Educating a new generation of bioethicists

Programme Director for the MA Bioethics and Medical Law, Matt James shares news of exciting developments with the MA programme and his participation in the global Cambridge Consortium on Bioethics Education.

The MA Bioethics and Medical Law programme continues to flourish and attract students from a variety of disciplines, including medicine and healthcare, law, philosophy and the social sciences. Following the programme’s recent revalidation, a number of changes were introduced to help enhance the programme so that it can provide the very best in bioethics education. One such innovation has been the introduction of a bioethics careers forum, the first of which was held on Wednesday 6th June.

Designed to raise awareness of the range of career opportunities related to bioethics and assist students to begin thinking through career options, the evening saw a number of MA alumni speak briefly on how the MA has impacted their work and shape top tips for career progression.

As part of the update to the Employability Service, the evening helped both current students and those looking to study with us in the future to consider the relevance of bioethics in contemporary society, as well as begin to hone their skills in making connections and explore the values they can bring to the workplace. While we have always linked students up to the Employability Service, being able to showcase alumni experience and achievements in the world of career development was something many students found extremely valuable.

Supporting students to prepare well for their dissertation research project is probably one of the highlights of the programme for me. Encouraging and empowering students to pursue a research question of interest to them is always rewarding, especially something that we have always prioritised through the writing of a research methods portfolio. As part of the revalidation process, we have now changed this to an oral presentation. This has given students the chance to explain how their research has evolved, their research methodology and present their indicative research findings in front of an audience.

Students submitting their dissertation in September of this year had made their presentations at a research forum on Saturday 9th June, which provided a sense of achievement and stimulation as students reflected on their work. The overwhelming feedback from students was positive, with many saying how much they appreciated the chance to hear about their peers’ research to date and engage in the exchange of ideas.

In early July, I travelled to Paris to attend the Eighth Cambridge Consortium on Bioethics Education (supported by Cambridge University Press). This has become something of a highlight for me each year, as it provides us with an opportunity to build relationships with bioethics educators and students across the world and exchange best practice and ideas. I chaired the opening morning of the conference, which saw a number of presentations all highlighting the need for clarity of language, thought and purpose in bioethics education from a variety of different angles. I also presented an afternoon session on using wikis in education and assessment, based on my introduction of a wiki-based assessment on the MA programme. My session gave delegates the chance to learn more about wikis in the wider context of e-learning, as well as test out the technology and dispel any negative connotations with wikis.

Particular highlights for me this year were two of the last-dive sessions: a distinctive of the conference where delegates are able to ‘test drive’ some of the ideas and innovations discussed.

The first session involved re-enacting a court case concerning medical malpractice. Aside from allowing us all to display our inner Trialan, it was powerful to see how much more insight into and understanding of the case was gained through both acting it out and passing all key points on to focus on refocusing and applying theoretical understanding to the case. The second session that captured my attention looked at how context shapes health behaviors. Focusing on the matter of childhood obesity, one of the support sessions aimed to help us to explore our own attitudes and responses to sleep, and reflect on the morality and habits that inform this. Reflecting on an extract from Thoreaux’s Walden helped to spark some lively debate and exchange of ideas concerning simple living in a technological age.

It was a privilege to represent St Mary’s and CBET at another global gathering of bioethics educators. There is something powerful in being able to connect with others involved in a similar endeavor, to encourage another and exchange new ideas. If also helps to put into context the vital role programmes such as the MA at St Mary’s has to play in helping to educate and inform the next generation of bioethicists.

CBET is partnering with the Scottish Council on Human Bioethics on a new research project addressing the ethics of new transhuman persons.

Can transhuman and posthuman persons be generated ethically?

The generation of new persons has fascinated human beings throughout the ages but, with the development of modern science and technology, the generation of different kinds of new persons (beings regarded as having full inherent dignity, which either exist or otherwise arise in nature), can now be considered. These beings include:

Transhuman Persons (beings who have a body that is recognisably human), who are already being generated:
1. Human-non-human interspecies combinations
2. Human-robot Cyborgs
3. Human-Posthuman Biological Chimeras

Posthuman Persons (beings who no longer have a body that is recognisably human):
4. Virtual persons living in cyber-space
5. Artificial Biological Posthumans

The project will study whether (a) it is even possible to generate such different kinds of beings who are recognisably human-like, and if so (b) how this should be undertaken. Accordingly, it will first consider how the recognition of new kinds of persons takes place, and then seek to examine:

• Who are the real generators of new kinds of persons in the light of new technologies?
• How do these generators interact when considering the generation of new kinds of persons?

The project began with a workshop of experts in 2018 and will end with a conference, open to the general public, in 2019. The publication of the papers arising from both these events will then be brought together in the form of an edited book, which will complete the study.

Commenting on the project, CBET Director Dr Trevor Stammers commented: “We are delighted to be partnering with the Scottish Council for Human Bioethics on this project, which will not only explore possible answers to fundamental questions about existing technologies, but also provide prior ethical awareness of new questions that may arise from technologies which don’t, as yet, exist.”

Further information about the project can be found on the CBET website. The CBET Bulletin is available online at www.stmarys.ac.uk/cbet

At a glance

A focus on public engagement 1
A focus on posthuman engagement 2
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At a glance

1. See for example: David Albert Jones and Carel Kockelkoren (Editors). 'Children, Ethical, Philosophical and Religious Perspectives on Human-nonhuman Continuities.' London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2016.

2. See for example: Calum Mackellar (Editor). Cyberneuroethics. In press.


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The CBET team was delighted to welcome Australian visiting scholar Dr Andrew Sloane for a short visit to St Mary’s in April. Thoraress Power writes on the public lecture Dr Sloane delivered, and offers some reflections and perspectives on the evening.

A warm April evening saw a diverse and engaged audience enjoy the privilege of a session in the CBET lecture series, given by Dr Andrew Sloane, Andrew, Director of Postgraduate Studies at Mooting College in Sydney, is a medically qualified theologian and well known in bioethics circles for inter alia, his 2013 book Vulnerability and Care, which emphasised the importance of care and community when cure is not possible and, ultimately, of course, our shared mortality means that care, in the medical sense, is never possible. The book also emphasised the role that those who are ill can continue to play in society. On this occasion, Andrew picked a specific instance of this, which he felt he hadn’t had time to explore in his book and which remained neglected: that of dementia. He explored dementia through the lens of philosophical theology. As the title of his session ‘The Dissolving Self’ indicates, he chose to focus, not on the contested ground of dementia. He explored dementia through the theological lens. Andrew argued, to coin a phrase, that they also ‘post-exist’ our memories. In this sense, we become patients in the original sense of the word. Our identity and selfhood is not effaced by this, any more than it was effaced in early childhood. And, in theological terms, our patience may see us as testimony to the existence of the Creator. Andrew’s talk was a rich tapestry, and questions from the audience showed this; exploring, as they did, practical theological implications of His Thesis for dementia care and painful personal encounters with identity issues in loved ones, as well as more philosophical and theological questions. It might have been interesting to explore Andrew’s take on Derek Parfit’s, whose work in the realm of identity is an alternative view to continued selfhood. I should also have enjoyed exploring Andrew’s view that physical continuity ‘won’t do’ for a sense of identity continued, given that assaulting and eembodiment come together in the Christian tradition.

The evening ended too soon, and it is hoped that, when Andrew is next on our shores, we may have been interesting to explore Andrew’s take on philosophical and theological questions. It might have been gratifying to have received messages from those facing death, who have written to her particularly gratifying to have received messages from those facing death, who have written to her. Her chosen patients and their stories draw the point of the book is not to give proscriptive direction: rather, the aim is to help readers develop an ethical and critically reflective approach to difficult questions that can also appreciate the ethical questioning. This is then followed by discussion in order to tease out difficult questions that can also appreciate the ethical questioning. This is then followed by discussion in order to tease out the ethical implications; and the case studies are broad enough to allow for a ‘what if?’ approach to the ethical questioning. This is then followed by relevant information that helps to dismantle the problem, and includes aspects of the law, guidelines and recognised chaplaincy codes, as well as current practice. Questions for reflection are offered so that the reader can link theory to his or her practice.

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