

INTERVIEW DUNCAN H. PRITCHARD

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*Professor Duncan H. Pritchard is a prominent figure in contemporary philosophy, with a particular emphasis on epistemology. He currently holds the position of Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Irvine (UCI), where he also serves as Director of the Interdisciplinary Center for Knowledge, Technology, and Society. In addition, he leads the campuswide curricular project “Anteater Virtues,” which aims to promote intellectual virtues such as curiosity, integrity, humility, and tenacity among university students. He earned his Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of St. Andrews in 2000. Prior to his current appointment at UCI, he was Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Eidyn Research Centre at the University of Edinburgh. His research encompasses a wide range of topics within epistemology, including radical skepticism, virtue epistemology, modal epistemology, epistemic luck, social epistemology, understanding, inquiry, and practical knowledge. Pritchard also explores applications of epistemology in specific domains such as law, education, religion, healthcare, and cognitive science. Among his major publications are *Epistemic Luck* (2005), *The Nature and Value of Knowledge* (2010), *Epistemological Disjunctivism* (2012), *Epistemic Angst* (2015), *Skepticism: A Very Short Introduction* (2019), and *Wittgenstein on Knowledge and Certainty**

(2024). His latest monograph, *Tempting Fate: Taking Risks, Pushing One's Luck, and Living an Authentic Life*, is forthcoming with Princeton University Press. He is also the author of the widely used textbook *What is This Thing Called Knowledge?* currently in its fifth edition. Professor Pritchard has received numerous honors in recognition of his scholarly contributions, including the Philip Leverhulme Prize in Philosophy (2007), election as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh (2011), delivering the prestigious Soochow Lectures in Philosophy (2013), and the Paul H. Silverman Award for Distinguished Work in Ethics (2024). In addition to his academic work, he is engaged in applied philosophy projects, such as the introduction of philosophy education in Scottish prisons and the investigation of the role of extended cognition in the education of individuals with special needs. He also serves as Editor-in-Chief of *Oxford Bibliographies: Philosophy* and Co-Editor-in-Chief of the *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism*. Professor Pritchard is internationally recognized for his innovative and interdisciplinary approach to philosophy, contributing significantly to the contemporary understanding of knowledge and its practical implications in society.

1. Philosophy is often perceived as a discipline somewhat detached from the immediate concerns of everyday life, particularly by students and professionals from other fields of knowledge. However, your academic trajectory reflects a consistent effort to bring philosophical reflection closer to the contemporary dilemmas of humanity. Could you explain how Philosophy can be mobilized as a practical tool for understanding and critically engaging with the complexities of the modern world?

Prof. Duncan: It's interesting how contemporary philosophy became so

detached both from everyday life and other disciplines, especially if you consider its history. Someone like Aristotle, for example, wouldn't have regarded any important topic as being off-limits—there was certainly no distinction in play in his work between abstract philosophical topics and, say (what we would call), scientific questions. Moreover, he clearly saw his philosophical work as having practical relevance for our lives. Indeed, the same is largely true even if you consider the key philosophers of the early modern period up until the early years of the 20th century. To give some examples:

Descartes, Leibniz, Kant, Mill, Russell, and Wittgenstein all engaged in inquiries that stretched beyond traditional philosophical boundaries, and they were all, in different ways, concerned in part with the practical implications of philosophy.

I think the divergence between philosophy and other disciplines that arose came about in part because of the specialization of academic inquiry in the latter part of the 20th century. Even so, we should try to resist this as much as we can by connecting with other disciplines, especially given that there are so many obvious points of overlap. For any discipline, X, there is going to be a 'philosophy of X' where philosophers can make important contributions.

Merely being open to engaging with other disciplines won't always deliver practical benefits, however (though often it does). What is also needed is a willingness to engage outside of the academy altogether. In fact, I think there is more of this going on in philosophy than many people realize. It just doesn't tend to be given a very high profile. I'm not altogether sure why. It might reflect the relatively low status of philosophy compared with, say, some of the hard sciences. Or it might reflect the fact that philosophers don't engage with the public very well! As it happens, I'm right

now putting the finishing touches to a book that is aimed at a general audience: *Tempting Fate: Taking Risks, Pushing One's Luck, and Living an Authentic Life*, (Princeton University Press, *forthcoming*). This is my attempt to connect some important issues in the contemporary philosophy of luck and risk to the question of how to live a meaningful life. I'm hopeful that this book will find the broader audience that it is aimed at.

2. A significant portion of your theoretical work is dedicated to the study of knowledge. Considering the current scenario marked by the proliferation of misinformation, conspiracy theories, and fake news on digital platforms, how do you assess the contemporary status of the concept of knowledge? Do its nature, value, and function remain intact, or do these challenges call for a conceptual reconfiguration?

Prof. Duncan: While I agree that there has been a proliferation of misinformation and conspiracy theories in recent years – something that is going to get much, much worse with the new wave of AI – I don't think this has any implications for the nature of knowledge. It is not that the nature of knowledge itself is changing,

but rather that at the present moment, and increasingly in the future, certain kinds of knowledge are going to be much harder to acquire, due to the widespread deceptions taking place. This is a tragedy, if you think about it. The internet and AI era could have led to a golden age where it is knowledge and understanding, rather than deception, that is proliferating!

3. Among your most remarkable contributions are projects involving applied Philosophy with socially marginalized groups, such as incarcerated individuals and persons with disabilities. Could you share with us the aims, methodologies, and impacts of these initiatives? What suggestions would you offer to researchers and educators interested in developing inclusion- and justice-oriented projects through Philosophy?

Prof. Duncan: My interest in educational practices aimed at students with disabilities came about because one of my sons was born with brain damage, and hence attended a special needs school (initially in Edinburgh, later on in Irvine, California, where we now live). What interested me was how technology was routinely integrated into special educational practices in order to help

students overcome their physical and cognitive difficulties. That struck me as an interesting example of what is known in cognitive science as extended cognition. This is where technology becomes over time a proper part of a cognitive process. (In short, cognition is not something that always takes place inside one's head). Working with social scientists to study the use of technology in special needs education thus gave us a way of testing whether this kind of education should be understood as promoting extended cognition. (The answer is that it does).

I initially got into prison education because of the work I'd done promoting philosophy in schools (this was back in the UK, before my move to California). Part of the challenge of teaching philosophy in schools, particular to quite young children (6 or 7, say), is that you need to make it fun, accessible and interactive. So, for example, you might initiate a conversation about what is real and what isn't, and use various props to elicit responses. (Is a toy tank real? It's not a real tank, after all, but then it isn't pretending to be one. Is a plastic flower as real as a genuine flower? Is a dream real? What is depicted in the dream didn't occur, but your experiences of the dream did. And so on). Anyway, what struck me is that this approach might also work in a prison education context. To our surprise, when

we discussed this idea with the prison educators they were very enthusiastic about it, and so we began a program of training them up to deliver this kind of philosophy education. Note that while I call it 'philosophy education', it's not like a traditional philosophical education, where you discuss different philosophers and their positions. As with teaching philosophy in schools, it is, rather, a kind of pure 'thinking about thinking'. This is what makes it so powerful. It certainly had a dramatic effect on the prisoners, who became very adept at using the new critical thinking skills that we had taught them, and hungry to learn more. As I explain below, I continue to be involved with prison education over here in California, but now as part of a very different project.

I'm not sure what advice I would give other philosophers about getting involved in projects like this, except to emphasize that they can be very rewarding. You have to be willing to engage with researchers from other disciplines, but as I've already noted, I think this is a healthy thing for philosophers to do anyway.

4. In an era of growing appreciation for interdisciplinary research, what would you identify as the main challenges and

potentialities in integrating Philosophy with fields such as Education and Health? In your view, how can philosophical reflection contribute to the development of more critical, ethical, and comprehensive investigative approaches in these domains?

Prof. Duncan: Interdisciplinary work is always hard, for the simple reason that one is operating outside of one's comfort zone. It requires a willingness to adapt your methods and be open to different perspectives. It can be very rewarding, however, particularly for philosophers. As I note above, for any domain there will be philosophical questions that arise in that domain. Moreover, it is often the case that the best way to engage with those questions is via collaboration with an expert from that domain.

One of the projects that I'm working on at the moment is devoted to providing students who are planning to go into healthcare professions (medicine, pharmacy, nursing, and so on) with a much broader, humanistic, education. In speaking to healthcare academics, there is a feeling that while giving such students specific skills and practically-oriented disciplinary knowledge is obviously very important, it also misses out something important too. Remember that healthcare professionals often engage with patients at crucial moments

in their lives, such as the birth of a child, the death of a parent, dealing with a serious illness, and so on. I think this is where philosophy (along with other humanistic disciplines) can be useful, in providing such professionals with a broader understanding of what it is to be human, one that will hopefully help them enhance their dealings with patients and also provide them with a more fulfilling professional life.

In Education, there are two pressing challenges at the moment, and as it happens I am engaged in collaborative projects with social scientists attempting to address both. The first involves making the case for the worth of education at a time when its value is regarded with suspicion. I think the Anteater Virtues project, which I describe below, responds to that challenge, by making explicit what a good education is really about. The second involves the challenge posed to education by the new wave of AI. How do we prevent widespread cheating and help our students to recognize the value of such activities as writing and reading as opposed to letting the AI do their work for them? This project intersects with the first, in that we are not only tracking AI use in students, and exploring various strategies to tackle it, but we are also empirically studying whether students who have engaged with the Anteater

Virtues project are more likely to value their education and hence use AI with integrity. (So far, the indications are promising, though we are still at an early stage of the project).

I think these projects in Health and Education offer good examples of how philosophy can meaningfully contribute to other disciplines.

5. We currently face a paradoxical scenario: on the one hand, there is a growing skepticism toward traditional religious and ideological systems; on the other, there is a noticeable rise in radical and dogmatic positions. How do you interpret this sociocultural phenomenon from a philosophical perspective? In what ways can philosophical practice offer tools for critical mediation and resistance to ideological and religious extremism?

Prof. Duncan: I agree with Hegel that every epoch contains within it contradictions that can be stabilized over the short-term but which eventually become so pressing that they lead to a new *zeitgeist*. I think you are highlighting one of the contradictions of the current epoch. On the one hand, we have widespread skepticism; on the other hand, we have radical dogmatism. And yet both seem to issue from similar sources, such as a mistrust in common

institutions (like the mainstream media or the political class). At an individual level, we resist these extremes by aiming for virtuous intellectual character. This is something that I believe is crucial to our flourishing and which ought to be embedded at the heart of educational practices. In short, to educate is not just to instill useful facts and skills but is, more importantly, to develop virtuous intellectual character. Only the intellectually virtuous subject has a hope of navigating the contemporary malaise that you highlight. I expand on this point in my next answer, as it relates to the Anteater Virtues project that I run.

6. You coordinate the “Anteater Virtues” project, which seeks to cultivate intellectual virtues – such as curiosity, integrity, humility, and tenacity – among university students. Could you elaborate on the theoretical and pedagogical foundations of this initiative? What have been its outcomes and impacts thus far? Do you consider the model to be applicable in academic contexts outside the United States?

Prof. Duncan: All of the educational initiatives that I’ve been involved with – philosophy in schools, in prisons, and so forth, but *especially* the *Anteater Virtues* project – arise out of my interest in an

influential way of thinking about the overarching purpose of education. This is that education is fundamentally about cultivating virtuous intellectual character, where this in turn is the integrated set of admirable intellectual character traits known as the intellectual virtues, such as intellectual courage, intellectual humility, intellectual tenacity, and so on. What interests me about this paradigm is how it explains how education can be truly *liberatory*. While we obviously do teach specific facts and skills, ultimately what we are trying to do is something much grander, which is the cultivation of intellectual character. Here’s one way to think about this: a good education doesn’t teach you what to think (much less what to value), but rather gives you the tools so that you can think for yourself, which will in turn help you to live wisely. This educational tradition has a long history, but it gets its strongest expression in the 1800s with figures like Wilhelm von Humboldt and John Henry Newman, both of whom were particularly interested (as I am) in the application of this idea to higher education.

Interestingly, this educational paradigm isn’t just supported by theory, but also enjoys a lot of empirical support too. There have been many studies that have shown that educating for virtuous intellectual character leads to widespread

improvements in academic performance. What is exciting about the *Anteater Virtues* project is that it is the first attempt at integrating educating for virtuous intellectual character into the heart of a leading R1 public university. The project also benefits from the excellent social scientists we have at UC Irvine who are studying the educational effects of this pedagogical intervention. The project is thus not only based on theoretical and empirical research, but is also contributing to further theoretical and empirical research.

Moreover, the educational materials that we are creating are not just for UC Irvine's students, as we have created public versions too. These are being used in a number of educational contexts, such as prison education, schools, community colleges, and other universities worldwide. In this way we are hoping to be able to have an effect on the public debate about the purpose of higher education. Given the challenges currently facing this sector, both politically and also from the new wave of AI, having a proper understanding of the purpose of higher education is crucial. If, for example, one thinks that higher education is just about learning facts and skills, then I don't think that this purely instrumental model of higher education stands a chance of surviving for very long (for one thing, a lot

of these skills will in the future be replaced by AI).

7. The Interdisciplinary Center for Knowledge, Technology, and Society at the University of California, Irvine, under your direction, constitutes a unique space for research and dialogue across disciplines. Could you present the main research lines pursued at the center? Does it welcome international students or scholars? What guidance would you offer to those wishing to become part of this scientific community?

Prof. Duncan: The goal of the center is to draw together existing strands of interdisciplinary philosophical work at UC Irvine and, in the process, cultivate new interdisciplinary philosophical work. We have hosted collaborations with many different fields, including Law, Religion, Nursing, Education, Social Science, and Cognitive Science. The Center regularly hosts visiting international scholars. Getting involved is easy, as our events are welcome to everyone, with many of them online so one can participate without having to leave one's home. We are always open to new collaborative projects as well.

8. Your philosophical research extends into various knowledge domains –

including Law, Education, Religion, Health, and Cognitive Science – always in dialogue with practical and theoretical challenges. Based on your experience, what emerging or “hot” topics do you foresee gaining prominence in these fields in the coming years? To what extent can Philosophy contribute meaningfully to the complex transformations that lie ahead?

Prof. Duncan: I think the biggest issue of our age is AI and the implications it has for our society. This is a topic that requires an interdisciplinary angle of scrutiny, as there are so many different layers to it. To what extent can AI genuinely replace human cognition, for example? Lots of disciplines are clearly going to be transformed by the new AI wave, with some disappearing altogether. The disciplines that *don't* disappear will be particularly interesting, since this will show that they offer something that the AI cannot offer. I'm confident that Philosophy will not be replaced by AI, since no matter how useful the AI is at mastering various skills, it lacks the capacity to engage in genuine philosophical reflection. And yet we will need philosophical reflection on the transformative power of AI more than ever.

In education, for example, it is vital that we don't cede a purely instrumentalist conception of what education is about—whereby education is just offering useful skills and knowledge—since on that conception the whole sector will be replaced by AI before long. We need to remind people that what an education actually provides is something that AI can never offer, which is the cultivation of virtuous intellectual character. The challenge will be to show how students with virtuous intellectual character can meaningfully employ the new technological resource that AI offers to enhance their education, as opposed to simply off-loading their 'learning' to the new technology (which in practice would mean that they learn nothing). This is why I think the *Anteater Virtues* project is so important.

9. As editor-in-chief of two internationally prestigious academic journals, you are closely engaged with the current landscape of scholarly publication. Could you comment on the quality of submissions received today and the key challenges facing academic publishing, especially in light of the increasing use of artificial intelligence? What advice would you offer to early-career researchers aiming to publish in high-impact journals?

Prof. Duncan: So far I haven't seen any drop-off in quality of submissions. I also haven't yet seen any AI-produced articles (though of course one can't always be sure about this). I think the challenge posed by AI to publishing is on the horizon, however. I'm not sure how best to respond to it. At the moment AI-produced research is usually detectable and (relatedly) often includes some fairly large errors (whereby it 'hallucinates' false claims). One can imagine a future where the use of AI becomes undetectable. Indeed, one can even imagine a future where it is the AI that is submitting a paper to your journal! What do we do then? I don't have answers right now, but we will need answers, and we will need philosophical expertise to do this.

In terms of advice to early career researchers (at least in my field anyway), I would say aim to focus on publishing relatively few pieces of work, but make sure they are of the highest quality and appear in the very best journals. That will have much more of an impact than publishing a lot, especially if doing the latter leads to a drop in quality and/or leads to you publishing in less prestigious journals. Another tip in this regard is not to take rejection too seriously. Yes, you should take the referee reports seriously and see what you can do to respond to them in future iterations of the paper. But

if you are confident in the quality of the work, then don't let a rejection side-track you—aim to get that (revised) paper submitted to a top-ranking journal as soon as you can. As any established academic will tell you, often their best and most influential work started off by being rejected. This is normal. That one top journal doesn't want to publish your paper doesn't mean that another equally good journal won't accept it.

10. Many of our readers aspire to pursue an academic career. Given your internationally recognized path – reflected in successful projects, academic awards, and influential publications – what guidance would you offer to those seeking to embark on this journey with intellectual excellence and integrity?

Prof. Duncan: The reality of the academic career is that it is a monumentally difficult thing to pull off. There are so many people pursuing this option and very few posts. Frankly, I am amazed that things worked out for me as they did, especially since I was a first-generation college student (very few people from this background make it in academia).

I think that if one is to succeed in this career, then the best way to do this is to work hard (obviously), apply for

everything, publish well, and establish a network. By ‘apply for everything’, I mean that one ought to be willing to work just about anywhere if that means landing that first academic position. I’m often amazed to hear of newly-minted PhD students (who have nothing tying them down) going on the academic job market but only applying to a few select places. Once you have a position, it will then be so much easier to get another, better, position, but you have to get that initial position first.

By ‘publish well’, I don’t mean publish a lot. In fact, as I note above, it is far better to publish just a few things early on but make sure they are very good and appear in top-ranking journals—people will be more impressed by that than by lots of mediocre publications. At the very least, if you do publish a lot, then make sure that a big chunk of those publications are at top-ranking journals. By ‘establish a network’, I just mean go to conferences and other events in your field and get to know your colleagues. Present your work as much as you can and make sure you give polished talks. People will remember you and your name will crop up in conversation when posts arise. Good luck!