

Philippe Mongin 1950–2020

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Philippe Mongin passed away on Aug. 5, 2020, at the age of 70, from a long disease. He was a towering figure at the intersection of economics and philosophy, and a leading contributor to social choice theory and welfare economics.

His intellectual background was as rich and diverse as his areas of interest. He had the best training in France from Ecole normale supérieure, with an “agrégation de philosophie,” supplemented with a diploma from Sciences Po and a PhD thesis in social sciences under the direction of Raymond Aron. Later on, when his interests

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turned to decision theory and economics while he was already a CNRS researcher, he completed a B.Sc in mathematics and another PhD in economics.

His first PhD was on Marx's *Grundrisse* manuscripts, and throughout his life he kept a keen interest for the history of ideas, frequently revisiting old controversies and shedding new light on them. His most recent re-examination of Allais' paradox (Mongin 2019), in which he established that Allais' questioning of the expected utility approach was not simply empirical, as is commonly remembered, but also genuinely normative, earned him the Maurice Allais Prize in 2019. He also wrote erudite pieces on controversies about the Marxian and Sraffian theories of value or about full cost (whether firms rely on marginal cost or average cost). In this vein, I had the privilege to work with him on the controversy around Bergson-Samuelson social welfare functions (Fleurbaey and Mongin 2005). He was even interested in certain parts of "real" history, such as the Waterloo battle, on which he published across traditional academic boundaries no less than five articles of exquisite historical and game-theoretic analysis. He advocated the application of game-theoretical analysis to historical events, the so-called "analytical narratives" approach (see Mongin 2018a, in which he relies on the Waterloo example to build a careful methodological argument addressing the reluctance of many historians, and Mongin 2020b for a broader analysis).

His contributions to economics cover a broad set of topics. To start with, he was a leading specialist of rationality, in all its aspects, having thoroughly studied Simon's approach to bounded rationality as well as Savage's axiomatics of expected utility. In Mongin (1984), long before behavioral economics took off, he argued against the idea that the Bayesian-maximizing approach to rationality encapsulates everything economics can bring to the analysis of rationality. In Mongin (2011), he defended the formal decision theory against critics arguing that it does not really make any progress upon the folk psychology of decision-making. In his most recent work (Mongin 2020a), building on his work on separable orderings on matrices (Mongin and Pivato 2015), he proposed a lean axiomatization of expected utility deriving the required separability from an assumption of stochastic independence between two sets of states of nature. His interest in the subtleties of rationality went all the way to implications on public policy. In Mongin and Cozic (2018), he decomposed the popular notion of "nudge" into three independent components, each of potential separate interest to policy-makers.

The aforementioned work on separable orderings on matrices provides perhaps the strongest form of Harsanyi's aggregation theorem currently available. This theorem was central to his work and was key in drawing him, a decision theorist, toward social choice during his stay at CORE (Louvain-la-Neuve) in the early 1990s. Among other contributions, he established a classical multi-profile version of the theorem (Mongin 1994), developed the core impossibility versions of this theorem involving heterogeneous beliefs (Mongin 1995), and affirmed the utilitarian significance of this theorem (Fleurbaey and Mongin 2016). One of his important conceptual contributions consisted in highlighting the weakness of the ex ante Pareto principle when beliefs are heterogeneous, coining the now famous phrase "spurious unanimity" (Mongin 2016) to describe when people agree but on incompatible grounds (e.g., agree to go to war when both sides are confident

to win). The clash between *ex ante* social evaluation that trusts individual beliefs and *ex post* social evaluation that seeks a consistent Bayesian approach at the collective level is most thoroughly investigated in Mongin and Pivato (2020).

His interest in normative issues led him to write now classical texts on social welfare, interpersonal comparisons and utility (d'Aspremont and Mongin 1998), the distinction between the normative and the positive in economics (most recently, Mongin 2018b), and the question of progress in normative economics (Mongin 2002, 2006). More broadly, questions of methodology in the social sciences, and especially in economics, have been a permanent interest in his career. He wrote on such diverse topics as the analytic vs. the synthetic, the *a priori* vs. the *a posteriori*, neo-Popperian approaches to explanation, revealed preferences, or the nature of the axiomatic method. His choice of topics was often guided by his broader interests and expertise in the philosophy of science.

His more recent work in social choice also included landmark contributions to the theory of judgment aggregation (Mongin 2008, 2012a; Dietrich and Mongin 2010), in which he especially highlighted the need to examine the logical structure of propositions and the different possibility results offered when performing aggregation at different levels of the propositions and their premises. True to his interests in the history of ideas, in Mongin (2012b) he pointed to an overlooked origin of the problem of judgment aggregation in the work of G.T. Guilbaud. Instead of judgment aggregation, Philippe Mongin actually preferred to talk about “logical aggregation”. Logic had always been a key domain of interest for him, especially modal logic with applications to epistemic game theory. Throughout his career, he pursued with L. Lismont analyses of the foundations of the concept of common belief (see, e.g., Lismont and Mongin 2003, which provides axiomatic justifications for various standard game-theoretic approaches and shows their compatibility with bounded rationality). Heifetz and Mongin (2001) also gives an axiomatic foundation to Harsanyi’s type space approach. Returning to social choice, he additionally ventured into the theory of voting and aggregation of classifications in joint work with Maniquet (2015, 2016), as well as egalitarian fairness in joint work with Jaffray (2003).

Philippe Mongin’s contributions to academia also consisted in editorial work for several important journals, including *Economics and Philosophy*, which he edited immediately after the founders of the journal, and *Revue Economique*, the leading French economic journal.

While Philippe Mongin was keen on abstract issues of logic and methods, he was also an economist concerned with the state of the world and involved in policy analysis, spending several years in the French prime minister’s Council of Economic Advisers, in which capacity he wrote, for instance, an influential report on the reform of minimum income support, as well as publishing occasional opinion pieces in the media and popular outlets. He was made Chevalier of the *Ordre national du Mérite* (1995) and of the *Ordre national de la Légion d’Honneur* (2003). He also received the Grammaticakis-Neumann prize from the French *Académie des sciences morales et politiques* for all of his work in 2019.

His career was primarily based in France, at CNRS from 1978, with a professorship at HEC since 2006. But he held many visiting positions around the world,

including several years at the University of Louvain-la-Neuve from 1988 to 1996, where he met his wife Françoise Forges, the prominent game theorist.

His colleagues, co-authors and former students will remember his immense erudition and his vast knowledge of all things intellectual, his rigor and sense of details, but also his modesty, his healthy sense of humor, and his irony, as well as the very French “*élégance*” of a true gentleman. He was at the same time curious in many directions and very keen on uncovering neglected twists in arguments and concepts. Not afraid to run against the tide, he fought for preserving some space for the use of French in academia while at the same time being fluent and delighted to speak in many languages. He passed away much too soon, at a time when he was still making frontier contributions, and his perspective on the ongoing research advances and controversies will be sorely missed.

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