

STANFORD UNIVERSITY
STANFORD, CALIFORNIA 94305-2060

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION
JOHN L. MOTHERSHEAD, JR.
(1908 - 1991)

John Mothershead, who was an emeritus professor in Stanford's Philosophy Department, died in his 82nd year on Wednesday, January 30, in his home on campus, as a result of a series of strokes. He was born on November 18, 1908, in Indianapolis. He grew up in California and attended Stanford. He received his B.A. degree here in 1930, and his M.A. in 1933. He received another M.A. at Harvard and completed his education with a Ph.D. in 1938. After three years of teaching at Harvard and at Syracuse University he started teaching philosophy at Stanford in 1941. He taught here on a full time basis, and later as a part-time professor in his retirement till the early 80s.

During the four decades of Mothershead's career at Stanford both this university and American philosophy underwent considerable changes. The education of graduate students became more and more important at Stanford, and many of the students studying philosophy had scientific as well as humanistic interests. Mothershead's teaching centered on the history of philosophy and on ethics. He developed not only excellent courses, but also strong educational ties with his students. Through his teaching Mothershead demonstrated that even in a specialized, technically oriented age, philosophy can be made relevant to concrete human problems.

Between 1940 and 1980 American philosophy was first dominated by positivism, and subsequently extended rigorous analytic techniques also to the more humanistic parts of the field. Mothershead kept the history of philosophy in the focus of his philosophizing and teaching. In the face of the trend towards specialization he felt that it was important for philosophers to have a synoptic view of the history of their subject. Mathematics is about numbers, physics about matter, and chemistry about chemical elements; in that sense philosophy

does not have a separate domain as its subject matter. If a student wants to have an adequate picture of what philosophy is, the best way is to survey the history of the subject. Mothershead taught a historically oriented introductory course that became legendary among Stanford students and alumni. He and his colleagues also organized a sequence of four courses in the history of philosophy for juniors and seniors that also became a landmark, and often attracted graduate students. In the 50's Mothershead helped to set up the graduate humanities program that offers still today students an opportunity to complete a Ph.D. in a humanistic field with additional training in a series of broad humanistically-oriented seminars.

A couple of quotations from student evaluations give well the flavor of Mothershead's teaching. A woman who then went on to graduate work in philosophy wrote about his course on the 19th century: "Thank you for helping us put Kant, Fichte, and Hegel not just in our minds, but in our hearts as well." Another remark comes from a letter written by a student who was part of Stanford's technical and logic-oriented special program called *formal systems*. "It is a difficult thing to teach a formal systems major to appreciate idealism. You have happily succeeded, and I thank you very much."

In 1972 Mothershead reached retirement age. Two other colleagues were retiring around the same time, and Stanford took steps to keep all three connected one way or another with the intellectual life of this university. When it was not immediately clear how this would be done in Mothershead's case, the students took matters into their own hands. A petition with more than 1,000 signatures was created, asking Stanford to do everything possible to keep Mothershead, at least on a part-time basis, in the classroom. This move turned out to be successful, and Mothershead continued to teach as long as his health permitted. His teaching was distinguished service not only to the philosophers but to the Stanford community at large. The university recognized this in 1964 with a Dinkelspiel award.

Much of his creative work went into his courses. Still, some of it is preserved also in the form of publications. He authored *Ethics: Modern Conceptions of the Principles of Right* (1955) and co-edited with John Goheen *The Collected Papers of Clarence Irving Lewis*.

Mothershead was also active in faculty affairs. He served as president for the Stanford chapter of the American Association of the University Professors,

and served also on many university committees, including the one that formulated the Statement of Academic Freedom. He was also concerned with some of the difficult moral choices that his students faced from time to time, and freely gave them counsel when asked by students during the period of the Vietnam War.

Finally, it need be mentioned that Mothershead had a strong impact on colleagues. Members of the philosophy department as well as colleagues who knew him from university committee work had the highest regard for him as a human being; his character was an inspiration to many.

He is survived by his wife Diane and two children from his late wife Elisabeth: J. Leland Mothershead III of Flintridge, California and Ann Bjorklund of Los Altos, California. Three stepdaughters are also among the survivors: Karen Crowther of Fort Bragg, California; Sheryl Della-Rose of Klamath Falls, Oregon; and Wendy Heffner of Menlo Park, California, as well as 13 grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren.

He will be missed sorely by his friends, former colleagues and many grateful former students.

Julius Moravcsik (Chair)

John Goheen

Patrick Suppes