In Memoriam

Paul Hoffman
Professor of Philosophy
University of California, Riverside
July 1992 – May 2010

Paul Hoffman was a member of the philosophy department at UC Riverside from 1992 until May 2010, when he died unexpectedly after an early-morning swim workout. Paul was a terrific philosopher, a supportive and inspirational teacher, and a wonderful colleague. We are very fortunate to have had him as a member of our department.

Paul was born in 1952 in Anderson, Indiana. He attended Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. After spending his freshman year at Brown, Paul transferred to Michigan, where he began his study of philosophy and received his BA. He earned his PhD in philosophy at UCLA, where he studied under Robert Adams. He was an assistant professor at Harvard from 1982 to 1985, a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow at Cornell from 1985 to 1987, and an assistant professor at MIT from 1987 to 1992. He joined the UCR faculty as an assistant professor in 1992, was promoted to associate professor in 1994, and became a full professor in 2003.

Paul was an internationally renowned scholar who specialized in the history of early modern philosophy. His work was deeply original and carefully thought-out. Although he wrote on a broad range of philosophers and topics, including Plato, Aquinas, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, and Reid, he is best known for his ground-breaking work on Descartes. Paul focused on the metaphysical, as opposed to the epistemological, side of Descartes’s philosophy, and believed that in order to understand Descartes one needs to understand the Aristotelian-scholastic background to his thought. Paul was one of the first scholars trained in the analytic tradition to appreciate the importance of understanding the historical background to Descartes, and rather than focusing on Descartes’s revolutionary departures from his predecessors, Paul tended to emphasize overlooked continuities. His main work on Descartes is found in his collection, Essays on Descartes, which he published in 2009 (with Oxford University Press). Although Paul was known primarily as a historian of philosophy, he was also a constructive philosopher in his own right who made contributions to contemporary work in the philosophy of mind, causation, free will, and metaphysics. He published approximately thirty essays in leading academic venues. Two of his papers, including his seminal “The Unity of Descartes’s Man,” appeared in perhaps the top journal in academic philosophy, The Philosophical Review. His work has been enormously influential, and it has provoked many of the best historians of early modern philosophy to engage with his ideas.

Paul’s service to the philosophy department and to UCR was exemplary. At the campus level, he was a member of the Planning and Budget Committee, the Budget Advisory Committee Subcommittee on Campus Administration and Growth, the Undergraduate Council, the Faculty Welfare Committee, and an Ad Hoc Committee on Graduate Education. He was extremely active in serving the department as Placement Director, Coordinator of the Dissertation Workshop, and Chair of the Graduate Admissions Committee. All of these roles are time-consuming, and Paul did a thorough and excellent job. Colleagues throughout UCR were impressed by the seriousness
with which Paul approached his duties. Much of our department’s success in placement over the years is due to Paul's hard work, especially in the Dissertation Workshop, where he gave detailed comments to graduate students and helped them present their work to a broad philosophical audience (and not just experts in their subfields).

Paul had a practice of providing careful, detailed, and insightful comments on the work of departmental colleagues here at UCR and also to philosophers throughout the nation and the world. He was remarkably generous in offering constructive and honest comments on others’ work. In all respects Paul was an exemplary citizen of the department, campus, and wider philosophical community.

In addition to being a very talented and conscientious scholar and philosopher, Paul was quite an athlete. He was a serious swimmer who was nationally ranked in his age group and an avid surfer. He had a wonderful sense of humor, and he took great delight in funny incidents and amusing stories; when he laughed, his whole heart seemed to be in it. Paul was a great friend and a loyal colleague, but perhaps most of all he was devoted to his family. With his wife, Brooks, Paul raised two daughters, Eva and Elaine, both of whom share his love of swimming and his dedication to critical thinking. He shared the last few years of his life with a loving companion, Anne Marie Mills, and her children.