

Gertrude Ezorsky (1926–2019)

Gertrude Ezorsky, professor emerita in the philosophy departments of Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center, died at home peacefully on April 19 at age 92. Gertrude combined excellence in analytic philosophy with a courageous commitment to political and social change in a career of rigorously argued and researched work, always lucidly presented in her terse, plain style. Drawn to lively and controversial issues with live and practical applications, Gertrude took clear stands, some notably controversial, and she refused to bury her opinions in disclaimers. She secured this reputation with steady work of the highest quality, even very early in her career. Her earliest papers appeared in elite journals, and her talent gained her the respect of men of top rank in the profession including R. M. Hare, Stuart Hampshire, Isaiah Berlin, William Frankena, Roderick Chisholm, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Sidney Morgenbesser, as well as her former professor, Sidney Hook—this at a time when few if any women were acknowledged in the field of philosophy.

Gertrude attended Brooklyn College as a student and returned to teach there fresh out of graduate school at New York University. Before going into philosophy Gertrude had done factory and office work and had also taught elementary school. She started her philosophical career working on traditional issues in epistemology and the nature of truth. She then went on to work on, and publish articles in, ethics and meta-ethics, especially on utilitarianism, arguing for an augmented consequentialism. Her lengthy assessment of Marcus Singer's work on generalization in ethics and her discussions of the work of David Lyons and John Rawls on the relation of act- and rule-utilitarianism earned her much attention. She then moved on to issues of justice and applied ethics.

Gertrude challenged many facile empirical claims for the presence of equal opportunity and academic freedom in the university, taking stands on discrimination against women, on justice in punishment, on discrimination in the hiring of blacks, and on justice and freedom for low-wage workers. Freedom in the workplace was the subject of her last book.

One of the hallmarks of Gertrude's argumentative work was her placing of social truths in their relevant empirical and practical contexts. Gertrude's criticism, in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, of Judith Thomson's work on the rights of employers is illustrative; as is her lead article "Fight over University Women" in the *New York Review of Books* in 1974—a path-breaking and devastating attack on discrimination against women in the university that indicted the academic establishments at Harvard, Columbia, Berkeley, and Chicago as well as her own employers at the City University of New York. Her article "Hiring Women Faculty" in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* continued that analytical argument and was reprinted both in the Congressional Record and in the *Hearings of the House of Representative Subcommittee on Education and Labor*, thus providing legislators with a carefully researched and argued documentation of the discriminatory attitudes and practices toward women in the university—an exemplary example of work in applied ethics. (Gertrude single-handedly organized a full-page petition in the *New York Times* with 3,000 signatures on behalf of a policy of affirmative action in the hiring of university women.) Gertrude was also an active consultant in an important class-action suit that positively established gross gender discrimination in CUNY.

Racism and Justice, Gertrude's defense of affirmative justice, was a book written at the height of criticism of affirmative action policies; it sold over 14,000 copies. The book shows how false were claims of an already just and meritocratic social/legal university context, claims on which opposition to affirmative action policies were often based.

Gertrude was a model of intellectual integrity, a fearless woman loyal to those wrongly treated, and willing to challenge those in high places, which she did by raising fundamental criticisms with vivid real-life examples, her significant philosophical abilities always informed by compassion, moral sensitivity, a distinct pragmatic sense, and a close regard for the empirical contexts in which ethical

questions arise. Illustrative of this combination of talents can be found in her criticism of Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, where Gertrude argued that Arendt's presentation of Eichmann's evil-doing as "banal" was made possible only by Arendt's disregard of the relevant context of Eichmann's murderous actions and by Arendt adopting half-truths as straightforward and unquestionable empirical premises. This charge was essentially about empirical assumptions on Arendt's part, assumptions which are questioned to this day.

Gertrude spent much of her considerable energy fighting for those much more vulnerable than herself, and she did so with actions guided by the same acute and precise analysis she brought to her publications. Indeed, she saved the jobs of several men and women who were victims of wrongful treatment. She constructed the winning legal argument presented by the Professional Staff Congress (the union that represents the faculty of The City University of New York) that showed gross gender discrimination at Brooklyn College. Gertrude's own academic history was germane to that argument: In spite of all the academic recognition she had received for her work in philosophy, she was hired only as an instructor despite her having her PhD at the time of her initial hiring, and she was later discouraged by the chairman of the philosophy department from applying for promotion to associate professor, although by the time of her application for that promotion, she had published 14 articles in leading philosophy journals. (She was passed over in favor of a man who had published only two articles in philosophy, one a joint publication.) Gertrude was also told that she would be supported for promotion only if she undertook *secretarial* duties, a confirmed affront which defies belief today. The affront was constant and continuing: when Gertrude was rightly placed on the doctoral faculty at the Graduate Center of the City University in the late 1960s, she was never informed of that placement, nor was she given any courses to teach at the Graduate Center until the university was monitored for discrimination years later.

Few women of her generation were so outstanding professionally and yet gave so much of their time and effort to help others while also providing such notable service to the profession in general, publishing successfully all the while. Gertrude's efforts on behalf of others and especially on behalf of underappreciated women in the field were certain to garner her enemies, and they did. But no matter how many enemies Gertrude made in these struggles, if there was to be a struggle, Gertrude was prepared to fight. She fought with principled appeals to justice, those principles always stated with such clarity that they won the support not only of the women she went to battle for but also of fair-minded men.

Whenever one hears Gertrude described as a "troublemaker"—and who has not?—one should think of the troubles she made on behalf of the entire profession and for the cause of justice, and of what this troublemaking helped all of us in the profession to gain. To call her a troublemaker is to tacitly bestow on her a particular honor. We can leave it at that.

Gertrude is survived by her husband of many years, Eli Cohen.