

DAVID BOSTOCK AS PHILOSOPHER AND COLLEAGUE

Tribute by Daniel Isaacson

in the Service of Thanksgiving for the life of David Bostock
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David Bostock's career as a scholar was tremendously distinguished, and exceptional in combining accomplishment of the highest order in two distinct disciplines, ancient philosophy on the one hand and formal logic and philosophy of mathematics on the other, which in no other case I can think of have been pursued by one person at this level. There is overlap in these two branches of philosophy—formal logic began in Ancient Greece, and Plato and Aristotle are important philosophers of mathematics, but the skill sets required to be a major figure in both disciplines, namely complete command of ancient Greek and of modern formal logic, have no overlap, and David was a master of both.

After doing his National Service (1955-57), David went up to St John's to read Greats (1957-61), where Paul Grice was his Philosophy tutor. Grice was himself a Greats man whose philosophical interests turned to modern philosophical logic, and the seeds of David's interest in this combination may have been sown then. David belonged to that intermediate generation of Oxford Philosophers for whom graduate study was called for, but not to the extent of a doctorate, and he took the Oxford B.Phil. (1961-63). After a one-year post at the University of Leicester (1963-64), and three years teaching philosophy at the Australian National University in Canberra (1964-67), he spent a year at Harvard (1967-68) as a Research Fellow in Classical Philosophy. In 1968 he was elected Tutorial Fellow in Philosophy at Merton College, and continued in that post until the mandatory retirement age of 67, in 2004.

David's first major work after his arrival at Merton was *Logic and Arithmetic*, his two-volume re-founding of logicism, Volume 1 1974, Volume 2 1979. In the Preface to Volume 1, David writes, "My chief debt is almost certainly to Professor Quine, whose logical writings first brought me to think about the subject and proved a constant stimulus ever since." (p. vii). He also acknowledges indebtedness to Michael Dummett and Robin Gandy for their "searching criticisms of earlier versions". David's project there is to demonstrate "that the logicist programme as Frege conceived it, can indeed be completed—but only if we abandon Frege's own conception of numbers as objects" (p. vi), for which Frege had invoked extensions of concepts, and laid himself open to Russell's paradox. David's approach, instead, is to define the natural numbers from higher order quantifiers. Neo-Fregean logicism has had a huge vogue over the past thirty-five years, though in the version propounded by Crispin Wright rather than David's. Even so, no less an authority in these matters than Michael Dummett, in his important book *Frege Philosophy of Mathematics* (1991), puts these two approaches on a par (p. xii), though in the context of casting doubt on the philosophical significance of neo-Fregeanism. Dummett's doubts have not discouraged the continuing development of Wright's version of neo-Fregeanism, and the time may come—I hope so—when David's quite different idea becomes a focus of further development, both mathematically and philosophically.

After this major work in Logic, David's publications turned more to ancient philosophy, which lies outside my areas of expertise. Our colleague Lesley Brown has kindly given me her account of the significance of David's work in ancient philosophy, which I abridge as follows:

In 1994 David brought out a volume in the renowned Clarendon Aristotle series covering two key books in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. As he explains in the Preface to a later volume, he had long had the 'ambition of writing a fat tome on Aristotle's conception of substance', but abandoned it on realizing that a major part of the project was hopeless. Nevertheless, those works which did emerge from the project were very influential, especially his writings on Aristotle's *Physics*. While still mulling over that fat tome on Aristotle, David published monographs on Plato's *Phaedo* (1986) and *Theaetetus* (1988) which were immediately acclaimed and are still required reading for anyone writing about or studying those works. Both books were the outcome of giving lectures on the works, but they had different audiences in mind: the *Phaedo* book was for those for whom this Plato dialogue was their introduction to philosophy, while that on the *Theaetetus* was explicitly addressed to those further on in philosophy, with plentiful references to Frege and Russell, Quine and Kripke. But David wrote with such clarity, and explained difficult philosophical concepts so lucidly, that —far from requiring prior knowledge— David's explications were the perfect introduction to (say) the distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* readings, at the same time as giving an enlightening insight into Plato's fascinating arguments. In 2000 David published a slim volume on Aristotle's Ethics, in part as the outcome of many years of teaching the work to undergraduates. Everyone who has read his works in ancient philosophy has come away with plenty of food for thought and a great admiration for the boldness of his views and the clarity of his writings.

Returning to my own voice, let me also say that when I mentioned to a Japanese ancient philosopher in my college, Naoya Iwata, that David had died, he told me that "Bostock's commentaries on Plato's *Phaedo* and *Theaetetus* and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Metaphysics Z* (zeta) and *H* (eta) are regarded in Japan as musts for both research students and senior scholars who work on those treatises."

In retirement David continued hugely productive in writing and publication, despite suffering a debilitating heart attack during this time, from which he made an excellent though not complete recovery, and then also beginning to suffer from muscular degeneration. These late publications continued his lifelong pattern of research in both ancient and modern philosophy, and included a collection of essays on Aristotle's *Physics*, and books on *Philosophy of Mathematics*, on *Russell's Logical Atomism*, and his last book, yet to find a publisher, on *Problems of Hume*, as well as substantial articles on "The Interpretation of Plato's *Crito*" and "Aristotle's Philosophy of Mathematics".

David was a hugely good citizen of the Philosophy Sub-Faculty, serving at various points in all its time-consuming but essential administrative roles. He also served on the Lit Hum. Board, and as a member of the General Board. He chaired the Joint Committee for

Mathematics and Philosophy almost as much as I did in my capacity as an ex officio member of that committee, and much more than anyone else.

My first contact with David was as a fellow Moderator for Honour Moderations in Mathematics and Philosophy (along with Ralph Walker), in my first year as University Lecturer in the Philosophy of Mathematics 1975-76. I remember we were particularly proud of setting the sentence “McFiggis Tonic Wine is the same every year” under the rubric, “Express the following by interpreted well-formed formulas of the first-order predicate calculus with identity” on the 1976 Elements of Deductive Logic paper. David’s humane and efficient approach to examining gave me an ideal to follow in that most arduous and stressful part of our job.

David was a brilliant lecturer, as well as a creative scholar, and it’s very fortunate, as Dana Scott remarked to me, that students can continue to benefit from his teaching though the books he has published based on courses he taught, both in ancient philosophy and in logic and philosophy of mathematics. He was also an exceptionally sympathetic and caring tutor. I remember a student who participated in a class I was teaching and was having tutorials with David in that term, who spoke with great warmth and admiration about his brilliance in the subject combined with his conscientious care for his students. I also came to know of David’s empathy with his tutees through invitations from David and Jenny to me and my wife to lunches and dinners at their home in Manor Road which brought together David’s undergraduates with other guests, and in early days included Tim and Penny and some of their friends, which were wonderfully congenial events that built bonds. Even after Jenny had died and David had moved to 1 Mansfield Road, he continued these very special get-togethers. It was a privilege to enjoy this generous hospitality, which for me deepened the experience of teaching in Oxford through meeting students outside the hectic business of teaching and being taught, and will have added significant depth to the academic experience of David’s Merton students.

David did not use a typewriter, or later a computer, so he wasn’t on email. His letters and documents came in his instantly recognizable and completely legible handwriting. For some people, myself for example, the advent of computers and email was a godsend, allowing endless revision, and communication at the last minute. David handwrote letters and drafts with absolute clarity, and handled everything with such efficiency that communication never needed to be at the last minute.

I remember David with enormous admiration and affection, feelings undoubtedly shared by all who knew him.