

JEFF PELLETIER

John King-Farlow
1932-2002



John King-Farlow was born 9 July 1932 in London (England) in unusual circumstances. He is the son of "the intrepid" Denys King-Farlow [Hugh St Denys Nettleton King-Farlow, BME] and Barbara Hazel Guggenheim (he was the third husband of four). Denys wrote the 1940 book *The Farlows over 1000 Years*, in which he traces the Farlow line from Adam through Noah, King Cerdic of Wessex, then to Sweyn, son of Godwin and Githa, through the Plantagenet Kings of England (King Ethelwulf, 13th in line from Cerdic, the common ancestor of the House of Farlow) and a host of other dignitaries, ending early in the 20th century. Hazel was the youngest daughter of the wealthy industrialist Benjamin Guggenheim and his socialite wife Florette, and thus John is the grandson of Benjamin Guggenheim. When Hazel was eight years old her father died on the Titanic. Hazel and her flamboyant older sister, Peggy Guggenheim, had a life-long intense rivalry that often focused painting and on vying for the sexual attention of men. Hazel's two very young sons by her second husband were mysteriously killed in 1928 in a 13-story fall from a fenced-in rooftop, where the only other person present was Hazel. Unfounded rumour says that millions of the Guggenheim dollars were spent "covering this up". John would have grown up with this in his consciousness.

From 1939 to 1945, John was sent to the US as a way to avoid the London Blitz. There he attended public and private schools, and returned to London to attend Westminster School, where he attained certificates in Greek, Latin, French, and Ancient History. As well, he was an editor of *The Trifler*. After a year of study in Paris, John returned to Christ Church, Oxford, where he graduated in 1955.

In 1957 he went to the US for graduate school, receiving an MA in Philosophy from Duke University in 1958 and a PhD in Philosophy from Stanford University in 1960 under the well-known polymath, Patrick Suppes.

During the 1960s John taught at various US colleges and universities, and held some post-doc positions in Europe and England. In 1968 he visited the Philosophy Department at the University of Alberta, and in 1969 was appointed as an associate professor. He was promoted to Professor in 1972. He stayed at the University of Alberta for the rest of his academic career, except for occasional visiting positions at Canadian universities.

During a long academic career that included many infamous articles in the journal *Analysis* (which specializes in "short squibs"), he was one of the four founding editors (in 1970) of the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* (widely regarded as Canada's strongest philosophy journal, and as one of the top-tier general philosophy journals in the world) and was President of the Canadian Philosophical Association (1977-78).

His contributions to Philosophy included a number of very engaging articles providing counter-examples to supposedly "necessary" or "analytic" truths that some philosophers thought arose from within ordinary language. In a way, he could be seen as challenging claims made about ordinary language by means of carefully and fully describing out-of-the-way scenarios that were nonetheless examples of ordinary language. Thus he described vividly what it would be to encounter talking trees (scientists discover that the particular types of leaf-rustlings correlate perfectly with what seems to be awareness on the part of the trees...or would be awareness if humans were in the same situations as the trees), or how language would work in a "monistic"

world where there was only one thing (contrary to the then-popular Wittgensteinian thought that there cannot be a “private language”), or with objects that transformed themselves, like Caddis flies, with a regularity that defied any persisting personal identity. John also spent some time complaining about logicians’ attempts to “straightjacket” classical thought, thinking particularly about various logical attempts to deal with Aristotle’s famous Sea-Battle puzzle. (Aristotle thought that the sentence ‘Either there will be a sea-battle tomorrow or there won’t be a sea-battle tomorrow’ was true today, even though neither ‘There will be a sea-battle tomorrow’ nor ‘There won’t be a sea-battle tomorrow’ was true today.)

A particular interest of John’s was the notion of self-deception. Most ordinary people (as well as philosophers) have thought that self-deception is a bad thing and ought to be eliminated wherever possible. But John was actively in favour of self-deception, at least in some cases. He describes scenarios where an athlete, knowing on the one hand that he is an inferior-to-the-champion tennis player, tries on the other hand to “psych himself up” to beat the champion by saying over and over that he is in fact the better player. Ordinary thought agrees that this self-deception might be the only successful way for him to win. John also challenged various other thoughts about self-deception, for instance that it was somehow contradictory because you can only deceive someone when that person doesn’t know you are trying to produce false beliefs in him. But you can’t do that to yourself. Indeed, on the more mundane front of ordinary deception, John (in)famously pointed out that it did not necessarily involve an intention to produce false beliefs in anyone – he gave the counterexample of a man “deceiving his wife” right in front of her at an orgy.

John was very generous with his time, especially to younger colleagues and to graduate students. Many of his writings were joint publications with these people, and he took pains to explain to them “how the academic world worked”. He was also generous with his money in ways that were sometimes not in his best interests.

John retired from the Philosophy Department in 1998, after some years of medical and disability leaves. He resided in Edmonton until he died 31 July 2002. The Philosophy Department has benefited from donations made by John, notably his financing of an undergraduate essay prize awarded under the name of his long-time colleague, Herman Tennesson.

*Jeff Pelletier
Department of Philosophy
University of Alberta*

(Author’s title given as of the time of writing)