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By Hazel Tang

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## My winning proposal: AHRC philosophy bid's big impact

Christoph Hoerl went beyond the usual impact strategies to make his project on the metaphysics and psychology of time stand out. Reaching out from one of philosophy's more abstract areas paid off, he tells Hazel Tang.

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Christoph Hoerl, a professor of philosophy at the University of Warwick, teamed up with Teresa McCormack, a developmental psychologist and professor at Queen's University Belfast, for his bid to the Arts and Humanities Research Council's response mode scheme.

His project, Time: Between Metaphysics and Psychology, was awarded £482,426 from the council in June 2016, and got underway at the start of this year. It will run for three years.

### What's your project about?

It starts from the observation that there are various aspects of our everyday thinking about time that have a distinctively philosophical flavour. In our everyday understanding, we think of the past as fixed whereas the future is somehow open. We also think of time itself as passing or flowing. These ideas are hotly debated in philosophy, within metaphysics, which is usually regarded as very theoretical and abstract, and quite removed from our everyday thinking.

### What will you be investigating?

We'll be asking where we get these ideas from, in particular because many philosophers argue that they are fundamentally misguided. Modern physics, for instance, seems to have no place for the idea of time as passing, or the idea that the past differs fundamentally from the future. And this is of course where the psychology aspect comes in: can we give an account of the psychological sources of those ideas that may also be able to bear on the debates about time in metaphysics?

### What's new about the project?

Appeals to our experience of time in the existing philosophical literature rarely engage with actual empirical work in the psychology of time. Teresa and I both recognised an opportunity to bring something new to existing debates by connecting our disciplines and asking how psychological research might help inform philosophical approaches to time. We also realised that this, in turn, might lead to interesting new ideas for empirical work, as well as putting work in the psychology of time on a firmer theoretical footing.

### Some people might not consider developmental psychology and metaphysics as logical partners.

Developmental psychology has quite a lot to offer to philosophers interested in analysing concepts such as time. Part of what developmental psychologists do is to tease apart different aspects of our understanding of different domains, some of which children acquire earlier than others. For instance, adults' reasoning about time draws a sharp distinction between the past and the future, but that distinction may not be as clear-cut for younger children, who sometimes get confused about what's the past and what's the future. That raises the question as to what grounds our understanding of the past as fixed and the future as open, and how exactly this might be related, for instance, to the sense we have that we can control what happens in the future.

### The interdisciplinary and the metaphysical element to the project makes me think that it could have been pitched to the Leverhulme Trust. Did you consider Leverhulme as a potential funder?

I am also a co-investigator on a separate, Leverhulme-funded project, and it is true that there are aspects of the project that would have fitted in well with Leverhulme. We didn't approach Leverhulme because such an application would have fallen under their standard Leverhulme Research Project Grants scheme, and that scheme does not provide funding for workshops.

### You will be running workshops?

Yes, we will organise three interdisciplinary workshops on three sub-themes of our project, and these workshops play an essential part in the project. They are particularly important in the context of our aim to promote a more interdisciplinary approach. There just isn't any substitute for getting people who approach the same kinds of topics from different disciplinary angles in the same room together, to figure out how they can learn from each other. So a scheme that doesn't provide funding to hold project workshops wouldn't have worked.

### Other than that, why did you choose the AHRC?

As a philosopher, I think of the AHRC as my natural home among the funding bodies. In addition, for this project, we thought it would be interesting to have a substantial impact component, which is something the AHRC is specifically looking for nowadays. It is clearly a challenge to think of potential ways that work in a theoretical area of philosophy, such as metaphysics, might have an impact outside academia. But we wanted to take up that challenge and think of something new, and an AHRC grant provides the opportunity for that.

### Could you expand on that?

Yes, having sat on a selection panel for the AHRC a couple of years ago, I've seen what difference it makes to the strength of an application if applicants have invested some time in coming up with an original and ambitious impact strategy. So in our project we really wanted to go beyond some of the usual ways of engaging with non-academic audiences—giving talks at science festivals and so on.

### What did you come up with?

As our project is concerned with ways in which we experience, represent or think about time, we thought it might be interesting also to engage with art forms that have a particular connection to time—what are sometimes referred to as 'time-based arts', such as performance art, dance and theatre.

Hence, part of our impact plan is to work with three arts groups—a dance company, a theatre company, and a performance arts collective—to produce a performance evening called 'About Time'. It will feature short pieces from each group, alongside some interactive talks about the academic research carried out in our project. Three such performance evenings are planned: two at venues in Northern Ireland and one at Warwick Arts Centre.

### It has been some time since your last AHRC grant win as principal investigator. How have things changed?

When we started to put together the application for this project, I pulled out the previous one, which was for a project that ran from 2004 to 2008. I have to say that the process of applying seems to me a lot more complex nowadays than it was then. For one thing, there is the impact requirement, but I also saw that in the "Case for Support" for the previous project, we managed to get away with something that was still quite speculative, with many of the details still to be worked out in the course of the project.

### That wasn't the case here?

No, in this proposal I had the sense that we had to go into quite a lot more concrete detail as to what exactly the different parts of the project would be, how they connect with each other, what the specific outputs would be, and so forth.

### How long did you spend on the application?

From the first informal discussions to finalising the application, it took the best part of a year. As the AHRC's response mode research grants scheme is open year-round without a deadline, it requires quite a lot of self-discipline to get the proposal finished. There are always ways in which you think you could change or improve the proposal, and then you delay submitting it. We tried several times to set ourselves a deadline, but failed to meet it, until we finally got to a point when we said, "OK, this is now finished and we are happy to submit".

### At nearly £500,000, this grant is relatively big for an arts and humanities research project. Did you hesitate putting in such a big bid?

Not really. The project touches on a number of quite big topics and has an ambitious set of objectives as well as combining two different disciplines. We reasoned that there is enough work here to employ two research fellows—one in philosophy and one in psychology.

Even though it is a three-year project, each research fellow is only appointed for two years. The philosophy research fellow has already started and we will have the psychology research fellow for the second and third year of the project, so that the duo will overlap in the second year. But even keeping it down to four years' worth of salaries for research fellows, you don't have to add much else to get close to £500,000.

### What help did you receive when putting together this application?

We received quite a lot of support from research support staff at Warwick and at Queen's University Belfast. They helped a lot, for instance, in drawing up the budget, and they also provided us with examples of successful AHRC applications.

### Is the growing drive for research that delivers concrete benefits problematic for someone whose work might be described as theoretical or abstract?

I think this is always going to be a challenge if you are working in the kinds of areas of philosophy I work in. There are areas of philosophy—political philosophy, for example—that are more applied. But areas such as the philosophy of the mind and metaphysics are invariably more removed from applied concerns. But there are ways in which work even in those areas can touch upon practical issues.

### And that's what you've tried to do?

Yes. This year, for instance, the main focus of our project will be on asymmetries in our attitudes towards the past and the future, respectively. In what respects, precisely, do we regard the past as being different from the future? Is not just are our grounds for doing so? Answering questions like this is and what of theoretical interest and can link up with quite concrete concerns about human decision-making.

### Do you have any advice on funding for early-career researchers in philosophy?

Speaking from my capacity as a research director for the department, one thing that I think is important to stress is not to miss the opportunity for early-career schemes. I think these can make a big difference to your chances of success later on.

### How's the project going—especially the performance collaborations?

We've already had quite a lot of contact with the three arts groups, and it has been fascinating to exchange ideas with them. They've all been very enthusiastic about the idea of collaborating with our project. I've never done anything like this before, and I'm really looking forward to seeing how this collaboration develops.

### CV: Christoph Hoerl

**2015-present** Professor, department of philosophy, University of Warwick

**2004-2015** Lecturer, then senior lecturer, then reader, department of philosophy, University of Warwick

**1997-2004** British Academy/HRB institutional research fellow, department of philosophy, University of Warwick

**1996-1997** Jacobsen research fellow, department of philosophy, King's College London

**1992-1996** DPhil in philosophy, Magdalen College, University of Oxford

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