



IN MEMORIAM

Rogers Albritton
Professor of Philosophy, Emeritus
Los Angeles
1923-2002

The death of Rogers Albritton on May 21, 2002, stilled one of the most distinctive – and most influential – philosophical voices of the twentieth century. Rogers' primary medium was conversation and in a half-century of remarkable conversations he shaped the character of two philosophy departments, UCLA's own and Harvard's, and profoundly affected many of the best philosophers of the age.

Rogers was born in Columbus, Ohio. He was admitted to Swarthmore at the age of 15, left to serve in the Army Air Corps and received his B.A. from St. John's College Annapolis in 1948. He taught for a year at St. John's, and after 3 years of graduate work at Princeton, began teaching full time at Cornell. After receiving his Ph.D. from Princeton in 1955, he taught at Cornell one more year, and was appointed at Harvard in 1956, receiving tenure four years later. He served as chair at Harvard from 1963 to 1970. In 1972, he came to UCLA and served as chair here from 1979 to 1981. In 1968, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 1984 he was president of the Western (then Pacific) Division of the American Philosophical Association.

Rogers' philosophical concern was with the central problems of philosophy. Here are his own words in a document prepared for the review which led to his being promoted to Professor Above- Scale in 1982.

"I came to the study of philosophy, in college, from an original preoccupation with literature, music, drawing, painting, acting, and being in love, but what interested me most in philosophy was not, on balance, aesthetics or ethics-- much less social and political philosophy-- but metaphysics and epistemology. For example: the reality or unreality of God, universals, the external world, the soul, causation, freedom. The possibility or impossibility of knowing this and that. The 'mind- body problem.' Philosophical theories of perception. That sort of thing. The great philosophers who most forcibly struck me as essentially right about a lot of what mainly interested me were, first, Plato (though later I much preferred Aristotle) and then, at about thirty, Wittgenstein. ... I still think that Wittgenstein was by far the greatest philosopher of this century. Well, the century isn't over; and there's always Heidegger (though I doubt it very much); and I suppose I underrate Russell (I would); but all the same: Wittgenstein."

Rogers was one of the great Wittgenstein interpreters but his own way of doing philosophy was more directly Socratic. Like Socrates he had the power to help one see how deceptively hard philosophy is. As he put it:

"Philosophy, as he [Wittgenstein] means to be practicing it "simply puts everything before us, [it] neither explains nor deduces anything" and it "may not advance any kind of theory" (Philosophical investigations I 126, 109). Its aim is, rather, "complete clarity," which "simply means that the philosophical problems should completely disappear" (ibid., 133). I'd like nothing better. Moreover, I believe it: the problems (at any rate, those I care most about) should indeed, as he says, completely disappear. That's how they look to me. I love metaphysical and epistemological theories, but I don't believe in them, not even in the ones I like. And I don't believe in the apparently straightforward problems to which they are addressed. However, not

one of these problems has actually done me the kindness of vanishing, though some have receded. (I don't have sense- data nearly as often as I used to.) And if there is anything I dislike more in philosophy than rotten theories, it's pretenses of seeing through the "pseudoproblems" that evoked them when in fact one doesn't know what's wrong and just has a little rotten metatheory as to that."

Rogers made signal contributions to our understanding of several central issues in philosophy. He showed us the difference between freedom of will and freedom to do what we will, he showed us that one does not always know what one knows to follow from what one knows, he showed us how to take seriously the idea of God as a person and yet not a being. Perhaps equally important, Rogers made signal contributions to our understanding that there are problems in philosophy which simply don't vanish easily – that skepticism is much harder to refute than might appear, that the problem of evil is not to be solved by any facile free will defense nor the question of the existence of God to be resolved by any facile problem of evil, that we cannot easily treat reasons and causes as species of the same genus – nor as of different genera either.

Rogers exercised his power as midwife and torpedo fish both in conversations – frequently lasting all night no matter when they began – and in lectures crafted right down to the gesture which yet made visible his day- to- day and minute- to minute wrestle with the problems on which he focused. The conversations helped shape the views of almost every colleague at UCLA as well as those of such former students and colleagues as Stanley Cavell, Marshall Cohen, Saul Kripke, Thomas Nagel and Hilary Putnam. The lectures made legends of his HUM 5 at Harvard and his Phil 1 and Phil 7 here at UCLA.

Rogers neither published much nor perished. While a family joke had it that "Albritton" abbreviated "all- but- written," Rogers did write. It was publishing philosophy, with its pretence that something in philosophy is complete – or at least complete enough – which flummoxed him. He published five papers in his lifetime. As he said of himself in 1982:

"I do what I do. That is: teach, talk, discuss, listen (I think I'm a remarkable, though impatient, listener), make difficulties, invent (I think I am more inventive than I usually suppose), study (but not nearly enough), and even write. I intend to publish again, too, come hell or high water. (Well, come high water, anyway)."

He published just one more paper after that, his American Philosophical Association presidential address, but he did continue to do what he did long after his retirement in 1991. In the last few years as his emphysema grew very much worse, the conversations were less often in the Philosophy Department and more often in his favorite restaurants and his home in Silver Lake, and they got a bit shorter but they continued. The last UCLA graduate students to be directly influenced by him are just now beginning to teach and practice philosophy in their own voices. We miss him.

Calvin Normore