

# Max Black

*February 24, 1909 — August 27, 1988*

A world-renowned philosopher, Max Black, the Susan Linn Sage Professor of Philosophy and Humane Letters, Emeritus, and Senior Member of the Program on Science, Technology and Society, died on August 27, 1988. He had taught at Cornell for thirty-one years, and had a marked influence on countless students, and as the founding director of the Society for the Humanities, and the Program for Andrew D. White Professors-at-Large.

He was born on February 24, 1909 at Baku, now capital of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic. When he was three years old, his parents emigrated and settled in England, which they cherished as a land of freedom and religious toleration. He attended a free school in north London, but at the age of nine he was, on the recommendation of the school's headmaster, admitted to Owen's School, an ancient and well-regarded public (in the English sense) school, where he remained until the age of eighteen. He then went to Queen's College, Cambridge, on scholarships, and received the B.A. degree with honors in mathematics in 1930. In college he concentrated heavily on mathematics. He spent the following academic year at the University of Göttingen, where he studied under Paul Bernays, Hermann Weyl, and David Hilbert, and other famous mathematicians and logicians. He spent the following five years as a mathematics master at the Royal Grammar School at Newcastle upon Tyne, and then for four years was a tutor in mathematics at the teacher-training Institute of Education, at the University of London.

In his second year as a undergraduate student at Queen's, some students at Girton College stimulated Black's interest in philosophy, and he became a member of the Moral Science Club, where he met Bertrand Russell, G.E. Moore, Frank Ramsey and the other leading philosophers. He also met I. A. Richards, C.K. Ogden, and William Empson. He became a close friend of Susan Stebbing, who was a major influence in his life. He also attended many meetings of the Aristotelian Society. Thus his interests broadened out of mathematics and the philosophy of mathematics to logic, semantics, philosophy of science, logical positivism, and literary theory and criticism. During the years when he was teaching at the Institute of Education, he took graduate work at the University of London, and was awarded the Ph.D. degree in 1939 for his dissertation on theories of logical positivism. As a graduate student his concentration was on mathematical logic. Perhaps it was through Ramsey, who was one of the first to expound the early teachings of Wittgenstein, that Black met Wittgenstein and read his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

An especially notable event in Black's life occurred in his last year at Queen's. Ogden, who was General Editor of the International Library of Psychology, Philosophy and Scientific Method, published by Kegan Paul, asked Black if he would write a book for the series. He was then twenty-one years of age. Black accepted the offer, and three years later, in 1933, *The Nature of Mathematics* was published in the series. The book is still in print.

While still a student at Owen's School, Black taught himself chess from an article in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (11th ed.), and before long he was good enough to compete in British and international tournaments. At Queen's he was captain of the Cambridge chess club, and was on his way to becoming a chess master, but he could not afford to become a professional player; besides, his other intellectual pursuits would not allow exclusive concentration on chess; however, chess-playing remained a life-long interest and enjoyment. He collected and knew the contents of about a hundred books on chess.

A sharp turning point in Black's career came about in 1940, when he received an offer of a full professorship in philosophy from the University of Illinois at Urbana. Until then he had taught mathematics, and held no professorship. Teaching positions in Great Britain at that time were scarce, as they were also in the United States. The position at Illinois became available because Arthur E. Murphy, head of the department, was in England on a sabbatical and had instructions to rebuild the department by appointing outstanding young scholars. He recognized in Black all of the qualifications for which he was searching. Black readily accepted, and he and his family (Michal, whom he had married in 1933, and their two children) moved to Urbana, with the expectation, however, that they would return to England after a few years. But in September 1939 Britain declared war on Germany, and in December 1941 the United States entered the war, so naturally Black's expectations of an attractive offer from England weakened considerably. In 1946 Murphy became head of the Philosophy Department at Cornell, and he invited Black to join him. Accordingly, Black accepted an appointment as full professor of philosophy at Cornell, and began to teach in September 1946. Two years later he became a naturalized United States citizen. In 1954 Black was named the Susan Linn Sage Professor of Philosophy and Humane Letters, and in 1971 he became also Senior Member of the Program on Science, Technology and Society. After thirty-one years of teaching, he retired in 1977 and was named professor emeritus; however, he retained his position at STS until his death.

During his teaching years at Cornell, Black offered a total of fifty-five courses in logic, semantics, philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of science, philosophy of social science, philosophy of logic, philosophy and literary criticism, and philosophy of choice and decision.

Before coming to the United States, Black had published *The Nature of Mathematics* and articles and reviews in the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, *Mind* and other leading philosophical journals. He also translated works of Gottlob Frege and Rudolph Carnap. While at Illinois he wrote numerous articles and reviews for *Mind*, the *Journal of Philosophy*, the *Journal of Symbolic Logic* (of which he was an editor), the *Philosophical Review*, and other scholarly philosophical journals. In 1946 he published *Critical Thinking*, a widely-used textbook that appeared in numerous editions.

Black's major creative years as a scholar were those that he spent at Cornell. During those years he published an additional eight books, including *Language and Philosophy* (1949), *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* (1962), and *A Companion to Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (1965). The bibliography of Black's publications lists 242 items through only 1979. He continued to write, edit, and publish during the remaining nine years, including *The Prevalence of Humbug* (1983). At his death, he left another book—his eleventh—*Perplexities*, composed of previously published articles, which was being prepared for publication in 1989. Black also edited five books, including *The Social Theories of Talcott Parsons* (1961) and *The Morality of Scholarship* (1967). He was General Editor of the Contemporary Philosophy Series of fifteen books published by Cornell University Press. He wrote numerous articles for leading encyclopedias, and was philosophy consultant for *Random House Dictionary of the English Language*. Over a period of two decades Black served frequently as an editor of *The Philosophical Review* and played an important role in making it one of the leading philosophical journals in the world. Black's writings have been discussed and cited innumerable times, and several of his books have been translated into Spanish, Italian, Hebrew, Japanese, Greek, French and German.

His writings brought Black invitations to teach or lecture at many American and foreign universities. He was in Israel eight times and taught and lectured at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where he established firm friendships. He also lectured in Australia, the Scandinavian countries, Japan, and India. In 1978 he delivered the Tarner Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, and was a visiting fellow of Clare Hall, Cambridge, at St. John's College and Wolfson College, Oxford. In recent years he was a visiting professor at Hamilton College, the University of California at Irvine, and the University of New Mexico. He was a member of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, and a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study of the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, and the National Humanities Center in North Carolina. He was also a Guggenheim Fellow in 1950-51.

Black was a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He was president of the American Philosophical Association (Eastern Division), and was the first American member to be president (1981-84) of the

Institut International de Philosophie (an international academy with a membership limited to about a hundred philosophers, based in Paris and supported by the French government).

At Cornell, Black served on numerous faculty and presidential committees. In 1965, as a member of a presidential commission to help plan the centenary of the founding of the University, Black proposed the establishment of the Society for the Humanities, broadly conceived as “embracing not only literary studies and the fine arts, but all subjects ... to the extent that they concern themselves with human values and problems of moral decision.” Black served as director of the Society from its founding in 1965 to 1971. At the same time Black also proposed the establishment of the Program for A.D. White Professors-at-Large, for persons “who have achieved outstanding international distinction in the humanities, the natural or social sciences, or the learned professions, or have achieved such distinction ... in such fields as public affairs, literature, or the creative arts.” Black served as director of the Program from the time of its founding in 1965 to 1978.

In a retrospective statement of his conception of his work and position as a philosopher, Black wrote in 1987:

On the whole I see my work as having been marked by concern for reasonableness, restrained by a conviction that rationality is not enough; commitment to common sense of a kind that does not shy away from science and philosophy; appreciation and distrust of abstract models; as much interest in unformulated stratagems and implicit understandings of speech as in the normative codes of grammar and logic.

Though no enemy of theory, I have always been interested, like a poet, in minute particulars. Striving to live in “uncertainty, mysteries, doubt, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Keats) is occasionally rewarded by calm and exhilarated contemplation: it is a well-kept secret that philosophical investigation, like music, can be enjoyable. For glimpses of my own “way of life”, a curious reader is referred especially to the essays on humaneness and humbug in *The Prevalence of Humbug* (1983)], with their emphasis on “fellow feeling” and respect for the integrity of other human beings: my moral position can be crystallized in the ... maxim, “Do no harm.”

Max Black belonged to no philosophical school and created none. Although often referred to as an ordinary language philosopher, he preferred to think of himself as a logician, as someone devoted to conceptual clarification and to combatting “muddle and confusion.”

When Morris R. Cohen was reproached by a student for being so overly critical or negative, he replied: “You have heard the story of how Hercules cleaned the Augean stables. He took all the dirt and manure out and left them

clean. You ask me: 'What did he leave in their stead?' I answer: 'Isn't it enough to have cleaned the stables?' Max Black could very well have offered the same answer. He devoted the major part of his life to combatting muddle and confusion. That was certainly time well-spent. Two months before his death, the Provost's Commission on Undergraduate Education sponsored a public lecture by Black on the question: "Is There a Crisis in Higher Education?" The audience that came to hear him filled the Kaufmann Auditorium in Goldwin Smith Hall. Black's reputation for incisive thought, critical acumen, studied analysis, common sense and creative insight will persist as his writings continue to attract and be studied by a world-wide family of thinkers.

*M.H. Abrams, Sydney S. Shoemaker, Benjamin M. Siegel, Milton E. Konvitz*