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Postal Address: - 295 Glebe Point Road Glebe 2037
Email: - sydreal1@hotmail.com

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D.M. Armstrong, Sydney's most influential philosopher: Life and work

James Franklin

Abstract: David Armstrong (1926-2014) was much the most internationally successful philosopher to come from Sydney. His life moved from a privileged Empire childhood and student of John Anderson to acclaimed elder statesman of realist philosophy. His philosophy developed from an Andersonian realist inheritance to major contributions on materialist theory of mind and the theory of universals. His views on several other topics such as religion and ethics are surveyed briefly.

Life

David Armstrong was the son of John Malet Armstrong, a Commodore in the Royal Australian Navy. While serving on *HMAS Australia* in the Pacific theatre in World War II, Armstrong senior assumed command of the ship after the captain was killed in a kamikaze attack.¹ David's mother came from a well-off Jersey family and her father was Rector of Exeter College, Oxford. His memoir, *A Jerseyman at Oxford*, is said by David to be a good read but rather self-satisfied.

David attended the Dragon School, the celebrated preparatory school in Oxford, and later Geelong Grammar, where he was taught history by Manning Clark. He joined the Navy as ordinary seaman in 1944-6 but was too late to see active service. He comments "I found the Lower Deck a humane and civilised environment after life in a boarding school".² He served with the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan, and believed that Japan was so devastated that it would not recover in his lifetime. When it did, he concluded that what matters to a people is that which they have in their heads, and their culture.

He then studied philosophy at Sydney University, where he met two of the most important people in his life, his teacher Professor John Anderson, and his fellow philosophy student and friend, David Stove. The relationship with Anderson was not entirely a happy one, though David was grateful to have learned how to do philosophy and what the



Commodore J.M. Armstrong (photo: RAN)

¹ J.S. Sears, John Malet (Jock) Armstrong (1900-1988), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 17 (2007); Commodore John Malet Armstrong, Navy biography, <https://www.navy.gov.au/biography/commodore-john-malet-armstrong>

² D.M. Armstrong, An intellectual autobiography, part I, *Quadrant* 27 (1-2) (Jan 1983), 89-102; also in Radu J. Bogdan, ed, *D.M. Armstrong* (Reidel, Dordrecht, 1984), 3-54.

questions were. While Anderson was still alive, he criticised Anderson publicly, saying “His real intellectual weakness lies in his desire to make disciples, his encouragement of the growth of an Andersonian orthodoxy, his unwillingness to take criticism seriously ... his encouragement of an Andersonian provincialism in place of those other provincialisms he so vigorously attacked in the name of culture.”³



Sydney University Quad, 1940s (photo by Frank Hurley, nla.obj-158913252)

Anderson had his complaints too. In a private letter to Ruth Walker, he wrote “The fact is that both Davids are weak in logic — D.C.S[tove]. because he doesn’t have the training, D.M.A[rmstrong]. congenitally.”⁴

Nevertheless Anderson and Armstrong are an instance of the old story of teacher and student who disagree vigorously on answers but share assumptions on what the questions are and the methods of solving them.

In his honours year David coughed up blood and was found to have TB. The disease was only recently curable but he survived well. He associated closely with the Push, and in 1950 married another Push member, Madeleine Haydon. They separated in 1979 (and he married very successfully Jenny Clark). He writes of Madeleine, “Her strong and clear intellect was nevertheless entirely literary.”⁵ That might give the impression that his own intellect was by contrast scientific, but that is not exactly the case. Despite the importance to his later

philosophy of the thesis that science can explain everything, he did not read detailed science. As with many philosophers, the sort of science he liked was the theory of evolution which allowed smart people to explain anything without too much need to look into details. Shakespeare, not any scientific work, was his sacred text.

Pictured in Barcan’s book (see photo credits at end) is a photo of David’s radical youth, presumably in its entirety. At a 1947 protest against the Dutch occupation of the East Indies, he appears third from left bearing a sign saying “WE HAVE NOTHING AGAINST THE DUTCH ... IN HOLLAND”.⁶ Soon he became strongly anti-communist.

He then left for Oxford to do a BPhil. The linguistic philosophy of Ryle, Strawson and Grice was a shock to the system after Anderson’s realism. David was not impressed with their replacing the big questions of philosophy with analysis of language. He recalled an early incident:

Grice, I think it was, read very fast a long paper which was completely unintelligible to me. Perhaps others were having difficulty also because when the paper finished there was a long, almost religious, hush in the room. Then O.P. Wood raised what seemed to be a very minute point even by Oxford standards. A quick dismissive remark by Grice and the room settled down to its devotions again. At this point a Canadian sitting next to me turned and said, ‘Say, what is going on here?’ I said, ‘I’m new round here, and I don’t know the rules of this game. But I think Strawson and Grice are winning.’⁷

The story of the brash young colonial got around. He almost failed his viva, but Grice, after showing his work implied a contradiction, graciously allowed him to pass.

I recall a class in the Seventies in which Armstrong spoke of his time as a student at Oxford. Everyone, he said, went around parroting Wittgenstein’s saying “The meaning is the use”, which acted as a slogan for the language-first approach to philosophy. He paused a moment to let us meditate on that saying, then said deliberately, “Not so big now...” One reason it was not so big was that Armstrong and a few of like mind had brought back an emphasis on fundamental philosophical questions.

³ D.M. Armstrong, *Educating Sydney?* *Observer*, 19/4/1958, 152; further in James Franklin, *Corrupting the Youth: A History of Philosophy in Australia* (Macleay Press, Sydney, 2003), 47.

⁴ Anderson to Ruth Walker, 1952, in Mark Weblin, *A Passion for Thinking*, (unpublished), ch. 15; Franklin, *Corrupting the Youth*, 48.

⁵ Armstrong, *An intellectual autobiography*, part I.

⁶ Alan Barcan, *Radical Students: The Old Left at Sydney University* (Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2002), 199.

⁷ Armstrong, *An intellectual autobiography*, part I.

After Oxford he held appointments as lecturer in London and Melbourne. As one who knew him in Melbourne said, “he lectured us long and hard on the evils of Communism.”

He was appointed to the Challis chair of philosophy at Sydney University in 1964, aged 37. He was proud to succeed to the chair once held by Anderson, but wrote later “If I had known what was to happen in the Sydney Department over the years I might have been less enthusiastic.”



Clifton Pugh's portrait of Armstrong, Archibald Prize finalist, 1959 (National Portrait Gallery)

His most successful book, *A Materialist Theory of the Mind*, was published in 1968. (Its content is described below.) But by then political storm clouds were gathering. 1965 saw the Knopfelmacher affair, when his choice of Melbourne anti-Communist Dr Frank Knopfelmacher for a position in political philosophy was overturned by the Academic Board, creating a national furore.⁸ He was active in Friends of Vietnam, an organisation promoting continued Australian commitment to the Vietnam War. I was present at the event in 1971 which led to the best-known photo of Armstrong. When the First Secretary of the Vietnamese Embassy was giving a talk at Sydney University, a left-wing ex-student seized the microphone and began shouting slogans. The photographer caught Armstrong just at the moment he attempted unsuccessfully to grab the microphone back. People blew the photo up and put it on their walls and he became known as “the Beast”. Things got worse. A course proposal on Marxism-Leninism which he opposed was approved. A colleague (if that is the right word) wrote a private document on “strategies for isolating the Beast” which fell off the back of a photocopier and was read out in State Parliament by Armstrong’s friend Peter Coleman. In 1973 a strike in favour of a

philosophy course on feminism saw lectures disrupted and tents on the Quadrangle lawn.⁹ Jack Munday of the Builders’ Labourers Federation lobbed onto campus to express his criticism of Sydney University philosophy by threatening to down tools. To attend David’s lectures on perception we sometimes had to cross aggressive picket lines.

As his colleague David Stove put it in his tribute at David Armstrong’s retirement, “while I and certain others were only casting about for some avenue of escape, David never gave up. He battled on, and battled on again, and always exacted the best terms, however bad, that could be got from the enemies of philosophy.”¹⁰ Pat Trifonoff, the departmental secretary, said that when he was in the common room and heard of the latest outrage from the Left, he’d leap up, his shirt tail would fly out of his trousers, and he’d be into action.



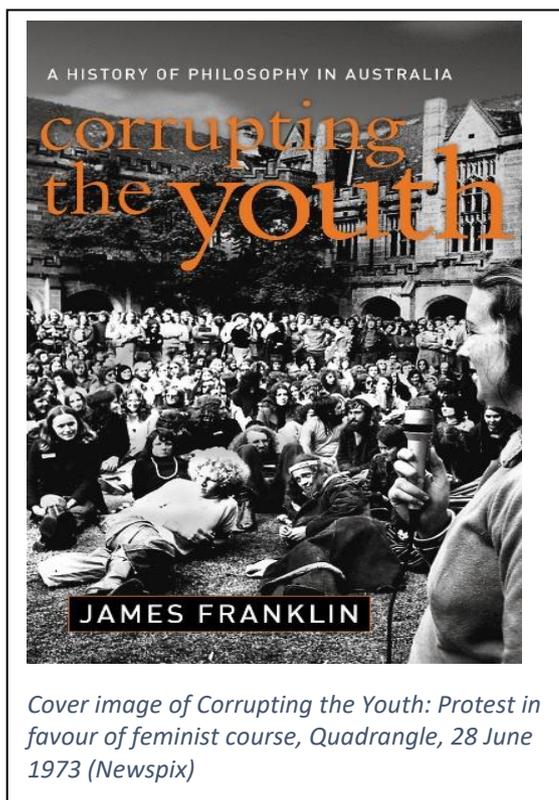
Armstrong “the Beast” attempts to seize back the microphone, 24 June 1971 (Fairfax Photos/Corrupting the Youth)

The terms he achieved were the division of the Philosophy Department into two. While the opposition Department of General Philosophy was subject to political infighting and splits, the Department of Traditional and Modern Philosophy, “Armstrong’s department”, pursued the classical problems of philosophy. It provided the calm and collegial atmosphere for his work described below.

⁸ Franklin, *Corrupting the Youth*, 283-8.

⁹ Franklin, *Corrupting the Youth*, 294-305.

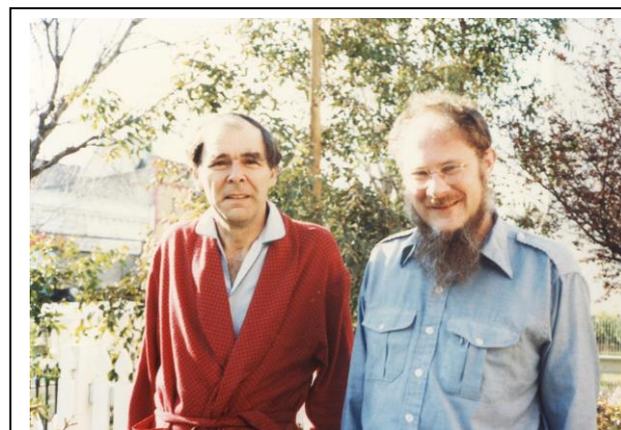
¹⁰ David Stove, A tribute to David Armstrong (1991), *Quadrant* 58 (3) (Mar 2014), 42-43, <https://quadrant.org.au/magazine/2014/03/tribute-david-armstrong/>.



In later life David produced many books developing his work on universals and laws of nature. He had few research students and rarely attempted to win grants, nor did he have a set of disciples like Anderson. He did collaborate with a number of overseas philosophers, especially David Lewis, who often visited him and became a kind of honorary Australian. Lewis was an even more well-known philosopher than Armstrong – a 2013 count found he was the most cited philosopher of recent times in top anglophone journals, being cited much more than all women philosophers put together.¹¹ While his style of philosophising resembled Armstrong's, his intuitions on which philosophical theses were true deviated from common sense much more than Armstrong's.

David maintained involvement on the board of *Quadrant* magazine, including in the sacking of editors that occurred from time to time.¹²

He retired compulsorily at age 65 in 1991. He remained active and his last book was published in 2010. In the last



David Armstrong and David Lewis

two years of his life he suffered from dementia. His form of the disease was one that tends to lead to paranoia; he suffered a little from that at the time he had to move to a nursing home, but by and large his rationality was helpful in dealing with his situation even when his memory became poor. He died in 2014.

Ideas

Armstrong worked in three main areas of philosophy. The first was perception and knowledge (which will not be covered here). The second was materialist theory of the mind. The third was universals and laws of nature.

The materialist theory of the mind says, in simple terms, that the mind equals the brain. That is, it says there is nothing to the mind (defined as whatever performs the usual tasks of thinking, perceiving, deciding etc) except the brain and its functions. It stands against Cartesianism, which says there is something mysterious and non-physical in there. It also stands against the behaviourism of Ryle and many mid-twentieth-century psychologists, according to which there is really nothing in there – just a series of reactions to stimuli. According to Armstrong, there are indeed mental images, thoughts, decisions and the other mental entities that there seem to be by introspection; it is just that they are all really physical. It is a straightforward theory. The point of Armstrong's book is to lay it out clearly and reply to objections.¹³ His success in doing so has made it the classic in the field, with an extraordinary 3700 citations in google scholar.

Armstrong does agree that it doesn't look like that – when you introspect it does not seem as if thoughts, mental images and so on are physical. He explains that appearance away by an analogy to the "headless woman illusion". A magician puts a black cover over the head of a woman on stage against a black background, and it seems to the audience that they see a woman with no head. They move illegitimately from "I don't see that the woman has a head" to "I see that the woman does not have a head." Just so, Armstrong said, when we introspect we illegitimately infer from "I don't see that thoughts are physical" to "I see that thoughts are non-physical."¹⁴

¹¹ Kieran Healy, Lewis and the women, <https://kieranhealy.org/blog/archives/2013/06/19/lewis-and-the-women/>; the Armstrong-Lewis correspondence is being edited by Peter Anstey, A.R.J. Fisher and Stephanie Lewis.

¹² Robert Manne, Sorry business: the road to the Apology, *The Monthly*, Mar 2008, 22-31.

¹³ Andrew Irvine, David Armstrong and Australian materialism, *Quadrant* 58 (3) (Mar 2014), 36-41, <https://quadrant.org.au/magazine/2014/03/david-armstrong-australian-materialism/>

¹⁴ D.M. Armstrong, The headless woman illusion and the defence of materialism, *Analysis* 29 (1968), 48–49.

In the way of philosophical problems, the matter remains as unresolved as ever. Some agree with Armstrong's materialism, while others continue to maintain there is a "hard problem of consciousness" which prevents consciousness being explained in physical terms.

From the early 1970s Armstrong devoted most of his effort to the problem of universals and related topics. He wrote, "The problem of universals has the interesting characteristic that it is impossible to explain to the non-philosopher what the fuss is all about."¹⁵ It is difficult, but I think not impossible.

Suppose we agree that there aren't any gods, minds over and above brains, or spooky stuff generally, and that we should stick to the entities that appear in science. So what entities does science talk about? Physical things, certainly, like atoms and cats. But what about, say, forces? Forces aren't *things*, but it seems you can feel a push or a pull, so are they real? What about space? Is it a sort of ether that things swim around in, or is it just a way of speaking about relations of distance? What about dispositions like the solubility of salt in water? Laws of nature? (They're not things, and they're not literal laws as in written instructions to planets on how they ought to behave; more like persistent patterns in how things develop, on the basis of the properties they have: Armstrong wrote a book *What Is a Law of Nature?* to try and explain.) Numbers, what are they? Difficult questions...¹⁶

The central problem of that family concerns *universals*. The law of gravity says that two bodies, such as planets, attract each other with a force that is proportional to their *masses* and inversely proportional to the *distance* between them. So the law refers to mass, a property of the bodies. Any other bodies with the same mass then would have the same force between them. It refers also to the distance between them, a relation. Properties and relations, like mass and distance, are called "universals" or "repeatables" because they occur across multiple things. They are not themselves things but they appear throughout the laws of nature and they seem to be responsible for the causal powers of things – for example, I see something as yellow because some physical property of the thing affects the light to my eye, causing it to be different from the light reflected by other coloured surfaces.

So what account should be given of such universals? There are three theories. *Nominalism* says they are only words or names or concepts – created by us and our language. That is hard to believe when they seem to cause things, and are so much embedded in the laws of nature that tell us how reality works. The second position is *Platonism*, which says they do exist but in an abstract, non-causal realm, to which we have some sort of intellectual access. It is then hard to see how they get into the causal laws of nature in this, physical, world. Armstrong defended the third option, called *Aristotelian realism* as it was begun by Aristotle. It says that properties and relations are real aspects of things in our world and are responsible for their causal powers. The properties of things are just as real as the things that have them.¹⁷

Based on that idea Armstrong gave a wide-ranging story of how to see laws of nature, causes, dispositions, states of affairs, truthmakers and possibilities, the basic metaphysical furniture of the world as it appears in science.¹⁸

Armstrong was not the kind of philosopher who is keen to write on everything. Although involved in politics, he did not write on social and political philosophy. A rare exception is a paper on 'The nature of tradition',¹⁹ and even that is an exercise in linguistic analysis as done in 1950s Oxford more than a substantive contribution. For example, it discusses why one says that a custom spreads but a tradition is handed on. The paper has a paltry ten citations and the little reaction from philosophers in the field was along the lines of "stick to your day job".

He was against religion, and when young was in principle a crusading atheist though without the motivation to crusade much. In later life he was less against religion, but not so much because he found the arguments for it better but because he came to hold a metaphilosophical view that it is hard to get knockdown arguments in philosophy on any question. A Catholic student once asked him what he'd say if he got to heaven and realised the arguments for the existence of God were valid after all; he said he'd just tell God he didn't make the arguments strong enough.

In ethics, he mostly stayed quiet, but he did once write an article on 'A search for values'²⁰ where he made it clear that ethics was the one thing he was not realist about. He agreed with Mackie's view that objective value is a metaphysical

¹⁵ Armstrong, An intellectual autobiography, part II, *Quadrant* 27 (3) (Mar 1983), 68-78.

¹⁶ See Franklin, *Corrupting the Youth*, 324-9.

¹⁷ D.M. Armstrong, *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction* (Westview Press, Boulder, 1989).

¹⁸ D.M. Armstrong, *Sketch for a Systematic Metaphysics* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010); discussion in Stephen Mumford, *David Armstrong* (McGill-Queens University Press, Montreal, 2007).

¹⁹ D.M. Armstrong, The nature of tradition, in *Liberty and Politics: Studies in Social Theory*, ed Owen Harries (Pergamon Press, Sydney, 1976), 7-19.

²⁰ D.M. Armstrong, A search for values, *Quadrant* 26 (6) (June 1982), 65-70; Franklin, *Corrupting the Youth*, 399.

superfluity not found in the world as revealed by science. So there is really no ethics, over and above techniques for getting around in the social world – what one philosopher called “traffic rules for self-assertors”.

In the course of summing up what he had learned from his philosophical life, Armstrong wrote:

I have found philosophers to be generally very good people. Granted that all human beings are born in whatever is the non-theological equivalent of original sin, a training in philosophy seems to be in a modest degree a training in virtue. Philosophers, usually clever, can also be extremely silly, both inside and, more perilously, outside, philosophy. But this seldom seems to spring from badness of heart.²¹

That is strange, not to say magnanimous, given what he lived through.

Further resources:

David Armstrong’s papers in the National Library: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-414348017>

Curriculum vitae (to 2002): <http://www.ditext.com/armstrong/armstrong.html>

Armstrong oral history interview with Stein Helgeby, 2009 (audio and transcript): <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-219136771/listen>

A sound file of Armstrong discussing universals: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=evjTWTMEUTw>

James Franklin interviewed on Armstrong’s truthmaking theory in the Philosophy & What Matters series: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QO_uvEUac_M

Photo credits (permissions gratefully acknowledged):

Armstrong’s father, the Commodore: Royal Navy.

University of Sydney Quad: Frank Hurley (1885-1962), National Library of Australia, nla.obj-158913252.

[A photograph of David Armstrong at the 1947 Dutch Consulate demonstration has not had copyright issues resolved, but it can be found on p. 199 *Radical Students* by Alan Barcan, available on Google books]

Clifton Pugh, portrait of David Armstrong, permission from Shane Pugh and the Pugh estate.

David Armstrong "the Beast" attempts to seize back the microphone, 24 June 1971 (*Sydney Morning Herald*), permission from Nine.

Book cover from *Corrupting the Youth*, permission from Macleay Press.

David Armstrong and Davis Lewis, personal property of the author.

²¹ Armstrong, *Intellectual autobiography*, part II.