

1985, University of California: In Memoriam

William Ray Dennes, Philosophy: Berkeley

1898-1982

Mills Professor of Intellectual and Moral Philosophy and Civil Polity, Emeritus

The death of William R. Dennes, on May 2, 1982, cost the University a beloved teacher and scholar with whom it had the closest and most beneficial ties for nearly 70 years. The long association began in 1915, when young Will arrived from his native Healdsburg to enroll at Berkeley as a freshman. By the time of his graduation, he had amply demonstrated the intelligence and diligence that marked his activity all through his later life: despite a difficult course of study that combined philosophy, the classics, and the biological sciences, he was awarded the University Medal as the top scholar in his class. During the following year, while holding the Mills Fellowship in Philosophy, he earned the master's degree. These attainments, together with his attractive personal qualities, then won him a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford, where, three years later, he received the D.Phil. degree. While in Oxford he married the former Margaret Stevenson of New York. They returned in 1923 to this country to accept the offer of an instructorship in philosophy in California.

In 1929 Dennes studied in Germany and began a life-long friendship with the noted classical scholar, Kurt von Fritz, whose courage during the Nazi period he never ceased to admire. In 1932 he was invited to Yale University as associate professor, but after only a year in New Haven he decided to return to Berkeley. An important factor in his decision was his respect for the Academic Senate's voluntary acceptance of pay cuts in the higher ranks, instead of dismissal of non-tenured staff, as a way of coping with the budgetary cuts necessitated by the Depression. The Berkeley faculty's self-government, and especially this sort of principled action on its part, were the chief ground of his loyalty to the institution and of his willingness to remain here despite many attractive offers. He retired in 1965. During his last decade of service, he was Mills Professor of Intellectual and Moral Philosophy and of Civil Polity, a formidable title that gave him no little amusement.

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Dennes's philosophical interests lay mainly in the field of ethics and general theory of value, but he was also very well informed in the history of philosophy and in most of the other areas. Although he had little use for what he called "large views," he did not strongly resist being classified as a philosophical naturalist. Naturalism, in its most general form, is a point of view about the acceptability of explanatory systems: it holds that no such system is satisfactory if it resorts to supernatural beings or states of affairs. Accordingly, in ethics the naturalist holds that the only considerations that are relevant to the validity of moral judgments are those involving features of this "natural" world in which we live; it is neither necessary nor even useful to take into account the supposed commands of deities, or the possible rewards and punishments in an imaginary hereafter, or any other such mysteries. What *are* relevant are the empirical facts, especially those having to do with the basic needs of the affected persons--where the term "basic needs" is understood to refer not only to those for food, shelter, and other necessities for immediate survival, but also to needs for knowledge, beauty, and affiliation with one's fellow man.

In his writings, Will Dennes gave special attention to the problems that arise in connection with the resolution of human conflicts. "The reconciliation of conflicts," he once said, "is probably the dominant motive of my life and work in philosophy." A quotation from his Woodbridge lectures is apposite here. Noting that when such conflicts arise the philosopher not only must ask "What ought to be done?" but also must consider the second-order question, "How can one properly determine what ought to be done?" Will wrote:

A naturalist is likely to answer this philosophical question by suggesting that the first thing to do is to try to understand the conflict as thoroughly as possible in the time that may be at one's disposal--to make out the content of the socially accepted rules or the habitual action-patterns that are in collision with specific desires, or with external threats, or with other actual, imagined, or proposed patterns of activity. The second thing to do (and the first and second, of course, go on concurrently and influence one another) is to learn as much as one can in the time at one's disposal about the probable consequences that would follow from one or other compromise or resolution of the conflicting factors.

Those who have seen Will Dennes in action as an administrator will recognize in the foregoing a brief description of his own *modus operandi*. What made him so effective as a reconciler of differences, and so persuasive on any issue he discussed, was, in addition to his unfailing tact, kindness and good nature, his capacity to understand all aspects of the matter and to make well-informed estimates of the probable consequences of the various possible courses of action. The participants in such disputes found

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that he understood, usually even better than they did, what could be said for their own points of view. Under the circumstances it was difficult for rational people not to be persuaded.

In his long career at California, Will had ample opportunity to exercise these skills. He built a record of university and public service seldom equalled. Besides his many years as Dean of the Graduate Division and his three terms as Chairman of the Department of Philosophy, he served on nearly every major Senate and Administrative committee, nearly

always at least part of the time as chairman, and usually with several tours of duty. A sample: nine years on the Budget Committee, six years on the Educational Policy Committee, seven years on the Graduate Council, five years on the Privilege and Tenure Committee, seven years on the Research Committee, and so on. In addition, he served as Chairman and as Vice Chairman of the Northern Section of the Academic Senate and as a member and officer of many Statewide committees and committees of national organizations. He played an important part in the establishment of the Santa Cruz campus, and in the selection of its initial faculty. During World War II he was an assistant director, under J. Robert Oppenheimer, of the Los Alamos project. In all of this, as his friends were aware, he acted in accord with Kant's criterion, i.e., "not by inclination but out of a sense of duty."

Dennes's special influence on students came from attitude and manner as well as from learning. His lectures, in particular those on the history of philosophy, were works of literary art. The perennial insights of Aristotle, Spinoza, and Hume were presented with all the glowing freshness of immediate revelation, but at the same time they did not escape his gentle though sometimes devastating commentary. The undergraduates crowded into his courses, and graduate students admired him to such an extent that some of them even began unconsciously to imitate his manner of speaking. Many are among the leaders in academic philosophy today.

As would be expected, there is a long list of honors, including a Guggenheim fellowship, an honorary Doctor of Laws degree from New York University, an appointment at Columbia University as Woodbridge Memorial lecturer, election as Fellow of the Royal Society for the Arts, and election as President of the American Philosophical Association. Among his numerous published writings the best known are his book, *Some Dilemmas of Naturalism*, and the papers he contributed to 18 volumes of the *University of California Publications in Philosophy*.

No tribute to Will Dennes can fail to mention his talented wife Margaret who survives him, as do his son, Richard, and daughter, Margot Honig, and seven grandchildren. Margaret's intelligence, wit, and good humor were a source of strength to him in all his undertakings, as he well knew, and they were a joy to the many students, colleagues and friends who had


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the good fortune to be invited to the Dennes home, whether for a large get-acquainted gathering or for a quiet afternoon of pleasant conversation and profitable discussion. Many treasured memories derive from those occasions.

Will Dennes will be remembered not only for his contributions to philosophy and to higher education, but above all for his qualities as a person. Most prominent of these were his thoughtfulness and kindness to all with whom he came in contact. We have lost a remarkable friend and colleague. He is sorely missed.

B. Mates K. Aschenbrenner C. W. Jones W. I. Matson E. W. Strong

 **Date:** 1985

 **Place:** Berkley, CA

 **Description:** University of California (System)--Faculty--Biography