

Press release

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In the Humanities category

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- **The John Dewey Professor at Columbia University** has made fundamental contributions of wide-ranging impact in the philosophy of science, particularly the philosophy of biology and genetic research, which “demonstrate the relevance of the life sciences to the humanities, and vice versa,” in the words of the award citation
- **He is also the author of landmark publications on a wide range of issues**, from the philosophy of mathematics and the origins of ethics to the role of science in democracy and the philosophy of education, by way of a series of Socratic dialogues on climate change, which he depicts as the greatest challenge facing humanity
- **The awardee defines philosophy as a synthetic endeavor** whose goal is “to incorporate all sorts of knowledge from scientific and humanistic disciplines, figuring out how disparate things that seem not to fit together can be welded into a coherent whole” that helps us “progress morally and improve the world we live in”

The BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Award in the Humanities category has gone in this seventeenth edition to the Anglo-American philosopher Philip Kitcher, described by the committee as a “humanistic intellectual” whose trailblazing work addresses a broad spectrum of the core questions of our time.

The John Dewey Professor Emeritus at Columbia University has made fundamental contributions of wide-ranging impact in the philosophy of science, particularly the philosophy of biology, which “demonstrate the relevance of the life sciences to the humanities, and vice versa,” in the words of the award citation.

In an academic career spanning over four decades, Professor Kitcher has authored landmark

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publications on multiple topics ranging from the philosophy of mathematics and the origins of ethics to the role of science in democratic societies, the vital role of education in turning children into citizens and the global environmental crisis. On this last score, he has written a series of Socratic dialogues meditating on the issue of climate change, which he depicts as the greatest challenge confronting humanity.

His intellectual curiosity, the committee points out, has also led him to unpack the ethical and philosophical teachings to be found in the works of literary greats like James Joyce and Thomas Mann or in the music of Richard Wagner.

“What stands out in Kitcher’s work is its enormous breadth, the way it spans the philosophy of science (to improve the practice of scientific research), ethics, politics and education, interrelating all these domains in order to improve society and further its progress,” said committee chair John Dupré, Professor of Philosophy of Science at the University of Exeter (United Kingdom).

“His book *The Advancement of Science* (1993), which came out just over 30 years ago, is a pioneering work that defends the importance of rationality in science. It’s also the forerunner to another of his most celebrated titles, *Science, Truth, and Democracy* (2001), where Professor Kitcher explores the role of science in a democratic society, and articulates a key philosophical concept, that of ‘science in the service of the common good’. That is, the idea that scientific activity is not just a matter for the researchers who do it, and far less the economic interests of the institutions who put up the funding. Rather, the research agenda should emerge from a process of rational, public deliberation among informed citizens in pursuit of a common benefit. Scientific progress should be governed by the principles of social justice and equity, as well as ethical responsibility,” explains committee secretary Atocha Aliseda, Professor of Philosophy in the Institute for Philosophical Research at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM).

“He is not a specialist philosopher of science, but I believe that his signal contribution has been to broaden the scope of inquiry of philosophy of science towards issues that had been disregarded or even seen as pernicious. He has taught philosophers of science that we need to abandon our ivory towers and technical virtuosity and get down to dealing with society’s very real concerns about the implications of scientific progress,” reflects Antonio Diéguez, Professor of Logic and Philosophy of Science at the University of Málaga and Kitcher’s nominator for the award. “In his writings, he talks insistently about the democratic governance of science – well-ordered science – such that the research agenda is set by democratic means, factoring the

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interests of the least advantaged. Applied to biomedicine this would mean, for instance, not only studying rich-country problems like cardiovascular disease, which bring in a lot of business, but also other conditions like malaria.”

The awardee himself defines philosophy as a synthetic endeavor whose goal is “to incorporate all sorts of knowledge from scientific and humanistic disciplines, figuring out how disparate things that seem not to fit together can be welded into a coherent whole” that helps us “progress morally and improve the world we live in”

From mathematics to the philosophy of science

Philip Kitcher’s road to philosophy began at the University of Cambridge. Initially a math undergraduate, he was convinced by one of his professors to move sideways into history and philosophy of science. Similarly, his early research during his doctoral studies at Princeton University was on the history and philosophy of mathematics, but the questions posed by his students there sparked an interest in biology. He spent a year learning about the subject at Harvard’s Museum of Comparative Zoology, and would later take issue with the theory of sociobiology which, he contended, was based on the social behavior of insects like ants, with the conclusions then extrapolated to human beings. For the awardee, “with humans, you have to deal with far more complex environments, and take account of the cultural forces that help shape our evolution.”

The philosophy of science also provided the subject matter for his 1993 book *The Advancement of Science*, in which Kitcher – in the words of nominator Antonio Diéguez – “sets out to demystify the legend about science through lenses which portray it, from a naive, uncritical perspective, as a progressive accumulation of truths arrived at through the application of strict methodological canons.” This critique of scientificism was nothing new, adds Diéguez, “but it had previously been advanced from more radical, relativist and constructivist positions. What he does is to go from realism to pragmatism to mount a defence of scientific objectivity, at the same time dismantling over-rationalistic or positivist tropes about scientific progress.” Kitcher indeed used the pages of this book – now a standard text in philosophy of science teaching – to present a new model of scientific explanation, based on the ability to unify disparate phenomena.

Ethics as an amplification of the biological capacity to help others

Kitcher has also reflected on what biology can teach us about human ethics, summing it up thus:

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“The central feature of our ethical life is the capacity to see that a fellow creature needs something and help them to achieve it.” The primatologist Frans de Waal (1948-2024), who taught psychology at Emory University, Atlanta, showed that chimpanzees and bonobos can detect when one of their own is trying to complete a task, and will take quite complex steps to help them out. In his book *The Ethical Project* (2011), the awardee contends that humans too have always possessed this responsiveness, though in our ancestors’ times it was fairly limited. “I see the introduction of ethical life as a way of amplifying this responsiveness, enabling us to be more cooperative and thereby to live in increasingly large societies, from groups of 40 people about 20,000 to 30,000 years ago to the first cities about 8,000 to 10,000 years ago. Such amplification requires our coming to terms with one another, understanding who we are, and trying to find solutions to the problems that divide us. So it’s negotiation, cooperation and mutual understanding that lie at the core of ethics.”

Kitcher proposes three examples of society’s moral progress, when public debate is shaped by this mutual understanding, expanding our sympathies to people we once saw as limited or even not entirely human: the abolition of slavery, the expansion of opportunities for women, and the recognition of same-sex romantic love. “These shifts came about when a few people here and there started to understand the lives of others in a way they hadn’t before. And that became more and more broadcast until it eventually led to changes in social norms and even laws in ways that count as moral and social progress,” he explains. “Now, I think the difficulty for ethical life is understanding how to do this in complicated situations, where there are many people who have demands and needs that are not being met.”

From the Human Genome Project to the role of science in democratic societies

In the mid 1990s, Kitcher examined the ethical implications of the Human Genome Project in a report for the U.S. Library of Congress, which became the book *The Lives to Come* (1996). In the course of talking to congressional staff, he realized that the reasons they thought the project was important were completely different from the reasons that were motivating the scientific community. Rather than curing, or at least diagnosing all kinds of disease, what the politicians wanted was to gain a competitive advantage over Japan, then rivaling America in technological prowess.

This disconnect led the philosopher to reflect on how science does and should relate to the societies that fund it and in which that science will be applied. The result was *Science, Truth, and*

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Democracy, a book publication in which, he says, “without underrating the value of basic research, which I consider immensely important, I argue that the reason it is so important is because, eventually, it yields understandings that enable people to do things that improve human lives.” For in the end, he reflects, “science is all about the benefit it can bring to humanity.”

These reflections led Kitcher to inquire further into science’s role in society, which led him in turn to a vision of democracy “that requires far more than simply people voting from time to time on different issues or even constitutions. What democracy really requires is people working together to try to understand what problems need to be solved and how the knowledge that we are gaining from scientific research can be adapted to solve those problems.” In this respect, the philosopher sees the progress of the sciences and the progress of our ethical and political systems as forming what is potentially a “virtuous spiral,” such that as we learn more about the world, we make better ethical decisions, and as we make better ethical decisions, we learn more about which scientific programs or projects are most important.

Educate children by giving them the resources to become citizens

This ability to connect objects of analysis so present in Kitcher's thought also emerges in his work on education, another of his passions. It is for this reason that he considers *The Main Enterprise of the World: Rethinking Education* (2021) to be among the most important books he has written. Here too he talks about cooperation as a fundamental driver of social progress, setting out three main ways in which childhood education can contribute to this goal: allowing children to do productive things that help them maintain themselves (in the sense of earning a living rather than contributing to the national wealth); making them into citizens who can cooperate with other people in the building of a society; and, finally, giving them the opportunity to understand what matters to them and choose the shapes of their own lives.

“I’m profoundly indebted to John Stuart Mill, who said that ‘the only freedom which deserves the name is that of choosing and pursuing our own good in our own way’. By that, I think he meant throwing off the thought that people’s lives are prescribed by the fact that they belong to a particular race, caste, class or sex. That people's lives should be shaped by themselves. And to do that, you need to give them the resources for understanding themselves and understanding their options well enough so that they can find their own path and pursue it with some chances of success. So my education book is really a book about these three aims and how you might put them all together.”

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The committee also made reference to Professor Kitcher's work on climate change. In his talks and writing on the subject, he reviews what he sees as the main problems of the climate challenge and provides verifiable data on its main magnitudes, to conclude once more that without in-depth cooperation, in this case between countries, the challenge will not be easily solved. "Climate change is a social and ethical problem," he affirms, while admitting that he is not the person to take this message into the political world. "What I am is a diagnostician who can lay out what's happening in a clear and convincing way. Then maybe others who are much more talented at political and social work can take it and use it to build something better."

Philosophy as a 'superdiscipline' integrating knowledge from every field

For Kitcher, the humanities are "immensely important," because "they are crucial to our understanding of ourselves. We don't want to settle for oversimplified cartoonish descriptions based on the idea that science tells us everything we need to know about ourselves. The humanistic tradition in literature, in history, in philosophy, in certain kinds of anthropology is tremendously important to our understanding of what human beings are and what they can be."

Within the humanities, though, the awardee accords philosophy a special place: "It's a kind of superdiscipline that tries to take the sciences, what we learn about politics, religion or history, the insights literature gives us... and tries to make them all fit, so we can figure out how it all hangs together. That is philosophy's task."

The role of literature in our ethical understanding of others

The breadth of Kitcher's scholarship that the committee remarks on extends to his leisure time pursuits. An amateur musician and book lover, he has unpacked the philosophical ideas contained in such masterworks as Richard Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung* tetralogy and James Joyce's *Ulysses* – for which he is now writing a detailed reader's guide – and *Finnegans Wake*.

In doing so, he says, he realized "how much my personal interests relate to my ethical views and my general social and political philosophy. There are themes, at least in my takes on the literary and musical works that I write about, that reflect the kinds of approaches I take to ethical and political life. And indeed, I have another project which is underway but far from finished, which is literature and the moral imagination, the way that literature plays a role in sparking our understanding of other people."

Laureate bio notes

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Philip Kitcher (London, United Kingdom, 1947) is the John Dewey Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at Columbia University (New York), where he was appointed to a full professorship in 1998. On completing his PhD in History and Philosophy of Science at Princeton University in 1974, he opted to continue his academic life in the United States, occupying tenure-track positions at the University of Minnesota and the University of California, San Diego. He has served as president of the American Philosophical Association (1996-1997) and as editor-in-chief of the journal *Philosophy of Science* (1994-1999), and has been distinguished with honorary doctorates from Erasmus University Rotterdam (2013) and the University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht (2019), both in the Netherlands. His research interests, which began in the philosophy of mathematics, have expanded throughout his career to encompass conceptual and methodological issues in biology and the role of scientific research in democratic societies.

Nominators

A total of 28 nominations were received in this edition. The awardee was nominated by Antonio Diéguez-Lucena, Professor of Logic and Philosophy of Science at the University of Málaga (Spain) on behalf of the Department of Philosophy of this institution; Daniel Gamper, Director of the Department of Philosophy at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Spain); the Spanish Society of Logic, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science; Thomas Sturm, Research Professor at the Catalan Institution for Research and Advanced Studies, ICREA (Spain); and Mauricio Suárez, Professor in Logic and Philosophy of Science at the Complutense University of Madrid (Spain).

Humanities committee and evaluation support panel

The committee in this category was chaired by **John Dupré**, Professor of Philosophy of Science and **Consulting Director of the Centre for the Study of Life Sciences, Egenis**, at the University of Exeter (United Kingdom), with **Atocha Aliseda**, Professor of Philosophy in the Institute for Philosophical Research at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) acting as secretary.

Remaining members were **Ignacio Bosque**, Professor of Spanish at Universidad Complutense de Madrid (Spain) and a member of the Real Academia Española; **Isabel Burdiel**, Professor of Modern History at the University of Valencia (Spain); and **José Manuel Sánchez Ron**, Emeritus Professor of History of Science at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (Spain) and numbered member of the Real Academia Española.

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The evaluation support panel charged with nominee pre-assessment was coordinated by **Elena Cartea**, Deputy Vice-President of Scientific-Technical Areas at the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC) and **Lorenzo Delgado Gómez-Escalonilla**, Scientific Researcher at the Institute of History (IH, CSIC). Its members were: **Jon Arrizabalaga Valbuena**, Research Professor at the Mila i Fontanals Institution (IMF, CSIC); **Esther Hernández Hernández**, Scientific Researcher at the Institute of Language, Literature and Anthropology (ILLA, CSIC); **Daniel Riaño Rupilanchas**, Tenured Scientist at the Institute of Languages and Cultures of the Mediterranean and the Near East (ILC, CSIC); and **Concepción Roldán Panadero**, Research Professor at the Institute of Philosophy (IFS, CSIC).

About the BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Awards

The BBVA Foundation centers its activity on the promotion of world-class scientific research and cultural creation, and the recognition of talent.

The BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Awards, funded with 400,000 euros in each of their eight categories, recognize and reward contributions of singular impact in basic sciences, biomedicine, environmental sciences and climate change, information and communication technologies, social sciences, economics, humanities and music. The goal of the awards, established in 2008, is to celebrate and promote the value of knowledge as a global public good, the best instrument to confront the great challenges of our time and expand individual worldviews. Their eight categories are congruent with the knowledge map of the 21st century.

The BBVA Foundation is partnered in these awards by the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC), the country's premier public research organization. CSIC appoints evaluation support panels made up of leading experts in the corresponding knowledge area, who are charged with undertaking an initial assessment of candidates and drawing up a reasoned shortlist for the consideration of the award committees. CSIC is also responsible for designating each committee's chair across the eight prize categories and participates in the selection of remaining members, helping to ensure objectivity in the recognition of innovation and scientific excellence. The presidency of CSIC also has a prominent role in the awards ceremony held each year in Bilbao, the permanent home of the BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Awards.

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