

Philosophy and the Neurodivergent

There has recently been a burgeoning interest in issues falling under labels such as ‘philosophy of psychiatry’, ‘philosophy of mental illness’, and ‘mad philosophy’. The following pages highlight some of the work of this kind happening in the Oxford Philosophy Faculty.

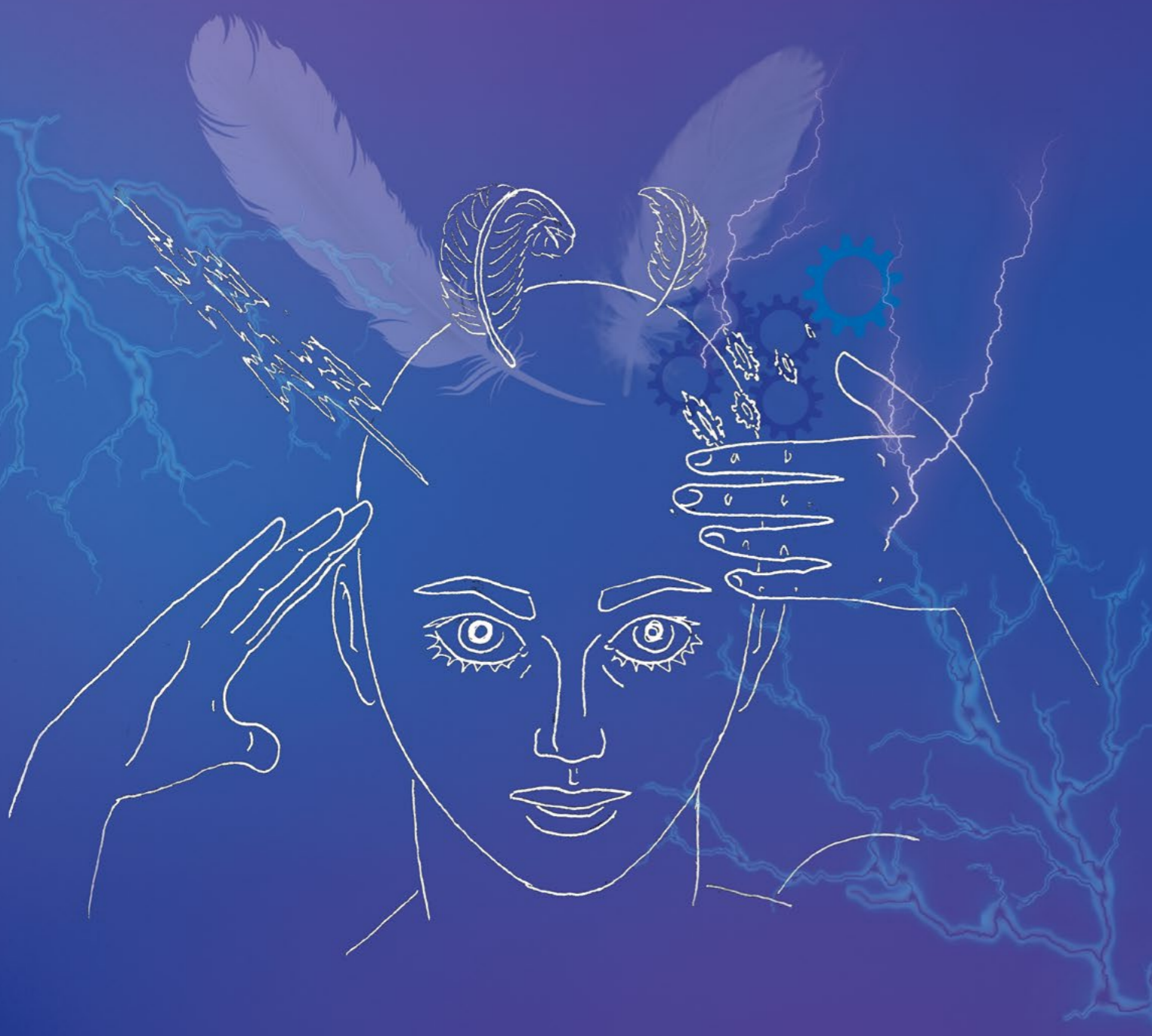


Illustration: Sofia Jeppsson

Madpeople’s Coping Mechanisms

Paul Lodge reports on a conference he organised with Sofia Jeppsson from Umeå University in Sweden.

‘Madpeople’s Coping Mechanisms’ took place in the Philosophy Faculty in September 2023. It was funded by a grant from the Wellcome Trust as part of the project *Renewing Phenomenological Psychopathology*, based at the University of Birmingham.

The conference followed on from a series of online workshops which I had been organising with Sofia and others since 2020 called ‘Philosophy of Psychiatry and Lived Experience’. In both cases the aim was to bring people with lived experience of ‘mental illness’ (myself included) together to learn from each other. The papers from the conference will appear in a special edition of *International Mad Studies Journal* which Sofia and I will edit.

‘Madpeople’s Coping Mechanisms’ took as its starting point the fact that madpeople/service users/psychiatric patients are a heterogeneous group. There is great variety on a neurological, behavioural, and experiential level even among people with the same diagnosis; and the same treatments often have very different effects. The aim of the workshop was to move beyond diagnostic categories and statistics. Instead, it focused on the problems of madpeople/service users/psychiatric patients from the perspective of those coping with them, the strategies they have developed to deal with their experiences, and how and why these strategies have been helpful.

The presenters all had lived experience. Most were philosophers, but there was also a psychologist, a mental health worker, activists, and artists. They discussed themes such as: beginning to heal after recognising past trauma as opposed to engaging with mental health clinicians who talk of problems as stemming from inside your brain; relying on collective action and peer support instead of facing mental health problems as a lone patient; seeing the positive in, and identifying with, ‘bad’ psychiatric conditions like Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD); intellectual humility and embracing the possibility of error and mistakes as a way of dealing with hallucinations.



Photography: Keiko Ikeuchi

Testimony to the success of the conference and the profound importance to those working on the issues can be seen in the feedback provided by those who had given presentations:

‘The conference organisers should be congratulated ... for the care they took to include academic, activist, new, and established voices. In decades of attending academic conferences, Madpeople’s Coping Mechanisms had the most impact, both personally and professionally.’

‘Not only did I leave with the satisfaction that I had connected with valuable allies and potential collaborators, but the very nature of the ... work that I’ve been doing over the past decade felt validated and nourished in a completely genuine way.’

‘This conference was the first time that I had an opportunity to share ideas at the intersection of philosophy and coping with challenges posed by mental health in an environment that was clearly non-judgmental. The presence of others in the room who had similar or at least analogous experiences was exhilarating.’

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