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Winter News

Knowles, Charlotte

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Winter News

“All I want for Christmas is a glimpse of the preserved head of the founder of utilitarianism” is a refrain we’ve probably all heard countless times before from various, friends, relatives and acquaintances. Well now little Hester or little Ivy’s wish can come true, as Jeremy Bentham’s head is displayed at the Octagon Gallery, Wilkins Building, at University College London until February 2018. Bentham’s body has been on display at UCL since his death in 1832. However, the cadaver sports a wax head – although featuring some of Bentham’s own hair – instead of his own mummified head due to the “technically successful”, but aesthetically grotesque results of the mummification process, with the head ultimately being judged “too distasteful” to be put on show. Instead, the real head has been kept in a safe and taken out once a year “to check that skin and hair are not falling off”, *The Daily Nous* reported. Bentham wanted his body preserved and displayed so that “he could be wheeled out at parties if his friends were missing him” and in an effort “to encourage others to donate their bodies to medical science, believing that individuals should make themselves as useful as possible, both in life and death”, according to *The Telegraph*.

Although a noble and selfless goal I’m sure you’ll agree, his error perhaps lay in getting his friend, Thomas Southwood Smith, a trained physician – but only a casual mumifier – to carry out the process, leading to the inexpertly rendered head with its tightly stretched skin and incongruous piercing blue eyes. Nevertheless, this body

shaming did not stop Bentham putting in an appearance at a meeting of UCL’s college council in 2013, where he was listed as “present but not voting”.

The Daily Nous also reported that scientists are taking advantage of the head’s holiday from its safe to sample Bentham’s DNA and test the hypothesis of researchers Philip Lucas and Anne Sheeran that Bentham had Asperger’s syndrome. Lucas and Sheeran drew their conclusions from certain distinctive character traits reported in biographies of Bentham, including his “having few companions his own age” and being “morbidly sensitive”. *The Telegraph* reported that “recent studies have suggested that autism is around 82 per cent heritable and there are specific regions in the genetic code linked to traits”, and so by sampling his DNA scientists will seek to test Lucas and Sheeran’s hypothesis.

Bentham was a great social reformer, arguing for the rights of women, the legalisation of homosexuality and playing a pivotal role in the establishment of Britain’s first police force, as *The Telegraph* reported, so this is a great opportunity to see a giant of British philosophy in the flesh, as it were. My only regret is that his cat, the fantastically named “The Reverend Sir John Langbourne”, was not also preserved for posterity alongside his owner.

From a philosopher who helped to establish a police force in the nineteenth century, to an American police force that’s benefitting from philosophy today, this is the news that



police in Baltimore are to receive philosophy lessons as part of broader police reforms aimed at tackling police violence and misconduct.

Perhaps more associated with the ineptitude of officers like Prez from *The Wire* than their mastery of Plato, the Baltimore police force are to receive a humanities hour at the city police department's in-service training facility, as part of various reforms and new educational programmes for its officers. This initiative is a response to an incident in 2015 where Freddie Gray suffered fatal injuries in the back of a police van, causing widespread rioting and protests across the city. In an interview in *The Atlantic*, detective Ed Gillespie, who teaches the courses, explained how studying Plato can be relevant to modern day policing:

“You can get so into the outcomes, into the methods, [that] you don't look at the ethic with which you're operating in many cases,” Gillespie said. ‘And we're trying to get officers to delve into it.’ In a course on Plato, he introduces officers to the philosopher's idea of the tripartite soul, which can be governed by the intellect, by the ‘spirit,’ or by the appetites. Gillespie has his students discuss real stories of police misconduct in Platonic terms.”

The Atlantic also cited research by a criminal-justice professor at Arizona State, William Terrill, which shows that officers with higher education are less likely to use force than those officers who have not been to university. Terrill did not draw strict conclusions about the reasons for this, but suggested it was possible that “exposure to

unfamiliar ideas and diverse people have an effect on officer behavior”. Let's hope this is the case and Gillespie's educational efforts have a positive effect across the force, then perhaps we'll see similar programmes rolled out in other areas, with the added benefit of an expanded job market for philosophers.

And finally this quarter is the report from *The Financial Times* that one of the world's largest academic publishers, Springer Nature, has agreed to demands from the Chinese government to censor over 1,000 articles. The articles that have been blocked so far “contained keywords deemed politically sensitive by the Chinese authorities, including ‘Taiwan’, ‘Tibet’ and ‘Cultural Revolution’”. As *The Daily Nous* commented, “Springer Nature includes among its imprints Palgrave MacMillan and Nature, as well as Springer, which publishes over 60 philosophy journals, such as *Philosophical Studies*, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, *Erkenntnis*, *Synthese*, and many others”, although “it's not known at this time whether any articles by philosophers have been blocked.” According to *The New York Times* “the publisher defended its decision, saying that only 1 percent of its content was inaccessible in mainland China”, although those in the academic community have denounced Springer Nature's decision accusing the company of “prioritizing profit over free speech”.

Charlotte Knowles is a postdoctoral research fellow in ethics, social and political philosophy at the University of Groningen.

In Memoriam

Jerry Fodor (1935 – 2017)



The death of Jerry Fodor at the age of 82 was a great loss to philosophy in more ways than one. As a professional philosopher he managed to combine a clear-eyed commitment to the highest standards of argument and clarity with the sheer sense of the fun of engaging in philosophy and arguing for what one believes. At the same time, he never lost sight of the human shortcomings of the profession's practioners; himself included. During one memorable passage from *LOT2*, his 2008 sequel to his 1975 groundbreaking book, *The Language of Thought*, he alludes to Plato's arguments in the *Meno* for

our innate knowledge of mathematical concepts, and he parodies Socrates interrogating the slave boy, managing to bring out our lurking suspicions that Socrates could be a bit overbearing. In response to Socrates' persistent hectoring that his interlocutor must see that intentionally distinct concepts could be coextensive, Fodor has the interlocutor politely agree, "Yes Socrates" many times and finally, "Yes, Socrates. Can I go home now?"

Jerry Fodor was as witty in life as he was on the page. He said and wrote deeply funny things, which also made you think. A passionate advocate of the computational theory of mind, he wrote that it was the only game in town, and you can't see the game without a program. The program was of course a series of computational operations performed over the internal symbolic code he called the Language of Thought. This code was a series of internally represented symbols that had causal and semantic powers. Their shape properties engaged the casual wheels in the way a programming language does, while they also had semantic properties in virtue of symbols standing in certain head-world relations. The internal symbol for horse was causally tokened by the presence of horses and could be tokened accidentally but other things too, such as muddy zebras. However, muddy zebras wouldn't token the symbol for horse unless horses did, and that's what made the symbol