



*Barry Taylor*  
*(1946–2010)*

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Barry Taylor died on Friday 15 January 2010, at his home, with an open copy of *The Spectator* nearby, a book on the philosophy of fly-fishing, test cricket on television and, in the kitchen, pig's trotters cooking slowly on the stove. Like a consistent utilitarian, after spreading good cheer and avoiding harm to others, Barry Taylor further increased the total balance of happiness in the world by really enjoying the things he enjoyed.

His career began with vigorous years at Oxford, in the early 1970s. This was followed by an eminent career at the University of Melbourne, from 1974 until his retirement at the end of 2007. His death is a great loss to philosophy. Taylor's most significant contributions in philosophy are encapsulated in his two main books. These books are like a fly-fisherman's lures: small but perfectly formed. They are also like gems: nowhere obscure, translucent throughout; but they are also very hard – even an expert has to study them very closely, to appreciate how valuable they are.

Taylor's first book, *Modes of Occurrence* (1985), was part of 'the Davidsonic boom' reverberating from Davidson's 'Truth and Meaning' (1967). Taylor articulates a rigorous theory of 'states of affairs', which he brings to bear on the puzzling semantics of adverbs in natural languages. His theory of states of affairs is ontologically parsimonious, and of utility for many more purposes than just the semantics of adverbs. Furthermore, adverbs are of lasting philosophical interest, in part because 'adverbial theories' enter into many attempts to reduce our 'ontological commitments', and it is far from obvious why moving commitments 'into adverbs' should remove them 'from ontology'. The book is also of lasting significance because, in explaining what people mean by their words, Taylor tries to use only resources that are already understood by those same people – making this book a purist's paradigm of rigorous 'truth-conditional' semantics.

*Models, Truth, and Realism* (2006) distils research that evolved over Taylor's entire career. He argues for a distinctive diagnosis of the core commitments (in epistemology

and semantics) of philosophical 'realism' – and then he argues that this position is untenable. He often echoes other leading 'anti-realists', Michael Dummett and Hilary Putnam, but Taylor is exhaustive, and yet also clear and concise, about the details.

Taylor's argumentation is of special significance for the 'Australian realism' of Jack Smart and David Lewis – who recognised that you need friction to move forwards, and worked very hard at figuring out precisely where they could block Taylor's arguments. In a letter to Smart (copy to Taylor), 22 August 1991, Lewis concludes: 'You'd like a win; so would I, but I don't think there is any hope of that. (I think there almost never is in philosophy – it's too easy to force a draw.) ... when Barry says at the end that no noncircular argument can be mounted against the Putnamian, I agree ... And the Putnamian, in turn, has no noncircular argument against us. And there we may let matters rest ... So you see that I have no dispute with the letter, as opposed maybe to the spirit, of Barry's analysis. And I must say that I think it's very helpful indeed', (quoted with permission from Stephanie R. Lewis).

In particular, Lewis thanked Taylor for formulating 'realism' as a *coherent* doctrine (which Taylor then argued to be false) – whereas Putnam and others had maintained that realism is 'incoherent'. By 2006, Taylor had advanced the debate much deeper. Arguably the result is still 'a draw'; but it is now more true than ever that Taylor's work is 'very helpful indeed', for realists and anti-realists alike, not least because it rigorously clarifies the issues over which realists and anti-realists can agree to differ.

Taylor was 'a philosopher's philosopher', and something of a perfectionist. (As a leading 'anti-realist', his relationship to his teachers at Oxford, Dummett and McDowell, was closely analogous, in the history of music, to that of Webern to Schoenberg.) Taylor felt deeply the non-utilitarian bonds of family and friendship, of loyalty, fairness and justice, and he worked conscientiously at university governance, as well as teaching and research, at Melbourne University. He was discouraged in battles against the tide in administration, and took early retirement; but his impact on his students and colleagues was profound, his books and articles are of lasting value in the discipline, and his early death is a painful loss.

*John Bigelow*