DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR DAVID BRAYBROOKE

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for David Braybrooke, professor emeritus, government, has filed with the secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

Dean P. Neikirk, Secretary
General Faculty and Faculty Council

IN MEMORIAM DAVID BRAYBROOKE

David Braybrooke was born 18 October 1924 in Hackettstown, New Jersey. He was the eldest son of a civil engineer, Walter Leonard and his wife, Netta Rose Foyle, both British expatriates. Most of David’s life took place inside classrooms. From his early youth he remembered teachers often saying something to the effect of: “Braybrooke, stop talking!”

He postponed his undergraduate studies at Hobart College to volunteer for the U.S. Army in 1943 and served until 1946, all the while studying at Downing College, Cambridge, in the United Kingdom. In 1948, he graduated from Harvard with a B.A. in Economics, and during the next two years, he taught history and literature at Hobart and William Smith Colleges. In 1951, David earned an M.A. in Philosophy from Cornell and, two years later, a Ph.D. with a dissertation on welfare and happiness.

David continued his teaching career as an instructor of philosophy at the University of Michigan (1953–54), which he quite disliked, and then at Bowdoin College (1954-56) and, in 1955, published in the Review of Economic Studies his first article: “Farewell to the New Welfare Economics.” From 1956 to 1963, he served as assistant professor at Yale University teaching interdisciplinary economics and politics and collaborating with Charles Lindblom. In 1962, David was turned down for tenure at Yale—the very year he received a Guggenheim Fellowship—and angrily resolved to give up academia. Serendipity intervened and later that year, he found his way to Dalhousie University in Halifax in the far eastern Canadian province of Nova Scotia.

David dearly loved Dalhousie, as he dearly loved Canada—which was for him the better America—and there he spent the core of his life, almost thirty years. David remained there until his retirement in 1990 as the McCulloch Professor of Philosophy and Politics with a joint appointment in political science and philosophy. In 2011, Dalhousie awarded him a Doctor of Laws honoris causa. Over the years, he also served as a visiting professor at a number of universities, most significantly two years running as visiting research professor of philosophy at Pittsburgh.

David was president of the Canadian Philosophical Association (1971-72), president of the Canadian Association of University Teachers (1974-75), and in 1980, was elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. He was also vice president of the American Political Science Association (1981-82). He carried a Canadian passport in addition to his American one. David then retired from retirement when Government Chair James Fishkin recruited him to an appointment in both departments of government and philosophy at The University of Texas at Austin as the centennial commission chair in the College of Liberal Arts.

On Lake Austin Boulevard, David found an apartment that looked out over Lake Austin and the Tom Miller Dam, in this way reminding himself of his beloved Halifax.

At Texas, he taught graduate seminars with such titles as “Philosophy of History,” “Natural Law Modernized,” “Rousseau as a Rigorous Thinker,” and “Utilitarianism”; undergraduate seminars on Hegel, Marx, and Hobbes; and on socialist theory, liberalism, utilitarianism, and democracy. He thought that his teaching, rather than original and
important scholarship, justified his University appointments. From the point of view of social policy, it is not the results but the activity above all in teaching, which ensures that a university appointment is valuable. David retired a second time, this time more successfully, in 2005.

General Scholarly Achievements.


Contributions to Utilitarianism in Particular.

David identified as a utilitarian, which holds that the moral worth of an action is determined by its outcome—and not by anything intrinsic to that action such as duty or piety, courage or benevolence. His interest in utilitarianism came from a very practical interest in public policy. The needs and rights of the individual figure prominently in his scholarship, as do the rules that, ideally, a self-determining political community self-consciously constructs for itself. David focused on consequences, in organizing political community in ways to get better rather than worse consequences: consequences that would improve the everyday lives of ordinary people, by organizing society in ways more thoughtful, more rational. David always took a careful step-by-step approach to thinking through problems, and he recommended the same method to others. That the recommended process was step-by-step signals two things. First, that it is hands-on, practical doings, not ideal theory; second, that anyone can participate and should participate.

Public policy has one goal, according to David: to meet human needs. The central question of his scholarship was, quite simply: “What do we need to live a life worth living?” First, said David, “We must determine what true human needs are. Then we need to look at how, in any given community, rules and rights attempt to address these needs. Then roll up your sleeves, replace those rules and rights that don’t work, revise those that do but only inadequately, and construct new ones to do work presently not done.”

David felt he had ended what he regarded as one of the biggest scandals in modern philosophy: for over two centuries, the discussion of utilitarianism had been on the wrong track, asking what was to be made of a utilitarianism associated with a calculus of pleasure and pain, a calculus formulated as a suggestion by Bentham, but never established in an acceptable form and in any case never used in real applications.

David believed that he returned the on-going discussion of utilitarianism to the right track, the notion of “census.” It deals with the all too frequent possibility of mixed results, where a promising policy will both benefit some people and take away benefits from others. This should not be regarded as an embarrassment but as a sign that the census approach rests on an ubiquitous pattern of dispute over policies. It makes fundamental points about how one moves from one social policy to an improved one. Society must maintain an open discussion of differences to reach policies that transcend objections.

David’s contribution is an elaboration of what the Principle of Utility demands: that policies should promote both having the greatest number happy and having them as happy as could be, and what this means as a criterion for choosing policies. He believed he had shown that the notion of a comparative census is both a remedy for the standard objections to utilitarianism (which generally assume a calculus rather than the census) and a guide to a
basic form of resolving disputes about choosing policies. Both applications entail repeatedly using the census
notion to make the relevant comparisons.

Contributions Beyond Utilitarianism.

David regarded his other central contributions to lie in the understanding of rules, rights, needs, work, and
Marxism.

While his work on the concept of needs was allied with his work on utilitarianism, it was independent to the extent
that utilitarianism could rest on other concepts (happiness or personal preferences); and the concept of needs calls
for attention and analysis regardless of affiliation with utilitarianism. David felt that his work clarified the relation
between basic needs (“course-of-life needs”) and the multiplicity of adventitious needs. It also made clear the way
in which some needs take moral precedence over mere preferences (commonly distinguished as “wants”).

David’s work on the difficult problem of exactly what a rule is culminated in Logic on the Track of Social Change.
It elaborates a non-circular definition that rests on the notion of blocking an action, which can be defined and
illustrated without referring to rules.

Finally, David took Marx to be concerned with social systems defined by systems of rules, and changes from one
system to another. He followed Marx in this approach, though with a more studied concept of rules; and followed
Marx, too, in his treatment of ideology. His contributions to Marxist theory concerned the alienation of labor and in
the position that Marx’s chief teaching lies in the theory that capitalism has the effect of accelerating economic
growth but that in respect to employment the effect is only temporary, realized in boom periods that are becoming
shorter and shorter, with stagnation in-between. If David was right, then both Republicans and Democrats are
mistaken in their faith that the great capitalist economies have full regenerative power. Instead of going back to
Keynes, David urged a return to Marx.

The Man.

David had an offbeat, irreverent sense of humor. He liked intellectual discussions, good wine, fine beers, and
Amy’s Ice Cream. He was a proud member of Amnesty International and of OXFAM-Canada as well. He loved
lunches, his favorite meal of the day, and he loved them especially in the Faculty Center. David loved Beethoven’s
Piano Sonata No. 8 in C minor, Opus 13. He especially loved the second movement, titled Adagio cantabile, with
its grand, expansive movement in A-flat major. David also loved key lime pie.

David married Alice Noble on the last day of 1948. They had three children: Nicholas, Geoffrey, and Elizabeth.
They divorced in 1982. He married Margaret Odell in 1984 and later divorced. In Texas, he met Michiko Gomyo of
Japan, and they married in 1994. Michiko’s children—Linda, Brenda, and Michael McAdams—became David’s
stepchildren. David struggled to get right the sometimes-difficult balance between family life and professional
career.

David died of cancer on 7 August 2013 in Austin. He was surrounded by his wife, children, stepchildren,
colleagues, and friends every day for the last eight weeks of his life. David asked that his ashes be spread in Halifax
Harbor, a large natural harbor on the Atlantic coast of Nova Scotia.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Benjamin Gregg (chair), Al
Martinich, and Paul Woodruff.

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http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/.