

Institution: The Open University

Unit of Assessment: D32 Philosophy

Title of case study: Rethinking ethics and personhood in philosophy and in practice

1. Summary of the impact

Chappell's recent work developing an anti-systematic philosophical ethics, and in particular his work on the notions of personhood and second-personality, has had an impact on (1) provision of public and health services, (2) policy-making, and (3) cultural life. He has presented work on ethics and persons to public audiences in Northampton, Mexico City, Oxford, St Andrews, Leeds, Milan, and Sydney. Besides a general intellectual-cultural impact on these public audiences, he has had specific impacts on thinking and practice (1) in paediatrics at The Northampton General Hospital and (2) in religious and educational constituencies in Britain and Australia.

2. Underpinning research

During the REF period, Chappell was Professor of Philosophy at The Open University.

At least since *Ethics and Experience* (2009a), Chappell has been sceptical about the systematic moral theory that dominates academic ethics. Developing an alternative is now Chappell's main research programme. Parts of this programme are visible in his REF research portfolio. A full presentation of the programme is in his forthcoming monograph *Knowing What To Do: Virtue, Imagination, and Platonism in Ethics* (OUP, 2014).

Chappell argues that the kind of virtue ethics derivable from Plato and Aristotle constitutes an *ethical outlook* rather than a systematic moral theory (2009a). Plato was engaged, and Aristotle to some degree succeeded (2009b), in articulating an understanding of the ethical role of the imagination and the passions. Aristotle was officially interested, and Plato unofficially, in how these passions, as educated by the virtues, were expressed in (for example) poetry and tragedy.

These interests gave Plato and Aristotle significant advantages over some contemporary moral theorists. Three particular ways in which academic moral theory today can easily disconnect itself from extra-academic reality are (1) lack of imagination, (2) professed value-neutrality, and (3) insensitivity to the character of actual ethical experience.

These are general flaws and Chappell's research diagnoses their presence in a number of contexts (see 2011b). As far back as 1997, Chappell suggested that philosophers might fruitfully take a more explicitly value-laden approach to personal identity. Chappell (2011a) now argues that all three flaws are present in contemporary discussions of personhood.

Bioethicists now routinely assert that counting as a person simply means meeting some test or criterion for personhood—rationality, sentience, emotionality, or the like. They assume (1) that there is no conceivable alternative to such criteria and no practical problem about applying them, (2) that 'success' or 'failure' in these tests is best judged from an impersonal, value-neutral standpoint, and (3) that any counter-intuitive consequences of the application of such criteria for personhood are to be toughed out as 'sentimentality' or otherwise irrational emotion.

Chappell (2011a) rejects all three assumptions.

(1) As soon as we apply our imaginations to thinking what it would be like to actually judge 'candidate persons' by such criteria, the psychological unreality (and inhumanity) of the procedure becomes blatant. What we do in practice is take characteristics like rationality and sentience not as *criteria for admission* to the 'persons club', but as *dimensions of interpretation* of creatures that we already take to be persons.

(2) Our actual engagement with other persons is neither value-neutral nor impersonal. It is essentially second-personal: it can be described with a useful pun as an exercise of the principle of charity.

(3) That our actual engagement with other persons is always an exercise of compassion for each other's essential vulnerability, given that we are all what MacIntyre calls 'dependent rational animals' – this explains how (at our best) our intuitive response to humans who are very young, very disabled, very ill, or very unconscious is not to dismiss them as 'non-persons' because they fail some armchair *a priori* test, but to embrace them as fellow-mortals.

3. References to the research

Chappell, T. (2009a) *Ethics and Experience*, London, Acumen.

Chappell, T. (2009b) 'Naturalism in Aristotle's political philosophy' in Balot, R.K. (ed.) *A Companion to Greek and Roman Political Thought*, pp. 382–89, Oxford, Blackwell.

Chappell, T. (2011a) 'On the very idea of criteria for personhood', *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 49, no. 11, pp. 1-27.

Chappell, T. (2011b) 'Glory as an ethical idea', *Philosophical Investigations*, vol. 34, no. 2, pp. 105–34.

Chappell, T. (2014) *Knowing What To Do: Virtue, Imagination, and Platonism in Ethics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Research funding

During 2011/12 £40,883 was awarded by the AHRC to Timothy Chappell for a project entitled 'Making Good Decisions'.

4. Details of the impact

Chappell's engagement with a diverse range of non-academic and academic audiences has resulted in his research influencing and challenging healthcare professionals in the NHS to providing the impetus for an interdisciplinary approach to religious studies in Latin America.

As Director of the OU Ethics Centre, he seeks out opportunities to challenge and expand thinking about ethics, both in the UK and internationally. For example, he has presented his research on ethics without moral theory in talks given at the Keble College conference for schoolteachers (June 2013), the Heythrop College conference on ethics and philosophy for Key Stage 5 students (January 2013), and the Pinner Philosophical Group (September 2011). These presentations have made a difference to the outlook, thinking, and action of all sorts of individuals. Audience comments made to him in person have included, 'That was a revelation', 'Made me look at things completely differently', and 'I'd never seen it that way before'.

Chappell has research links with the Ian Ramsey Centre for Science and Religion (IRC) in Oxford. He gave a keynote address at the IRC's public conference in Mexico (November 2011), El Congreso Panamericana Ciencia y Religión, held at La Universidad Panamericana; his topic was 'Varieties of knowledge', including personal knowledge. The IRC credits him with influence in the way the conference was organised, and the impact that it had on Latin-American academics and members of the public: '...one of the large teams that attended the Mexico conference in 2011 (Universidad Austral, Argentina) gained experience and expertise. As a direct result, they have just secured \$0.3m of funding for a project of their own.'

The project will take an interdisciplinary approach to the study of science, religion, and philosophy and will have an anticipated direct effect on tens of universities in Latin America, and an indirect effect on many thousands of people. As well as benefits to higher education and research, the

project will create a collection of popular science books 'to foster a more informed debate in society and will develop open-access websites in Spanish to provide qualified information and updates on interdisciplinary topics'.

Chappell has been an invited speaker at public conferences at the Catholic Institute of Sydney ('Knowledge of persons', September 2012) and the University of Notre Dame, Sydney ('Persons, humans, and the principle of charity', July 2013). One audience-member at both these events who reports that Chappell's thinking has made a difference to the way he does his job is the Headmaster of Wollemi High School, New South Wales. He says: '[the] school [is] known for its character education initiatives and for the close parenting support we provide ... in these times when the stability of marriages and the bond between parents and children are so challenged, I believe it is very important to show the link between dedication and personal fulfilment. Chappell's work provides a platform for me to do this.'

Chappell has also presented his research about personhood in NHS and other healthcare contexts. In June 2009 he presented the research that became 'On the Very Idea of Criteria for Personhood' (Chappell 2011a) in a 'Grand Round' talk at Northampton General Hospital; this drew a very positive response from an audience of several hundred healthcare professionals. This presentation was part of a continuing working relationship between Chappell and a consultant paediatrician at Northampton General Hospital, who said of the talk: 'Professor Chappell used the lecture not only to demonstrate the necessity of having a meaningful philosophical structure to underpin how one lives one's life, but also particularly within the challenging context of health care, of making decisions and living with the decisions you have to make.'

Over the last five years Chappell and this paediatrician have cooperated on a number of projects. The consultant is the author of several dramas on medical themes, on which Chappell has worked as an informal ethical advisor. They have also worked closely together on a case with a severely disabled and terminally ill boy and his parents, who were under the consultant's care up to the child's peaceful death in 2011. This offered, in delicate circumstances, an opportunity to observe how far Chappell's ideas of personhood work in practice.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

WEB LINKS

1. <http://www.pinnerphilosophygroup.org.uk/>
2. <http://www.cis.catholic.edu.au/news-a-events/biennial-conference>
3. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S_vj8fAyNEg

Headmaster, Wollemi High School, New South Wales.

Director, Catholic Institute of Sydney, Australia.

Director, Ian Ramsey Centre for Ethics, Oxford.

Deputy Vice Chancellor (Sydney Campus), University of Notre Dame, Australia.

Consultant paediatrician, Northampton General Hospital.