

Balliol College Philosophy Dr Adam Caulton - Video Transcript

The tutor, DR Adam Caulton, is seated, facing the camera. The tutor's name and course subject are shown the first time they appear. The tutor answers the questions that are displayed on screen.

>>DR ADAM CAULTON (ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, CLARENDON UNIVERSITY LECTURER, FELLOW AND TUTOR IN PHILOSOPHY): My name is Adam Caulton I'm a Philosophy Tutor at Balliol College and my research focuses mainly on the philosophy of physics, especially conceptual issues in quantum theory and I organise the teaching for students doing what you might call the Science and Philosophy Joint Schools. So, that's Maths and Philosophy, Computer Science and Philosophy and Physics and Philosophy.

[Question displayed on screen:]

How is Philosophy different from other subjects?

>>DR ADAM CAULTON: That's a really great question. I think a lot of people come to philosophy with a sort of bewilderment because, a lot of them haven't done philosophy at school (not even at A-level) and of course, we don't require any applicants to have done philosophy at A-level. I think in some ways, philosophy is very similar to the other science subjects that are often connected to philosophy and the joint degrees. One common theme I think that they all have, is giving arguments, going from A to B. Of course, philosophy is very different from physics in that it's not subject to empirical control, at least not in the direct way that physical theories are, and that means that certain aspects of giving an argument become more important. So, it's important to be extremely rigorous and to engage in conceptual analysis. I think it's also different, in a way from mathematics, in that there's a focus on justifying assumptions. A lot of mathematics is deriving results from axioms and not a lot of attention is paid to the axioms themselves. In philosophy you pay attention, as it were, both to the inference and to the axioms. The sort of skills that are required to do philosophy well are exactly the same sort of skills that are required to do mathematics or physics well.

[Question displayed on screen:]

What qualities are you looking for in undergraduates?

>>DR ADAM CAULTON: Enthusiasm and curiosity, absolutely important. In addition to that, one of the things that I really look for and I hope my students develop in tutorials with me, is the ability to critically appraise and develop arguments, so critically appraise arguments that they find in the literature and to develop arguments of their own. Some of the things that I look for in an applicant and I sort of try and encourage my students to develop, is that they might find a very good argument for a particular conclusion and, they might be resistant to that conclusion, they have a good argument for X and they think: "well I think X is

false." Some people in response to that will just give an argument against X, so you've got two opposing arguments. What I look for and what I think is important, is that they're able to diagnose what went wrong with the first argument. So, it's not enough just to have an argument for something and an argument against something. There're too many arguments in the world. What I want, is the ability to sieve through and to assess the quality of these arguments, to get to a reasoned conclusion. Another thing that I look for, is a student who doesn't look to me for the answer, as much as they might come to the right answer. I'd much rather that they tell me what the answer is and convince me that that's the answer. That's what I'm really looking for.

[Question displayed on screen:]

What type of work do you give students to prepare for a tutorial?

>>DR ADAM CAULTON: Well, the tutorials by and large are focused around an essay. So, we will meet maybe once a week or once every fortnight, and in preparation for the tutorial, they'll write an essay of say, about 1500 to 2000 words which is a response to a question that I set them. That question by and large, will be quite open-ended so examples would be: "does time pass?" Or, "does the empirical success of a scientific theory give good reason for believing that that theory is true?" Something like that. I will set them somewhere between four and eight pieces of reading and, they'll go away for a week or two weeks and I expect them to do the reading, digest the material and then, come up with a coherent, sustained argument for a well-defined conclusion to that question.

[Question displayed on screen:]

How are tutorials structured?

>>DR ADAM CAULTON: The setup would be, that it's me and one or two other students and the tutorial is sort of focused around the essay or the essays that they'll have prepared. For slightly more technical topics, such as the philosophy of special relativity or the philosophy of quantum mechanics, these are some topics that are closely connected to material that the students will have studied on the physics side. I tend to have slightly larger groups, maybe three or four and instead of meeting for an hour, we'll meet for two hours. Tutorials are very different from lectures in the sense that the structure is very organic so, sometimes a tutorial might take the form of simply going through the essay that the student has written, asking them to expand on some points or to defend some points to hone the argument and so on. Sometimes there will be less attention to the essay and we will sort of go into a foundational discussion of the surrounding topics, maybe clearing up some muddle or helping to clarify some ideas, develop some concepts and arguments and so on. It's a great thing about the complete freedom to sort of go where seems most appropriate at the time.

[Question displayed on screen:]

What do you enjoy about conversations with students?

>>DR ADAM CAULTON: Essentially, I am discussing topics that I am very passionate about with the most talented and intelligent people of that age, who are also passionate about that subject. Who wouldn't want to do that for a living?

[Question displayed on screen:]

How do the students inform your own understanding?

>>DR ADAM CAULTON: They are approaching a topic that I've thought about a lot from a completely different angle, most of the time and that sort of clashing of different angles, I think can produce very exciting, new ideas. I think it comes as a bit of a surprise to the students to learn that maybe, I've not thought about the topic that I've been thinking about for you know, 10 years or 20 years, that what they've said has made me think about it in a new way but, it happens all the time. The best thing of course, is that the students are incredibly talented. What I really like is the way that the teaching is organised in the tutorials. It's really between me and the students. There's not, as it were, a sort of faceless body that's organising things for the both of us, and there's a lot of flexibility that comes with that and, I think that in that flexibility good things can happen.

[Question displayed on screen:]

What should prospective applicants consider?

>>DR ADAM CAULTON: The first thing they should do is seek out some philosophy and read it as soon as possible. That can be a variety of things so, maybe getting hold of a classic piece of philosophy for example, George Berkeley's, Principles of Human Knowledge. that was one of the first philosophy books that I ever read and gave me my passion for it. Or, to seek out a growing number of very reliable secondary literature authors like; Daniel Dennett or Simon Blackburn have written very nice introduction to philosophy books which I think give a nice overview of the topics and, there's this wonderful thing now, called the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, which is a resource that's in fact, used by academic philosophers which gives a very complete overview of a number of different topics and it's quite nice to sort of dip into that. I think there's a sort of, wealth of resources now available to applicants, either from their library or from the internet and I would just advise them to get stuck in.

[Final page:]



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