

OBITUARIES

DAVID MALET ARMSTRONG AO

1926–2014

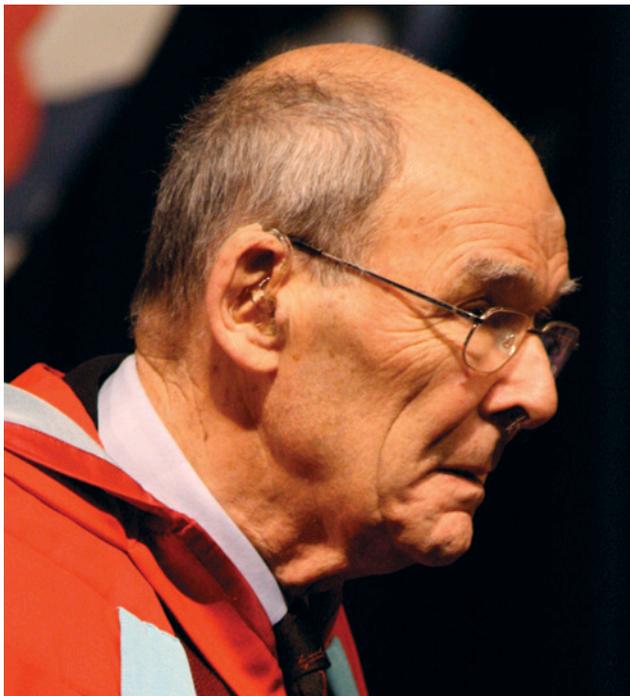


PHOTO: JENS MAUS (DAMATO) [CC BY-SA 3.0] VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

David Armstrong, the doyen of Australian philosophers, and the most influential to date on the international stage, has died in Sydney at the age of 87. He leaves a philosophical legacy of 16 books and innumerable articles, principally in epistemology and metaphysics, and several generations of students deeply influenced by his teaching. He also leaves us laden with honours: AO, Foundation Fellow of this Academy, Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy, Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Honorary Fellow of Exeter College, Oxford, and Honorary D.Litt. from the University of Nottingham, all of which attest to his standing among his contemporaries.

His was a family of some distinction – his father rose to the rank of Commodore in the Royal Australian Navy, retiring with both a CBE and a DSO; his mother belonged to an academic family from Jersey. One grandfather became Director-General of Public Health in New South Wales, while the other was an early anthropologist who became Rector of Exeter College, Oxford. David particularly valued the Jersey connection, and in retirement he and his wife Jenny (de Bohun) were much given to genealogy.

After a school career that included periods at the Dragon School in Oxford, and at Geelong Grammar, and after a short stint in the navy in the post-war occupation of Japan, he distinguished himself as a student of philosophy in John Anderson's Department at the University of Sydney. In 1950 he married Madeleine Annette Haydon, a fellow student who was to become a librarian and theatrical critic. Soon after the marriage David was diagnosed with tuberculosis picked up in Japan, so he spent most of that year recuperating in the Concord Repatriation Hospital

Having recovered, David went with Madeleine to Oxford, where he undertook the newly established and prestigious BPhil postgraduate degree. On account of his Exeter connection, that became his College, a matter perhaps a little tardily acknowledged by an Honorary Fellowship in 2006.

On graduating, David held a temporary post at Birkbeck College in the University of London, and then in 1956 settled in Melbourne, where with great energy he set about building a reputation and a career at the University of Melbourne, in what was at that time the premier philosophy department in Australia. His first book, *Berkeley's Theory of Vision*, appeared in 1960. The following year he picked up a PhD, almost in passing, for work that appeared as *Perception and the Physical World*. A third book, *Bodily Sensations*, followed closely behind.

In 1964 he was appointed to the Challis Chair at the University of Sydney, where, apart from a string of visiting appointments, he spent the remainder of his career, retiring in 1991, but continuing to be active as a Professor Emeritus for many years afterwards. Indeed, with his second wife Jenny (Jennifer Mary de Bohun Clark), whom he had married in 1982, David spent a full semester visiting the USA to teach and philosophise on an American campus almost every year until 2008.

Of the many ways in which he had an impact, indefatigable correspondence and conversation were important. An extensive body of letters exchanged with David Lewis is being prepared for publication, and lesser archives concerning Jack Smart, C. B. Martin and Reinhardt Grossmann are among Armstrong's papers in the National Library in Canberra.

Outside philosophy, he was keen on intellectually demanding games – being good enough at chess in his younger days to have been, I think just once, a member of the NSW state team. In middle life, go, the Korean game of strategy, afforded him much enjoyment. When the Sudoku craze arrived, he was an early adopter. He loved bushwalking, Shakespeare, and the Sydney Swans.

He held conservative political and social views that distinguished him from many of his academic colleagues – being, early and late, a supporter of the *Quadrant* element in Australia's political and cultural life. But in no way a starchy one. In Melbourne, he and Madeleine chose to live among the mildly Bohemian inhabitants of Eltham – in a house designed and built by Alistair Knox, pioneer of environmental correctness. On moving to Sydney, it was in then still gentrifying Paddington, and subsequently Glebe, that he dwelt among the chardonnay socialists.

Fairly early in his time at the University of Sydney, in an atmosphere already made tense by differences over the Vietnam War, his convictions came into play as he led the resistance to attempts to transform and radicalise the content and the methods of teaching and assessing courses in philosophy. By the early 1970s the conflict had reached the point where only a dramatic move, the 'Split' that created two reciprocally antagonistic Sydney philosophy departments, could provide any resolution.

For a time all this resulted in David having to endure some vilification and notoriety, and the loss of some friends. But even in the most fraught circumstances, his constitutional cheerfulness and collegiality, which had enabled him to establish a wide circle of warm local and international friends and co-workers, now enabled him to maintain it. And as one who did not bear grudges, once political passions had subsided he became cordially reconciled to many of those who had been his opponents. Already those tumults seem long ago, and there is no doubt that what he will be remembered – and honoured – for will be his contributions to philosophy.

It is not easy, after the passage of more than fifty years, to recapture the anti-metaphysical tone of British philosophy in the 1950s. There was a great deal of late-Wittgensteinian discussion of the nature and

possibility of philosophy itself, with a widespread sense that philosophy would have to take a quite new direction. Armstrong had been inoculated against such an outlook by his training under Anderson, and by his own sanguine attachment to earlier, more confident, conceptions of the philosopher's task. It is not the least of his services to have demonstrated – *ab esse ad posse* – that systematic epistemology is a proper study, and that metaphysics consists in tackling genuine questions, not merely in unravelling tangles.

A naturalistic realism was, first and last, the *leitmotif* of his work. It is there in the perception book, and still more so in *A Materialist Theory of the Mind* (1968), with its immensely influential division of intellectual labour – philosophical analysis to identify the mind as responsible for mental activities, and scientific enquiry to discover that the nervous system is indeed what does the work. This book consolidated the emerging family of identity and functionalist theories of mind which continue to dominate the field.

Armstrong then returned to epistemology, with his work on causal theories of perception, a reliabilist theory of knowledge, and map theories of belief, in *Belief, Truth and Knowledge* (1973) – before embarking on his largest and most original programme, in ontology of a traditional stamp. Almost single-handedly, with *Universals and Scientific Realism* (1978), he revived Realism about Universals in the midst of the prevailing Nominalism. This stunning reversal of a well-entrenched received view remains in place to this day. Then he developed an account of laws of nature (1983's *What Is a Law of Nature?*), followed by accounts of *A Combinatorial Theory of Possibility* (1989), *A World of States of Affairs* (1997), and *Truth and Truthmakers* (2004), before finishing in 2010 with his *Sketch for a Systematic Metaphysics*.

In all these fields his tireless contributions made and continue to make their mark, setting or modifying the terms of the debate. The impact of all this has been several generations of philosophers, following his lead as much as that of any other single figure, engaged in the revival of metaphysical philosophy. A matchless achievement.

KEITH CAMPBELL FAHA

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