

Princeton University

HONORS FACULTY MEMBERS
RECEIVING EMERITUS STATUS



May 2016

The biographical sketches were written by staff and colleagues in the departments of those honored.

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JOHN MADISON COOPER



John Cooper was born in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1939. His interests in ancient Greek and Latin began at the Phillips Exeter Academy and developed further when he went to Harvard University, where he graduated with a bachelor's in philosophy in 1961. After Harvard, he went to Corpus Christi College, at the University of Oxford, on a Marshall Scholarship (1961–63). There he read for the B.Phil. and wrote a thesis, “First Philosophy in Aristotle,” under the supervision of Gilbert Ryle, the leading Oxford philosopher at the time. After Oxford, he returned to Harvard for his Ph.D., writing a dissertation, “Plato’s *Theaetetus*,” under G. E. L. Owen, with whom he had also worked at Oxford, and who had moved to Harvard in the meantime (1963–66).

Beginning his teaching career at Harvard, where he held a joint appointment in philosophy and classics, John moved to the philosophy department at the University of Pittsburgh in 1971, serving with distinction as chair between 1977 and 1981. His first book, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* (Harvard University Press, 1975), published while he was at Pittsburgh, won the American Philosophical Association’s Matchette Foundation Book Prize in 1977. *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* illuminates the structure of Aristotle’s ethics by an extended exploration of Aristotle’s conception of happiness or *eudaimonia*, with particular attention to whether this alleged “most final end” of human life could really include the several things — contemplation, friendship, and practical engagement in public life — that Aristotle considered to be independently good in themselves. Most notably, John illustrates his account of *eudaimonia* by extracting from Aristotle a coherent ideal of friendship, giving it a contemporary twist without in any way disguising its distinctive aspects.

In both method and content, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle*, like John’s earlier work on Plato and sense perception, moved importantly beyond the contributions of his famous teacher, Gwilym Owen, and Owen’s equally famous contemporary in the United States, Princeton’s own Gregory Vlastos. Both of these seminal scholars had

in their own way recovered Plato and Aristotle for contemporary philosophy, but arguably at the cost of making these towering figures all too sensible and unsurprising. John maintained the same argumentative and expository clarity as his distinguished predecessors while initiating the kind of scholarly engagement with the historical texts that, by reading them against the background of their original context, actually brings more of the unexpected to light.

John visited Princeton in 1980, took up an appointment in 1981, and became chair of the philosophy department in 1984, a position he held until 1992. During this time he published *Plato's Theaetetus* (Garland Publishing Company, 1990), and then began working on the later Hellenistic and late-antique periods of classical philosophy, where he helped make a good deal of Stoic thought available to us. John has an extraordinary range in the topics he sure-footedly covers within ancient philosophy — not only ancient ethics and politics, but ancient epistemology, metaphysics, and philosophy of mind. In the last twenty years or so, his work has come to a kind of culmination with the publication of *Seneca: Moral and Political Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); *Plato: Complete Works* (Hackett Publishing Company, 1997); the appearance of two volumes of his collected papers *Reason and Emotion: Essays on Ancient Moral Psychology and Ethical Theory* (Princeton University Press, 1999) and *Knowledge, Nature, and the Good: Essays on Ancient Philosophy* (Princeton University Press, 2004); and, most recently, *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus* (Princeton University Press, 2012).

John doesn't just write about how to live, but displays it in his person. For the twenty years after his time as chair of the philosophy department, he had special responsibility for placing our graduate students into teaching positions, a task he was astonishingly good at. He was also an excellent, highly rated teacher. He had a strong following among the undergraduates, having had primary responsibility for teaching "Introduction to Ancient Philosophy." Many students from this course fed into "Plato and His Predecessors," which he also taught regularly. In the last few years, he has taught several freshman seminars on Socrates and his transformation of philosophical thought. At the graduate level, John has been the core of our world-renowned classical philosophy program. Over the past thirty years, he has supervised

the dissertations of many of the best young people going on to make careers in classical philosophy. His many contributions at Princeton were recognized in 2003 when he received the Graduate Mentoring Award from the McGraw Center for Teaching and Learning, and again in 2004 when he was given the Howard T. Behrman Award for Distinguished Achievement in the Humanities.

John has held fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, American Council of Learned Societies, and John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, and his general standing in philosophy at large was recognized in 2000–2001 when he held the post of president of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association, a distinction not held by any other scholar of ancient philosophy since Gregory Vlastos, himself a former Stuart Professor of Philosophy at Princeton, and by only one ancient philosopher since, our own Alexander Nehamas, John's colleague for many years in the classical philosophy program. John was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2001, and to an honorary fellowship of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, in 2008. He gave the Immanuel Kant Lectures at Stanford in 2003, the John Locke Lectures at Oxford in 2011, and the Tanner Lectures on Human Values at Stanford in 2012. By any measure, John's academic life has been a life well lived.