



## WRITING, SEMINARS, AND SINGING DAVID OWENS

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From August 2025, David Owens will be the Sekyra and White’s Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Oxford and a Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Oxford. He is the author of four monographs (*Causes and Coincidences*, 1992; *Reason Without Freedom*, 2000; *Shaping the Normative Landscape*, 2012; and *Bound by Convention*, 2022), together with a collection of his papers (*Normativity and Control*, 2017). – Address: Corpus Christi College, Oxford OX1 4JF, United Kingdom. E-mail: david.owens@philosophy.ox.ac.uk.

In the project description I submitted to the Wissenschaftskolleg, I proposed to study the ways in which political and social authority threatens our liberty. That is what my fellowship has enabled me to do. During my time at the Kolleg, I’ve been working on half a dozen papers, some of which I had in draft when I arrived and several of which are fresh products of my stay. I also began drafting a monograph that links these papers together. This work would have been much retarded without the fellowship.

During the past year, two papers were published that outlined the central themes of my project:

“Command and Obedience.” In *Engaging Raz*, edited by A. Marmor, K. Brownlee, and D. Enoch, 443–462. Oxford University Press, 2025.

“Rules and Rulers: Demanding, Commanding and Assuming Responsibility.” *Political Philosophy* 1, no. 2 (2024): 463–487. <https://doi.org/10.16995/pp.15381>.

The fellowship was spent elaborating on and applying these ideas more widely. Some papers were in draft when I arrived: “Coercion as an Excuse,” “Liberty, Equality, Authority,” “Authority and Choice: The Case of Employment,” “Property and Slavery.” These all

required further work. In the course of the year, they were given as talks generating valuable feedback. All four have now appeared or will appear in print.

During my time at the Kolleg, my work took a methodological turn. A new paper drafted during my fellowship, “Morality, Convention and the Method of Cases,” examines the way in which Anglophone moral and political philosophers use examples to establish their conclusions. It argues that they must do this rather differently, since a good part of morality is based on social convention.

Another new paper entitled “The Fragmentation of Justice and the Direction of History” examines the methodology of Anglophone political philosophy. The paper argues that there can be no such thing as a philosophical theory of justice. Justice is conventional rather than natural; a society’s conception of justice consists in the set of political values that actually regulate that society’s collective deliberations. My Colloquium presentation at the Kolleg was based on this paper. Given the thesis being defended, it was especially valuable to receive feedback from historians and social scientists, an audience to which I usually have little access. I intend to give this as an Inaugural Lecture when I take up the Sekyra and White’s Chair of Moral Philosophy at the University of Oxford this coming academic year.

My residence in Berlin generated a number of invitations to give talks in Germany. Within Berlin I spoke to academic fora at the Humboldt-Universität and the Freie Universität and received invitations to LMU Munich and to the Department of Philosophy at Bielefeld University. Outside Germany, I addressed conferences at the University of Bergen, the University of Neuchâtel, and the University of London. The freedom from teaching provided by my fellowship enabled me to deliver fresh material on these occasions, making them more profitable for both speaker and audience.

My work has benefitted in more intangible ways from my stay at the Kolleg. I’ve long had a keen interest in history, but little opportunity to interact with professional historians except in purely administrative contexts. In my cohort of Fellows, there are at least half a dozen historians with whom I speak regularly about matters of mutual interest. (Among them is David Edgerton, a colleague at King’s College London whom I had never previously met!) I frequently found myself ordering and reading historical works that had been recommended and that enriched my own research. Had there been more social scientists in my cohort (economists, sociologists, anthropologists), the atmosphere would have been even more stimulating, and I’d recommend a recruitment drive in those areas.

The weekly Fellows' Colloquium is central to the intellectual life of the Kolleg. To facilitate discussion among people in different disciplines, Colloquium talks must strike a difficult balance between giving the audience some sense of the details of the Fellow's project, on the one hand, and placing that project in a broader intellectual context, on the other. Though I invariably learnt from both presentation and discussion, I felt that the balance was not always achieved. Some talks presented the material on which the Fellow was working without giving the audience too much of a sense of its wider significance. Other talks painted a clear picture of what was going on in the Fellow's discipline or of the Fellow's past academic work, but without really describing their Wiko project. Upon arrival, some of us (myself included) felt rather unsure what was expected of us, and it might be helpful to give Fellows more of a steer at the start of the year.

Beyond the strictly academic sphere (and the excellent library that supports our work), the Kolleg's ecosystem in 2024/2025 contained some important informal institutions. Nikolaus Wachsmann organised a writing club where those of us who wish to write in a more accessible way could present and get feedback on work intended for a wider audience. As someone who has tried (and largely failed) to do this, I found these sessions very illuminating. I know that the Kolleg rightly prides itself on its efforts to integrate Fellows' partners into the life of the institution. As well as attending social and academic events regularly, my husband Sam took German lessons throughout the year and found them extremely helpful. Sam (together with Hannah Darabi) also established a film club whose showings were illuminating and well-attended.

There was one quite unexpected pleasure during my stay at the Kolleg. For most of my life, I've been a chorister, though I'd rather given up singing in the past decade. Upon arrival I was delighted to discover that the Wiko ran a choir composed of Fellows and staff with an excellent director of music, Simon, to conduct us. The standard was high, and both the weekly rehearsals and the informal performances we gave were very enjoyable. Hopefully I've got back into the habit of singing—not the least of the many benefits the Kolleg has brought me.