

In Memoriam: Judith Jarvis Thomson 4 October 1929 - 20 November 2020. We announce with sadness the death of Judith Jarvis Thomson, one of the world's leading philosophers, and an eminent alumna of Cambridge and of Newnham College. Thomson was awarded a Cambridge BA in 1952, and an honorary doctorate from Cambridge in 2015.

Thomson was formerly Laurence S. Rockefeller Professor of Philosophy, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She worked in ethics and metaphysics, and transformed debate on abortion and on moral decision-making. She is especially known for her imaginative thought experiments which provoke and challenge us in new ways. Of these, her story about a runaway trolley has international fame, studied by philosophers, psychologists and students around the world. She was a pioneer, entering the field 'when only a tiny number of women even considered pursuing a career in philosophy', according to her colleague Sally Haslanger (Ford Professor of Philosophy at MIT), who calls her 'the atomic ice-breaker for women in philosophy.' Cambridge can take some modest credit for inspiring her, but perhaps also for discouraging her, as Alex Byrne describes (MIT obituary below):

From Cambridge to Cambridge

After receiving a BA in philosophy from Barnard College in New York in 1950, Thomson (then Judith Jarvis) went to Newnham College at Cambridge University on a Fulbright Scholarship. The work of the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who had been a professor at Cambridge until resigning in 1947, had an enormous influence on students there. This was the heyday of so-called 'ordinary language' philosophy; philosophical problems were said by Wittgenstein to arise from 'the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.'

Accordingly, philosophical problems were to be solved — or rather dissolved — by paying careful attention to the use of words. Thomson was especially impressed by John Wisdom, a follower of Wittgenstein and Thomson's Cambridge supervisor. His papers, she wrote, 'are often witty, and they are rich in clever examples' — a characterization that fits Thomson's own work perfectly. She later came to reject completely Wittgenstein's view of philosophy, but she retained the idea that philosophers should take careful note of our ordinary ways of speaking and thinking.

Years later, Thomson recounted that after not doing well on her final exams, 'I concluded that I wasn't really any good at philosophy.' With her 1952 Cambridge B.A. (second class honors), she was back in New York, writing copy for Fleischmann's Dry Yeast at the advertising agency J. Walter Thompson. But a daytime class in the history of philosophy at Columbia revived her enthusiasm for the subject, and she started the Ph.D. program there, graduating in 1959.

Many at Cambridge will recall Judy's visit on the occasion of the award of her honorary doctorate in 2015. She gave the Routledge Lecture in Sidgwick Hall, 15th June, on the topic of 'Partiality', about why we favour some people over others, and when this is justifiable. We are glad to recall her energy, joy and verve at the celebration we held in her honour. It is good to remind ourselves not only of her force, brilliance and wit, but also of the highest intellectual ambitions she had for herself, and for all who knew her.

(Photograph courtesy of Dr. Paulina Sliwa.)

<https://shass.mit.edu/news/news-2020-memoriam-judith-jarvis-thomson-philosopher-1929-2020>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/03/us/judith-jarvis-thomson-dead.html>

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