



IN MEMORIAM

Thompson Clarke
Professor of Philosophy, Emeritus
UC Berkeley
1928-2012

Thompson Clarke, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, was born in Cleveland, Ohio March 27, 1928 and died in Berkeley February 29, 2012 after a sudden illness. He studied philosophy as an undergraduate at Harvard (B.A. 1950 summa cum laude) and as a graduate student at Harvard and Oxford (1952-54). After completing his service in the U. S. Army in 1956 he became Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Chicago in 1957. He came to Berkeley as a Visiting Assistant Professor in 1958-59 and was made a regular member of this department the following year. He received the Ph.D. from Harvard in 1962.

As a student at Harvard he concentrated mainly on the study of mathematical logic and on some of the fundamental questions about perception and human knowledge as pursued by his admired teacher C. I. Lewis, for whom he later served as a teaching assistant. At Oxford, then in the heyday of “linguistic philosophy”, he studied with J. L. Austin, among others, and also continued extended discussions with him during Austin’s semester-long visits to Harvard in 1955 and Berkeley in 1959.

Clarke was equally impressed by the force of the new “linguistic philosophy” in drawing attention to our actual speech and thought about our position and activities in the world and by what he saw as the depth and power of what he called “traditional epistemology”, even with its apparently skeptical implications. His writings on ‘Seeing Surfaces and Seeing Physical Objects’ and ‘The Legacy of Skepticism’ have had a continuous influence on the best philosophical reflections on perception and knowledge. Throughout his life his work was directed towards understanding human knowledge while doing full justice to what he saw must be accepted and accounted for on each side of the apparently irresolvable conflict between those different ways we seek to understand ourselves in philosophy. This took him to the heart of the philosophical enterprise, well beyond concerns with perception and knowledge in particular.

Thompson Clarke was a deeply thoughtful, reflective philosopher. He had a remarkable sensitivity for the presence of philosophical difficulties where everything seems smooth and straightforward to most of the rest of us. And he had the insight, the imagination, and the persistence to bring to light those problems he showed we have missed or misunderstood and must find a way to deal with. His careful focus and intensity were a powerful influence on the philosophical attitudes and practice of many students, whatever particular interests they eventually pursued. He was for many years an active, concerned member of the Philosophy department, bringing to questions of appointment, promotion, and the admission of graduate students the highest standards and sound, sympathetic judgment. In later years he gradually began to teach less and less, and stopped teaching entirely in 1987. In his retirement he continued the same patient, ambitious philosophical work, absorbed in developing more fully the account he had been advancing, while gradually withdrawing more and more from public participation in philosophy.

His wife, Jill, survives him.