

# Michael Frede (1940-2007)

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## Michael Frede (1940–2007)



Probably the last photograph of Michael Frede, taken around noon on 11 August 2007. Courtesy of Gabor Betegh.

Professor Michael Frede was one of the world's leading and most respected interpreters of ancient philosophy. In his many seminal papers, as well as in classes and conversations, he brought ancient philosophy to life. He could make one see why an ancient philosopher had held a certain view, how that view connected with other views of this same philosopher, or of other thinkers in different epochs, and indeed what philosophical force that view had. When a view lacked such force, or even common sense, Frede could nevertheless show why someone in antiquity might come to hold such a view. In short, he could convince one that much of ancient philosophy was indeed good philosophy, or that it made good sense. This accomplishment of Frede's inspired some of the best work in the field of ancient philosophy over the past three decades.

Michael Frede was born in Berlin on 31 May 1940. He went to the Jesuit Sankt Ansgar-Gymnasium in Hamburg, where he acquired an excellent knowledge of the classical and several modern European languages. At the age of 22, while still a student in Hamburg, he published his first paper, entitled "Bemerkungen zum Text der Aporienpassage in Platons *Sophistes*", in *Phronesis*, the leading journal for ancient philosophy. Frede spent most of his student years at the University of Göttingen, where he

obtained his doctorate in 1966 under the supervision of Günther Patzig. His dissertation, a meticulous study of the uses of the verb “to be” in Plato’s *Sophist*, was published in 1967 as *Prädikation und Existenzaussage*.<sup>1</sup> Frede stayed in Göttingen for a few more years as a junior faculty member. In 1972 he submitted a magisterial study of Stoic logic as his *Habilitationsschrift*, which was published in 1974 as *Die Stoische Logik*.

Although he could easily have pursued his academic career in Germany, Frede moved to the US in 1972. He taught at the University of California, Berkeley from 1972 to 1976, and then at Princeton from 1976 to 1991. During his years in the US, Frede wrote many of his most important papers on various topics in Aristotle, ancient scepticism, ancient medicine, and grammar. Most of these papers were collected in a volume entitled *Essays in Ancient Philosophy*, including his two seminal studies of ancient sceptic philosophy, which have also been translated into Croatian.<sup>2</sup> The volume opens with a valuable introduction, in which Frede outlines his approach to the study of ancient philosophy. “One reason we study the thought of great philosophers with such care,” he writes, “would be precisely this: that we trust that in many cases they had good reason to say what they did, although, because of limitations in our understanding, we do not readily understand it. These limitations are one of the things we hope to remove by studying the great philosophers of the past.” And we study them in order to “see by their example, as concretely as possible, what it actually means and amounts to when one does philosophy”.

In addition to the *Essays*, Frede also published a short book called *Galen: Three Treatises on the Nature of Science* in 1987. It includes his exemplary translations of Galen’s “On the Sects for Beginners”, “An Outline of Empiricism”, and those parts of “On Medical Experience” which have been preserved in Greek (for the rest, Frede reprinted Richard Walzer’s translation from the Arabic). Frede’s 26-page introduction gives a philosophically relevant survey of the debate on the nature of medical knowledge that continued for centuries among the three main medical schools in antiquity, and traces Galen’s position in that debate.

As a fellow of the *Wissenschaftskolleg* in Berlin during the academic year 1984–85, Frede collaborated with Patzig on an edition with com-

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<sup>1</sup> Having purchased a copy of this book in an obscure second-hand bookshop in Zagreb, and knowing that Michael had no copy of it in his vast library, I presented it to him after a tutorial in Oxford. He received the book with a smile, then returned it to me with the inscription: “A gift gladly accepted and gladly returned.”

<sup>2</sup> “The Stoics and Sceptics on Clear and Distinct Impressions” and “The Sceptic’s Beliefs”, both translated in P. Gregorić, F. Grgić and M. Hudoletnjak Grgić (eds.), *Helenistička filozofija: Epikurovci, stoici, skeptici* (Zagreb, 2005).

mentary of the central and most difficult of all the books of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Published in two volumes as *Aristoteles 'Metaphysik Z': Text, Übersetzung und Kommentar*, the work appeared in 1988, and will remain a landmark in the study of Aristotelian metaphysics. In this work, Frede and Patzig reinstated the ancient tradition according to which each composite substance has an individual form, as opposed to the view, predominant since the Middle Ages, that composite substances of the same kind share a universal form. The central part of the introduction to this study has also been translated into Croatian.<sup>3</sup>

In 1991 Frede left the US to become Professor of the History of Philosophy at the University of Oxford, a post he held until his retirement in 2005. During this period Frede contributed numerous papers on a whole range of topics in ancient philosophy and science to various collections and periodicals, and also took part in several collaborative projects. He edited a collection of papers in honour of Patzig together with Gisela Striker (*Rationality in Greek Thought*, 1996), including Frede's excellent introduction and his illuminating paper entitled "Aristotle's Rationalism". The two aforementioned papers on sceptic philosophy appeared in a collection he edited together with Myles Burnyeat (*The Original Sceptics: A Controversy*, 1997). He also edited, along with Polymnia Athanassiadi, an interdisciplinary collection of papers dealing with theories and practices of ancient pagan monotheism (*Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, 1999). Together with David Charles, Frede edited the papers from the 11th Symposium Aristotelicum, which was devoted to the twelfth book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (*Aristotle's Metaphysics Lambda*, 2000). Apart from a paper in which he analysed the first chapter of that book, Frede wrote a lengthy introduction to the volume, setting forth his understanding of the structure, purpose and subsequent reception of this immensely influential text, in which Aristotle articulates his views on the Prime Mover.

Michael Frede was a regular contributor at major international conferences on ancient philosophy, including the two most distinguished ones, Symposium Aristotelicum and Symposium Hellenisticum. He also gladly took part in smaller conferences organised by his colleagues or former students, where his presence guaranteed a high level of discussion, if not always contributing to a relaxed atmosphere. It took one a while to get used to Frede's unfaltering way of making remarks and raising questions that drew on his vast knowledge and passion for ancient philosophy.

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<sup>3</sup> In P. Gregorić and F. Grgić (eds.), *Aristotelova Metafizika: Zbirka rasprava* (Zagreb, 2003). This collection contains another paper by Michael Frede in Croatian translation: "Aristotle's Notion of Potentiality in *Metaphysics* Θ", originally published in T. Scaltsas, D. Charles and M. L. Gill (eds.), *Unity, Identity and Explanation in Aristotle's Metaphysics* (Oxford, 1994).

Frede took more than a passing interest in the philosophical scene in Greece, the home of his long-term partner, Katerina Ierodiakonou, and a welcome refuge from the gloom of Oxford. Upon his retirement in 2005, he moved to Athens and settled into a beautifully refurbished old house in the shade of the Acropolis. He clearly enjoyed living in Athens, and felt at home there. Predictably, retirement did not slow him down at all. Frede continued to write, gave seminars at the University of Athens, and attended conferences both in Greece and abroad.

Frede encouraged and assisted the founding of the South-East European Association for Ancient Philosophy (SEAAP) in 2002. The Association, established with the aim of bringing together scholars working on ancient philosophy in South-East Europe, organised annual conferences in various parts of the region, and Frede participated in all of them. The Association also launched *Rhizai*, an international journal for ancient philosophy and science. Frede was a member of its advisory board, and his illuminating piece entitled “Aristotle’s Account of the Origins of Philosophy” opened the journal’s very first issue. Moreover, “On the Unity and the Aim of the Derveni Text”, printed in *Rhizai* IV.1 (June 2007), was the last of his papers to be published during his lifetime. Sadly, his copies of that issue arrived just a few days too late for him to see it.

Michael Frede visited Croatia only once, to attend SEAAP’s conference on Plato’s *Timaeus* in Dubrovnik in April 2004. He liked the place very much, despite the frustrating fact that no tobacco store in town sold unfiltered cigarettes. Frede had a more lasting, if less tangible, connection with this country through two of his Croatian graduate students. He had an especially high regard for Heda Šegvić (born in Split in 1957), who studied with Frede in Princeton in the late 1980s, held a permanent position in Pittsburgh after 1995, and produced excellent work on Plato and Aristotle prior to her tragic death in 2003.

For his services to classical scholarship, Frede was admitted to the Göttingen Academy of Sciences, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the British Academy. Apart from his lasting achievements as a researcher in ancient philosophy, he will also be remembered as a teacher. He gave seminars on a wide range of ancient texts, from the obligatory ones found in every philosophy curriculum to more exotic ones, including texts by Cicero, Galen, Alexander of Aphrodisias, and Plotinus. His seminars proceeded at a slow pace, delving into the smallest textual minutiae yet retaining a sense of philosophical relevance. They usually continued, in a less formal manner, in some nearby café. His virtues as a teacher were especially manifest in his tutorial sessions: his inexhaustible passion for the subject, articulateness, learning, the care with which he read his students’ writings, and the patience he had with them. All of this earned

him their admiration and created a renown which attracted many international students. If his students occasionally voiced a complaint, it would be that Michael did not boost their confidence. True, words of praise seldom came from his lips. I suspect that he genuinely believed, following Socrates, that too much confidence is likely to encumber one's progress. He wanted his students to gain confidence from what they felt they really knew, and so have just as much of it as their knowledge and understanding of the subject permitted.

Michael Frede died on 11 August 2007. He had gone swimming with a few friends between the morning and afternoon sessions of the 11th Symposium Hellenisticum, and drowned in the choppy waters of Agios Minas, a cove about 20 kilometres south-east of Delphi. He was buried in Athens, as he would have wanted. A copy of Aristotle's *De Anima*, a text of which he was especially fond, and which he had planned to write a commentary on, was placed in his coffin. There can be little doubt that Michael's commentary would have been a true heir to the tradition of Simplicius, Philoponus, Averroës and Aquinas, and it is most unfortunate that he had to join them before carrying out his plan.

Michael had a number of unfinished projects, and left behind volumes of manuscripts. Among them are the Nelly Wallace Lectures on the historiography of ancient philosophy, delivered at Oxford back in 1990; the Sather Lectures on the origin of the notion of free will, delivered at Berkeley in 1997; and his lectures on Stoic physics, delivered at the *École normale supérieure* in Paris. Further, there is a monograph on Aristotle, advanced drafts of papers on ancient medicine, ancient scepticism, and Stoic philosophy, and even one more piece on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Zeta. It will take years of collaborative effort to sort out these manuscripts and prepare them for publication. So we shall be reminded of Michael for years to come, and there is some solace in that.

However, nothing can diminish the sense of loss felt by his children from previous marriages – Sebastian, Victoria, Natalie and Julia – his sister Stefanie, his partner Katerina, and his many friends, colleagues and students.

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