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KAREN FOLEY: Hello, and welcome back to the Student Hub Live Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Showcase. In this last of today's sessions, we take a look at A853, the Masters of Arts in Philosophy. And I'm joined by Jon Pike.

JON PIKE: Hello.

KAREN FOLEY: Hello, Jon. Why on earth would students want to do an MA in philosophy?

JON PIKE: Oh, philosophy is wonderful. It's addictive. It prepares you for everything, not nothing, in life. We have run an MA in the OU for about 12 years. And it's the biggest MA in philosophy in the country. It's got a very good reputation.

And we find that students who studied maybe some philosophy on their undergraduate courses want to do more, can't get enough of it, can't stop thinking in this kind of particular way that we encourage and teach. Students with a science background want to go deeper into some of the pre-empirical issues, the issues that we discuss before we get into discussions about facts about the world.

We have a whole range of students, from retired high court judges to professional racing cyclists, who are studying philosophy in their rest days. And the new MA has got a wider spread of topics than the previous MA. And we're very enthusiastic about it, and we hope students are as well.

KAREN FOLEY: Yes, indeed. OK, so let's just go through some of the basic aspects then. So this is the first of the modules. So this is the first year of 9 months, 60 credits. Then one will go into 120 credits, which would be the next 12 months, so a very similar structure to what we've heard about before. This is all online.

JON PIKE: Yes, that's right.

KAREN FOLEY: And it's open access, isn't it?

JON PIKE: Yes, it is. You need an honours degree in order to be taken onto the MA. I mean, we would say that if you've got some philosophical background, it's going to be easier for you. And it's

intellectually challenging, this work. And there will be diagnostic tools that allow students to assess whether this is for them and this uses the skills that they have from their first degree. But yes, it's open access from people who are graduates, people who have got an honours degree.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. And it's entirely online.

JON PIKE: It is, yes. And the Philosophy Department has pioneered some electronic means of teaching, going back 15, 20 years. And we find this works very well. The current MA is entirely online. We do manage to organise a meet-up in London. But that's a kind of informal thing that the course team itself sorts out.

KAREN FOLEY: Now workload is an issue, I think, that a lot of students will consider. And the workload plan for this is 20 hours per week.

JON PIKE: 17 hours a week, which is standard for the MA, one hour of which is organising your student life. And there's a good deal of reading. But the reading is not so much the length of materials that you need to read, as the intensity with which you need to study and think about them. So that's what takes the time. It's the thinking, the processing of the arguments, that uses up your time. And if you want to spend your time thinking about tough questions, then this is the course for you.

KAREN FOLEY: OK, well, let's take a look at some of these tough questions, because they are very, very tough. And if you're interested, the *PodMag,* which is the audio news magazine from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, this month's edition features three of the authors from the module talking about some of these very challenging topics. So we've got four areas, and the first one is on this aesthetics of nature.

JON PIKE: Yes.

KAREN FOLEY: I mean, these just blow me away, to be honest. Once you start talking about these aspects, there are so many implications. And what's apparent is that these skills are very, very relevant right now. But it's also a skills-based activity. It's that thought process that one would, I guess, enjoy if one was studying this particular MA.

JON PIKE: Yes. And it's true that what people learn are reading skills and analytical skills. But I think the topics, they are tough in a way. But they're also reasonably straightforward, at least at first, at least just to present. At least, I hope they are.

So the aesthetics of beauty, well, here's an example. We think about landscapes as being beautiful. Is this just a matter of taste? Or is there something a bit more to it that we can get at?

And here's a particular way in which that might make sense. Let's suppose a mining company proposes to dig up a beautiful bit of down land and mine it and dig out lots of precious metals. And they say, of course, this is going to make the landscape horrible. But in five years' time, we are going to restore it, put it all back together. And it will be a perfect replica of the landscape that existed before that you all thought was beautiful.

Now you're losing five years, but what else, if anything, are you losing by the fact that the landscape has been, as it were, rebuilt? So it's not nature. It's a copy of nature that you're returning to.

Some people think there is something quite important that's been lost, apart from the five years. And other people might say, well, it looks exactly the same. It's got the same physical properties. What's the problem? So there's just two different ways of looking at the beauty or the aesthetic value of the natural environment there. And that's the sort of topic that this part of the module deals with.

KAREN FOLEY: Now these are topics that may be familiar in different contexts and guises to the sorts of things that might be in an undergraduate curriculum, so this idea of an absent [? guard, ?] or who is making what and what actually exists. How is that different when you're looking at some of these at a postgraduate level, compared to an undergraduate level? I mean, clearly length and the extent to which you go through those arguments would be much deeper and greater. But how, fundamentally, are they different? And therefore, how important is it to have some prior understanding of philosophy and philosophical argument?

JON PIKE: That's a very good question. It's very difficult to answer, except in a simple way, which is to say that the work is harder at postgraduate level than at undergraduate level. And that's, I suppose, the arguments are a bit more subtle, a bit more nuanced.

We managed to find five different positions where previously we'd found two. And there's just more complexity in it, which means reading the papers in the academic journals about these issues quite intensively and drawing out the different positions there.

In the sense of what do you need to do before you consider the aesthetics of nature, there isn't previous reading that one needs to do before thinking hard about the aesthetic properties of the South Downs. It's just a matter of thinking carefully about art, nature, the beauty of artefacts, compared to-- so a painting.

We can think about what's beautiful about a painting. And then trying to think, what's beautiful about a landscape? Does that map across in some way? Or are these two different sorts of beauty? So it's just a matter of thinking through carefully the issues, thinking about one's own aesthetic reactions to these two different areas.

KAREN FOLEY: But a lovely first area to explore, irrespective of whether you've had some previous experience or philosophy, because I guess if you haven't, you're getting to grapple with these. And if you have, you're getting to do it at a different level.

JON PIKE: Yes.

KAREN FOLEY: Before I talk about sources and the second aspect, HJ, have you got a question for us?

HJ: Yes. I have a good question from Ben, who's always asking the big questions but is very interested in this masters, as I would expect, from all these great questions he has. But what he's wondering is, in this MA, how much focus is on the Western analytical continental type traditions? And does it feature any Eastern type of philosophies, any influence from, yeah, Eastern thinkers rather than just focusing on the West?

JON PIKE: Well--

KAREN FOLEY: Good question.

JON PIKE: --yes, good question. OK, let me separate out a couple of things. Our previous courses have been more analytical than this course. And this course, this MA, particularly in its second year, involves thinking about and studying some thinkers who are normally thought of as continental philosophers. And that's a new move for us as a department.

So in the second module, there's quite a lot of discussion of Michel Foucault, Hannah Arendt, who's difficult to place, and Friedrich Nietzsche. You spend quite a lot of time on a whole unit, studying Nietzsche and the genealogy of morals.

Now does that mean it's exclusively Western? There isn't a chunk on Eastern philosophy,

that's true. That's partly because we don't have the expertise in the department. And it's partly because there's only so much you can do.

What I think we have done is extended our range quite a lot to include some continental authors, continental thinkers. But of course, I'm going to start arguing about whether there's a proper divide between continental and analytical philosophers and get a bit disputatious about that distinction. But yeah, that's the spectrum, and it is a wider spectrum.

KAREN FOLEY: OK. So I wanted to briefly touch on sources, because really, what I want to talk to you, Jon, about is this issues in global justice.

JON PIKE: Right.

KAREN FOLEY: So let's just cover those other two aspects beforehand so that we can really get to grips with this. *Consciousness,* which is Derek McTravers's book, which is the third of the four, is about contemporary consciousness. And this, I guess, is fairly reminiscent in terms of the aesthetics of nature. So here we're looking at various arguments and various ways of doing things.

And then there's Plato's the *Meno,* which is where Sophie Grace Chappell has translated a text for students. And they get to read that, which is brilliant. And we have an interview on the *PodMag* about that.

So there's a lot of different things that students are going to be doing in terms of the skills and the discipline and also the primary texts, which is quite unusual. Is there anything you want to mention about those two before we look at issues in global justice, which I think relates to what Ben was talking about?

JON PIKE: Yes. The reading and getting on top of a Plato dialogue is something I never managed to do as an undergraduate. Finding your way back into the origins of philosophy and getting to grips with the *Meno,* which is what Sophie Grace has translated and is teaching, seems to me--strikes me, having read the material, as an incredibly interesting and exciting thing to do, which kind of sets you up to look at philosophy in a different way.

I wouldn't say you get an ultimate answer on the question, "What is virtue?" from reading the *Meno.* But you do get a sense of the importance of the question and the way it's been dealt with in these foundational documents of philosophy.

And it's, at the same time, fascinating, irritating, head-scratching, frustrating, exciting. Reading

a Platonic dialogue is-- it's kind of a thrill to get your head around a piece of philosophy from 5th century Athens and see how it relates to, how it informs, the way we go about philosophy today.

And *Consciousness,* which is-- Derek's chapter is on the hard problem, as it's called. The hard problem is working out how there can be a relationship between what happens when I drink a glass of water, that sensation, that sense of what it's like to drink, to taste water, what you might call the qualia, or the sensations, that one has as a conscious being, and whatever it is that the neuropsychologists can tell us is going on in my brain at that time, because there seems to be some lack of fit between these two things.

Now that's a hard problem. It's a bit too hard for me. I--

KAREN FOLEY: [LAUGHS]

JON PIKE: --stick with applied philosophy and political philosophy, moral philosophy.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, absolutely, because I think we can see how one might deal with those issues. But your section, which is on issue in global justice, I mean, this is one I personally really, really struggle with. We were talking about this, about saving a drowning child, and about the extent to which we have a responsibility. And I must say, it made me feel pretty dreadful.

JON PIKE: Yes. It's supposed to, I'm afraid. I hope that people rethink their attitude to the world after reading my stuff here, not necessarily in a massive way. And my objective is not to make people feel bad. But I suppose it's to deal with and grapple with what seems to be, along with climate change, the biggest moral problem that faces us as individuals, which is the simple fact of massive world poverty, and then to think about our reactions to that and our responsibilities to that.

KAREN FOLEY: It's particularly poignant right now with the migrant children being turned away. I mean, not literally drowning, in that sort of sense, but very difficult.

JON PIKE: Yes, yes, that's right. So Peter Singer's argument in which he uses the example of a drowning child, is to say, well, supposing you were walking past a lake and there's a child drowning. And you said, well, I'm not going to go in and rescue that drowning child, because I don't want to get my feet wet. We would think that that was morally contemptible.

But then he says, well, there are children dying a long way away for want of 20 quid, or

whatever the very small sums of money are. And we're not paying out that 20 pounds, because what? We want to update our iPhone, or something like that. And he draws a kind of equivalence between these two cases.

Now, in a way, I think it ought to make us feel bad. But then there are arguments that this is a bad analogy, that this is a poor analogy, that this doesn't take the importance of our own lives and our own projects seriously enough.

And then there are other thinkers that we study in this part of the course who say, actually, it's worse than Peter Singer suggests, because our obligations to the global poor are not so much a matter of being kind or being charitable towards them. We chucked the child into the lake. And we owe it to the child to rescue them because we put them there. So it's the actions, if you like, of the West, of the relatively prosperous citizens in the West that cause massive global poverty.

Now that's quite a hard line to take. And I think there are some things problematic about that. I don't go out of my way every day to act in a way that impoverishes children around the world. So there's a question about responsibility, what my intentions are, and so on.

But it's a challenging argument that's posed against-- posed at us. I think we need to come to terms with it and think it through. I think we owe the-- the massiveness of the problem means that we owe it serious attention. Perhaps I'm not sure I want to say more about what commitments people should have. It's for students to work that out for themselves. But yes, it's a big issue, and we need to think about it very carefully.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. I mean, it sounds very remiss of me to end by saying these are massive questions. And I can see why it would be such a commitment but also so exciting to deal with some very classic, I guess, philosophical debates and also translations, et cetera. So to be able to engage in quite a range of skills is going to be really exciting for students.

So Jon, thank you very much for filling us in on that. And as I said earlier, if you'd like to find out more about that, then this month's *PodMag* has interviews with three of the module team from the MA of Philosophy. So do check that out to find out more. And there's also more information on the Resources page of our website.

It's the end of the show now, so I just want to take a quick trip to Sophie and HJ to say our goodbyes before we wrap up.

HJ: Yes. Oh, I think we've just had a great day with lots of different chat, very interested in all the modules. I know there are a couple of things that we have missed. So if you email us, studenthub@open.ac.uk, we will get back to you with answers to your questions.

SOPHIE: Yes. Thank you ever so much for joining us. It's been lovely to see everyone again. And hopefully, we will be seeing everyone very soon.

HJ: Yes. Well, since everyone's doing their EMAs now, we want to hear some good news about them being completed and some nice results when we come back for our next event, which I think is the 4th of July. So it'd be very good to, yes, see how everyone is getting on.

SOPHIE: And best of luck to everyone out there with their EMAs and their exams. Yeah, I'm sure you'll all be fine.

HJ: Yes.

KAREN FOLEY: OK. Well, join us for our next session. You can subscribe to our mailing list, and then we'll tell you when the next session is. So go back to the website, click on the Count Me In button, and give us your email address. And we can add you to our mailing list.

But our next session is the 4th of July. We have an Open day. That will be very exciting. And then we're having a session at the end of July, which is all about preparing for your next module. So we'll have very specific advice there, from level 1 to level 2, Year 1 to Year 2, and all the way up to postgraduate. And we'll also be looking at a variety of things that may be relevant for you at that time of year, as you prepare for the October start.

So thank you for joining us today. Thank you to all my guests who've been on the show and told us all about these fantastic new modules.

I don't envy you with a choice to make out there. There are so many things that are exciting. But as our people have said today, take your time. There are a range of sources and places to look for advice. Talk to your tutors, other people, about things that you enjoy doing. And I hope that you make the choice that's right for you.

That's all from us at the Student Hub Live. We'll see you at the next event. Bye for now, and thanks for watching.

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