



A SALUTE TO DR. RONALD AMUNDSON: AFTER 34 YEARS, THE PHILOSOPHER SAYS GOODBYE TO THE VULCANS

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PHOTO: BRYAN PATTERSON

When Dr. Ronald Amundson accepted a position teaching philosophy at the University of Hawai'i Hilo, the world was a little bit different. The 5.25-inch floppy disk was becoming the standard for computers. Wide-use of the Internet was still decades away. Jimmy Carter was the president of the United States, and Pete Rose wasn't banned from baseball yet. He was actually recording his 3,000 hit. The year was 1978, and Dr. Ron Amundson took his first steps to achieving a career of success both on the UH Hilo campus and abroad. Thirty-four years later, as Amundson steps away from the university, he reflects on his teaching, his research, his disability and the department he has invested so much into.

Path to Professorship

There is a definite amount of certainty that fills a Dr. Amundson classroom. The last three-and-a-half decades have certainly allowed him to work out any kinks or wrinkles that ever plagued any of his classes. His words carry clout. Even his key strokes tend to be strong and precise. At this point, some things are just no longer questions in the philosopher's mind, but his path to professorship did not have the same fixed nature.

Born near Madison, WI, Amundson soon faced a virus that would alter the rest of his life: polio. Diagnosed at the age of six, it shortened and weakened his right leg and gave him a clubfoot. For most of his life, Amundson did not consider himself to be disabled in the slightest. He felt like he could do anything anybody else could, though hindsight has made him a little less sure.

"That was just some sort of psychological defense reaction. The impairments from polio probably affected me a lot, but I'm still trying to figure out how. I had a short, weak and unusual right leg and foot. When you're a kid, you don't really know what to compare yourself to, to figure out normal."

This did not hinder Amundson from having aspirations, though he never had the childhood dream of becoming a professor. He always thought he would work with wood. It was something he enjoyed and had learned from his father. The younger Amundson built and repaired acoustic guitars during his college years for a few extra dollars. He envisioned himself building cabinets and other wood items, like his father did as a hobby. However, the adolescent belief would never be realized.

Amundson enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1964, planning on a physics degree. He soon came to the realization that his high school education was so inadequate that he could no longer reasonably pursue the degree due to the numerous remedial prerequisites that he would have had to take to merely understand the math involved in the major. So, contrary to his own desires, he dropped the major.

He tried several other majors but couldn't settle on one. This all changed when, as a junior, he came to a realization: "I had taken more philosophy classes than anything else."

A little over two months from retirement, Amundson leans back in his chair slightly, strokes his grey beard and laughs, "So, I guess I was a philosophy major."

The reflection is obviously humorous to him, and why wouldn't it be? The

way he tells it, Amundson was subconsciously pulled to philosophy despite undergraduate work in anthropology, linguistics and psychology. He naturally liked to question things, and his family routinely labeled him argumentative, so his transition into the philosophy major, albeit by coincidence or fate, was the beginning of what would become the rest of his life.

"You know, I was taking the easiest road all of the time. It's not like I had this great ambition to be a philosophy teacher, but I had a lot of respect for my philosophy teachers. I had good ones, but I didn't know until I was nearly out of grad school that I'd do it as a profession."

He received his Bachelors of Arts in 1969 and his PhD in 1975.

Sticking to historical trends, there was no surplus of philosophy positions available on the job market. As a new PhD with no other job prospects, but with strong student evaluations, his alma mater hired him as a lecturer. Amundson taught in Madison for three years, until 1978.

He is the first to admit that "If Wisconsin hadn't given me those three years, I might have been back making guitars."

It was in 1978 that a job in the middle of the Pacific popped up on the job market. The UH Hilo philosophy staff, which included Dr. Barry Curtis and Dr. John Cheng, took a liking to the analytic philosopher from Madison. The university needed a professor to teach metaphysics and epistemology, and Amundson was looking for a job to teach both. It was a perfect marriage.

In the Books around the Nation

In the early stages of his career, Amundson found it difficult to do quality research outside of the classroom. His colleagues in philosophy focused either on ethics or Asian philosophy, and the Internet was years from even dial-up modems. Eventually, as the Internet found its place in modern society, it became much easier for Amundson to further his own academic interests.

"The Internet changed the game. Hilo wasn't good for research for my first five years, and I barely got tenure. Hilo was isolated, and I didn't have a lot of specialized colleagues—colleagues who worked on the same topics I did."

Despite this, Amundson found a way that Hilo's academic quarantine could be turned to an advantage. He received three National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Summer Seminar grants because his displacement from any close research libraries allowed him preferential treatment. These seminars opened his eyes to the historical aspects of science and psychology, which holds its own philosophical intrigue, and the recognition that it was much easier to do history of science than to do analytic philosophy when you have no specialized colleagues in town.

A 1984 University of Hawai'i travel grant became the launching pad for the rest of Amundson's career. He was invited and travelled to the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University, where he linked up with Stephen Jay Gould, a famous paleontologist and biologist. This became Amundson's introduction to the history of evolutionary theory and the role of development in evolutionary biology.

Ron Amundson quickly got involved in a debate that Gould was engaged in during the 1980s. The field that is now called "Evo-Devo" was an alterna-

tive to mainstream evolutionary biology, and it was just appearing on the horizon in the mid-1980s. It didn't attract many philosophers at the time, but when it became the huge contemporary topic in biology in the late 1990s, Amundson was one of only about three philosophers prepared to directly discuss the issue. He counts his collaboration with Gould as a fortunate accident that allowed him access to an important new field of philosophy and science. Indirectly, Hilo's geographic isolation led Amundson to collaborations with international scholars.



PHOTO COURTESY OF RONALD AMUNDSON

The Mind is Stronger than the Body

As Amundson's mind got sharper, he began to feel his body getting weaker. In the late 1980s, post-polio syndrome began to get the better of the no-longer-so-young professor. His legs would go through times of extreme pain, and he watched his left calf muscle shrink in size. Part of his youthful myth was that his left leg hadn't been affected by polio. Now, he had to admit that it had.

For the better part of his life, Amundson had refused to accept that he was disabled, but with the onset of the syndrome, he began to come to terms with the fact that his disability had been there all along, and it was worsening. The pain of prolonged standing led him to begin using a wheelchair. This brought him to terms with the challenges he faced during his childhood, along with the defense mechanisms he had used to mask them.

"I didn't accept the fact that I was disabled until post-polio syndrome hit me, and I started using a wheelchair. That made me rethink my childhood and recognize all of the experiences that I had suppressed because I was maintaining my self-imposed myth of being non-disabled, 'normal.' It was an interesting experience of self-reinterpretation. I've reinterpreted all sorts of things that happened to me when I was a kid. By the way, this all has to do with how memory works as a reconstructive process, a topic that I'm right now discussing in the metaphysics class. It just goes to show, you can't keep life out of the classroom."

His physical problems gave Amundson a new perspective on various issues, including research, campus disability policy and athletics. His research became directed to the biological basis for concepts of normality and abnormality. He became heavily interested in disability politics. Amundson says that as he "began to do research on the topic, I discovered that my knowledge of the philosophy of biology allowed me to discover ways to criticize the ordinary concepts of biological normality. Normality isn't what we think it is."

The Americans with Disabilities Act (the ADA) was passed in 1990. Like many other colleges, UH Hilo was in violation of federal standards on accessibility. A newcomer to political activism, Amundson joined an informal

student organization called the Ad Hoc Committee for Disability Access as their secretary. This committee negotiated with UH Hilo Administration to install the handicap parking areas by Edith Kanaka'ole Hall and make other accessibility improvements on campus. He remembers how the students had been so much tougher than Amundson himself, especially when negotiating with then-Chancellor Kenneth Perrin. This experience was one of many that led Amundson to rethink his own attitudes towards disability. He had a PhD and was only slightly disabled, but the undergraduate students, some of them physically tiny and profoundly disabled, were much stronger than he was in the crucial negotiations. Who was disabled? He soon joined a local grassroots advocacy group to push Hawai'i County into compliance with the ADA, such as installing curb cuts in sidewalks, and remains active in that organization.

With activism, Amundson found both an avenue for open dialogue with other disabled people as well as more understanding of his own disability. Wheelchair athletics, along with disability rights advocacy on a local level, put the philosophy professor in direct contact with others who have disabilities. He became amazed at the ease with which people find ways, outside of the customary able-bodied strategies, to get things done. Meanwhile, Amundson found a new way to challenge himself. In 1996, on his 50th birthday, his wife, Sherry Amundson, bought him a racing wheelchair. This quickly became a passion that he embraced and loved to compete in. For many years, he did three wheelchair marathons a year -- Maui, Kona, and Honolulu (the Hilo Marathon isn't wheelchair-friendly). It even gave him an extra argument about what should count as 'normal':

"Wheelchair marathon champions are about 45 minutes faster than the fastest runners. Even an aging amateur like myself can finish the Honolulu Marathon faster than any runner ever has finished any marathon, but I'm cheating, of course, by using a wheelchair," Amundson states with a grin. "It makes it much easier."

"Now tell me what's 'normal'," he adds.

The Changing Role of the Embryo in Evolutionary Thought – Dr. Ronald Amundson

After a major conference in the history and philosophy of biology held in Leuven, Belgium, Ron Amundson was putting a few beers back with his scholarly peers when Cambridge University Press Editor Michael Ruse cornered him. Ruse asked Amundson his age. When Amundson replied that he was about to turn 50, Ruse dug into him.

"You're 50 years old, and you don't have a book yet? You ought to be ashamed of yourself. You should write a book, and I want to publish it."

If the idea of being printed through the oldest publisher in the world wasn't enough to get Amundson to work on the book, there might not have



PHOTO COURTESY OF RONALD AMUNDSON



PHOTO: BRYAN PATTERSON

been one in his future, but as Amundson tells it, he got right to work. It took him eight years. The book, “The Changing Role of the Embryo in Evolutionary Thought,” hit shelves in 2005. It delves into the topic he learned of from Stephen Jay Gould—the history of mainstream Darwinian evolutionary theory and the new development, Evo-Devo. It was well-received internationally and was favorably reviewed in *Science* magazine. It is one of Amundson’s proudest accomplishments and has led to invitations to international biology conferences and labs. It allowed him to be even more intimate with his topic, as it has hooked him up with important evolutionary biologists.

Maybe the most telling quote on Amundson’s publishing experience is this: “It’s not like I went to Cambridge and offered them a book. Cambridge came to me and told me to write a book.”

Amundson has continued his research on developmental biology. Research behind the book had come with the help of two grants from the National Science Foundation, and his later publications on normality were aided by two more grants from the National Institutes of Health. Amundson’s undergraduate research assistants coauthored four of these publications. Amundson invites his more promising students to apply for a job as his assistant, and the Disability Services office funds them for a few hours per week. They serve as assistants to help him with things that have become more difficult with the onset of his syndrome. Almost all of these assistants have gone on to advanced degrees. These publications and the students’ degrees are another point of special pride for Amundson.

His book, research connections, students’ successes (especially those of his research assistants) and the thrilling achievements of the old “Ad Hoc Committee on Disability Access” in wrestling UH Hilo into recognizing the importance of a barrier-free campus—these are the points of most pride as Amundson reflects on his UH Hilo experience.

Philosophy 310: Metaphysics and Philosophy 230: Epistemology

It’s been a 34-year commitment. Metaphysics, epistemology, and Ronald Amundson have been intertwined like cornrows, and he would want it no other way. He likes consistency in his courses. It allows him the freedom of trial and

error. It permits fine-tuning.

The main way that Amundson’s epistemology and metaphysics classes have changed during the last three decades is “discoveries in cognitive psychology and neurology,” which comprises about the last third of each course. The information worked through in the first two-thirds of the classes has remained fairly stable.

With metaphysics playing such major roles in philosophy, the department has found a replacement: Celia Bardwell-Jones. The University of Oregon graduate will have no small task on her hands, replacing the champ who held the belt for three decades.

As Dr. Amundson’s last research assistant, former Ke Kalaheha news writer and philosophy major, Mariah Partida puts it, “Dr. Amundson is the most interesting, articulate and dedicated professor I’ve ever come across. After taking his metaphysics course, I couldn’t imagine majoring in anything other than philosophy.”

No small task indeed.

The Champ Has Left the Building: The Philosophy Department Post-Amundson

Though he probably wouldn’t admit it, his retirement will be a huge loss for UH Hilo’s philosophy department. Though he is optimistic for the future, he does have a staffing concern.

His main worry for the future of the department is filling the fourth professor position. It is a disappointment that he completely disapproves of. He understands the challenges of running a program with three full-time professors. Not only does it force teachers to step outside their own boundaries, but it also hinders the completeness of philosophy students’ educations. It doesn’t allow them as broad a range of teachers or classes to choose from.

Amundson understands that the issue is mostly due to the budget. He also cites the old, pre-2011 philosophy department’s policy of keeping their introductory classrooms small as a possible reason for their lack of funding.

“If that old department had packed 50-person classes for Intro PHIL, we might have been able to keep four positions. We were gambling the intimate, 25-person Socratic classroom against a well-staffed philosophy department. For the time being, the new UHH Philosophy Department will have to live with the outcome of the old department’s gamble—only three tenure-track positions and larger class sizes anyhow. I think us old ... let’s say ... colleagues owe the younger colleagues an apology.”

Despite that concern, Amundson is very confident in the teachers that he will be leaving the department to. Dr. Christopher Lauer and Dr. Bardwell-Jones will join long-standing professor Dr. John Cheng in the major.

Lauer, a Penn State University graduate, believes that Amundson has continued to lay the foundation for the program, even in his last year before retirement, in hopes that it will continue to expect the work ethic that he asked of his students.

“Dr. Amundson likes to say that he’s out the door at the end of this year and that it’s up to the rest of the department to plan for the future, but the truth is that he’s put in more work over this past year to keep the department on stable footing than even most mid-career professors would. We philosophers as a group like to pride ourselves on our classes being some of the most intellectually rigorous around, and Dr. Amundson wanted to make damn sure that after he’s gone the philosophy major will continue to push its students to work as hard as they can.”

The Grind Never Stops: Life after UH Hilo and the Professor’s Parting Words

Though he can no longer put in 12-hour days studying as he could when he was younger, retirement does not equate the end of Amundson’s pursuit of knowledge. He plans to remain active in the philosophy and science of Evo-Devo, in the debates surrounding normality and in disability politics. Lauer hopes that the man that he considers “a good friend” doesn’t stray too far from campus because Lauer hopes to collaborate with him on scholarly matters for years to come.

As for the school that occupied a majority of Amundson’s life, he says it has been a joy to watch UH Hilo grow. The University of Hawai’i Hilo made the right decision back in 1978, and philosophy at the school is better for it.

“He will be greatly missed, and the philosophy department definitely won’t be the same without him,” Partida said.

Amundson was asked if he had any final philosophical insights for the UH Hilo community. His words were simple: “Umm, Descartes was a nativist, and Locke was an empiricist. I guess that’s all.”

Spoken like a true analytic philosopher.

It’s been an honor, Dr. Ronald Amundson. The University of Hawai’i Hilo, the philosophy department and your students all thank you.