

HUGH MELLOR

David Hugh Mellor

10 July 1938 – 21 June 2020

elected Fellow of the British Academy 1983

by

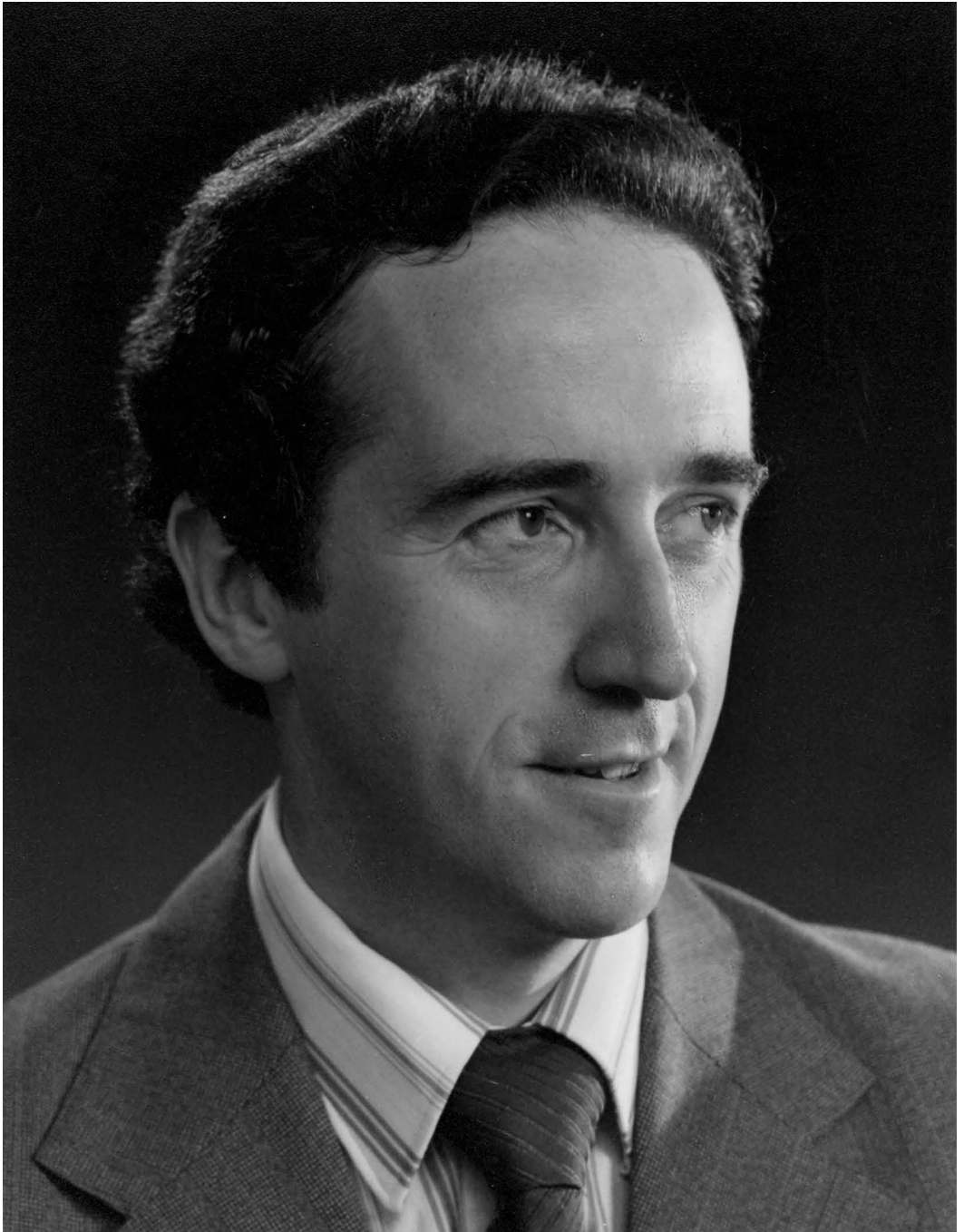
TIM CRANE

David Hugh Mellor, who published as D.H. Mellor and was known to friends and acquaintances as Hugh, spent his entire academic life at the University of Cambridge. His philosophical work was mostly in metaphysics, the philosophy of science and the philosophy of mind.

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D. H. Meller

I

Hugh Mellor was born on 10 July 1938 in London, and spent his childhood and adolescence in Newcastle and then Manchester, where he attended Manchester Grammar School, at the time one of England's oldest and most prestigious state schools. His father Sidney David Mellor came from Derbyshire and studied electrical engineering at the University of Liverpool. Sidney pursued a career in telecommunications, becoming Chief Regional Engineer for Post Office Telephones in Wales. Hugh's Welsh mother was Ethel Naomi Hughes, who studied modern languages at Aberystwyth.

Mellor studied Chemical Engineering at Pembroke College Cambridge from 1956 until 1960, and then at the University of Minnesota where he took an MSc in 1962, supported by a prestigious Harkness Fellowship. While at Minnesota, he took a course on the philosophy of science taught by the Vienna Circle exile Herbert Feigl. After working at ICI (Imperial Chemical Industries) for a year, he returned to Cambridge in 1963 to work on a PhD on the nature of chance, supervised by Mary Hesse in the Department of History and Philosophy of Science.

Mellor obtained his PhD in 1968, but by this time he had already been appointed to a Fellowship at Pembroke College (1964) and a University Assistant Lectureship in the Faculty of Philosophy (1965). He resigned his Fellowship at Pembroke in 1970, and in 1971 he became a Fellow of the new Cambridge college for graduate students, Darwin College, where he remained until 2005. In the Faculty of Philosophy he was promoted to a Readership in Metaphysics in 1983, and then elected to one of the two established Professorships in the Faculty in 1986 (his was the professorship held by G.E. Moore, Ludwig Wittgenstein and G.E.M. Anscombe). He was Pro-Vice Chancellor at the University of Cambridge from 2000 until 2001, when he retired from the University.

Among his honours and awards were a Fellowship of the British Academy (1983–2008),¹ an ScD (Doctor of Science) from Cambridge (1990), an Honorary PhD from Lund University (1997), and an Honorary Fellowship of the Australian Academy of the Humanities (2003). He was President of the British Society for the Philosophy of Science (1985–87), President of the Aristotelian Society (1992–93), and Chairman of the Analysis Trust (2000–8). At his death he left a substantial donation to Darwin College to support postgraduate philosophy students in Cambridge.

¹Mellor had delivered the British Academy's Philosophical Lecture in 1979, on 'The Possibility of Prediction'.

II

Although he completed his PhD in the History and Philosophy of Science Department, and his first publications were in the philosophy of science, Mellor's main philosophical achievement is the metaphysical system he developed in three substantial books: *The Matter of Chance* (1971), *Real Time* (1981; the second edition was the heavily revised *Real Time II* in 1998), and *The Facts of Causation* (1995). He also had strongly held and original views in the philosophies of mind and science. His main papers on these latter subjects were collected in two volumes of essays, *Matters of Metaphysics* (1991) and *Mind, Meaning and Reality* (2012). Here I will concentrate on what I take to be the heart of his philosophical system: his treatment of probability, time and causation, and the connections between them.

The Matter of Chance was based on Mellor's PhD thesis, and its topic is statistical probability, which Mellor calls 'chance'. Mellor defends the view that 'chance is objective, empirical and not relational, and that it applies to the single case'. In this respect he distinguishes his view of probability from subjectivists who treat probabilities only as degrees of belief, and frequentists who treat them as relative frequencies. Mellor thinks of chances as dispositional properties, the properties whose instantiations make true the claims about the probabilities of specific events. He calls these properties 'propensities' (the term comes from Popper).

Frequentism is an 'objectivist' view of probability, like Mellor's, but the objective facts appealed to are only collections of actual and possible events – consequently it has difficulty in making sense of the chance of a single occurrence. When it comes to subjectivism, Mellor's views are more complex. He does not object to the idea of degrees of belief; on the contrary he uses the concept to motivate his version of the propensity theory. But degrees of belief are not enough to explain chance. Mellor's view is that belief does come by degrees, and objective chances are the 'truth makers' for partial beliefs and their expressions in language. By linking subjective degrees of belief with their objective truth-makers, Mellor anticipated David Lewis's famous account of chance and subjective probability.

Real Time defends a now-popular position in the metaphysics of time, which has become known as eternalism, the 'block universe' or (inspired by the terminology of J.M.E. McTaggart) the B-theory of time. This is the view that all times are equally real, whether we characterise them as past, present or future. In fact, there is no distinction in mind-independent reality which corresponds to the concepts of past, present and future (what McTaggart called the 'A series'). The 'flow of time' does not exist.

In *Real Time*, Mellor expressed eternalism as the thesis that while time is real, tense is not. (In *Real Time II* he dropped this terminology in favour of McTaggart's unmemorable 'B' and 'A' series, which by that time had become standard.) By 'tense' he did not

mean a grammatical feature, but rather whatever it is in reality that is supposed to correspond to the flow of time, the thing we mark with the concepts of past, present and future. Grammatical tenses are verbal modifications which are supposed to reflect those features of reality, features which Mellor and other eternalists deny. The reality of time is best described in terms of the *relations* between events: an event's being earlier than, later than and simultaneous with other events. These relations hold eternally.

Mellor's explicit argument for eternalism relied on McTaggart's notorious argument for the unreality of time. McTaggart had argued that if time is real, the distinction between past, present and future (the A series) must be real. But, he claimed, the A series is incoherent, therefore time itself is unreal. Mellor accepted McTaggart's argument that the distinction between past, present and future is incoherent – because it implies that all events have incompatible properties – but denies that this incoherence implies the unreality of time. He denies this because he denies that objective time (the B series) presupposes the distinction between past, present and future (the A series). This distinction is the product of our perspective on time, which is necessary for us to act, but does not belong to time itself. In a world with no agency, there would be no A series at all.

However, although the overall picture is now familiar, very few accept Mellor's use of McTaggart's argument to defend it. And his use of the argument is not plausible. No-one who believes in the flow of time thinks that all events are past, present and future *at the same time*; and to insist that there must be a purely eternalist way of stating all the facts about time plainly begs the question against the reality of the flow of time. C.D. Broad criticised McTaggart's argument on these grounds in his *Examination of McTaggart's Philosophy* (1933), and the point is well-known. What is puzzling is why Mellor thought he did not have to answer it. I will return to this below.

One question for eternalist conceptions of time is how to account for the direction of time – what explains why we can intervene to change the future but not the past? If time is just the fourth dimension of spacetime, then why can we travel in the three spatial dimensions but not in the fourth temporal dimension?

Of course there are eternalist philosophers who deny that there is any fundamental reality to the direction of time. But those who do believe in it, like Mellor, need to answer these questions. Mellor follows Hans Reichenbach in explaining the direction of time in terms of the direction of causation. This means, of course, that he cannot employ time to define causation, as Hume and his followers do ('a cause is an object, followed by another ...').

The Facts of Causation (1995) attempted to solve this and other problems about causation. For Mellor, causation is not so much defined, but rather *characterised* in terms of what he called 'connotations': causes explain their effects, causes and effects are evidence for each other, and causes are means to bringing about their effects.

These connotations are intended to entail the main principle behind Mellor's theory of causation: that a cause is something that raises the chance of its effects. He understands this in terms of a complex counterfactual conditional: if C caused E, then the chance of E given C is higher than it would have been without C. Again following Reichenbach, Mellor defines causation for the indeterministic case and sees deterministic causation as a special case of indeterministic causation. For Mellor, objective chances are essential to his theory of causation, and his theory of causation is key to his views about time.

The other central aspect of Mellor's theory of causation is his view that causation relates facts, not events. Facts here are what correspond to entire sentences, and events are particulars as conceived by Donald Davidson, referred to by singular terms. So a canonical causal statement links sentences with the connective *because*. 'Cholera spread across the city because there was a flood' describes a relationship between the fact that there was a flood and the fact that cholera spread across the city.

Of course events are often involved too – the flood is an event, after all – but Mellor's view is that the fact-relating causal 'because' statements are more basic. This is partly because there can be *negative* facts linked by 'because' statements – e.g. *there was no flood this year because the flood defences had been repaired* – but there are no 'negative events': this idea makes as much sense as 'negative objects'.

Mellor had been arguing for facts as causal relata – against Davidson's influential view that they are events – for some years before the 1995 book came out. But as he was writing the book, Mellor came to realise that it was a consequence of his argument about negative facts that strictly speaking there is no such thing as a causal relation after all. Genuine relations, for someone with Mellor's metaphysical views, must link genuine entities in the world, and although there are true 'because' statements which link negative facts, these negative facts are no more entities in the world than negative events are. What is in the world, Mellor argues, are not facts (in the sense of those things that 'because' statements link) but what he called 'facta' – a neologism for the truth-makers of true sentences, whatever they are. Thus 'there was no flood' is made true not by the existence of a non-flood, but by a complex of entities of various kinds. This claim about truth-making is consistent, however, with the claim that 'E because C' reports causation, even when E and C are negative. But from this it follows, according to Mellor, that causation is not a relation.

The argument from negative facts to the thesis that facts are causes and effects has been much criticised; as has Mellor's use of counterfactual conditionals to characterise chance-raising, and his claims about negative entities. I think that – as with the use of McTaggart's argument in *Real Time* – it would be myopic to let too much rest on these specific arguments, when forming an overall assessment of Mellor's philosophy. Like many analytic philosophers (Quine and Armstrong come to mind) Mellor thought of

himself as providing knock-down arguments for his positions, but then didn't seem too bothered when those he knocked down immediately stood up again. Why is this?

The answer, it seems to me, is that arguments play a largely rhetorical role here. What is most important is the presentation of a vision. In a substantial critique, Dorothy Edgington described *The Facts of Causation* as 'a difficult, thought-provoking book, the presentation of a substantive metaphysical world view'. And this world view is very original, even if the arguments are not persuasive or 'knock-down', and even though it takes elements from other thinkers.

At bottom lies the commitment to objective chances or propensities, conceived of as real dispositions of objects; these explain causation, which is understood in terms of chance-raising; causation explains the direction of time, which explains how the fourth dimension of spacetime differs from the other three; and unlike many eternalists, Mellor believed that objects and events are fundamentally different. He was not a four-dimensionalist or (in Lewis's terminology) a *perdurantist* about persistence; he combined an eternalist view of time with an *endurantist* view of objects. In a nice appeal to English usage – somewhat ironic from one who claimed to despise ordinary language philosophy – Mellor wrote, 'When Winston Churchill wrote *My Early Life*, he called it just that. He did not call it *Early Me*'.

More generally, there is a common thread running through all of Mellor's work: his realism or objectivism about metaphysics. This is the view that the subject-matter of metaphysics is the way it is regardless of what anyone thinks about it. In the philosophy of probability, he defended single-case objective chances or propensities; in the philosophy of time he defended the reality of the temporal series ordered in terms of earlier and later, and argued that the 'now' is a kind of illusion of subjectivity. In decision theory, Mellor argued that the rationally correct action is the one which actually gets you what you want only if your beliefs are true, not the one with the highest expected utility. In the philosophy of mind, Mellor argued against those who think that the subject or the self is something outside the objective order of the world. He was an objectivist even about the subjective.

If there is a general methodological constraint it is this: metaphysics should not mix facts about the way we represent the phenomena with the phenomena themselves. Though it is in fact very difficult to draw this line sharply, it is a deep motivation for much of Mellor's philosophical vision.

III

Mellor's work in metaphysics fits squarely into a 20th-century Cambridge philosophical tradition which included Bertrand Russell, F.P. Ramsey, C.D. Broad and R.B. Braithwaite.

Mellor regarded Ramsey, in particular, as an inspiration – he wrote and presented a fine BBC Radio programme about Ramsey, and edited two distinct collections of his papers. Braithwaite became a personal friend and mentor. Mellor often claimed as his other influences Hans Reichenbach, the Australian metaphysicians J.J.C. Smart, D.M. Armstrong, Frank Jackson, and the honorary Australian David Lewis.

The curious thing about this list of philosophers, however, is how few ideas or commitments Mellor actually shared with them. He rejected Ramsey's pure subjectivism about probability and his theory of laws of nature; he was opposed to the physicalism or materialism of the Australian philosophers, and to almost all the philosophical ideas of David Lewis (for example: modal realism, Quinean 'nominalism', Humean supervenience, the counterfactual analysis of causation, the mind-brain identity theory, four-dimensionalism about objects, and the semantic approach to many metaphysical questions). He has perhaps the most in common with Reichenbach, but he although he accepted Reichenbach's general approach to the direction of time, he rejected both Reichenbach's appeal to entropy and his frequency theory of probability. In fact, the distinctiveness of Mellor's philosophical system can be mapped out in terms of his rejection of most of the tenets of post-Quinean analytic metaphysics, including most of the views of its patron saint, David Hume.

Mellor would sometimes say that the only thing that matters in philosophy is getting it right – but if this really were his view, then it would make a mystery of his admiration for Lewis and Ramsey. The truth is rather that his attachment to most of these authors is more a matter of intellectual and personal style than specific philosophical doctrine. Most on the list above had a literary style that appealed to Mellor – plain, straight-talking, direct, concise. They also all treat philosophy as continuous with natural science and something that must engage with contemporary scientific thinking.

Mellor himself had a distinctive and fruitful conception of the relationship between philosophy and science. He reminisced that Herbert Feigl began his philosophy course at the University of Minnesota by announcing that there are three kinds of philosophy: 'the philosophy of nothing but' (needless reductionism), 'the philosophy of something more' (mysticism and spirituality) and Feigl's own preferred middle way: 'the philosophy of what's what'. This is very much how Mellor conceived his own philosophy: saying 'how things are', without being misled by metaphysical fantasies or misreadings of science.

However, his critics saw him as excessively scientistic; and there was some justice in that. Despite his official philosophical anti-reductionism – which was sincerely held – his immediate personal reactions tended towards the no-nonsense reductionist. Fashionable food ingredients really brought this out, with special scorn reserved for Maldon Sea Salt ('it's sodium chloride for God's sake!') and balsamic vinegar ('vinegar is vinegar, it's acetic acid!').

But when a reductionist philosopher would declare that temperature ‘just is’ the motion of molecules, Mellor would not hesitate to correct them that this is not true for solids, nor for the temperature of a plasma or empty space. His grasp of contemporary science was typically deeper and broader than that of many philosophers who like to pronounce about the limits of science.

Mellor was proud of his training in chemical engineering, a subject which he used to describe as ‘neither chemistry nor engineering, as Voltaire said about the Holy Roman Empire’. His point was that the subject centrally involved fluid dynamics and statistical mechanics – two of the less glamorous areas of physics for philosophers (unlike quantum mechanics and relativity). He liked to take examples from real, workaday sciences to puncture what he saw as the grandiose metaphysics hypothesised by physicalists, for example, who liked to claim the authority of science.

He regularly complained about philosophers’ ignorance of science. Part of what moved him was a frustration with the ‘two cultures’ culture, in both Cambridge and Britain as a whole. This division permeated Cambridge philosophy too, and had its effects on the already fractious Faculty of Philosophy in the 1960s and 70s. Mellor (surely correctly) detected something of the Oxbridge classicist’s traditional sense of superiority in this dismissive attitude to science, and he certainly felt the sharp end of such snobbery during his career. It was symbolically significant therefore that when he applied for a higher doctorate at Cambridge in 1990, it was for an ScD (Doctor of Science) rather than a LittD (Doctor of Letters).

Mellor’s view of the relationship between philosophy and science went along with a disdain for, or lack of interest in, the philosophy of philosophy itself (he would have agreed with David Armstrong’s view that it is ‘an unrewarding subject’). He tended to be impatient with people who speculated about the essence of philosophy, thinking this a question of as little interest as the question of the essence of science. For him, philosophy is its own endeavour: there is truth and falsehood in philosophy; the truth can be attained; and our philosophical questions are about, on the whole, exactly what they seem to be about: time, causation, probability, the mind and so on. Mellor used to talk of philosophy as ‘the business’ – and after all, if you are running a business, you don’t waste time thinking about what ‘the essence of business’ is. You just do it.

IV

Mellor was an antagonistic philosopher. In the local context, the adversary was often Ludwig Wittgenstein and his followers (though it is somewhat ironic that Wittgenstein once wrote to a friend: ‘my father was a businessman, and I am a businessman. I want my philosophy to be business-like, to get something done’). Mellor disliked what he saw

as the personality cult associated with Wittgenstein, the reverence paid to his texts, the gnomic and cryptic style of the later philosophy, and its anti-metaphysical implications. But he also explicitly opposed the dominance of a more systematic philosophy of language: specifically Michael Dummett's claim that philosophy of language lies at the heart of analytic philosophy, as well as Davidson's semantic programme, which spread through Oxford and the rest of the UK in the 1970s and 80s.

Outside Cambridge and the Anglosphere, the various forms of 'continental philosophy' were the antagonists, and from the perspective of analytic philosophy no one personified this trend so well as Jacques Derrida. So it was not really surprising that Mellor should enthusiastically join a group of Cambridge academics in May 1992 who protested against the proposal that the University award Derrida an honorary degree. Most of these academics were not philosophers, so Mellor lent the group some philosophical 'muscle', leading the charge that Derrida was a charlatan and a fraud. News of the protest spread, leading to a distinguished collection of philosophers (including W.V. Quine and D.M. Armstrong) writing a letter to *The Times* complaining that 'Derrida's work does not meet accepted standards of clarity and rigour'.

Mellor enjoyed being in the forefront of this squabble. There is no evidence, though, that he had read much Derrida before joining the protest in 1992. (He did read some after the affair was underway; but given the circumstances, this was unlikely to change his opinion.) If he had read it in a charitable spirit, he might have detected themes which were familiar in analytic philosophy too – in particular a scepticism about the constancy or reality of linguistic meaning which is not a thousand miles away from (say) Quine's scepticism, or the later views of Davidson.

Derrida got his honorary degree in the end, and the affair did not do much for the reputation of analytic philosophy in the wider world – there was an evident lack of knowledge of Derrida's texts among those who denounced him. Although Mellor and others presented themselves as standing up for 'clarity and rigour', it is arguable that the issue ultimately came down to philosophical taste and style as much as anything. Mellor despised the attempts at humour among Derrida and his followers, regarding these philosophers as 'unserious'. He also disliked the self-reflectiveness of a lot of writing in this style ('what are we so much as doing when we are so much as asking this question?' etc). But this falls far short of a genuine critique of a thinker whose wide appeal among serious scholars demands explanation. In a fine essay, 'The Popper Phenomenon' (1977), Mellor provided both an insightful critique of Karl Popper (another thinker he considered over-rated), and also an explanation of Popper's appeal. But he made no serious attempt to understand the Derrida phenomenon.

The pugnacious, straight-talking style that Mellor adopted in the Derrida affair was very characteristic of his engagement both inside and outside the university.

When Mellor's own college (Darwin) accepted a donation intended for research into parapsychology, Mellor said on BBC Radio that this was like 'accepting money to research into whether the earth is flat'. The barb may have had some effect: the college ended up giving the money to the psychologist Nicholas Humphrey to research why people believe in parapsychology, rather than into parapsychology itself.

Mellor was not afraid of public controversy; in fact, he relished it. When he turned 70 in 2008, he resigned from the British Academy, of which he had been a Fellow since 1983. He had been trying to campaign for the Academy to introduce a category of Emeritus Fellow, on the grounds that the Fellowship as a whole was too old and out of touch with its disciplines. He wrote to John Lucas that 'now I am 70 I have far better things to do with the rest of my declining years than sit on committees with even older OAPs who really don't have anything better to do'. In an interview in *Times Higher Education* he said that the Academy was a 'club with a self-perpetuating membership' which was 'grossly unrepresentative' of the disciplines it served. This was an admirably principled attempt to bring about change – maybe it helped prompt the Academy into introducing the category of Emeritus Fellow.

In Cambridge, he brought the same style to academic and intellectual discussion. He was a formidable opponent at the Moral Sciences Club, the Philosophy Faculty's weekly visiting speaker colloquium. The Cambridge PhD students in the 1980s coined a *Philosophers' Lexicon*-style definition: '*hughmellorate* (verb, transitive) = to show a visiting speaker that their paper is completely worthless; hence *hughmellation*'. He could be uncharitable and excessively literal-minded in discussion, but he could also be positive, suggesting ways in which papers might be improved, or alternative directions for inquiry.

As a teacher, Mellor was dedicated and tough. He would devote hours to the supervision of his PhD students, and he set them the same high standards as he set himself. He supervised students across a wide range of subjects – from conditionals and time, through to mental representation and aesthetics. Among his PhD students were Kwame Anthony Appiah, Jeremy Butterfield, Robin Le Poidevin, Derek Matravers, Gonzalo Rodriguez Peyrera, Huw Price, Nigel Warburton and me; and others who were not his PhD students but whom he supported in their work included Alexander Bird, Ben Colburn, Daisy Dixon, David Papineau, Matthew Simpson and the late Peter Menzies. This is quite a mixture of philosophers, and none of them counts as a disciple. Although he never claimed to have a wide knowledge of the literature in all areas of philosophy outside his research areas, he brought to supervisions his clear-sighted focus on the goal of a philosophical project, his sharp nose for fluff and waffle, and his energy in suggesting new ways to think about the problems. Supervision meetings could be exhausting and depressing, but also inspiring.

V

Mellor was openly gay – at least since homosexuality was decriminalised in England and Wales in 1967 – but apart from a short relationship in the 1980s he lived a single life. Characteristically, he had little time for those who talked about the ‘gay community’ (‘why should I have anything significant in common with those who share my sexual orientation?’). He tended to concentrate his emotional attachments on his research students, who were mostly heterosexual young men. He required a lot of social and intellectual commitment from them, and the attention could be suffocating. But the commitment went both ways: he supported his protégés personally and professionally without limit, so long as they remained ‘serious’ (one of his favourite words) about ‘the business’.

Mellor could be prickly and short-tempered; he was also warm and generous, and a very loyal friend. Some students found him intimidating, and his ‘tough love’ style of teaching was not for everybody. But those students and colleagues who learned from him remained dedicated to him, even if they dispensed with many of his philosophical assumptions. He could fall out with people, but he genuinely tried to repair friendships, and for the most part he did not bear grudges. Disagreements could always be resolved or ignored on a joint trip to one of his beloved theatres: the National Theatre in London, the RSC in Stratford-upon-Avon, or the Arts Theatre in Cambridge.

As he got older, he softened. He became more tolerant of philosophical views different from his, and he played the role of the retired professor in Cambridge with a dignity almost verging on modesty. He maintained his passionate interest in the theatre until the end of his life, generously taking younger people as his guests to performances in London and Stratford, and participating in many amateur productions in Cambridge.

Mellor died of complications arising from lymphoma in the summer of 2020. He had been ill for a few years but suffered stoically without complaint, planning meticulously for the dispersal of his possessions after his death. He died at the beginning of the COVID pandemic, and his funeral was therefore a small affair. In July 2022 there was a large and – to use another of his favourite words – cheerful celebration of his life in Cambridge. Following his strictest instructions, there was of course no religious service.

A website which contains almost all his writings, warm tributes, obituaries and a photo gallery is www.hughmellor.com

Note on the author: Tim Crane is Professor of Philosophy and Pro-Rector at the Central European University (CEU) in Vienna.

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