

JOHN JAMIESON CARSWELL (JACK) SMART AC

1920–2012

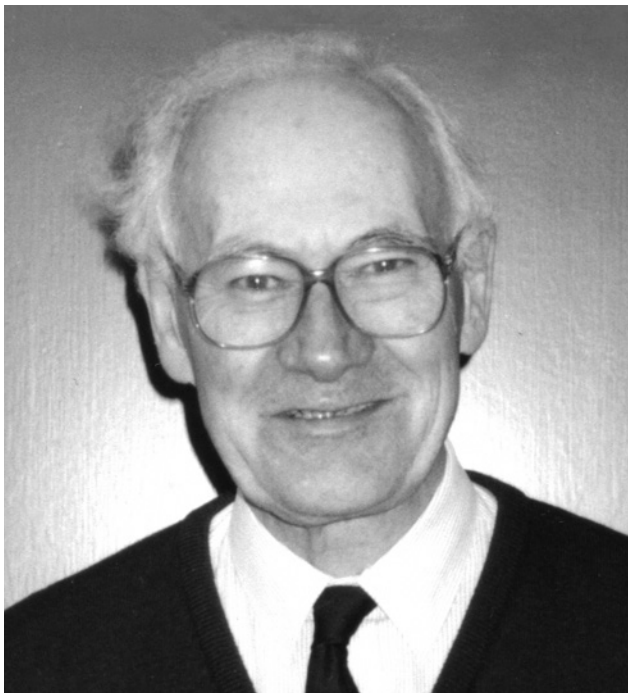


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John Jamieson Carswell (Jack) Smart was born on 16 September 1920, in Cambridge, England. He studied philosophy and mathematics at the University of Glasgow, graduating with the MA in 1948. His career as an undergraduate was interrupted by service in the British Army, 1940–1945, serving mainly in India and Burma. He took the BPhil at the University of Oxford in 1948, was a Junior Research Fellow at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, 1948–1950, before being appointed Hughes Professor of Philosophy at the University of Adelaide. He was very young (29) for a chair and his appointment was part of Adelaide's policy of making bold appointments of early-career scholars to chairs. This is a high risk policy but it paid off in more than spades in Smart's case. During his time at Adelaide (1950–72), he made enormously influential contributions in four areas of philosophy: the philosophy of time, the philosophy of science, normative ethics and the philosophy of mind. The impact of his contributions can be gauged by the fact that during this time he accepted visiting professorships at Princeton (1957), Harvard (1963) and Yale (1964), and later at Stanford (1982). Despite a great affection for Adelaide – the city and the university – in 1972 he felt it was time to move on and he took a

Readership at La Trobe University, 1972–76, before moving to the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University, in 1976, where he was Professor of philosophy and the Chair of the Department. He retired in 1985. He was a Visiting Fellow in the Research School of Social Sciences from 1986 to 1999. He moved to Melbourne in October 1999, where he was an Honorary Research Fellow in philosophy at Monash University and regularly attended philosophy seminars there for many years. Among his many distinctions were honorary doctorates from the University of St Andrews, Glasgow and La Trobe, the giving of the Gavin David Young Lectures at Adelaide in 1987, being a Foundation Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, and being made a Companion in the General Division in the Order of Australia in 1990.

Although born in England and educated in Scotland, Smart very quickly became identified with Australia and Australian philosophy. The directness and informality of Australia and Australian philosophy appealed to him and when the Philosophy Programme (formerly department) in the Research School of Social Sciences decided to name an annual lecture in his honour, he asked the Programme to change the title from the 'J. J. C. Smart Lecture' to the 'Jack Smart Lecture'. His publications were marked by great clarity and an unusual lack of pretension for someone of his eminence, but it was the kind of clarity and lack of pretension that is only possible for someone with a deep understanding of difficult issues. He had a remarkable ability to cut straight to the core of a philosophical problem and make a seminal contribution in surprisingly few words.

His most famous article, 'Sensations and Brain Processes', first published in 1959, reshaped the philosophy of mind and is one of the most reprinted articles in analytical philosophy. In it he defended and developed the view that sensations are brain processes. Later he extended the view to encompass intentional states like belief and desire and mental states in general. Nowadays some form of materialism is a very widely accepted position, but in the 1960s and 70s the view was extremely controversial and was known in some quarters as the 'Australian heresy'. (David Armstrong at Sydney also played a very important role in developing the view and together they influenced a generation of Australian philosophers.)

In the philosophy of science Smart was one of the most influential supporters of realism about the sub-microscopic particles of physics. Electron theory is not merely a device for predicting experimental results, rather electrons are the causes of the results; otherwise, Smart argued, the results would be some kind of enduring miracle. Smart viewed time as a fourth dimension akin to the three spatial ones – objects are extended in time as well as in space. He saw this view as the only one to hold in the light of relativity theory and was impatient with those philosophers who think that one can sensibly philosophise about time without due deference to what physics has to say. In normative ethics he defended act utilitarianism: the right act is that act out of those available to the agent that would produce the most happiness (or, better, has the greatest expectation of doing so). His criticism of rule utilitarianism – the view that the right act is the act in accord with the rule the following of which would produce the most happiness – as involving a kind of ‘rule worship’ inconsistent with

utilitarianism’s guiding focus on outcomes, set the agenda for much of the debate over utilitarianism and more generally consequentialist views in ethics.

Philosophy for Smart was much more than something he was quite unusually good at; it structured his life. But it was never all his life. He had a great affection for family and friends – and then there was cricket. He was known to check the Test score (discreetly, on a small radio held to his ear) during philosophy seminars, and he remarked that he realised he had become an Australian when he found himself barracking for Australia against England in cricket. (He became an Australian citizen in 1976.)

His first wife Janet Paine died in 1967. He married Elizabeth Warner in 1968. He is survived by Elizabeth, and his children Helen and Robert from his first marriage.

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