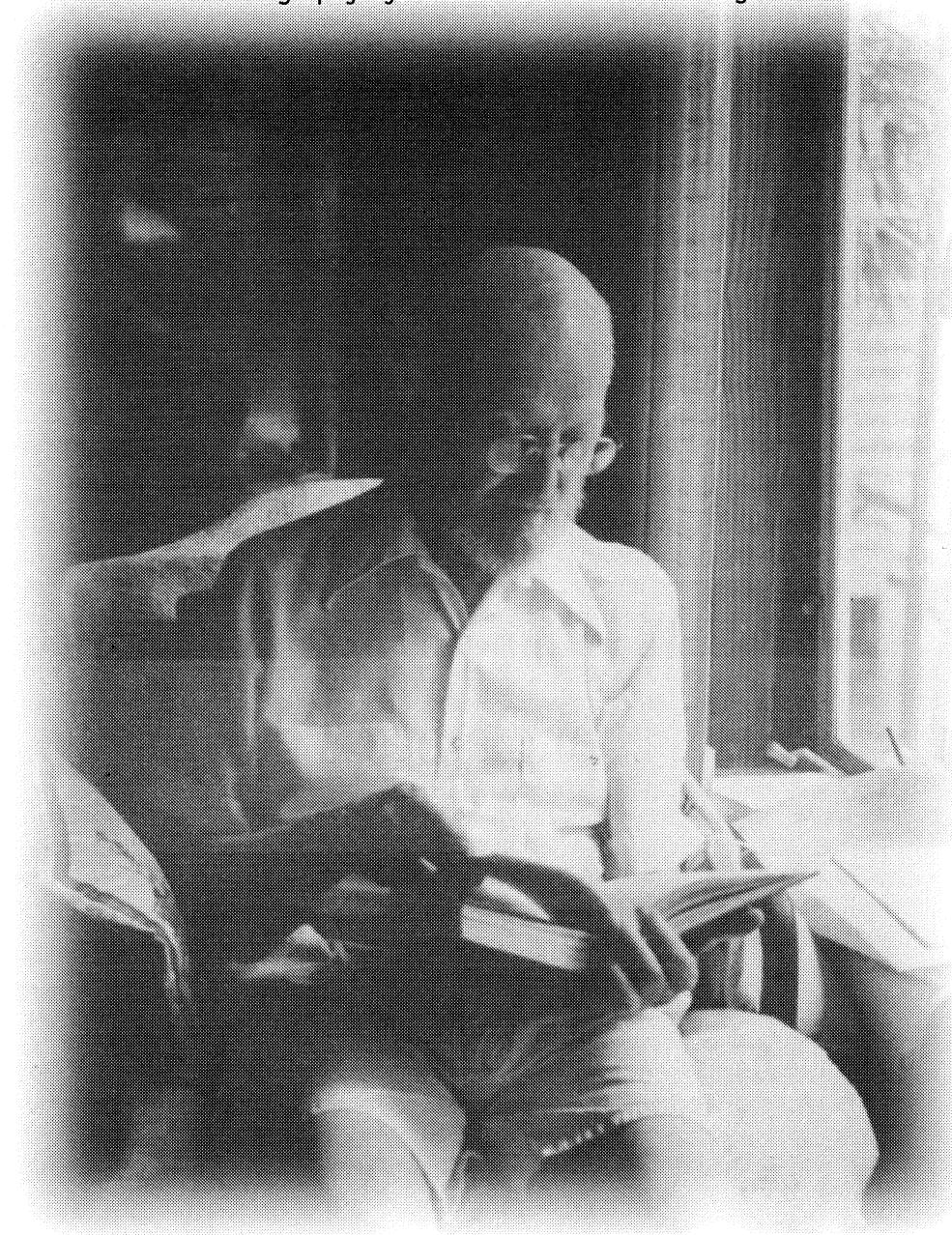


# Philosophy 101

## Centenarian Charles Hartshorne is Austin's preeminent man of ideas

by Dayna Finet

Photography by Barton Wilder Custom Images



The spirits of the great philosophers hover in lofty, lonely section 3-M at UT's Perry-Castañeda Library. Institutionally arrayed along this brownish steel shelving rest the best ideas of Hobbes, Locke, Bentham and Hume. Dewey, Mead, the Jameses and Hartshorne. They're mostly, pardon the phrase, dead white men. But one.

Counted among the most significant American philosophers of this century, one hundred and one-year-old Charles Hartshorne lives today in a modest white frame house at the dead end of a quiet North University neighborhood street, near the footbridge spanning a little creek. Faded Amnesty International, Greenpeace and Audubon Society stickers cling to and near the front door.

Hartshorne loves visitors, says his daughter, Emily Goodman. And he shows it. His eyes have an attentive shine. He laughs impishly, with delight.

He notices small things and enjoys them. "Fifty-plus singles." "Fit-

ness after fifty." Hartshorne smiles slightly as he reads out loud to himself headlines from samples of "The Good Life" that I've brought to our interview. What might a man twice that age think about comparative youngsters facing aging?

Seated at the head of his dining room table in a big room crowded with books and papers and art objects, he asks and answers questions graciously. We're talking about the Civil War. He asks me if I know the reason for it.

"Economics," I respond.

"Economics," he repeats, then pauses. "That makes some sense, I think."

Just for the pleasure of hanging out with Charles Hartshorne, I want to come back again, and without my interviewer's note-scribbling obligation.

Hartshorne earned his reputation for work in the field usually called "process" philosophy, and its close-relation, "process" theology. Process philosophy views reality as constant movement, chancy, nondeterministic, ever-emerging in unpredictably creative ways. Process theology disputes the concept of an all-knowing, all-powerful God. The God of process theology relates to human action, so that God and people mutually create the universe all the time.

To see no wisdom in the history of philosophy is to be benighted, to see no comic foolishness in it, ditto.

—Charles Hartshorne

THE GOOD LIFE ■ OCTOBER 1998

How deeply these philosophical commitments have penetrated shows in Hartshorne's conversation. He is very elderly now, and his mind has aged. But that distinguishing feature of creative intellect, a consistent ability to notice the big broad abstractions in everyday things, keeps poking through. More average minds miss such connections, or dismiss them.

Hartshorne's philosopher-self is so integral that the walls of his home reveal it. He points at random dark knots in the wood paneling.

"I've been in this house a good many years, looking at what's in this house. I've studied these walls all the way around to that doorway. I've discovered that if you go all the way around to that corner there's no definite pattern. You can't predict what comes next. It shows the element of chance in life. Some philosophers have tried to get rid of that. But you can't. You can't. Here's one of the things that's predictable. A week is seven days long. A year from now a week will probably still be seven days

long. But we won't always be here. No one knows how long he'll live."

He gives me another example of empirical fact's randomness.

"Which is colder, the North Pole or the South Pole?" Hartshorne asks me.

"South, I think," I guess.

"Right. The South Pole is a lot colder. Why not the other way? No particular reason. No definite advantage. We're just used to it that way. If it had been the other way, we would have found that acceptable."

Process thought dwells on a universe not only inherently unpredictable, but also essentially interdependent.

Interdependence links our natural environment, all creatures and people, with each other and with God. Nowhere within this infinite web of connection do things occur in isolation.

This holistically conceived universe demands vital moral choices.

Before the philosophy of interdependence, there was the philoso-

phy of dualism, dominating Western thought and its social, political, and economic processes. Dualism separates. Dualism exploits differences. Dualism permits us to act primarily in self-interest, manipulating those we conceive of as separate and different, as if our fate and theirs weren't all wrapped up together.

Process philosophy and process theology reject dualism entirely. In the interdependent process universe, everything that we do reverberates, affecting well-being beyond ourselves.

"Dualism doesn't amount to anything," Hartshorne says. "We have to be pluralists."

"If we believe in unity we should also believe in diversity. If you say the one, you have to say the other."

Hartshorne got his start as a process thinker working for famed philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. The Pennsylvania-born son of an Episcopal minister, Hartshorne had interrupted his Haverford College studies in 1917 to volunteer for the Army Medical

Corps. He served two years in France. The war ended, and by 1923 Hartshorne had completed bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees at Harvard University. After studying two more years in Europe, Hartshorne returned to Harvard to teach and do research from 1925 to 1928. During that time he served as assistant to Whitehead, the originator of process philosophy. Whitehead's influence persisted throughout Hartshorne's entire career.

At Harvard, Hartshorne found other inspiration in the work of then-unfashionable nineteenth-century philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, whose papers Hartshorne edited.

Hartshorne's publication of the papers revitalized Peirce's intellectual reputation.

"Charles Sanders Peirce was a great genius. He discovered a new argument for the existence of God. It was a pretty good argument," Hartshorne says.

Hartshorne concentrates on the little card he holds, thumbs at lower corners. The card has on it a

## Finding more on Charles Hartshorne and process thought

Charles Hartshorne has written extensively, publishing more than twenty books, most of which are available on the World Wide Web at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com). This chronological bibliography of "essential" books, selected by Hartshorne himself, comes from The Center for Process Studies' web site ([www.ctr4process.org](http://www.ctr4process.org)).

- "The Philosophy and Psychology of Sensation" (1934).
- "The Divine Relativity" (1948).
- "Philosophers Speak of God" (1953).
- "A Natural Theology for Our Time" (1967).
- "Born to Sing" (1973).
- "Insights and Oversights of the Great Thinkers" (1983).
- "Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes" (1984).
- "Creativity in American Philosophy" (1984).
- "Wisdom as Moderation" (1987).
- "The Darkness and the Light" (1990).
- "The Philosophy of Charles Hartshorne" (1991).
- "The Zero Fallacy" (1997).

Hartshorne's autobiography is "The Darkness and the Light: A Philosopher Reflects Upon His Fortunate Career and Those Who Made It Possible" (1990).

Located in Claremont, California, the Center for Process Studies maintains a collection of published and unpublished Hartshorne papers. Several articles in the Center's journal, "Process Studies," have detailed Hartshorne's work. The Center for Process Studies has established relationships with other centers of process work located in Australia, Belgium, France, Japan, Korea, and the United States.

A free Internet discussion list focuses on Whitehead, Hartshorne, and other process topics. Get information about the list from [www.mailbase.ac.uk/lists/process-philosophy/](http://www.mailbase.ac.uk/lists/process-philosophy/).

—Dayna Finet

black ink portrait of Peirce, with handwritten annotation in blue ballpoint apparently added sometime after the card was made. "Love is the foundation of everything desirable and good."

"He said that in 1853, when he was fourteen years old. Can you imagine? A fourteen-year-old, saying that?"

Charles Hartshorne and Charles Sanders Peirce share some profound commonality that transcends time and geography.

"He looks serious, doesn't he?" Hartshorne chuckles. "But he knows what he thinks."

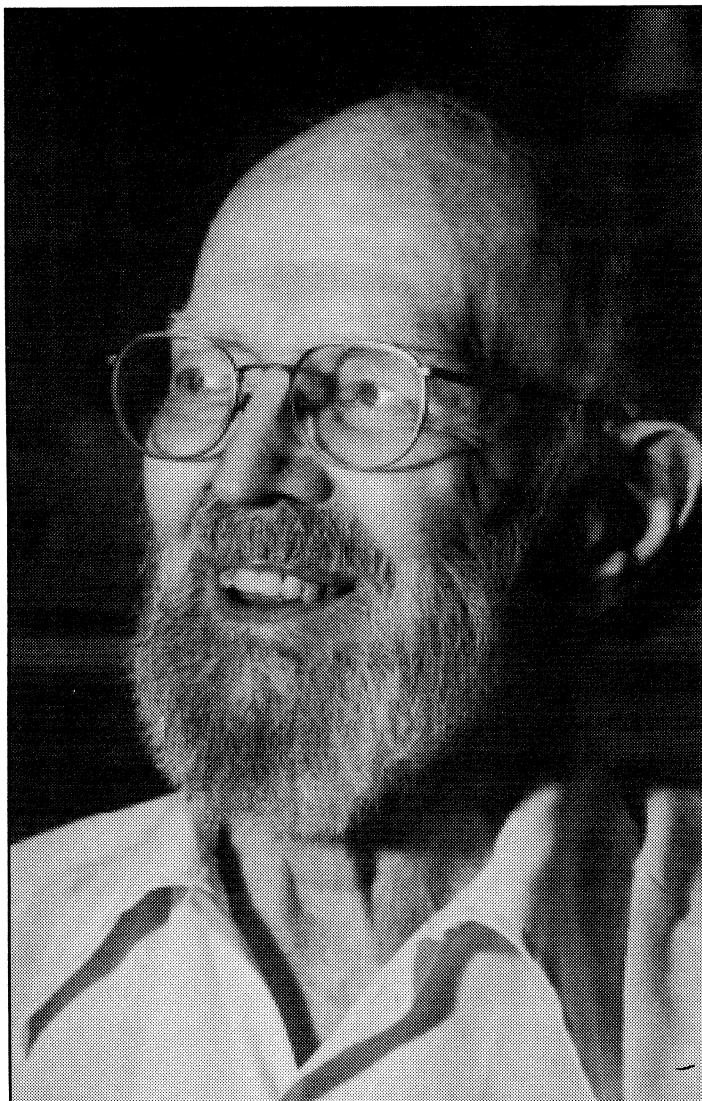
After serving for fifty years on faculties at three major universities (the University of Chicago 1928-1955, Emory University 1955-1962, and the University of Texas 1962-1978), Hartshorne officially retired at the age of eighty one. Then he kept on writing. His most recent book, "The Zero Fallacy," came out last year.

While at Chicago, Hartshorne married Dorothy Eleanore Cooper. Their partnership lasted sixty seven years, until Dorothy Hartshorne's death in 1995. "Rarely can two people have been so serenely confident that they wanted each other," Hartshorne wrote in his autobiography. The Hartshornes had one child, Emily, born during their time in Chicago. His grandchildren, Charles and Eleanor, are now students at the University of Michigan and Amherst College, respectively.

At five p.m., the wall clock in Charles Hartshorne's dining room tweets. Twelve bird pictures take the place of numbers on the clock's face. Hartshorne rests his arm on a place mat from the Karuizawa Bird Sanctuary. Bird images populate the whole room, actually. For most of his life, Hartshorne has studied ornithology, seriously enough to claim expertise, and publication credits, in that field.

"I'm interested in birds, not

because they fly—which is what most people are interested in—but because they sing. Bats fly and my interest in bats is close to zero.



They hold no charm for me. Mosquitos can fly. I'm not interested in mosquitos." In his book "Born To Sing," Hartshorne theorized that birdsong evolved as a reflection of birds' aesthetic capacity and enjoyment.

Birding trips, and visiting scholarship in Europe, Australia, Japan, and India, once took Hartshorne all over the world. Now he seldom leaves his house. After Dorothy Hartshorne's death, her husband's health deteriorated. Daughter Emily Goodman, knowing her father needs her nearby, has moved to Austin from New York.

Goodman says that his motivation to work nourished her father's longevity.

Now Charles Hartshorne says he's written everything he wants. Lots of people are reading his books.

His lifework is done.

Trendy academia never really took to Hartshorne's process philosophy or theology. It "violates perhaps the strongest postwar intellectual taboo: He believes God actually exists," wrote Gregg

Easterbrook in a February "U.S. News & World Report" article.

Yet as academic tastes have shifted through the century, Hartshorne has kept his intellectual commitments.

Most of his books remain in print. Volume Twenty in The Library of Living Philosophers—where he shares company with celebrity scholars like Russell and Sartre—is dedicated to Hartshorne. An impressive corpus of scholarship concentrates on his work. Especially as he neared his hundredth birthday, tributes to his life and work multiplied.

Is Charles Hartshorne a great philosopher? What makes a philosopher great, anyway?

"Immanuel Kant gave three critiques and every one is about as wrong as it could be," Hartshorne says. "First I thought he was not a great philosopher. Then I changed my mind and decided, yes, Kant actually was a great philosopher. But not for the reasons he thought. What you have to say is this. Kant did not

know what was important about his beliefs, the reasons his beliefs were important. It took genius to make some things as wrong as they were. Ordinary people are ordinarily wrong. To be extraordinarily wrong, as Kant was, took real genius."

"I was called Sir Charles by a number of people. Everyone had a feeling about me. My friends said, 'We feel you are preparing yourself for something important.' One of them predicted my activities fifteen years ahead of time. He said when I could do what I wanted I'd be writing book reviews. He said, 'Charles is not so much a fool as you think. He knows what he's doing.' He got it right. I've written over a hundred book reviews in half a dozen languages."

"One thing I've decided is that ordinary people always know when a philosopher is a great philosopher. Ordinary people can sense this person is important. They always do that with every great person. If you asked them to explain just why, they'd have a terrible time. That always happens.



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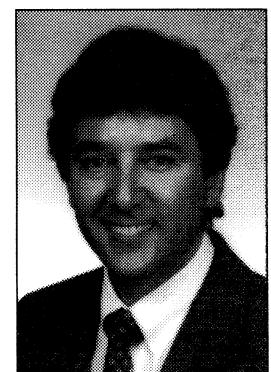
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All the great people have been recognized. It is never clear what makes this person great but people know."

Charles Hartshorne has spent his lifetime considering what gives our lives value. In the last pages of his autobiography, "The Darkness and the Light," he compares the usual exchange-based, "what's in it for me" experience that we all know with an alternative grounded by the convictions of process thought.

"But a life whose goal is maximal reward and minimal punishment for the self is an enslaved life. There are greater things, more interesting or magnificent things, than any one ego, especially one focused on its own preservation and aggrandizement. The universe, or the universal and everlasting Self or Reality, is the interesting thing, not the mortal (or allegedly mortal) human self. On this the religions come close to agreeing. But they nearly all tend to cloud the picture by dreams of survival of death.

"There is a kind of survival, sometimes called social immortality. What my process theology

does is to include in 'posterity' the one truly imperishable Life of God who survives all creatures and cherishes their having been, as primarily interesting, beautiful realities, despite secondary blemishes. This is the form of optimism of which Whitehead beyond all others is the spokesman. He should be honored for it for many a century, if our species manages to maintain its sanity and survive that long."

I ask Charles Hartshorne whether anyone would ever write his biography.

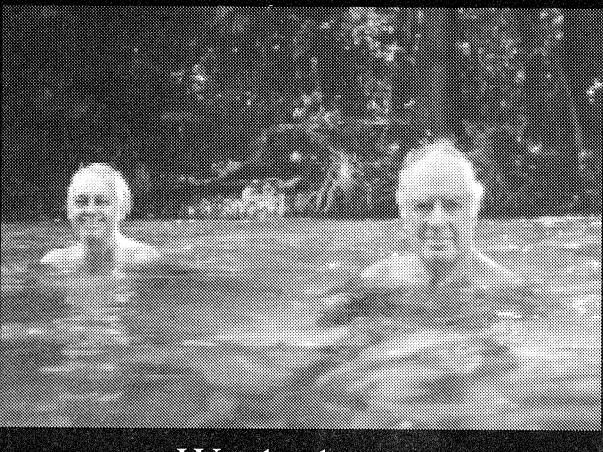
"I wrote so much about myself already, I kind of doubt it," he replies.

But to conclude that would contradict the philosophy to which Hartshorne has committed so much. At a hundred and one years of age, he is still, in the language of process thought, "becoming," his life's work evolving as it continues to connect with readers and thinkers. ☺

*A former academic, Dayna Finet still likes big ideas.*

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