



The Royal Institute of Philosophy

2023 Book Prize Award Ceremony

Remarks by Professor Nayef Al-Rodhan

31 October 2023

Members of The Royal Institute of Philosophy's Executive Committee and Council,

Esteemed Prize Panel,

Distinguished guests,

Dear friends,

In the first instance, I would like to thank the eight eminent members of the Prize Panel for all their hard work. For the countless hours you spent reading, discussing – dare I say arguing? – and deliberating. A perfect example of transdisciplinary debate at its finest. Given the number of high-caliber book submissions – over 100 in total – deciding on a winner was no easy feat.

My thanks also goes out to our great friends at The Royal Institute of Philosophy, our hosts, for their punctilious work piecing together this Transdisciplinary Philosophy Prize and bringing you all here tonight. It is a great honour to have this Prize, which I have initiated, named after me, not least because of The Royal Institute of Philosophy's remarkable history and rich transdisciplinary traditions. After all, the Institute has transdisciplinarity at its core. When almost one hundred years ago, Bertrand Russell and friends established what we now know as The Royal Institute of Philosophy, they were ahead of their time.

The first Executive Committee consisted of classically trained philosophers as well as philosophically-minded professors from biology, mathematics, law, physics, psychiatry, and psychology – including the exceptional Beatrice Edgell, the first British woman to be named professor of psychology.

Today, the Institute continues in this proud transdisciplinary tradition by rewarding the most original philosophical research that transcends academic disciplines. It is, I believe, a very timely award, because we are approaching an era that will be defined by exponential innovations in transformative neuroscience, cascading geopolitical challenges and highly disruptive technologies.

Technologies such as generative, accelerating and potentially sentient AI. Quantum and neuromorphic computing. Cognitive neuro-technological enhancements. Synthetic biology. Autonomous weapons.

And many more technologies, all of which will challenge our societal and global order and what it means to be human.

Philosophy will need to keep pace with the ethical, moral, societal, cultural and political implications of these changes happening around us.

Philosophy will also need to play a part in helping achieve societal cohesion and sustainable transnational peace, security, dignity and prosperity for all.

To remain on the front foot, the world needs highly trained transdisciplinary thinkers, including philosophers who can connect the dots between various academic disciplines.

The world needs people like you.

Recent years have seen philosophy widen its reach, becoming seamlessly woven into the fabric of our society. This is in large part due to the role played by philosophers such as the authors long-and-shortlisted for this Prize. Your books have helped promote deeper, critical thinking to a wider audience.

We may not have all the answers – but we can start by asking the right questions about the nature and purpose of philosophy. For example: What can this age-old discipline of inquiry teach us about who we are and how we live our lives in this brave and complex new world?

And does possessing the skills for philosophical reflection and theorising make us any wiser about the nature of our lives?

One thing is clear: transdisciplinary approaches are needed to untangle intractable philosophical problems about human nature, emotion, morality and reason. This is something I have learned during my own journey as a philosopher.

Inspired by my late mentor, Lord Walton of Detchant, I began my career as a medical student in the UK and later trained and worked as a neurosurgeon and experimental neuroscientist in the US, at the Mayo Clinic, Yale and Harvard. I thus entered the world of philosophy as a man of science, with scalpel in hand.

My personal experience showed me that the worlds of science, neuroscience, philosophy, applied history, strategic culture, cultural studies, disruptive technologies, international relations and many other disciplines are very much complementary.

They are all essential pieces to the same puzzle explaining individual, societal, cultural and global frameworks.

On a broader level, we should remember that philosophy, technological innovations, the arts, and science have always tried to make sense of the world. In doing so, they have influenced each other and informed our understanding of the human condition and experience.

Initiatives such as this Transdisciplinary Philosophy Prize are a powerful reminder of the critical value of transdisciplinary approaches to pragmatic problem-solving and scholarly innovation. But we still have a way to go.

Looking to the future, I hope this Prize will give philosophers of all ilks the courage to follow their Passion. The courage to seek out unusual fields of knowledge and synergies with profound intellectual consequences.

The courage to encourage responsible, impartial, equitable, fair and inclusive domestic and foreign policies.

And the courage to make sure that these policies facilitate transnational cooperation, global transcultural understanding and dignified peace and prosperity for all.

In a highly connected and deeply interdependent world, individual and collective dignity deficits fuel contempt and turbulence. If these dignity needs are met, our neurochemically-mediated emotions and motivations will promote social cohesion and cooperative behavior. If not, the opposite is likely to happen.

To achieve sustainable peace, security, dignity and prosperity for all, humanity must unshackle itself from deeply embedded cultural hierarchies and exploitative and extractive paradigms of hegemony. We must break away from binary Zero-Sum paradigms and narrow, short-sighted geopolitical goals.

To truly unleash the best in cooperative and peaceful human behavior, we must strive towards win-win, non-conflictual competition and absolute gains in the form of Multi-Sum Security and Symbiotic Realism paradigms.

For any state or culture to be sustainably safe and prosperous, every other state and culture will have to be safe and prosperous as well.

This is the reality of our increasingly connected and interdependent world. No one can be left behind: no matter how different, distant or dysfunctional.

Humanity's future on earth and in outer space is bound to face serious cascading and complex frontier risks, and mutual vulnerabilities.

That is why we need collective solutions to guarantee humanity's survival and triumph. That is why, together, we should root our work in integrity and goodwill.

We should always aim to make a positive impact far beyond our own personal needs, ambitions and narrow disciplinary, geographical and cultural frameworks.

These are qualities embodied so well by the submissions to this Transdisciplinary Philosophy Prize.

We need these qualities now more than ever, as the world tackles so many burning human, economic, cultural, societal, and global challenges.

Thank you. And good luck to all shortlisted authors.

Prof. Nayef Al-Rodhan

St. Antony's College, Oxford University,

www.sustainablehistory.com

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