

Helen Morris Cartwright, 1931-2006

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HELEN MORRIS CARTWRIGHT, 1931-2006

Helen Morris Cartwright, professor of philosophy emerita at Tufts University, died at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston on May 14, 2006. Her degrees were all from the University of Michigan, with an AB with Distinction in 1954, and a Ph.D. in 1963. After holding brief teaching appointments at Michigan, Berkeley, Eastern Michigan University, and Wayne State, she joined the Tufts Department in 1968, was promoted to associate professor in 1973, and full professor in 1988. She retired in 1997. Her seminal work in metaphysics, logic, and the philosophy of language, and especially where the three fields overlap, continues to frame some of the central questions in these areas. She is best known for her pioneering analysis of mass terms and the metaphysics of “stuff” in such classic papers as “Heraclitus and the Bath Water” (1965), “Quantities” (1970), “Amounts and Measures of Amount” (1975), and “Parts and Partitives: Notes on What Things Are Made of” (1984). In addition to many other papers on these topics, she also published important work on Aristotle, personal identity, and plurality.

Helen was a kind but demanding teacher, eliciting a degree of precision and accuracy from her students (and colleagues) that they had typically never aspired to or imagined possible. Her metaphysics course was legendarily challenging, but also regarded as the backbone of Tufts’ Masters program. Veterans of that course invariably found themselves solidly grounded and finely tuned for further work when they continued their Ph.D. studies elsewhere. Helen created the first undergraduate courses in formal logic and philosophy of language at Tufts; her course in ancient philosophy became a model for how to connect current problems of analytic metaphysics with the issues made famous by the pre-Socratics, Plato, and Aristotle. She ably served the university on its tenure and promotion committee, its curriculum committee, and more than a dozen other committees, and was an incisive commentator and raiser of objections at the Philosophy Department’s Friday colloquia.

In 1982 she was elected a visiting life member of Clare Hall at Cambridge University, where she often visited with her husband, the philosopher Richard Cartwright. Helen and Dick pursued a lively and informed interest in jazz, and constructed an enviable library of records to complement their joint library of philosophy books.

Helen Cartwright was a philosopher’s philosopher, who will be remembered for her metaphysical imagination, her intense devotion to philosophical rigor, and her good-humored and graceful scholarship. When she posed a question, it was always crystal clear, and she always wanted the answer to be just as clear, and as carefully defended as any claim could be. She set the highest standards and lived up to them, an ideal role model for her students and colleagues. We mourn her passing and miss her presence.

Daniel C. Dennett and Mark Richard
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