.

Put like that the theory looks simple and obvious. In truth it is neither. It stops being simple when you add the mathematical detail necessary for most applications. And it stops even *looking* obvious when you compare it to the *Causal* Decision Theory that most philosophers prefer, according to which you shouldn't do what you want to *learn* but rather what you think will *cause* or *bring about* what you want. The theories differ because a choice can be good news without causing good things. Voting at a large election won't *cause* the result you want but it might be symptomatic of a turnout that does. Evidential Decision Theory says vote; Causal Decision Theory says not.

One of the book's novelties was to unify *randomising* phenomena into a single rationalising framework. Consider augury and haruspicy—making decisions by counting birds or reading entrails. How *could* they be rational? The anthropologist O. K. Moore thought they make sense if you are *trying to be unpredictable*, e.g. to overcome natural biases in your choice of hunting grounds, biases that your prey might exploit. *Evidential Decision Theory* showed that what justifies those antique practices is also what justifies a decidedly contemporary one: randomisation in clinical trials.

In both cases this is because our choices not only *are* but *have* causes, so side-effects of their causes can create correlations (e.g. between characteristics of the patient and whether they get the placebo) that randomisation can eliminate. By contrast, the causal approach can't explain either: according to it, we evaluate choices if they were completely undetermined by anything, like the unmoved mover of metaphysical legend.

These arguments also support randomising procedures in other areas where bias might intrude, for instance by introducing a lottery element to university admissions. As you might imagine, and as experience has now taught me, it will take more than

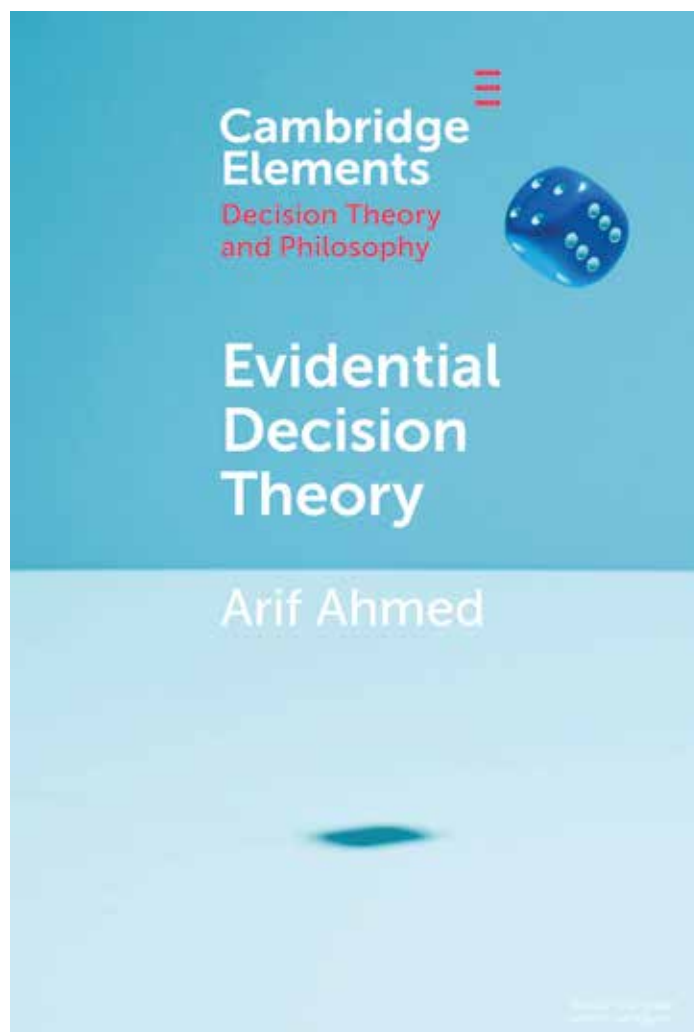


Image courtesy of Cambridge University Press

one philosophical argument (or fifteen) to persuade my University colleagues about *that*.

A second application was in ethics: here, my 'output' was joint work with MIT colleague Jack Spencer. We showed that Evidential Decision Theory makes morality a matter of choice but not judgment: there *are* no objectively true or false propositions about what might be better than what, what you ought to do, how to be good, etc.

That conclusion is disturbing but also liberating. Maybe (as Foucault might say) the moral fashions of an age *don't* reflect any progress or insight but only its metaphysical apparatus of control. Evidential Decision Theory casts a new light on these ideas. For similar reasons it creates a novel analytical expansion of James Buchanan's thesis, central to my own political philosophy, that people might be wholly rational and yet differ over ends, for themselves, for others and for society as a whole.

Evidential Decision Theory is published by Cambridge University Press and available now in print and ebook.

Arif Ahmed is Professor of Philosophy in the Faculty.

Ethics in the Time of COVID-19

Richard Holton

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic brought a set of radically new issues to the NHS. Case numbers were rising; time was short; little was known about the disease. So, of necessity, much of the responsibility for responding to COVID-19 devolved down to the local level. Individual hospitals, groups of clinicians, GP surgeries: everyone was working to come up with solutions that would work for the particular problems that they faced.

But when decisions are made quickly, outside the guidelines that have evolved over time, and when they matter so much, the responsibility falling on those involved can weigh very heavily. So the Cambridge and Peterborough NHS Group decided to institute a COVID-19 Ethics Committee. The idea was not to provide a regulator, but a body to give advice: one to which people wrestling with a difficult problem could turn for help in thinking through the ethical issues.

I was asked to join. I was the only full-time philosopher there. Others included Zoë Fritz, an acute-care doctor and medical ethicist with whom I had previously written some pieces on trust and medicine; Julian Huppert, the former Cambridge MP, who was chair; and Kathy Liddell from the Cambridge Centre for Law Medicine and Life Sciences. But overwhelmingly the membership was from the NHS: clinicians and administrators.

Joining the committee was an eye-opening experience. I was struck by the commitment and ingenuity of the NHS staff, and equally by the difficulty of the task they faced. It is hard from the outside to understand just how complex an organisation like the NHS is; and hard to realise how decisions made in one area ramify across so many. When we started the big ethical question that was worrying everyone was one about resource allocation: who would get access to the ventilators if they ran out? Thankfully we never had to answer that question, because, though it came horribly close, the NHS never did run out. But a host of less dramatic questions came flooding in. How to treat a patient with dementia who doesn't understand that they may be infecting others with COVID-19? How should you address the inequalities that result from a switch to online care when some of the population lack the resources or the skills to make that switch? How do you balance the need to prevent the spread of infection with the need for patients to see those who are dear to them?

As the pandemic has progressed some of these immediate concerns have lessened; and where they haven't, rules are in place to handle them. The committee, however, is still going, with its concerns now broadened to cover ethical issues across the Cambridge and Peterborough NHS Group. Many of those, especially around equality of health care, very marked in an area like ours, were there long before the pandemic. The issue now is ensuring that the wake of the pandemic doesn't make them much worse.

What can a philosopher bring to all this? It is almost never a case of simply outlining what a given moral theory would recommend. Sometimes you realise that people are moving towards a familiar philosophical distinction—that between doing something, and allowing it to happen, say, or between maximising average welfare or the welfare of the worst off. In these cases, it can be helpful to bring some established

philosophical thought to bear. But most of the time it is just a case of listening to complex discussions between people who have understood these issues much better than you, and doing the kind of work that philosophers are trained to do: making some clarifications, simplifying some issues, pointing out an unnoticed tension. Philosopher in the role of under-labourer.

I have also found the experience immensely helpful to the work on trust in medicine that I've been doing with Zoë Fritz. Medical interactions are marked by asymmetries of knowledge and power; trust is essential. We are lucky in the UK that there is a high degree of institutional trust in the NHS. We saw much less of the suspicion of medical authorities that arose in other countries. How does the trust play out at the individual level? Trust is especially needed when there is uncertainty, and the pandemic brought plenty of that. Zoë and I are interested in the ways that trust enables clinicians to take responsibility for the uncertainty. We saw plenty of that too during the pandemic. It will take us a while to process all that happened.

Richard Holton is Professor of Philosophy in the Faculty.

