

UC San Diego

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By Cynthia Dillon

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Nancy Cartwright. Photo by Farshid Bazmandegan.

UC San Diego Professor Recognized as One of World's Most Influential Living Philosopher

Asking questions is a matter of course for UC San Diego Philosopher Nancy Cartwright. Her queries include, “What makes something evidence for something else?” and “Does policy work define outcomes?” For her deep-thought work that “fills in gaps,” as she explains, Cartwright is recognized as one of the world’s most influential living philosophers according to [The Best Schools](#), the University of Edinburgh, and others. But when asked how it feels to be among the world’s leading thinkers, Cartwright states: “If I thought it were true, it would be really great.”

But true it seems to be of this deep thinker specializing in philosophy and methodology of natural and social science, according to the stacks of evidence favoring her exceptionalism. Her current work on the nature of evidence for social and health policy in Britain, for example, led to the recent publication entitled “Improving Child Safety: Deliberation, Judgement and Empirical Research” by Cartwright, Eileen Munro, Jeremy Hardie and Eleonora Montuschi (Centre for Humanities Engaging Science and Society, 2016). Now, her questions include “What do we actually learn from a randomized control trial?” and “When is this information useful for extrapolation into other areas?” According to Craig Callender, professor and former chair of the UC San Diego Department of Philosophy, Cartwright has done “some really fantastic work here,” with Angus Deaton, a recent Nobel Prize winner in Economics. Cartwright has even been invited to testify on evidence before the British Parliament.

More empirical proof indicating Cartwright’s excellence includes her recent receipt of the 2017 Dr. Martin R. Lebowitz and Eve Lewellis Lebowitz Prize for Philosophical Achievement and Contribution—a top honor recognizing outstanding achievement in the field—awarded by the Phi Beta Kappa Society and the American Philosophical Association (APA). She also was recognized this year as the 38th Carus Lecturer by the APA at its recent annual conference in Seattle.

Jonathan Cohen, professor and chair of the UC San Diego Department of Philosophy said, “It’s difficult to overstate the impact of Cartwright’s research. For decades, she has set the intellectual agenda internationally on a diverse range of topics from scientific lawhood to causation to objectivity and evidence,” he said. “In all of these areas, Cartwright has changed the way philosophy is done by trenchantly and persuasively insisting that adequate accounts must make contact with and do justice to the practice of working scientists.”

Callender supported this claim, affirming Cartwright’s major influence on philosophy of science for almost five decades. “Where Nancy goes, the field has followed. Broadly speaking, she has moved from philosophy of the natural sciences to philosophy of the social sciences, in particular, from quantum mechanics to economics,” he said.

Cartwright began her career working in philosophy of quantum mechanics in the early 1970s, a time when the field was composed almost entirely of men with beards, noted Callender. “Today, that’s still true about the field. It couldn’t have been easy for her,” he said. “But she thrived; and if the field is any more inviting now, it’s because of the path she forged.”

Specializing in causal inference, modeling and evidence-based policy, Cartwright’s contributions to the field include work on laws of nature, scientific practice and explanation.

“She showed that the model of science linking these three things...often still taught in schools...isn’t at all right,” said Callender. “More than anyone else, she has pushed the picture of science as disunified, a kind of patchwork of models rather than a unity of method and laws.”

“What I most admire about her intellectually is that she insists on working on philosophy that matters. By spending time talking only to other philosophers, the subject can become sterile and insular. Nancy doesn't fall into this trap,” noted Callender. “Having what matters—to science, to society—always firmly in focus, she picks new and important problems. Apart from intelligence, hard work, and so on, I think this focus has been the key to her success.”

Cartwright is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, a MacArthur Fellow, a Fellow of the British Academy and Professor Emeritus at the London School of Economics. She was honored by the University of St. Andrews in Scotland during its 600th anniversary, along with Hillary Clinton and Dame Jane Goodall, and Cartwright serves as co-director of the Centre for Humanities Engaging Science and Society (CHESS) at Durham University in England, where she teaches part time. Additionally, her distinctions include past president of the Philosophy of Science Association, former president of the APA, former member of the U.S. National Research Council's Committee on Developing a Research Agenda for Social Science Evidence for Use, and the list goes on.

Besides her professional excellence, Cartwright also stands out in a more personal way. According to Cohen, not only is Cartwright a world-leading, highly influential and widely lauded scholar, she is also an inspiring teacher and advisor who cares deeply about students.

“She is generous with her time and support to students at all levels, and works tirelessly on their behalf,” said Cohen. “She is a great friend to generations of teachers, students and colleagues around the world.”

Callender concurred. “Somehow she has turned most of her graduate students and colleagues into a warm extended family, touching the lives as well as the intellects of dozens of philosophers.”

While Cartwright might not own up to her description as a most influential philosopher or a “force of nature,” as Callender calls her, she does admit her regard for students. “I love the students,” she said. “I still cry at graduation.”

The [Department of Philosophy](#) in the No. 23 globally ranked [Division of Arts and Humanities](#) at UC San Diego has grown to become an internationally ranked department, committed to the highest standards of teaching and research. The department strongly advocates interdisciplinary work, and it has close research and teaching connections to a wide range of fields, including history, physics, classical studies, psychology, linguistics, political science, biology, law, mathematics and more. Graduates of its Ph.D. program are successfully placed in top departments across the country and abroad.

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