



The
University
Of
Sheffield.

University of Sheffield Philosophy Alumni Newsletter

Hello to all our alumni,

My name is Yonatan Shemmer and I am the new Alumni Officer of the philosophy department. In this newsletter you will find some information about life in the department during the recent months: research news from the faculty, extracurricular activities of our undergrads and success stories of our grad students in the job market.

We would like to continue and extend contact with our alumni. We hope to see those of you who live nearby at the fundraiser for our non-profit 'Philosophy in the City' project (see details below) and are planning to announce another alumni philosophy evening soon.

We welcome written pieces and images about yourselves and your families for future alumni newsletters. And as always, we'd like your input regarding our alumni activities. You can contact me at y.shemmer@sheffield.ac.uk.

I wish you all a sunny spring and hope to hear from you soon.

Yours,

Yonatan

Summer 2011 2nd Newsletter

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Philosophy Department at Victoria Street

Philosophy Alumni Newsletter

A view from the 'top' – as I set off down Rob Hopkins

This is the last alumni newsletter before, at the end of August, I reach the end of my term as Head of Department. This seems a good moment to reflect on the last three years, which have been more than usually eventful.

Early on in my tenure, I was in the lucky position of being able to pass on to colleagues and the wider world the news of the Department's great success in the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise. Overall, the quality of our research was rated highly enough to put us third equal among philosophy departments in the country, behind only University College London and St. Andrews. I take no credit for this – the excellent research was done by all of us, and the credit for presenting it so as to make this manifest largely due to my predecessor, Bob Stern.



Rob Hopkins-
Current Head of Department

Soon after those sunlit moments, however, the weather took a turn very much for the worse. The worldwide economic crisis first led to radical reductions in the funding Universities received from government, and then, after the election of the Conservative-Liberal coalition, to the most drastic changes in funding for undergraduate study in decades. The Department has, I am very glad to say, already ridden out the first crisis. Although the University launched a scheme of voluntary severance, not a single Sheffield philosopher showed any interest in taking up the offer. Happy families may all, as Tolstoy says, be happy in the same way, but at least no one wants to leave them, whatever the terms offered to encourage their departure.

The effects of the second major change have yet to be seen. Certainly, the coming years offer us considerable challenges. We will have to work harder than ever to persuade prospective students that studying philosophy here at Sheffield is worth the candle – now the rather large candle of £9000 of debt for every year of study. However, I remain optimistic that, as a group of academics, postgraduates, undergraduates and alumni, we can rise to this task. Our shared sense of purpose, our collective passion for the subject, and the patent, if sometimes strikingly individual, humanity with which each and every one of us pursue our common goal, of mastering the complexities of philosophical problems, leave me in little doubt that, with the right spirit, we can make as least as much of the coming years as we have of the past ones.

I am sure that as she faces these challenges my successor as Head, Jenny Saul, will feel every bit as lucky as I do in having such wonderful students and colleagues with which to take them on. I certainly found being Head far less stressful than I'd feared. However difficult the challenges one is trying to deal with, there's nothing like facing them with decent, likeable and able people to help one feel that the obstacles can be met, and that meeting them might even be fun.

My experience in the job market

Andrew Howat



Andrew Howat

Getting a job as a philosopher is the hardest single thing I've ever done in my life. If you don't count the five years of post-graduate study, it's taken me three and a half years from thesis submission to permanent post. I can honestly say that it's been incredibly rewarding, albeit in much the same way that emerging alive and intact from a particularly extreme roller-coaster is rewarding. It was often thrilling, but I'm not sure I'd ever want to do it again.

What makes it so difficult? The number one thing you need to do to succeed as an academic is research - that is, to write papers and to get them published in the best journals. The key is to find someone who wants to pay you to do this, which is about as easy as it sounds (i.e. not at all). The lucky few get post-doctoral posts/grants. The rest must find a job to keep them alive while they research.

Working that job will, unfortunately, take time and energy away from your research. It's best for the CV if you are teaching philosophy, yet ironically most teaching jobs come with low pay and very heavy workloads (taking even more time and energy). Thus, what's best for your CV is also what's worst for your CV. And the irony doesn't stop there - the low pay and long hours also make it very difficult to attend conferences (you can't afford it and haven't got time anyway). Yet giving papers at such events is vitally important for networking and is by far the quickest and best way to get a paper into publishable shape. And yes, it's also great for your CV.

All of this is unfortunately a strong incentive for temporary lecturers to do one of several unpleasant and probably ill-advised things when they first emerge from their PhDs: to spend as little time on teaching prep, marking, etc. as possible (thus doing a disservice to one's students, oneself and one's employer); to spend enough time on one's job to do it well (thereby indefinitely delaying one's research and chance at a more permanent job); or give up and do something else because you are understandably losing your mind.

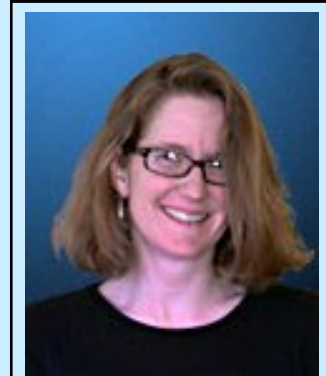
I chose option (2), and by a combination of bloody-mindedness, not a little good fortune, and immense support and encouragement from my partner, colleagues and supervisors at Sheffield, eventually achieved my goal of a permanent job. Granted, I had to travel 5,000 miles to find that job, and the process of getting it was even more torturous than the one I've just described. Nevertheless I consider myself incredibly fortunate. Which inevitably raises the question: why?

Why would any sane person want to put themselves through such an ordeal? Well, it comes down to this: being a philosopher is just incredibly good fun. You spend your days feeding the hungry minds of enthusiastic young people, discussing deep and fascinating ideas with extraordinarily intelligent and talented colleagues, and thinking about the hardest and most profound problems in human history. Does this make it worthwhile? On a personal level, absolutely.

In the grand scheme of things? I think the great metaphysician and feminist Sally Haslanger summed it up perfectly: "Given the amount of suffering and injustice in the world, I flip-flop between thinking that doing philosophy is a complete luxury and that it is an absolute necessity. The idea that it is something in between strikes me as a dodge. So I do it in the hope that it is a contribution, and with the fear that I'm just being self-indulgent. I suppose these are the moral risks life is made of."

Jennifer Saul's new research project on implicit bias

Over the last decade, a large psychological literature has developed on implicit biases. There is by now substantial empirical support for the claim that most people— even those who explicitly and sincerely avow egalitarian views – hold what have been described as implicit biases against such groups as blacks, women, gay people, and so on. (This is true even of members of the target group.) These biases are manifested in, for example, association tasks asking subjects to pair positive and negative adjectives with black or white faces: most are much speedier to match black faces with negative adjectives than with positive ones. They are also, it has been argued, manifested in behaviour: studies have shown that those with anti-black implicit biases are less friendly to black experimenters and more likely to classify an ambiguous object in a black persons hand as a gun while classifying it as harmless in a white persons hand.



Jennifer Saul

Philosophers have, with a few notable exceptions, paid little attention to this literature. But there is much that should interest philosophers, and much philosophical work to be done. Doing this work properly requires collaboration between philosophers of mind and psychology, ethicists, political philosophers, and philosophers working on gender and race. It also requires input from philosophically-minded psychologists. In addition, some of the issues considered have significant consequences for equality policy and are of interest to equality professionals and campaigners. The project for which I've just received funding will allow me to bring people together from all these groups, to hopefully make some progress on these important issues.

If you'd like to learn more about implicit biases, you might try taking one of the tests here:

<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo/>.

Recent Success in the Job Market

Our postgraduates have been particularly successful on the job market recently.

- Drew Howat (who got his PhD in Sheffield in 2009) has accepted a tenure-track position at the University of California, Fullerton.
- Suilin Lavelle (PhD Sheffield) has been offered a Teaching Fellowship in Mind and Embodied Cognition in the Department of Philosophy, University of Edinburgh.
- Jessica Leech (joint PhD Sheffield/ Geneva) has been offered a Junior Research Fellowship at King's College Cambridge.
- Julien Murzi (who finished his PhD last summer) has been offered a permanent lectureship at Kent.
- Tatjana von Solodkoff (PhD Sheffield) has been awarded the Jacobsen Fellowship in Speculative Metaphysics for the academic year 2010/11.

Philosophy Alumni Newsletter

Philosophy in the City at the Engaging Philosophy Conference, Mount Holyoke, USA

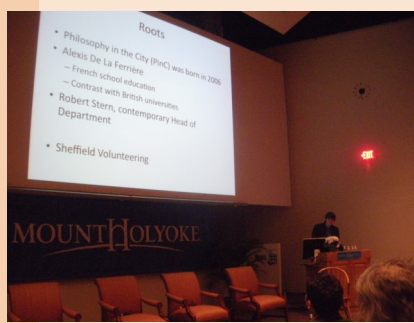
The Philosophy Department's student-run outreach programme, Philosophy in the City (PinC), was invited to a conference in the USA on the 25th -26th March. The conference in Massachusetts was addressing how philosophy can and should engage with communities. It was held in Mount Holyoke, whose staff and students were very hospitable.

On the first day, celebrity philosophers John Perry and Ken Taylor recorded their *Philosophy Talk* radio show with the conferees as a live audience. Louise Antony appeared as a guest for the extended discussion and Q&A on the merits of atheism.

On the second day papers were presented by Linda Alcoff and Sally Haslanger. These addressed public intellectualism and philosophy's role in mass movements. Three philosophers also presented projects they run where philosophy was applied in communities. One such project involved work in high-security prisons and using philosophy as a form of therapy.

This was followed by a student panel. This included Ben Arscott of the University of Sheffield's PinC. In his presentation Ben explained how student volunteers had been going into schools to teach parts of the A-level syllabus and mentor struggling pupils. He also described PinC's work in primary schools and how it is attempting to create a broader philosophical network in Sheffield. The reception to this talk and the student panel in general was highly positive. The other student panellists described their activities one of which was also a voluntary project. There was a fairly broadly held consensus that the student panel was the highlight of the conference. PinC's delegation, including third years Holly MacGregor and Cameron Bisset as well as Ben, was the only one from outside the USA.

PinC has gained several useful contacts from the conference. It also wants to apply several of the activities being practised in the US to Sheffield. For example PinC will commence a new partnership with a local homeless refuge next week. PinC is also looking into doing something with prisoners or youth offenders in the future as a direct consequence of experiences shared at Holyoke.



Philosophy Alumni Newsletter

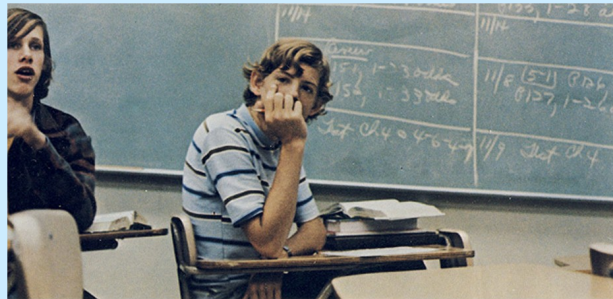
Philosophy in the City fundraiser

The department's student-run outreach programme, Philosophy in the City, is organising an event for staff, alumni and students on Wednesday 11th May.

Philosophy in the City is an outreach programme led by student volunteers from the philosophy department at the University of Sheffield. At the heart of the project lies a dual mission. On one level, we aim to stimulate young minds by introducing philosophy to pupils who would not normally have the opportunity to engage in philosophical discussion. On another level, we seek to provide academic support – in the form of mentoring or tutoring – to pupils from underprivileged backgrounds with the further goal in mind of helping them gain access to higher education.

The event will run from 6:00pm until late but feel free to arrive at any point. We'll be meeting at the University Arms pub where we have booked the upstairs space. The format will be casual drinks but there will also be some fun philosophy. Local teachers involved in philosophy, R.E. and Critical Thinking will also be invited so hopefully it will be a great opportunity for the local philosophical community to get together.

There will also be a light-hearted fundraiser for the outreach project. This will involve several postgraduate students trying to defend mock theses in what we're probably anachronistically referring to as a 'Medieval Viva'. We'll have a range of theses from metaphysics to political philosophy for PhD students to defend. Basically, you're invited to refute their thesis by questioning them.



For further information email Ben (President of PinC) at hia08ba@sheffield.ac.uk. The University Arms is just around the corner from the Information Commons (on the Upper Hanover Way-Broad Lane-Brook Hill roundabout).

Keeping in Touch

We've created a **Sheffield Philosophy Alumni** page on Facebook and hope as many people as possible will join in order to keep in touch with departmental goings-on and to reconnect with fellow graduates <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Sheffield-Philosophy-Alumni/109862295723230>

We also have a special Alumni page on our Departmental website <http://www.shef.ac.uk/philosophy/alumni>

You can download a copy of our Departmental Timeline from the Alumni page, which gives details of the fifty or more people who have worked to build the Sheffield philosophy over the past century. You can also access other Departmental web pages from the alumni page, and find, amongst other things, information current members of staff and news from the Department.

Feedback and Suggestions

We would very much welcome feedback about this newsletter, and suggestions of items for inclusion in future editions. Please send these to our dedicated alumni email address philosophy-alumni@sheffield.ac.uk or to our alumni officer Yonatan Shemmer (y.shemmer@sheffield.ac.uk)

The production of this newsletter is due to:
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