



Australian  
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# Janna Lea Thompson FASSA

## FAHA

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1942 – 2022

Janna Lea Thompson, one of Australia's most distinguished philosophers, died on 24 June 2022, only a few months after being diagnosed with multiple brain tumours. She was, at least, able in her final months to spend time with her sister, who visited from Canada; to attend the Adelaide Arts Festival; and to arrange for the publication of a novel she had finished writing. (The novel - *Lockdown* - was one of three featuring elderly female detectives, one of them a retired philosopher, that she had written to entertain herself during the Covid-19 lockdowns.) She was, fortunately, largely free of physical suffering throughout the period of medical treatment that followed her diagnosis and remained characteristically cognitively sharp until the final couple of days, which were mostly spent in peaceful drug-induced sleep.

Janna was born in Faribault, Minnesota, south of Minneapolis, in 1942. She was the first of two girls born to schoolteacher parents. Her mother's ancestry was Swedish and her father's (from many generations previous) a mix of English, Irish, Scots and Welsh. Apart from a year spent at a grammar school in England while her parents were on a teacher exchange programme, all of her schooling prior to undertaking a B.A. at the University of Minnesota was in the public school system in Faribault. She went to the University of Minnesota with the intention of becoming a journalist but was inspired by several of her Philosophy teachers to pursue further study in the discipline because they not only sought to use

evidence and argument to support their views but were willing to change their views when others produced more compelling evidence and argument. After completing her undergraduate degree Janna successfully applied for a Marshall Plan scholarship which enabled her to undertake postgraduate study at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford. She completed a B.Phil., which, at that time, was regarded as an excellent way to prepare for teaching Philosophy at the tertiary level.

Janna's first appointment was to the University of Manchester where she taught from 1966 until 1970. At that juncture the English weather and her spirit of adventure encouraged her to seek a change and it was Australia's good fortune that she applied, and was duly appointed, to Monash University. She taught there from 1970 until 1974 and while doing so took the opportunity to complete a Dip. Ed. (Tertiary) to enhance her teaching skills. She moved to La Trobe in 1975 where she remained until her retirement in 2012 other than for two periods of leave: first, from 2003–2005 when she accepted an invitation to be the Deputy Director of the ARC Research Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics at the University of Melbourne, and second, in 2007 for the Winter Semester as Humphrey Visiting Professor in Modern Feminism at the University of Waterloo, Canada. Her move to La Trobe was motivated in part, at least, by a desire for her place of employment to be closer to where she had chosen to live in Melbourne, and, in particular, within cycling distance. Given this concern it will come as no surprise that she immediately helped form a small group who introduced environmental ethics into the curriculum. Another of the subjects she jointly introduced was feminism. The choice to focus on these applications of Philosophy (and others to which she turned her attention later in her career) stemmed from Janna's desire first to understand why things were as they were and then on how to change them for the better. She was ethically and politically concerned from her teenage years through till the end of her life. She joined the Communist Party of Australia but there was no drop off in her activism after she ceased to be a member because she was always seeking ways to achieve a better and more just world. Her activism was motivated by her socialist conviction and involved traditional protest activities like

picketing, demonstrating, and writing letters to those in positions of power, but she also saw her teaching as an important vehicle for raising awareness of key ethical and political issues. Students thought highly of her teaching and supervision because it was well organised, rigorous and committed.

For much of the first two decades of Janna's academic career teaching was her main focus. In that period, she published only a handful of refereed papers and edited a special supplementary volume on 'Women and Philosophy' in 1986 for the Australasian Journal of Philosophy. That she did not publish very much in her early career years did not signify a lack of interest in research. Her extensive subsequent productivity is best understood as showing that Janna had been refining her thinking about various ethical and political issues, incorporating the refinements into her teaching, and readying herself to publish carefully considered treatments of those issues. In the remaining three decades of her career Janna published five monographs, co-edited two important collections of articles by leading thinkers from around the world, published scores of articles in refereed journals and scholarly collections - the last of them in March 2022 - and regularly used her philosophical abilities to contribute to public discussion of matters of significance for the nation in more popular outlets like *The Conversation* and *The Drum*. Never one to blow her own trumpet, Janna described her publication record as modest for someone who had had a lengthy academic career, but her colleagues, whether in Australia or more broadly, will vigorously dispute this assessment.

The first of Janna's monographs, *Justice and World Order: A Philosophical Inquiry*, published in 1992, attempted to provide a theory of international justice that took into account the growing philosophical interest in cosmopolitanism as well as providing a practical account of how it could be realised in a world where positive changes to international relations resulting from the end of the 'cold war' seemed possible. Janna's second monograph, *Discourse and Knowledge: Defence of a Collectivist Ethic*, published in 1998, attempted to explain why people disagree on ethical

issues and how they can nevertheless reach a consensus. Each of these books found a receptive audience – figures from WorldCat for the number of libraries worldwide that hold copies show that each far outstrips the representation of most philosophical works.

It is the third of Janna's books, *Taking Responsibility for the Past: Reparation and Historical Justice*, which appeared in 2002, that she thought of as her most important work. She took her cue for it from Prime Minister John Howard's contention that it was not necessary to apologise for wrongs done in the past to indigenous peoples because present-day people should not have to take responsibility for the deeds of past people. Janna appealed to examples of historic injustice ranging from the treatment of Native Americans and African slaves in the United States, and of indigenous peoples in Australia, to support her argument that since we are participants in an intergenerational society, each generation of citizens has good reason to make commitments which future citizens are honour-bound to keep. Accordingly, there is an obligation for present-day citizens to make reparation for past failures to keep commitments and, more generally, for historic wrongdoings. The book received very strong reviews which led to Janna receiving a raft of invitations to speak at conferences concerned with intergenerational justice in Austria, Canada, England, Indonesia, Macau, New Zealand, Switzerland and the United States. In 2006 she was awarded the Eureka Prize for Ethics for the book. Her fourth book, *Intergenerational Justice: Rights and Responsibilities in an Intergenerational Polity*, which was published in 2009, elaborated on, and developed further, the account she had argued for in the previous book and in various articles. In 2018 she published her final monograph, a work commissioned for a series on political theory entitled *Should Current Generations Make Reparation for Slavery?*. She accepted the commission because she thought that she had accumulated sufficient knowledge about the issue to be able to complete the short book without the hard slog usually associated with completing a philosophical work.

In addition to her monographs, Janna co-edited two well regarded collections on topics of contemporary social significance: first, in 2008,

with Loane Skene, *The Sorting Society: The Ethics of Genetic Screening and Therapy*, and, in 2015, *Historical Justice and Memory*, with Klaus Neumann. As previously indicated, Janna published numerous articles in professional journals and scholarly collections and did so right up until the diagnosis of the brain tumours. In short, her five-decade career as an academic can in no wise be thought to have been a modest one. She was, as the foregoing should have made clear, gifted both as a teacher and as a researcher, but it should also be noted that she: received a number of competitive grants to do research; served on half a dozen editorial boards; refereed papers for more than twenty different academic journals and book length manuscripts for various publishing houses; mentored and supported students, early career researchers, and more experienced philosophers; made astute and helpful contributions in seminars given by others; and used her philosophical training and skills to advance public consideration of important social issues. It was on such grounds that she was elected to a Fellowship of the Academy of Humanities in 2002 and to a Fellowship of the Academy of the Social Sciences in 2011.

It would fail to do justice to the fullness of Janna's life to focus only on her academic career. There was much more to her life than has been sketched above. Janna was not much interested in competitive sport, despite (or perhaps, because of) accompanying her father to baseball matches in her teenage years. But she was physically very active. Mention has already been made of her desire to be able to cycle to La Trobe University for work, but not that she continued frequently to cycle the roughly 14 kms from her home to the university and back until well into her seventies. Her cycling activities extended to participating in group cycling tours in Europe. However, she was engaged in many pursuits other than cycling, in particular, bush walking, swimming, canoeing, and cross-country skiing. The journey she made along the Camino de Santiago might be seen as topping everything.

Even with the mention of these many and varied physical pursuits the sketch thus far of Janna's life still leaves out a great deal. Janna was an avid movie-goer who delighted in discussing movies with friends and

colleagues. She was an opera lover whose love is shown most clearly by her attendance at more than one production of Wagner's Ring Cycle. She was an experienced and adventurous traveller. Even though an eye condition made lengthy periods of reading difficult she was extremely widely read, with her interests ranging from science fiction to modern science, through literary fiction, including crime fiction, to the reading she did for professional purposes. Even though her engagement in so many pursuits led to her having a large circle of acquaintances she, nonetheless, remained quite a private person who took special pleasure in spending time in the company of her closest friends. She is sorely missed.

**Robert Young FAHA**

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5 July 2022