

# PETER CHARLES MENZIES

1953–2015



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Peter Charles Menzies died at home in Sydney on 6 February 2015, the day after his sixty-second birthday, at the sad conclusion of a seven-year disagreement with cancer. No one who knew him will be surprised to learn that he conducted this long last engagement with the same strength of mind, clarity, and good-natured equanimity for which he was known and loved by friends, students and colleagues, over the three decades of his professional life. He continued working throughout his illness, teaching and supervising at Macquarie University until his retirement in 2013, and writing and collaborating until his final weeks. He will be remembered by the Australasian philosophical community as one of its most lucid and generous voices, and by philosophers worldwide as one of the most astute metaphysicians of his generation.

Menzies was born in Brisbane, and spent his childhood there and in Adelaide. His family moved to Canberra in 1966, where he attended Canberra Grammar School. He studied Philosophy at the Australian National University (ANU), graduating with the University Medal in 1975. He went on to an M.Phil at St Andrews, writing on Michael Dummett's views on Realism, under the

supervision of Stephen Read. He then moved to Stanford for his PhD, working with Nancy Cartwright on the then newly-emerging issues of Newcomb Problems and Causal Decision Theory.

His Stanford experience was evidently formative, not merely in setting the course of much of his future work, but in establishing a fund of anecdotes that would long enrich the Coombs tearoom at the ANU and other Australian philosophy venues. There is a generation of Australian-trained metaphysicians who know little about Michel Foucault, except that he had the good fortune to be taken out for pizza in Palo Alto by a young Peter Menzies, following a talk at Stanford. (Peter would add how delighted he was to discover that Foucault preferred pizza to something expensive and French.) The generous collegiality that Peter had evidently displayed on that occasion – stepping up to the plate, when other arrangements to entertain a distinguished visitor had broken down – would have looked completely characteristic, to all those who heard this story in later years.

Returning to Australia in 1983, Peter held a tutorship at the Department of Traditional and Modern Philosophy, University of Sydney, from 1984 to 1986. He was then awarded an Australian Research Council Research Fellowship, held initially at the University of Sydney and then at the ANU, where he won a Research Fellowship in the Philosophy Programme at the Research School of Social Sciences. He remained at the ANU until 1995, when he took up a Lectureship at Macquarie University. He was promoted to a Personal Chair at Macquarie in 2005, becoming an Emeritus Professor following his retirement in 2013. He was elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 2007, and was President of the Australasian Association of Philosophy from 2008–9.

The central focus of Peter's philosophical work, throughout much of his career, was the study of causation – both causation in itself, and causation in its relevance to other philosophical topics, such as physicalism, levels of explanation, and free will. From the beginning, he had a particular knack for putting his finger on difficulties in other philosophers' positions, and for explaining with great clarity what the problem was. With this combination of talents, he was soon making a difference. At the beginning of David Lewis'

famous paper ‘Humean Supervenience Debugged’ (*Mind*, 1994), Lewis singles out ‘especially the problem presented in Menzies (1989)’ as the source of, as he puts it, ‘the unfinished business with causation’. The reference is to Peter’s ‘Probabilistic Causation and Causal Processes: A Critique of Lewis’ (*Philosophy of Science*, 1989); other early papers had a similar impact.

Most philosophers who work in this field would agree that the ‘business with causation’ remains unfinished twenty years later, but that the field is greatly indebted to Peter for much of the progress that has been made in the past three decades. As a philosopher who argued that we should understand causation in terms of the notion of making a difference, he certainly practised what he preached, within his own arena.

*Making a Difference* is also the title of a forthcoming volume of essays from Oxford University Press, in which a distinguished group of authors, including Peter himself, engage with this strand in his work from various directions. The volume has been edited by Helen Beebe (Manchester), Chris Hitchcock (Caltech), and myself. It will now be dedicated to Peter’s memory. Several other Fellows of the Academy – Daniel Nolan FAHA and Philip Pettit FAHA – are also among the contributors.

As I have already noted, Peter was one of the most astute philosophical critics in contemporary metaphysics. But, fair-minded to a fault, he was just as adept at putting his finger on what he saw as failings in his own work, as with those of other writers. In his own case, he often returned with new insights to previously worked ground. His much-cited piece ‘Probabilistic Causation and the Pre-emption Problem’ (*Mind*, 1996) is such an example. Later classics include his ‘Difference-Making in Context’ (in Collins, et al., eds, *Counterfactuals and Causation*, MIT Press, 2004), and ‘Non-Reductive Physicalism and the Limits of the Exclusion Problem’ (*Journal of Philosophy*, 2009), a piece co-authored with Christian List, of the London School of Economics.

Christian List is Peter’s most recent collaborator and co-author, but several other philosophers, including myself, had earlier had this good fortune. In my case it happened twice, the first and better-known result being our paper ‘Causation as a Secondary Quality’ (*British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 1993), a piece actually written in the late 1980s, and first delivered in the Philosophy Room at the University of Sydney at the 1990 Australasian Association of Philosophy conference. (I can’t recall how we divided up the delivery, but we certainly fielded questions jointly, and I remember complaining to Peter afterwards that he’d missed an obvious Dorothy-Dixer from a young David Braddon-Mitchell.) Whatever its qualities, or lack of them, the paper proved a stayer, and is for each of us our most-cited article by a very wide margin.

The origins of this piece lay in conversations that had commenced several years earlier. Peter and I met as undergraduates at the ANU in the mid-1970s, and then found ourselves back there in the early 1980s, when we had returned from Stanford in his case, and Cambridge, in mine. After that, we were both in Sydney for several years, and it was from Peter that I learnt about the topics on which he’d been working with Nancy Cartwright, Newcomb problems and causal decision theory. In particular, Peter pointed out to me a now-famous argument of Cartwright’s, published a couple of years previously. Cartwright’s target was the venerable ‘associationist’ view of David Hume and Bertrand Russell. Associationists claim either (with Hume) that causation is nothing more than mere regularities – A causes B just in case A is reliably followed by B, as it were – or (with Russell) that there are really no causes at all, only regularities and patterns of association. But Cartwright argued that if we are to make sense of rational decision making, we need more than that – we need causal laws, in addition to Humean ‘laws of association’.

For my part, I was new to thinking about causation, but inclined to approach it in the same blythe Humean spirit I found attractive elsewhere. Peter patiently pointed out that if I wanted to go that way, I needed to have something to say to Cartwright. I don’t think I can date any specific conversations from that period, but I know they started pretty early, because their influence starts showing up in the pieces I was writing – including responses to that challenge – at least from as early as 1985. This became, and remains, a central interest for me, and it was Peter who not only steered me in that direction, but taught me much of what I needed to know, in order to get started. Our philosophical instincts often led us in different directions, to some extent, but in ‘Causation as a Secondary Quality’ they converged, apparently to good effect.

In the case of my second collaboration with Peter, I can actually place and date the conversation from which it traced its origins. At the beginning of the 1993 Australasian Association of Philosophy conference in Adelaide, Peter and I took the opportunity to indulge another common interest – cake and coffee – somewhere in North Adelaide, while he told me the latest philosophical news from the ANU. (He had been working there for several years at that point, while I had been in Sydney.)

Peter’s main news that day concerned what later came to be called the Canberra Plan – an ambitious unified approach to metaphysics being developed by Frank Jackson FAHA, and others at the ANU, along lines inspired by the great Princeton metaphysician (and Honorary Fellow of the Academy), David Lewis FAHA. I was somewhat sceptical, and among the things we

discussed were the apparent semantic presuppositions of the approach – the way it seemed to take for granted notions such as *truth* and *reference* – and the thought that it might run into difficulties if it sought to apply its own methods to the notions on which these presuppositions relied. More than a decade later, that discussion matured into the topic of our second joint paper, a somewhat neglected piece called ‘Is Semantics in the Plan?’, which appeared in a volume on the Canberra Plan edited by David Braddon-Mitchell and Robert Nola from Auckland.

As one of Peter’s collaborators, it is easy to understand why he was such a successful teacher and supervisor, held in such grateful regard by generations of students. He combined patience, equanimity, generosity, and unfailing good-humour, with insight, exceptional clarity, and an almost encyclopaedic acquaintance with relevant parts of the literature. In effect, he made it impossible for his grateful students – and collaborators! – *not* to learn, and not to enjoy the process. Many of his PhD students from the ANU and Macquarie, such as Mark Colyvan, Daniel Nolan, Stuart Brock, Cathy Legg, Mark Walker,

Joe Mintoff, Nick Agar, Kai Yee Wong, and Lise Marie Andersen, have now gone on to distinguished careers in Australasia and elsewhere. All remember him with fondness and gratitude. As Lise Marie Andersen (Aarhus), one of his last PhD students, puts it: ‘As a supervisor Peter was patient, warm and extremely generous with his time and knowledge. As a philosopher he was an inspiration.’

Peter Menzies is survived by his daughter Alice and son Edward (Woody) from his former marriage to Edwina Menzies, and by Alice’s three sons, Joseph, Nicolas and Eli; by his partner Professor Catriona Mackenzie FAHA, step-sons Matt and Stefan, and a step-granddaughter, Olivia, born a few weeks before his death; and by his brother Andrew and sister Susan. By his friends, students, and colleagues, as by his family, he will be very sadly missed.

#### HUW PRICE FAHA

This is an expanded version of an obituary that appeared in the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, June 2015.