

PodMag May2017

Karen Foley:

Hi and welcome to the PodMag, the audio news magazine from the Faculty of Arts & Social Science at the Open University.

I'm Karen Foley and in this May edition we focus on the new MA in Philosophy, a two year taught programme. I talked to three of the module team about what they have produced and about their own work also.

First I spoke to Carolyn Price. Carolyn is working on a section at the beginning of the second year which is about emotion.

Carolyn I wouldn't expect philosophers to be talking about the subject of emotion. So why have you decided that this is an important area to include in the Masters programme?

Carolyn Price:

Well emotion has been a very hot topic in philosophy for the last 15 years or so. And that's quite simply because it plays such an important role in explaining why we think act as we do and also in giving value and meaning to our lives.

Karen Foley:

It's been an area that's been of keen interest to psychologists also. So what would say a philosophical perspective can add to this very interdisciplinary discussion?

Carolyn Price:

Well it certainly is interdisciplinary. Philosophers often draw on psychology in talking about emotion. But I think I'd say that philosophers are interested in rather more general questions than psychologists are. So philosophers are particularly interested in questions about what emotions are and what role they play in our lives.

Karen Foley:

And how are you tackling this very, very broad area. I mean what are you actually including in the Masters in terms of emotion?

Carolyn Price:

Well we're going to look at a particular theory of emotion which is called the perceptual model. And philosophers who like that theory think that emotions are importantly similar to perceptual states like seeing something as red or hearing something as noisy. And we're going to be looking at that model through the lens of three different debates in the philosophy of emotion.

Karen Foley:

So what are those three debates?

Carolyn Price:

Well the first one focuses on cases where emotion and belief come in to conflict. So to give an example of that I'm absolutely terrified of roller coasters but I don't believe that they're as dangerous as my fear makes them out to be. So that's a case in which my emotion, my fear and my belief are in conflict with each other. And theorists who like the

perceptual model think that it gives a very good account of those cases whereas their opponents aren't so sure.

Karen Foley:

That links very nicely with your next of these big debates which is all about emotions and knowledge. Tell us about that?

Carolyn Price:

Well again that's a debate in which perceptual theorists think that we can make a comparison between emotion and perception. So when we see and hear things that's one of the ways in which we get information about the world and our perceptions provide a basis or provide grounds for our beliefs.

And perceptual theorists think that it's just the same with emotion. Emotions gives us information about the kinds of things that are valuable to us and that matter to us in our lives. But there are some people who think that that actually doesn't give a very good account of the way in which emotion gives us knowledge and understanding and offers some different accounts.

And that's an interesting topic at the moment because there's been quite a lot of debate in the public world about the way in which, for example, journalists use very emotive images to inform us about the world. Some people think that opens our eyes to the reality of the situation. But other people think it doesn't do that, it actually clouds our judgement. So this debate in the philosophy of emotion bears quite directly on that discussion.

Karen Foley:

And what's the third and final area that you're covering?

Carolyn Price:

Well that's about the relationship between emotion and action. And again we're going to be looking at cases where emotion and belief come in to conflict. And we're going to be asking whether sometimes emotions can actually give us better reasons to act than our beliefs do. So there are some cases where emotions seem to get things right and our beliefs actually get them wrong. And a question there is that in those cases when we act on emotion are we acting rationally because we're doing the right thing or are we actually still acting irrationally because we're not acting in accordance with our beliefs.

Karen Foley:

So can you give us an example of when that might happen?

Carolyn Price:

Well the example philosophers tend to talk about is a case from Mark Twain's book Huckleberry Finn and in that novel Mark Twain tells a story of Huck Finn who's a destitute boy growing up along the Mississippi. And Huck runs away with his friend who's an escaped slave called Jim. At one point Huck meets with some slave hunters and he's torn because his beliefs tell him that he ought to turn Jim in. But he can't bring himself to do that because he loves Jim so much.

So it seems clear to us now that Huck is doing the right thing when he doesn't turn Jim in. So in that case his emotion is getting him to do the right thing and his reason is pointing

him in the wrong direction. But that leaves a question, how we want to describe what's going on here. Do we want to say that his action is rational in not turning Jim in? Is his emotion actually giving him a better reason to act than his belief does? Or is there still something irrational in what he does because he doesn't act on what his belief is telling him he ought to do.

Karen Foley:

It sounds absolutely fascinating. I can see there's some really nichey debates within this area. And I imagine the MA will be incredibly popular. But tell us in addition to all the work you're doing in this area what's next for you?

Carolyn Price:

Well the work I've been doing on the MA draws on my research on emotion which I've been working on for quite a few years now. And at the moment I'm looking at a particular emotion which is the emotion of regret. And I'm interested in that emotion because it's a painful emotion. And it's also an emotion that's about the past. And that raises the question what role regret might play in our lives and why it might be important to us.

Karen Foley:

So if I was to ask you what your favourite emotion is would you say it is one of those more painful ones?

Carolyn Price:

Well if I was going to give you a favourite emotion I think it would have to be love. But yes, I think that the emotion I find most interesting from a philosophical point of view is a painful one and that's grief.

Karen Foley:

Carolyn Price thank you so much for talking me today about this. It's really interesting to get an update about the MA in Philosophy and also on your own personal work. Thank you.

Carolyn Price:

Thank you Karen.

Karen Foley:

Jon Pike then told me what his contribution was.

Jon can you tell us about the work that you're involved with in terms of developing this Masters course.

Jon Pike:

I've written a section on global justice. And very roughly to get the idea of that it's the question of the obligations that we in the global rich countries might have to the global poor, what the nature and extent of those obligations might be. So when you're watching Comic Relief maybe you think there's an obligation to give them some money. There's a question how much, and that's an ethically difficult question. And that's really the starting point for, I think, for non-global justice.

Karen Foley:

And in your own work you're developing a new theory in terms of the philosophy of sport but it's very different from the main two ideas around at the moment. So can you tell us briefly what it is?

Jon Pike:

OK. My theory is called local essentialism and it's opposed to two theories in the philosophy of sport, formalism and what you might call a spirit of sport idea. And it's about the nature of what's right and wrong in sporting behaviour. Formalism says that sports are constituted by their rules. Sport explanations, say that sports are governed by a capital 'S' Spirit of sport. I don't like either of those approaches. And what I want to argue is that particular sports have particular actions that provide them with their essential nature.

So we know that rowing is rowing whether it's done in a boat or on a rowing machine because the same sort of action is the constitutive core of the sport. Likewise for running, for cycling, for free-style swimming, we don't need a huge amount of rules because it's the body that dictates the action.

Karen Foley:

And of course for those sorts of sports you've mentioned one could see how it would be easy to isolate those actions. But some sports are a lot more complex. I'm thinking about things like sailing, for example.

Jon Pike:

Yes. Well in that case the actions that sailors undertake might look like pulling a rope or turning a wheel but in fact the constitutive actions there are things that have particular names from the particular sport so they might be jibing or tacking or running before the wind. So the action is, if you like, an action of the sailor and the boat. And it's the specific thing that is done in sailing rather than pulling a rope which is a generic action it would be the overall movement.

But, you're right, those sorts of examples are tough for my theory.

Karen Foley:

So you're really I guess thinking about what the essence is of this particular sport and you're using that as an alternative way to I guess establish what's right or wrong in opposition to the other ways of looking at things which would be very rules based or spirit of sport based. Why do you feel it is relevant to have this alternative perspective and when might it be useful to apply such a way of thinking?

Jon Pike:

Well I think there's a strong likelihood that there'll be an innovation in open water swimming which is the use of satellite navigation through swimming goggles. So part of open water swimming is swim in a straight line through a choppy sea which means you need to stick your head up and see where the buoys are that you have to swim around. Now it would be great if for useless swimmers like me you could get rid of part of the task by having some sort of satellite navigation device that keeps you swimming in a straight line and tells you when you're going vastly south from the buoy. But my theory tells us that part of the essence of open water swimming is the ability to sight and then we

are not doing the same thing when we're doing that with satellite information. So my theory tells us that we should prohibit these goggles.

Formalism can't tell us that because we haven't got the technology and we haven't got the rules yet. But my theory tells us that this technology changes the nature of the sport in an essential way and you need that category of the essential nature of a particular sport to do that.

Karen Foley:

Now being a philosopher I imagine that you're spending a lot of time thinking about things and reading around things. But how else are you developing your theory and is there a sense of application in terms of ways that you're working within the sports field?

Jon Pike:

Yes. Well there is and although I spend a lot of time sitting and reading and thinking and writing I coach some athletes. I'm a former athlete myself. And that keeps me a bit grounded. I'm also talking to some people in the International Paralympic Committee based over in Bonn about possible ways in which my theory might fit with categorisation of para athletes into classes for competition. And also the way in which we conceive of Paralympics more generally.

So there was a big stamash about Oscar Pistorius competing in the Olympics. My theory allows us to say things like, well he's doing something different. He's blading rather than running but given that we have two different sports here we should have two sets of rules, two sets of competition and so on. And I can say that because I can make quite clear the distinction between the two basic actions involved in these two activities.

So it gives me some results. So I'm talking to some institutions, talking to some athletes but it is mostly thinking and writing and reading.

Karen Foley:

Excellent. Thank you so much Jon for filling us in on all of that. And it sounds like it's going to have some real use as well.

Jon Pike:

I hope so.

Karen Foley:

Thank you.

Sophie-Grace Chappell focused on Plato's Meno.

Sophie-Grace you're also working on contributions to the MA in Philosophy and you're focusing on Plato's Meno. What is this all about?

Sophie-Grace Chappell:

Well I'm what I call a text maniac. I think it's very important when you're studying philosophy and some of the other humanities too to focus on the classic texts. And within the reading limit constraints of the MA that can be quite hard to do. But Plato's Meno is very obliging because it's only 15,000 words. And it's a great Platonic text where you're

presented with Plato presenting Socrates to us, so you've got two of the most interesting philosophers in the history of philosophy right there.

And in 15,000 words you get this amazingly rich and fruitful discussion of virtue and knowledge and whether virtue can be taught. That's a central question of Plato's *Meno*. And it's a question a bit like our modern question of nature or nurture. Are people born the way they are and you can't change them or can people be made better people by the way you educate them. And of course I wouldn't be in education if I didn't think you can make people better by the way you educate them.

But it's an absolutely gripping dialogue. So as soon as I spotted that it was only 15,000 words long and could easily fit in to the MA course I really wanted to do it.

Karen Foley:

And it's very applicable today as well when we look at education.

Sophie-Grace Chappell:

Yes, absolutely. Because our society is full of people who are convinced that you can make people better by the way you train them, the way you educate them and sometimes the way you drill them we have, you know, ideas like Pavlovian training. We have the idea that you can just get stimulus response patterns set up, that kind of behaviourist thing.

And Plato comes at it from a different point of view. He doesn't focus on the outward behaviour, he focuses on the inner state. And he says unless you are a virtuous person within all of this, you know, training of behaviour is no good, what we want is people to be virtuous. But what does that mean? What is it for someone to be inwardly virtuous? For Plato it's a matter of them having knowledge or wisdom.

And so Plato concludes in the *Meno* or Socrates concludes, one always has to be careful about phrases like Plato concludes, but Socrates concludes in the *Meno* that virtue is something that can be taught provided it's knowledge. And then he goes on to ask, well is virtue knowledge. And the problem with that he thinks, is that Socrates can't see anyone who he thinks looks like a real teacher of virtue. He sees lots of people who claim to be teachers of virtue but Socrates suspects that they're all charlatans, they're all snake oil salesmen. Socrates is very suspicious of a group called the Sophists who come up with sophistries, that's where the word comes from. And he thinks that they are not teaching real virtue.

So he says well if we can't find any real teachers of virtue then may be virtue can't be taught. And if virtue can't be taught then there's the answer to your question *Meno*.

Karen Foley:

Now what's interesting here is that whilst, you know, many students will be studying primary texts and many of those in translation. You have translated this yourself. Why did you choose to do that and what makes that a better experience for students?

Sophie-Grace Chappell:

Well there are three reasons and the first of them are very simple and very practical. The first is just to save students the expense of buying their own translation of the *Meno*. And

the second is that if they were buying a translation of the Meno they'd find there are lots of different ones that they can buy. And because we don't expect our students to have any Greek themselves for this course it's confusing if you find that different people translate the same thing in different ways.

So I put together a translation which I wrote which is new. And here's another reason why I did it because it was a ball. It was absolutely great fun translating the Meno. It really engages your attention with the text. And I produced a text which I think is readable and fun and which students can focus on without worrying about other possible translations. They just focus on that and that gives them the focus for the course.

Karen Foley:

Now you spoke about some of the themes that were coming through in the Meno and one of those is about being morally educated by our experiences. Now you're doing work on epiphanies and the extent in which they can change and educate us. Can you tell us what you're doing?

Sophie-Grace Chappell:

Well I'm thinking about experiences where something is revealed to us. That's what epiphany means. It's a Greek word and it's a Greek idea. And amongst the Ancient Greeks there certainly were people who claimed this kind of epiphanic experience. There's a famous passage in another dialogue by Plato called 'The Symposium' where Socrates is supposed to be going to a dinner party but he stops on the way because he's got a train of thought. And Socrates understands, and I think this is absolutely right, three cheers for Socrates about this, Socrates understands that there is nothing more important than concentrating on what you're thinking about and completing your train of thought. Our world is so full of distractions. Socrates just focuses absolutely on what he is thinking about, stops dead where he is. Doesn't care if people are laughing at him because he's stuck still like a statue in the porch when he's supposed to be going in to the party. He just has his thoughts and maybe something was being revealed to him. Maybe something was coming clear for him.

That's what epiphanies are. They're moments of sudden revelation. And one thing they reveal to us I think is value. They reveal beauty and goodness in the world. And when that happens, when we have that kind of revelation then I think we are being morally educated. We're learning to see something we didn't see before.

Karen Foley:

So you're taking a lot of these texts from a range of sources and looking at both the absence and presence of epiphanies?

Sophie-Grace Chappell:

Yeah. And I'm not just focusing on Ancient Greek texts I should say. I think one of the most stunning sources of epiphanies that I know of in the modern world is David Attenborough's nature programmes.

So you have an underwater camera held by a diver and the scuba diver is tracking a hump back whale 40 feet below the surface of the sea. And some of the visions of life on earth that you get in those series are absolutely epiphanic. Absolutely stunningly beautiful. And they teach us in ways we never understood before just how valuable the world out there is and how much we should treasure it. How much we should care about it.

Karen Foley:

Sophie-Grace thank you for filling us in on all of that.

Sophie-Grace Chappell:

Thank you.

Karen Foley:

That's all we have time for in this edition. For more information about the MA in Philosophy that starts in the autumn you can find out more by visiting 'Study at the OU'. You can also interact with some of the module team live online on 16th May at 4.35 in the afternoon at the FASS showcase where we're highlighting each of the new modules from the faculty. And you can find out more about that by visiting the Student Hub Live website.

Bye for now and thanks for listening.

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