



14 March 2017

The Holberg Prize Names British Philosopher and Kant Scholar Baroness Onora O’Neill of Bengarve as 2017 Laureate

(BERGEN, Norway) – Today, [The Holberg Prize](#)—one of the largest international prizes awarded annually to an outstanding researcher in the arts and humanities, the social sciences, law or theology—named British author, scholar and Philosophy Professor Onora Sylvia O’Neill as its 2017 Laureate. O’Neill is an Honorary Professor of Philosophy, Emeritus, at the University of Cambridge, and a crossbench member of the House of Lords. She will receive the financial award of NOK 4,500,000 (approx. USD 525,000) during a formal ceremony at the University of Bergen, Norway, on 8 June.

O’Neill will receive the Prize for her distinguished and influential role in the field of philosophy and for shedding light on pressing intellectual and ethical questions of our time. Her contribution to our understanding of Immanuel Kant is regarded as transformative and has led to a renewed interest in his work. In particular, O’Neill has explored the requirements of public reason and how they relate to international justice and to the roles of trust and accountability in public life.

For almost half a century, O’Neill has combined writing on political philosophy and ethics with a range of public activities, and her work has influenced generations of scholars, policy makers and practitioners alike. She has written extensively on political philosophy and ethics, bioethics and international justice, and is highly regarded as a specialist on human rights. She has applied a rigorous philosophical thinking when discussing major contemporary issues and her scholarship has had an immeasurable impact on the wider public sphere. O’Neill describes the central question in her early works on Kant as “how reasoning could bear on action.” “This seemed,” she says, “and still seems to me the elephant in the room that is all too often ignored or pushed into the margins in philosophical work in ethics and political philosophy.”

To date, O’Neill has published more than a dozen books and more than a hundred articles. Many of these confront some of the deepest moral and political challenges of our age. Her works on Kant include *Acting on Principle* (1975), which explores the relationship between morality and rationality, and *Constructions of Reason* (1989), which argued that Kant saw reasoning as requiring that we make it possible for others to understand what we say and to grasp what we do. In books such as *Faces of Hunger* (1986) and *The Bounds of Justice* (2000), she deals with the structural conditions of oppression and how global inequality may be understood through a concept of justice that is cosmopolitan rather than civic. In *Justice across Boundaries: Whose Obligations?* (2016), she deals with human rights and responsibilities and poses the question: Who ought to do what, and for whom? O’Neill argues that sovereign states often lack competence and will to secure justice and universal rights, and a progression towards global justice requires that obligations be held by both states and non-state actors. Complex questions of morality and public policy are also discussed in O’Neill’s work in bio-ethics: *Rethinking Informed Consent in Bioethics* (2007), co-authored with Neil Manson. In this book, they defy current practice and opinion by rejecting the widespread policy premise that informed consent sufficiently protects patients and research subjects.

“O’Neill has an extraordinary ability to blend questions of morality, with an account of psychological plausibility and institutional legitimacy that makes her a powerful guide to the most profound ethical questions of our time,” says Chair of the Holberg Academic Committee, Dr. Pratap Bhanu Mehta. “Not only has she transformed our understanding of Kant, she has also demonstrated how to do philosophy in a way that measures up to the complex moral demands of the world. Her philosophical work is rigorous, yet gracious in its articulation and profoundly moved by a deep and abiding concern for humanity.”

O’Neill studied philosophy, psychology and physiology at the University of Oxford before she received her PhD from Harvard University in 1969. In 1970 she became Assistant Professor at Barnard College, the women's college at Columbia University. In 1977 she returned to Britain and took up a post at the University of Essex, where she became full Professor of Philosophy in 1987. From 1992 until 2006 she was Principal of Newnham College, University of Cambridge, where she is now Honorary Fellow. O’Neill was created a life peer as Baroness O’Neill of Bengarve in 1999 and has served as a crossbench member of the House of Lords since 2000. She has won a number of awards, and was appointed a Commander of the British Empire in 1995 and a Member of the Order of the Companions of Honour in 2014. In 2015 she was awarded the prestigious International Kant Prize.

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O’Neill was President of the Aristotelian Society from 1988 to 1989 and President of the British Academy between 2005 and 2009, where she became a Fellow in 1993. She is also a Fellow of the Academy of Medical Sciences, and a foreign member or honorary member of several non-British academies. O’Neill was the founding President of the British Philosophical Association in 2003, and she became an honorary Fellow of the Royal Society in 2007. In 2013 she held the Spinoza Chair of Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam. O’Neill was Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission from 2012 until 2016, and she has been a member of many other policy committees and public advisory boards, including the Nuffield Council on Bioethics from 1996 to 1998 and the Human Genetics Advisory Commission from 1996 until 1999. As a crossbench member of the House of Lords, she has served on various Select Committees, particularly on Science and Technology. Furthermore, she has been Chair of the Nuffield Foundation since 1997, and she is since 2016 a member of the Banking Standards Board, tasked with improving banking culture and accountability in the UK. O’Neill holds a great number of honorary doctoral degrees. She was elected to the German order Pour le Mérite in 2014, and was awarded the Knight Commander's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany in 2016.

About the Holberg Prize

Established by the Norwegian Parliament in 2003, the Holberg Prize (@holbergprisen) is one of the largest annual international research prizes awarded to scholars who have made outstanding contributions to research in the arts and humanities, social science, law or theology. The Prize is funded by the Norwegian Government through a direct allocation from the Ministry of Education and Research to the University of Bergen. Previous Laureates include Julia Kristeva, Jürgen Habermas, Manuel Castells, Bruno Latour and Marina Warner. This year, the Holberg Prize received 109 nominations, for a total of 99 candidates, from universities and other academic institutions across the globe. To learn more about the Holberg Prize and the call for nominations visit:

www.holbergprisen.no/en

The Holberg Prize is named after writer, essayist, philosopher, historian and playwright Ludvig Holberg. Holberg was born in Bergen in 1684 and played an important part in bringing the Enlightenment to the Nordic countries.

Visit www.holbergprisen.no/en/press for press photos, biography, Committee citation and more.

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