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Memorial service on Oct. 7 for 'pragmatic Platonist' Julius Moravcsik

Hungarian-born Julius Moravcsik, former Philosophy Department chair, made important contributions to the study of the philosophy of language and of ancient Greek philosophy.

Julius Moravcsik

BY JANELLE WEAVER

A memorial service for Julius Moravcsik, professor emeritus of philosophy and a tireless advocate of ancient Greek views of ethics, will be held at noon on Wednesday, Oct. 7, at the Stanford Faculty Club.

Moravcsik, who died at 78 of natural causes at the convalescent care wing at Lytton Gardens in Palo Alto on June 3, made significant contributions to the philosophy of language and the study of ancient Greek philosophy. He described himself as "a Platonist but with a pragmatic flavor"; his eclectic and wide-ranging interests included the philosophy of friendship, sports and aesthetics. He served as chair of the [Philosophy Department](#) from 1972 to 1975 and again from 1983 to 1986.



"If I could use one word to describe Julius, it would be intensity," said his former student Professor John Woods of Kings College London and the University of British Columbia. "He was very serious about what he did, and he was not happy with mere professional competence." He added that Moravcsik thought of philosophy as his vocation; he worked hard and was impatient with slow results.

"He was not anyone's disciple," said Woods. "Julius' works were rigorously constructed. He was a careful, absolutely original thinker, but he was always mindful of intellectual debts owed to others."

A significant influence on his thinking was linguist and public intellectual Noam Chomsky, who in the 1950s introduced the concept of universal grammar – an innate set of linguistic principles shared by all humans.

An early appreciator of Chomsky, Moravcsik advocated the idea that "ordinary language was amenable to rigorous analysis of how communication takes place," said John Perry, Stanford professor emeritus of philosophy. "He emphasized the complexity and importance of lexical meaning of individual words to the study of philosophy."

Studied ancient Greek philosophy

Moravcsik's other major contribution was in the study of ancient Greek philosophy. He promoted an Aristotelian view of ethics, which emphasizes character and virtue rather than rules and individual acts.

"I kept up my broad interest in different parts of philosophy outside Aristotle as well because I was convinced that this was the way the Ancient Greeks did it and this was how we should do it today," Moravcsik wrote in an autobiographical essay. "Being very narrow-minded may be an advantage in some fields, but it does not help much in philosophy."

Woods, who was Moravcsik's doctoral student at the University of Michigan in the 1960s, said his mentor also was known for his generosity and popularity with students: "Many times he went the extra mile to help students and give them encouragement," he said.

"Julius taught me a very important lesson about intellectual tenacity. We were studying hard problems, but he simply would not let us be defeated by them," said Woods.

Moravcsik was born in Budapest, Hungary, on April 26, 1931. His father was Gyula (Julius) Moravcsik, a professor of Greek philology at the University of Budapest and an internationally known specialist in Byzantine history.

As a child during World War II, Moravcsik remembered buying groceries with food coupons and carrying them home himself – he was the only family member old enough for the task, but not old enough to be conscripted on the spot. He remembered a grenade exploding next to him, seeing two soldiers killed for no reason and finding 30 dead soldiers in the garden. The family's home was destroyed.

Recalling German writer Georg Büchner's phrase "Man is an abyss," he asked in his autobiographical essay: "If we try to peer into it, we recoil. I always thought that trust had to be the main element that brings us all together, but after what we had seen and heard, how can one hope for the unity of all mankind?"

After a postwar stint in Paris, he received his bachelor's and doctoral degrees from Harvard in 1953 and 1959, respectively. He was a professor at the University of Michigan from 1960 until 1968, when he came to Stanford.

"In 1968, I flew to the University of Michigan to look for a job, and he had just left. I remember clearly how devastated the graduate students were," said Perry, who was recruited to Stanford by Moravcsik in 1974.

Philosophy of friendship

At Stanford, Moravcsik launched new courses, such as one in the philosophy of friendship.

"The department centered on Julius," said Perry. "He turned the Philosophy Department into a major player in undergraduate education. He put his great energy and drive into helping other people and doing thoughtful things." At one time, after the suicide of one of his graduate students, Moravcsik worked tirelessly to polish his dissertation work and turn it into a book under the student's name. "It was incredibly meaningful to friends and family," Perry recalled.

Dagfinn Føllesdal, professor of philosophy at Stanford and Moravcsik's colleague since his arrival at Stanford in 1968, said that Moravcsik encouraged students to think critically and form their own views. "Building up competence in students was his main aim in life," he said.

Mohan Matthen, professor of philosophy at the University of Toronto and a former doctoral student of Moravcsik's in the 1970s, noted that "he had many PhD students who became influential and are in prominent positions today."

Moravcsik was the author of a number of books and a recipient of Fulbright, Guggenheim and National Endowment for the Humanities fellowships. He also was a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences and won a Humboldt Prize for Senior Foreign Humanists.

He also served as president of the Pacific division of the American Philosophical Association and president of the Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy.

About his life, Moravcsik remained philosophical: "My views have not been shared by many and at times they were not understood," Moravcsik wrote. "This led to a conversation with Noam Chomsky. He said to me: 'People will not understand you.' My reply was: 'You know, one cannot have everything in life.'"

Moravcsik is survived by his wife, Rita, who lives at Stanford, and two sons, Adrian of Burlingame and Peter of Woodside, and a sister, Edith, who lives in Milwaukee.

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