

David Hugh Mellor FAHA

1938 - 2020



Australian Academy of the Humanities archives

Philosophy in Australia has lost one of its most energetic overseas champions. Hugh Mellor (D. H. Mellor to his readers) died in Addenbrooke's Hospital, Cambridge, England, on 21 June 2020. Although he had been diagnosed long previously with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, a condition he bore with such characteristically stoic cheerfulness that many who knew him were unaware of its presence, his eventual decline from a respiratory infection was swift and his death peaceful. On 2 July he was buried, at his own wish, at Barton Glebe Woodland burial ground, near Cambridge.

Hugh was born on 10 July 1938 in London. An early mark of promise was his admission to Manchester Grammar School (then a so-called direct grant school where entry was gained by

competitive examination, parents were means-tested and fees paid primarily by local education authorities on a sliding scale). He went on to study chemical engineering at Pembroke College, Cambridge. In 1960 he graduated BA, and, financed by a prestigious Harkness Fellowship, moved to the University of Minnesota which awarded him the MSc degree in the same subject in 1962. Minnesota required him to take a subsidiary subject, and Hugh chose philosophy of science under Herbert Feigl, a distinguished former member of the Vienna Circle. Although on his return to England Hugh worked as a chemical engineer for ICI for a year, and enjoyed the job, he found that he had (in his own words) been 'bitten by the bug' of philosophy and returned to his old college where he was supervised by Mary Hesse in PhD studies on the nature of chance, graduating in 1968. His first book, *The Matter of Chance*, was published by Cambridge University Press in 1971.

In later life, Hugh reckoned that his engineering training, particularly its recognition of the need to work within acceptable degrees of tolerance, influenced his approach to philosophy, freeing him both from the clogged perfectionism that has wrecked many an academic career and the artificiality of thinking unconstrained by real cases and scientific discovery. But it occasionally put him on the receiving end of a

certain kind of academic snobbery: it is telling that the final page of *The Matter of Chance* closes, under the heading 'Apology', with this wry quotation: 'A person of true refinement would have expressed much of that very differently, but nothing will ever make up for the lack of a classical education.'

In contrast, as one friend said of him, 'He was the least snobbish person I have ever met, with pretty much zero sense of self-importance.' This, I think, is exactly right. Being a house guest of the Queen at Sandringham was unobtrusively combined with entertaining to dinner a member of the maintenance staff from his former college (someone he just liked, and whose work he respected), and, if he thought you weren't a snob you might be invited to the same occasion. This attitude carried risks for friends: if he suspected you of being a bit pretentious about wine, you could arrive at his place for dinner to be confronted with a decanted wine whose bottle had been hidden, and instructed to identify it while everyone else watched in gleeful anticipation. Such teasing might focus on other traits he did not share: having no particular concern for the history of philosophy himself, he might, on getting into the Cambridge/London train, say to you 'With your interest in history, you should sit with your back to the engine' (this probably rationalising his own preference for facing forwards).

If he *had* been self-important, he would have had much justification on his publications alone. *The Matter of Chance* was a bold book, rejecting all the standard accounts of statistical probability (frequency theories, degree-of-belief theories etc.) in favour of one in terms of objective dispositional properties that allowed a clear place for singular causation. *Real Time* (1981) became standard material for advanced courses and graduate seminars across the world: one commentator said 'it dominated the philosophy of time for

fifteen years', going on to remark that its heavily modified successor *Real Time II* (1998), which also became a standard text, 'will do the same for the next twenty years'. *The Facts of Causation* (1995), another bold book, not only challenged the standard and plausible Humean view that causation is a relation between events by arguing that the primary causal relata are facts but also argued that causality is not a real relation at all. One who finds this latter view extreme should recall that absences can be causes and effects. *Probability: A Philosophical Introduction* (2005) is far more than the textbook suggested by the title: it has much interest in its own right as well as being, as one reviewer pointed out, 'ideal for professional philosophers and graduate students who wish to find out what might be philosophically interesting about probability', the argument being 'perhaps too dense for the book to be used, unsupplemented, as a textbook in most undergraduate classes'. The same reviewer also said of the book that '[its] writing is very clear, and a model of concision'. This puzzling combination of judgements, 'too dense and very clear', appears in one or other guise in reviews of his other books, which have noted that their crisp prose style sometimes resulted in over-compression of the reasoning. As well as these books, all of them models of systematic organisation, there were two large collections of exemplary essays, *Matters of Metaphysics* (1991) and *Mind, Meaning and Reality* (2012).

But his distinction cannot be captured merely by listing his publications, even if his radio broadcasts are added. He was appointed Professor of Philosophy in Cambridge in 1986 (retiring as Emeritus in 1999), and was awarded the Cambridge higher doctorate of ScD in 1990, going on to collect an honorary doctorate from the University of Lund in 1997. (Courteously, he delivered part of his 1997 acceptance speech, including a modest joke, in Swedish — a language he did not know —,

making the joke funnier to his surprised audience by unwittingly delivering it in a strong Polish accent.) He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1983 (resigning in 2008), served as President of the British Society for the Philosophy of Science from 1985 to 1987 and of the Aristotelian Society (1992–3), as well as Chairman of the Analysis Trust from 2000 to 2008. He was elected an Honorary Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 2003. He held, successively, two Cambridge college fellowships, resigning from Pembroke in 1970 and from Darwin in 2005. Hugh's various resignations were usually on matters which he considered issues of principle, on which he would fight tenaciously. This tenacity brought him international notoriety when he took a prominent role in the opposition to Cambridge's award of an honorary degree to Jacques Derrida. He was serious about this, but not self-righteous: when an interviewer put to him that he was 'struggling to defend Enlightenment values against a rising tide of unreason', Hugh responded, 'No, no. It's not a rising tide of unreason; it's just been a bad year for bullshit in Cambridge.'

His opposition to the honouring of Derrida reflected firm convictions, in particular that objective truth is attainable in philosophy and that philosophers should eschew wilful obscurity and aim to argue for and speak that truth, as clearly and convincingly as possible. He expected that of himself, and of others, and greatly admired philosophers in whom he found these traits, in particular Frank Ramsey (1903–1930) and his great friend David Lewis FAHA (1941–2001). At Cambridge's famous Moral Sciences Club — a venue already intimidating enough for anyone aware of its illustrious history and strong personalities — he could accordingly be a formidable critic, leading to a local witticism that speakers could emerge from discussion "hughmellorated", that is, shown that their paper was severely defective. But his vigorous criticism, however

hard to take, was never a matter of point-scoring; Hugh was after the unadorned truth. And he was just as likely to offer useful help as criticism, even on matters far outside his range of sympathies, such as the elucidation of a particularly gnomic argument in Wittgenstein. These attitudes helped to make him a fine supervisor of postgraduate students, expecting high standards, conscientiously commenting in detail on work and conducting supervisions remorselessly and without regard to the clock. His students, who were never encouraged to become his disciples, but often remained his friends, emerged that much better prepared for the world they would have to enter, and they received his generous support when they did. But this generosity was not confined to his own protégés: for example, an Australian PhD student, who met Hugh for the first and only time on a recreational boat trip during a 2007 conference in Dunedin, New Zealand, said later that he learned more about properties from Hugh in that hour than he had done in all his past studies put together, and noted that Hugh also gave generously of his time to other junior delegates.

Hugh's first visit to Australia was to the ANU in 1975, where he encountered a no-holds-barred manner of philosophical discussion which made him feel immediately at home and led to many return visits as well as to his offering hospitality and support to Australasian arrivals in Cambridge. He was, in fact, a welcome visitor across the world, for many reasons: kind, charming and amusing on social occasions; careful and serious in his preparation of beautifully structured talks; willing to join and take a constructive part in undergraduate classes; unflaggingly interested in his surroundings. But though he enjoyed travel (of which he kept detailed and often exquisite photographic records), he was no rootless cosmopolitan, and remained always firmly anchored in Cambridge, both the city and the university to which he was so fiercely

loyal. He gave selflessly of his time to matters of university management and administration (long before this could become a well-paid career in its own right); having a good strategic sense, combined with much energy and the capacity for skilful planning, he was able not only to get things done swiftly and efficiently but also to help less experienced colleagues to become more effective. (One piece of advice to a junior colleague, who risked becoming over-extended, led him to coin a phrase whose usefulness has outlived him: 'You suffer', he warned, 'from weakness of won't.')

Using his practical skills in building and engineering (visible in the ingenious modifications to his own small house), he was able to engage profitably with architects and engineers in the complicated and expensive project of redeveloping the University's Raised Faculty Building, whose original was both ugly and impractical. It is unsurprising that the University was unwilling to lose his non-academic skills, persuading him to stay on as Pro-Vice-Chancellor for a year after his formal retirement. Outside the University, exploiting his wide range of contacts and friends, he was instrumental in raising the funds needed to preserve and refurbish the Cambridge Arts Theatre, rescuing it from a seemingly inevitable demise.

The resuscitation of the Cambridge Arts Theatre is one illustration of Hugh's lifelong love of theatre and his willingness to support it. He was himself an enthusiastic and talented amateur actor: the list of his performances stretches over more than forty years. Happy to take minor roles as well as major, he would work hard even for the more dismal plays and productions, such as St John's College's valiant staged reading of Wordsworth's dire *The Borderers* in 2007, which not even Hugh's efforts could save. But he enjoyed play-watching at least as much as play-making, as is evidenced by the recollections of many friends who found themselves organised into theatre visits, and by the paving stone bearing his

name at London's Globe Theatre. He chose for himself to have read at his funeral the haunting song from Act IV of Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, which closes with these fitting lines: 'Quiet consummation have; And renownèd be thy grave!'

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