

# Philosophers explore the boundaries of responsibility

**Dr Nicole Vincent from Australia and Dr Jessica Nihlen-Fahlquist from Sweden recently joined the ranks of the Philosophy section. Both post-doctoral researchers have forsaken their native country for three years to carry out TPM research into responsibility. Vincent is working on the interface of neuroscience, the law and philosophy. Nihlen-Fahlquist is focusing on moral responsibility within complex Research & Development (R&D) networks.**

## Nicole Vincent: "The interpretation of the data is crucial"

Nicole Vincent is Polish by birth. She studied computer sciences and philosophy in Melbourne and obtained her PhD in accident law reform at Adelaide University. She has also taught philosophy in New-Zealand. She moved to Delft at the end of October last year to carry out research into the common ground between insight into 'responsibility' from neuroscientists, in the law and in philosophy.

"The law holds people responsible, unless they are ill or underage. Philosophers have other ideas. They consider the 'free will' to be important. However, the law does not recognise this, and so there is dissonance between the law and philosophers. And then there are the neuroscientists. They look for physical explanations for particular behaviour, among psychopaths for example. Their findings do not tally with either the law or the insight gained by philosophers."

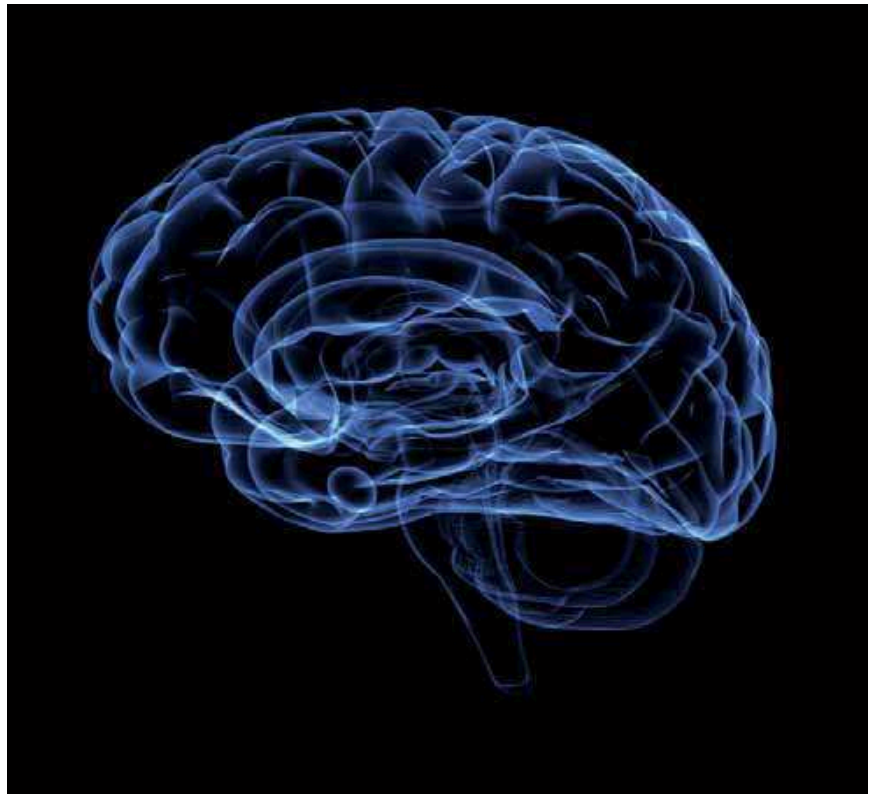
It is all about how you interpret the data. "Consider, for example, a kleptomaniac. A kleptomaniac has to steal, even if he doesn't need what he steals. The law takes account of this irresistible urge to steal. But does this factor count or not? Neuroscientists could find an abnormality and conclude that it is a fault of the brain. Does that mean that this person is ill? Or is he just a bad person? Science does not hold the key and neither does the law. So philosophy examines all the different ways of thinking and looks for factors that may make a person responsible for his actions."

### Not black or white

A factor that complicates matters even further is the various degrees of responsibility. "Imagine you bought books from a door-to-door salesman. Later on, you start to regret it; you were not thinking rationally when you bought them. Although you are normally a responsible person, in certain situations you turn out not to be. A psychopath can also be very rational. It is a classic example of not acting responsibly, but being held responsible for your actions. So it is never simply black or white."

Vincent is gathering as much information as possible. She helped organise a conference in Sydney, which brought neuroscientists and philosophers together to discuss the issue. She also reads a great deal, particularly new publications by other philosophers. But also about the precise definition of 'responsibility' according to the law. She uses all this knowledge to develop guidelines for policy-makers in politics, the judiciary and neuroscience to help determine when a person is responsible.

The significance of her research touches on many areas. "First and foremost, on ourselves. Everyone should be clear about whether an action is responsible or not. Then there is the law, which imposes sanctions or provides help. The sharper the boundaries, the better. And finally you have politics. Debate about obesity, alcoholism and smoking in relation to health is currently a hot item: is it people's own fault or are the people concerned simply unlucky? Here too, it is important to understand under which conditions someone is considered to be personally responsible."



## Jessica Nihlen-Fahlquist: "It is time to stop hiding"

Jessica Nihlen-Fahlquist studied Philosophy and Political Sciences at Linköping University and obtained her Master's degree in Political Sciences at Uppsala University. She carried out PhD work at the Royal Institute of Technology in Sweden between 2002 and 2007. She will shortly be defending her PhD thesis.

Meanwhile, she has been accepted at TU Delft to carry out post-doctoral research into responsibility in R&D networks. Last November, Nihlen-Fahlquist moved to Delft with her husband and two-year-old son. "My PhD project involved analysing ethical aspects within traffic security, focusing on 'moral responsibility'. This post-doctoral project explores much the same area, but this time applied to complex R&D networks. Very interesting and a golden opportunity!"

The research was prompted by the question of responsibility in large-scale building projects. "The R&D networks concerned comprise large numbers of varying players: university researchers, businesses, government organisations, etc. But what happens in the event of environmental damage, for example? Who is to blame? Usually nobody feels responsible; it is everybody's fault. But increasingly, society wants to pinpoint someone who will take responsibility. Moreover, it is important in terms of preventing the same thing from happening again in the future."

Traditionally, philosophical theories have focused on situations where damage is caused by one specific individual. There are

also theories relating to groups of people, in the form of a company for example. This is called collective moral responsibility. "However, R&D networks fall outside both categories. Up until recently, philosophers have paid little attention to the matter of responsibility in complex contexts like this. This is where I see a challenge."

### Standards & values

People tend to have firm opinions about when you can reasonably hold someone responsible for certain forms of damage. "If one of your guests breaks a valuable vase, there is a huge difference between whether they did it on purpose or by accident. We have standards and values with respect to situations like this. If the person concerned did it on purpose of their own free will, we will hold him or her responsible. If it was an accident or happened under coercion, we won't."

So the key question is when is it considered reasonable to hold individuals responsible for mistakes if they are not working independently, but as part of an R&D network. "Particularly when you realise how many potentially damaging activities are carried out in a collective context like this. If standards and values are not visible, individuals can 'hide' behind the group without having to shoulder any responsibility. But it is time to stop hiding. The consequences of activities jointly carried out by a group of individuals are potentially huge and can affect large numbers of people. Carefully conducted research is therefore in the interests of society."

Nihlen-Fahlquist hopes to complete her research in 2010. And what will she do next? "When I was doing my PhD research, I didn't know whether I wanted to work in a university. At the moment, the idea of working in a university as a researcher is quite appealing. But I am also interested in working for a research institute, a government organisation or in industry. It depends on so many other things, but I am open to all kinds of challenges. I think it is best to be both flexible and purposeful. After all, that's what got me here."