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OBITUARY

Helen De Cruz (1978–2025): an academic and personal tribute

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There is no greater joy for a teacher than to see a student develop and grow; and no more satisfaction to a mentor than to be overshadowed professionally by one's mentee. I have followed Helen's intellectual development and blossoming professional career with curiosity, pride, admiration, and (of course) wonder. It's a cruel, unnatural fate to have to write about Helen in the past tense.

My heart goes out to Johan De Smedt and their kids, Aliénor and Gabriel. Helen was the main breadwinner in the family. And before they were admitted to hospice, Helen asked me to help signal-boost the fund-raising to support them organized by Marcus Arvan. [Please donate here.]

Back in 2010, I started corresponding with Helen De Cruz because they posted a question about the relationship between the PSR and causation on a listserv. I had just moved to my position in Ghent, and I mistakenly thought Helen was a Leibniz scholar at Leuven. I cannot speak to the present situation, but back then Ghent and Leuven were great rivals that tracked an older rivalry between freemasons and Church. I was hoping we could create bonds through shared intellectual enquiry, and team up to strengthen early modern philosophy in the Low Countries. We did team up, but not in the way(s) I expected.

Much later I came to realize that while Helen had an enduring religious orientation, she was also product of the fierce, anti-clerical environment in Ghent and the Free University at Brussels. They would frequently surprise me with sudden references to Bruno or Franciscus van den Enden.

A few weeks later, at a philosophy of science conference in Leusden (the Netherlands), I saw Helen give a brilliant, somewhat unusual paper in which they combined Bayesianism with philosophy of archeology. (This was part of a project organized by Igor Douven.) In between Helen received a postdoc from, I think, the Flemish research council. At the conference, we talked at length, and I got my first glimpse of one the rawest and purest philosophical talents I have ever encountered. Helen was ambitious with a big, magnanimous and musical heart.

After that conference, Helen and I decided to team up and organize a workshop on 'empirically informed philosophy of social science' at Leuven. And thus started a nearly

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constant fifteen-year conversation mostly mediated by social media, while they was raising a family, moving jobs to Amsterdam (where we saw each other and each others' families most frequently in person), the Oxford Brookes University in Oxford (where they hosted me for a talk at Blackwells), and, eventually, as Danforth Chair in St. Louis. In between there were happy stints at Oxford University thanks to postdoctoral fellowships of the British Academy and Templeton residential fellowships. Helen's website also mentions a FWO postdoctoral fellow at the University of Leeds.

Along the way she had to deal with sexism in the academy (looking especially, alas, at you Leuven; here's how they put it once, 'They were not a woman-friendly department'). Helen also experienced what they would describe as class discrimination. These experiences were undoubtedly at the root of one of her famous papers on 'Prestige Bias: An Obstacle to a Just Academic Philosophy' in Ergo (2018). This paper is also an early example of using an intersectional analysis (without relying on the term) in the study of the organization of professional philosophy.

During these English years, they bonded with my wife over their joint anti-Brexit activism. In particular, Helen was a key member of the team that helped create a collection, In Limbo – Our Brexit Testimonies edited by Elena Remigi.

Along the way, I wrote letters of the recommendation and often acted as their *ad hoc* placement director; we co-blogged at *NewAPPS*; they edited my paper on Ibn Tufayl for their wonderful collection, Philosophy Illustrated. I diligently read their work on wonder and the Enlightenment, and I learned all about cognitive science/neuroscience of religion through their work (much of it with Johan). We avidly read each other's blogs, and I always read their speculative fiction. It's fair to say that without having to coordinate, we boosted each other's signals as best as we could. Whenever I could, I would use their drawings in my classroom lectures. If I needed a moment's reflection, I would listen to Helen sing while she was playing the archlute on YouTube.

The intensity and multiplicity of their pace never shocked me. When you discern how everything is connected with everything, tracing out the connections is encountering the familiar in the most unexpected places. For example, I adore their illustrated edition of Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World*. With the renewed interest in women authors, this seventeenth century work had been quickly moved into the early modern philosophy canon. But it's actually a rather awkward fit in the philosophy classroom. I abandoned teaching it. Helen encountered the same problem, diagnosed it, and then did something constructive and instructive about it (here). Let me quote them, 'I love this book very dearly but it is not an easy read. I hope my illustrations will help to make it easier to read.'

Even so, I increasingly felt that Helen was doing way too much public service; if a job had to be done Helen would step up: committees, causes, editing of journals, hosting conferences, etc. As we matured, we often talked about time-management and learning to say no. Educational institutions do not respect boundaries, alas. And as Helen never failed to remind me, care/service work is gendered. When Helen was first diagnosed with cancer, I hoped it would be an opportunity for them to back out from many commitments. I passed on the wisdom from my occupational physician that a major health scare could be a chance to reorganize life.

After they read my monograph on Adam Smith, Helen started to pester me for a follow up, more popular book on the Enlightenment. Helen was increasingly convinced that the public, self- described 'friends of the Enlightenment' like Pinker (and his acolytes) were misrepresenting its true spirit. When Helen looked back at the Enlightenment, while reading and listening to the sources, they saw insatiable curiosity and wit, irony and receptive cross-cultural exchange who delighted in global travel reports and discovering blazing worlds through telescopes and microscopes – Helen's kindred spirits. They increasingly

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loathed the dogmatism and sense of moral superiority to put down others with which the Enlightenment was deliberately being associated.

With my own more skeptical sensibility, I knew I could not tell the coherent story they wanted from me. And much to my surprise, I heard myself say, *I think you should do it. You can always run things by me.* Of course, I had sensed what she had already decided to do. Subsequently, they would pepper me with questions about Spinoza, Leibniz, and Fontenelle.

Often, I first learned they were reading and assimilating some dense past text because I caught subtle allusions to them in the brilliant short science fiction stories they would share (and publish). The book in progress would focus on the great intellectual and social omnivores (like Helen). At one point when they were quizzing me well beyond my knowledge, I said: Helen, I don't know, you are *the* expert. We 'lol-ed,' but it was true.

When I first got to know Helen as a scholar, I thought of them as a philosopher of religion and a philosopher of math. They used up-to-date cognitive science and evolutionary theory to frame their questions and answers. Their intellectual partnership in these areas with Johan was incredibly fertile. They would sometimes team up with my (now former) colleagues at Ghent. But Helen's work always lacked the crass reductionism of bad Darwinian explanations (fill in your favorite exemplar) because they could draw on Helen's background in anthropology. When I tried to explain it to others, I would say things like 'imagine a cross of Pascal Boyer, Dan Sperber, and Bill Wimsatt.'

I once jokingly said to Helen that 'you are doing what Hobbes and Hume only could imagine.' (I had made a similar joke a decade earlier to Dennett while he was drafting *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*.) Next thing I knew, I was reading the draft of 'The Relevance of Hume's Natural History of Religion for Cognitive Science of Religion.' (It's instructive to compare it to Dennett's use of Hume *in Breaking the Spell*.) I loved how Helen didn't just see anticipations of their own work, but they could also appreciate how the past could still instruct. I lack the knowledge to situate them authoritatively in the development of cognitive science of religion as an emerging field, and so will not attempt that here.

As the illness developed, we 'practiced backing out of commitments' on ourselves. A few years before, when I was still very sick with long covid, we had agreed to co-author, 'The New Science and the Sublime' for an *OUP Handbook on the Sublime*. I knew they had said 'yes' as a favor to me; to make me feel I still had a professional future. In our chapter, we would investigate the sublime in early modern science, with a specific focus on early science popularization. As they withdrew from our project, I had to narrow, of course, the focus of the subsequent chapter which will be dedicated to her memory.

As noted above, when we met, Helen identified as Christian, including as an active member for the Society for Christian Philosophers. Helen adored their fellowship. But Stateside Helen grew alienated from Christianity through its role in political life, but not spirituality (go read what Helen wrote on this here). Their budding Spinozism was not far from my own (more mystical) Platonizing Spinoza, but (to be precise) closer to Alex Douglas' (who they interviewed here). It's no surprising she once had a very strong interest in Zen Buddhism. But there was also an acknowledged restlessness in their searching, and in interview she noted that 'my spiritual journey has taken me on many paths.'

Helen's sister was a physicist who became a TV celebrity in their native Flanders for her work educating the public on the climate crisis. Helen's mom was the daughter of a general-major in the Belgian air force. Their father was a migrant from Malaysia. The parents met at a detention center for immigrants, where she volunteered. He ended up working in construction as a bricklayer. Helen often intimated that they were treated as an outsider in school. But that they had a happy childhood surrounded by music (including the church choir) and art.

Amongst Helen's many good effects on the discipline is that she has made academic philosophy more conscious of its own carbon footprint, and to nudge it toward sustainability.

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Helen was instrumental in turning The APA 2 + 1 Campaign into reality. No less important, she got the profession to become more at ease with co-authorship.

When you look over their CV you will notice that Helen wrote on an immense variety of topics, including ones we now call 'meta-philosophy.' Many of these papers originate in the ('why is this philosophy?') objections they encountered. This also includes the co-edited volume with Johan and Eric Schwitzgebel, *Philosophy Through Science Fiction Stories: Exploring the Boundaries of the Possible*. People always wanted to close intellectual borders, while Helen was always and everywhere showing that there were paths to be trodden. If data was absent for some problem they wanted to tackle, Helen found a way to do the study (or nudge others into doing it).

Helen had a rare skill to write for multiple audiences at once. And I am pleased that a wider public will be able share in that with *Wonderstruck: How Wonder and Awe Shape the Way We Think.*

When we started to discuss the end, I expected a meditative turn. But our last most serious chat was focused one the nature of ambition. Instead, Helen threw herself in more work, including organizing a posthumous reception. They knew I had studied how Hume and Smith, and Spinoza and his circle, had organized this and we discussed it without shame. *Wisdom is a meditation on life*, Helen quoted. When Helen elicited from me a promise to curate a collection of their blog writings, they mentioned Eric Steinhart's biographical text (see here at DailyNous). I said yes to their request not so much to honor our friendship, but primarily to give myself an excuse to re-read and trod their lively path, anew.

I am not ready to let go.

A single, slender breath sometimes no more than a sigh is the line between the living and our mortality. I often catch myself obliquely wondering whether Spinoza felt a creeping doubt about his intellectual edifice. But I have no doubt that Helen's vibrant, overflowing and infectious intellectual joy exemplified his insight that the more one understands things the less one is acted on by affects which are evil, and the less one fears death.

May their memory be a blessing.

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