



IN MEMORIAM

Oliver A. Johnson
Professor Emeritus, Department of Philosophy
Riverside
1923 — 2000

Oliver A. Johnson, professor of philosophy, following four and one-half years on kidney dialysis, died unexpectedly of a heart attack on March 22, 2000 in Temecula, California. Oliver was born in Everett, Washington, February 16, 1923 of Swedish parents. He attended Linfield College in McMinnville, Oregon from which he received his B.A. degree in absentia in 1944. From 1943 to 1946, he served with the U.S. Navy and was an officer on an L.S.T. in the South Pacific participating in many operations including the Battle of Leyte Gulf.

After doing graduate work in philosophy at the University of Oregon and later at Oxford University in England, Professor Johnson received his M.A. (1950) and his Ph.D. (1951) from Yale University, writing under Brand Blanchard, one of America's leading philosophers of that period. He taught at Yale during the 1951-52 academic year, followed by a year as a Fellow of the Institute for Philosophical Research (directed by Mortimer J. Adler) in San Francisco. In July 1953 he joined the faculty at the University of California, Riverside, as an assistant professor and charter member of the faculty, one year before the campus opened in the fall of 1954. In 1965 he was promoted to full professor. He retired from the faculty in 1989.

During the early years of the campus, one of his first assignments was to work with John Beatty of the History faculty to create the History of Western Civilization course. This was not an easy task, but one that was quite successful as this course became one for which the campus was well known for a number of years.

Founding a campus is not easy and starting UCR was no exception. The founding years provided many occasions for intense disagreements between some members of the Philosophy staff, but Oliver invariably intervened to mediate, resolve and smooth over disputes. A campus colleague, recalling Oliver in this role noted, "Blessed are the peacemakers."

In his research, Professor Johnson, not one to pursue faddish topics, concentrating instead on fundamental philosophic issues, established an international reputation for his work in ethics and epistemology. He argued for the rule of reason in ethics and sought clarity, rigor and lucid exposition in his views on epistemology.

His work in ethics appeared in journal articles and in three scholarly books: *Rightness and Goodness* (1959); *Moral Knowledge* (1966); and *The Moral Life* (1969). He edited a historical anthology *Ethics* (1958, 1965, 1974, 1978) that was one of the most widely used books in the field.

Professor Johnson's work in ethics concerned two topics: normative ethics and metaethics. In the former area, he argued for a type of naturalism in which the values of life are interpreted in terms of the maximum satisfaction of human needs and desires. Combined with a metaethical view that emphasizes the primacy of moral obligation, this theory yielded a way of understanding the moral dimension of life without need of any appeal either to intuition or religion. Throughout his work he argued for a conception of morality in which, for any individual living in a society to act morally is the same as to act rationally. Thus, the perennial practical question "Why ought I to be moral?" he argued, can be decisively answered, since it is reducible to the question "Why ought I to be rational?"

His work in epistemology concerned itself with the foundations of knowledge, with special emphasis on the basic question: Is knowledge possible? In wrestling with this question he devoted much of his attention to epistemological skepticism, dealing with such historical skeptics as Sextus Empiricus and David Hume, as well as contemporary writers. His rejection of skepticism argued that, the skeptics to the contrary notwithstanding, our ability to know certain things is logically demonstrable. Nevertheless, he was sympathetic to the strongly (but not absolutely) skeptical view that the scope of human knowledge is much more sharply restricted than many are prepared to concede.

His work in epistemology, which concentrated on the foundations of knowledge, was articulated in journal articles and two scholarly books: *The Problem of Knowledge* (1974) and *Skepticism and Cognitivism* (1978). Following retirement, he published *The Eternal Now*. Altogether Professor Johnson published six scholarly books and one monograph, edited or co-edited five more books, including *Heritage of Western Civilization* (1958, 1966, 1971, 1976, 1982, 1987, 1991, and 1995), *Sources of World Civilization* (1994 and 2000), and *The Individual and the Universe* (1981), in addition to numerous journal articles, essays, book reviews, and book chapters.

For his research contributions, the UCR Academic Senate selected him as the Faculty Research Lecturer in 1982.

Dedicated to the learning process, Oliver Johnson was an excellent teacher, challenging even introductory students by the Socratic Method. He particularly enjoyed making students squirm under Socratic examination of ideas and arguing both sides of particularly knotty issues.

His outstanding record of service to his department, the campus, and the field of philosophy exemplified his commitment to the university and the profession. He chaired the department for many years and was the leader in developing philosophy holdings in the research library as well as creating a departmental library that bears his name. He served as Chair of the Riverside Division from 1963 to 1966, and served on numerous local and systemwide senate committees. His Senate service culminated with a six-year term on the University of California Academic Council.

In the 1980s, he participated on a UC committee that took a quite critical look at the ties of the University of California to nuclear research at the Department of Energy's National Laboratories administered by the University of California.

His Senate contributions continued after retirement as he endowed a bi-annual UC systemwide Academic Senate award to recognize the meritorious service contributions of others.

Perhaps his most significant service contribution was as Secretary-Treasurer of the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association, and as a member of the APA's national Board of Officers, 1970-71 to 1981-82. Using these offices, Professor Johnson was instrumental in bringing the Pacific Division from the brink of dissolution to a position of influence within the profession. Today, many regard the annual meetings of the Pacific Division of the APA as among the most interesting in the profession.

Beyond the academy, he enjoyed tennis, baseball, reading history and sailing. Many weekends he would take his family or friends sailing on local lakes or in the nearby Pacific Ocean. His passion for travel, both domestic and foreign, led him to live in and travel throughout Europe with his family and fueled his keen interest in western civilization.

Professor Johnson is survived by his wife of 54 years, Carol; three daughters, Julie Katayama of Oceanside, Elizabeth Eckman of Philadelphia, and Melinda Johnson-Wright of Fremont, CA; a son, Stuart of Breaux Bridge, LA.; eight grandchildren; a sister, Katherine Brooks of Turlock; a brother, Gordon of Turlock; and numerous nieces, nephews, grand-nieces and grand-nephews.

Carl F. Cranor
David Harrah