



**Australian
Academy of the
Humanities**

Graham Charles Nerlich FAHA

1929 – 2022

Graham Nerlich, one of Australia's leading figures in the philosophy of Spacetime and Relativity, was born and grew up in Adelaide, the son of Alfred Hugo Nerlich and Mona Pearl Nerlich (nee Burdon). His education at Adelaide Technical High School suggests that he pioneered academic pursuits in the family.

At the University of Adelaide, he took Honours in both Philosophy and English Literature, graduating in 1954, and then completed an MA the following year. From Adelaide he followed Australians' then favoured route for post-graduate study in Philosophy, proceeding to Oxford for the BPhil, at that time a newly introduced two-year program involving both course work and thesis. He was at New College 1956–1958, under the supervision of J.L. Austin, whose distinctive brand of linguistic philosophising left no discernible mark on his thinking.

From the BPhil Graham moved straight into a Lectureship at Leicester University until 1961. He then returned to Australia to the University of Sydney where he was successively Senior Lecturer 1962–1968; Associate Professor, 1968–1972; Professor, 1972–1973. It was during this period that he developed the expertise and insight into the implications of Einstein's Special and General Relativity that are his most important contributions in the philosophy of science. He also much enjoyed the observational exploration of space, with a most serviceable and much used telescope in his garden, and the year's Ephemeris to hand.

And in addition to all his other commitments, for four years from 1968 he served the profession as editor of *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, the premier journal for Western philosophy south of the equator.

In 1974 he returned home to Adelaide and to the Hughes Chair of Philosophy, in which he succeeded his teacher J.J.C Smart. This was not only a homecoming, but an escape from the thankless task of Head of Department in a department at that time bitterly divided over the Vietnam War and the associated upheavals in Australian society, and, within the University, on curriculum issues and questions of departmental governance.

He brought to Adelaide some innovations in governance, detaching the role of Head of Department from the Chair, and admitting student members to committees. These changes became permanent and, by example, spread through the Faculty.

He was elected Fellow of our Academy in 1978, took the Chair of the Philosophy section from 1981 till 1987, and served on Council in 1989 and 1990.

On retirement after twenty years as the Hughes Professor, he became Emeritus Professor in 1995.

1976 saw the publication of *his The Shape of Space*, the culmination of his major project, which was to supplant in the philosophy of space the dominant Leibnizian Relationism, according to which Space is not an entity in its own right, but no more than the system of distances and directions holding between the various genuine physical realities which comprise the cosmos. Nerlich argued for a Realism about Space and Spacetime along two very powerful lines: that Relationism cannot provide any coherent account of enantiomorphism or handed-ness. A left hand is not congruent with its right-handed counterpart, yet the two sets of directions and distances between the parts of each are identical. Further,

unless Spacetime has fully real status, it cannot provide General Relativity's explanation of Newtonian gravity. The book is regarded as a classic, and an updated second edition appeared in 2009.

He refined and elaborated the merits of Spacetime Realism in a series of papers which were gathered together and published as *What Spacetime Explains* in 1994.

In 2013 he provided a final excursion into this territory with *Einstein's Genie out of the Bottle*. This little book was published by the Minkowski Institute, the 21st century's Gresham College, a worldwide informal network of philosophers working in collaboration to promote Minkowski's program of teasing out the metaphysics of Einstein's physics. That he was one of its founding members confirms Graham's standing in this field.

It was after coming to Adelaide that he entered a quite different philosophical field – the question of the origin and validity of moral thinking and other modes of valuation. His *Values and Valuation: Speculations on the Ethical Life of Persons* (1990) presents a naturalistic account of valuation as embedded in, and arising out of, the conditions of human life such as a common language and a social life that are prerequisites for culture and essentials for making common life tolerable. He argues that these capacities for language and sociability are natural human endowments, and that valuing rests on self-awareness and self-critique, the product of maturing in a social milieu.

This places him in a tradition descending from David Hume and taking Darwin on board and has been well received. His interest in Ethics extended beyond theory to practical application: he was the original convenor the University of Adelaide's Committee for the Ethics of experimentation on humans, and a long-serving member on its committee for the ethics of experiments on animals, the Ethics committee at the Institute of Medical and Veterinary Science South Australia, and at SA Pathology.

Throughout his life, Graham maintained his keen interest in matters literary, especially drama. He was an enthusiastic and accomplished participant in amateur theatre, both as an actor – particularly fond of Shakespearean roles – and later as a director. He did have some professional work with the South Australia State Theatre, and on television, but appeared chiefly at the Theatre Guild, and the Independent Theatre.

With Gillian Dooley he edited *Never Mind about the Bourgeoisie*, the correspondence, stretching across twenty years from 1977, between his friend the philosopher Brian Medlin and Iris Murdoch, whom Brian had met in Oxford in the 1960's.

Graham Nerlich was a genial man. His default mood was cheerful. So of course, he was very congenial as well, and will be widely mourned.

Keith Campbell FAHA

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