Professor Christian Edward Mortensen FAHA

1945 – 2026



Chris Mortensen FAHA, photograph supplied by family.

Chris, as he was known to friends, colleagues, and students alike, was born in Rockhampton, Queensland. He received his BA in philosophy with an accompanying major in mathematics from the University of Queensland in 1967, taking out the Douglas Price Memorial Prize in the process. He was a tutor at the University of Adelaide from 1970 to 1972 and received his PhD from there in 1976 for a thesis entitled *Mental Predicates*. He held a Postdoctoral Fellowship in the Department of Philosophy, the Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, in 1977, and then returned to the tutorship at the University of Adelaide, where he stayed for the rest of his academic life, interrupted only by a Research Fellowship back in the same department of the Australian National University from 1980 to 1982. At Adelaide, he quickly rose through the ranks, becoming lecturer, senior lecturer, reader, and finally the Hughes Professor of Philosophy on the retirement of Graham Nerlich in 1998. (Australia has/had only three named chairs in philosophy: the Hughes at the University of Adelaide, the Boyce Gibson at Melbourne, and the Challis at the University of Sydney.)

Chris was President of the Australasian Association of Philosophy (AAP) in 2000, President of the Australasian Association of Logic (AAL) in 1993 and 2003, and General Secretary thereof from

1994 to 2002. Indeed, he regularly attended the meetings of these associations and engaged fully in them—both intellectually and socially: For many years the AAP had a party towards the end of the conference, and Chris was regularly to be seen gathered together with other philosophers (including David Lewis and Ian Hinckfuss) singing Australian bush songs.

Chris was elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Humanities in 1997 and was awarded a DSc by the University of Adelaide in 2005 for a thesis comprising some of his published work, and entitled *The Theory of Inconsistency*. In the same year he retired formally, becoming Emeritus Professor at Adelaide, but remaining philosophically active for many years after that. He was the author of 104 papers in major logic and philosophy journals and edited collections, three books (*Inconsistent Mathematics*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995; *Inconsistent Geometry*, College Publications, 2010; and *The Impossible Arises*: *Oscar Reutersvard and his Contemporaries*, Indiana University Press, 2022), and numerous book reviews and reviews of papers for the *Zentralblatt fuï Mathematik* and *Mathematical Reviews*.

Chris was a person who understood that there was more to a full academic life than research, however. He was a committed undergraduate teacher and postgraduate supervisor. He refereed regularly for journals, and organised numerous conferences and workshops. At Adelaide University he sat on many university committees and served several terms as Head of Philosophy. During these terms, he was active in fighting against the bureaucratic corporatization of the University. After election to the Australian Academy of Humanities, he became Head of Section for Philosophy, Religion, and History of Ideas for four years and acted as Regional Representative for South Australia for four years. He regularly appeared in philosophy programs on ABC Radio National and local radio stations.

Chris published in many areas of philosophy. He never lost his interest in the philosophy of mind, and published a number of papers in that area. He published several papers on the philosophy of space and time (working with Graham Nerlich). In his later years he developed an interest in Buddhist Philosophy, travelling to the Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies (Sarnath, India) in 2000 to teach and study there. He published a number of papers in this area too. Indeed, he was one of the Australian philosophers who helped to make Asian philosophy a significant area in the Australian philosophy curriculum.

However, the central focus of Chris' work was logic—particularly non-classical logic—and its relation to metaphysical issues. Between the early 1970s and late 1980s there was a very active group of logicians located at the Australian National University. Arguably, this is the most important and influential school of logicians there has ever been in Australia. It was led by Richard Sylvan (né Routley) and Bob Meyer, but there was a whole cohort of graduate students and

postdocs (including Michael McRobbie, Errol Martin, John Slaney), who all went on to significant careers in logic. Then there were several logicians from other places in Australia who were frequently in Canberra with visiting positions. These included Ross Brady (La Trobe), Chris himself (Adelaide), and the author of this obituary (Western Australia). Several connected topics were in the air: relevant logic, paraconsistent logic, inconsistent mathematics, dialetheism, logical paradoxes, non-existent objects, the shortcomings of classical logic. Many important logical techniques were developed and theorems proved; many philosophical issues were hotly debated. Chris was an integral part of the group, and contributed very significantly to what was going on there. I think it fair to say that even after the group broke up, what went on there coloured nearly everything Chris did thereafter—even his work on Buddhist philosophy.

If there was something that dominated Chris' later work, it was inconsistent mathematics. Mathematics based on intuitionist logic was already known. But mathematics based on relevant/paraconsistent logics was an entirely new development. The seeds of Chris' work were in the Canberra group, but after the group broke up, he made the area very much his own. He investigated many interesting and important inconsistent types of structure, such set theories, arithmetics, topological spaces, and linear algebras; and his book *Inconsistent Mathematics* became the go-to book on the topic. (Those who wish for a good introduction to the whole area can consult his article 'Inconsistent Mathematics' in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mathematics-inconsistent/.)

One branch of inconsistencies mathematics became centrally important to Chris' work: inconsistent geometries. Of course, non-Euclidean geometries had been known for a couple of hundred years, but these were all consistent. What Chris produced and investigated was a whole new class of heterodox geometries. His second book, *Inconsistent Geometry*, again blazed a trail here.

One application of inconsistent geometry and topology was immediately apparent to Chris: the geometry of perception, and in particular, the geometry of impossible figures. Consider, for example, the following figure:



Qua two-dimensional diagram, this is of course perfectly consistent, but the object it depicts is not. The left-hand edge of the first step up is both horizontal and vertical. That, indeed, is how we know it to be an impossible figure. A full mathematical characterisation of the object depicted must therefore be inconsistent.

Many investigations of impossible figures followed *Inconsistent Geometry*. For example, Chris and one of his co-researchers, Steve Leishman, mounted a website on the University of Adelaide server (which, as far as I can see, has now disappeared). This contained graphics displays of impossible objects being rotated—before your very eyes! Watching this was at once fascinating and completely disorienting.

The mathematical study of impossible pictures led to Chris' final book. *The Impossible Arises*: *Oscar Reutersvard and his Contemporaries* was a study of the history and structure of the impossible figures invented by the Swedish artist Oscar Reutersvärd (1916–2002). This book included a chapter by Catherine Speck, Chris's wife, herself a well-known art historian (and Fellow of the Australian Academy of Humanities).

I end on a personal note. Chris himself was a somewhat larger-than-life figure; he was tall and strongly built. He had a large beard and (when he chose) a booming voice. One of his ex-students told me that she thought of him as a Norse god. Divine or not, there was not an iota of arrogance in him. He was congenial company, loved by his colleagues and students, a man of broad cultural interests (political, artistic, historical). He was one of the most outstanding philosopher/logicians that Australia has produced—never afraid to work outside the box, but always with an unpretentious honesty and rare technical acumen.

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