

OBITUARY

George Spencer Brown, 1923–2016

Farewell to G. Spencer-Brown, a creative mathematical logician extraordinaire, one of a handful of twentieth-century polymaths who saw the need to integrate spatial and numerical mathematics into a system of reasoning that is logically prior to conventional mathematics, symbolic logic, and mathematical science. While I never had the privilege of meeting him in person, I became aware of his work in 1984 when I purchased a copy of his exceptionally well-written book, *Laws of Form*. This book is one of my most prized possessions. I re-read it from time to time, and gain new insights every time.

Similar to many brilliant thinkers who forge ahead of their time in history, he was misunderstood and misinterpreted by some who, although competent in their individual fields of specialization, failed to see the larger picture he was able to perceive. In my opinion he deserves a place of high honor in the Meta-Mathematics Hall of Fame, if there were such an institution, for revealing the connection of ‘imaginary’ numbers (an unfortunate misnomer) with symbolic logic and geometrical representation.

G. Spencer-Brown was born in Lincolnshire, England. He studied medicine and passed the First M.B. at London Hospital Medical College in 1940 at the age of seventeen; but, after serving in the Royal Navy from 1943 until 1947, he struck out in a different academic direction at Trinity College, Cambridge, earning Honors in Philosophy (1950) and Psychology (1951). From 1952 to 1958, he taught philosophy at Christ Church, Oxford, and earned M.A. degrees in 1954 from both Oxford and Cambridge. His doctorate thesis *Probability and Scientific Inference* was published in 1957. Brown’s thesis expressed a healthy skepticism concerning the concept of randomness in the statistical methods commonly used in the evaluation of ESP and other psi phenomena.

During the 1960s, he studied under the Scottish psychiatrist R. D. Laing. He also did postgraduate work with Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and upon recommendation by Bertrand Russell he became a lecturer in formal mathematics at the University of London. From 1969 onward, he was affiliated with the Department of Pure Mathematics and Mathematical Statistics at the University of Cambridge. In the 1970s and 1980s, he was a visiting professor at the University of Western Australia,

and at Stanford University and the University of Maryland in the United States. In addition to his academic pursuits, he played chess, held two world records as a glider pilot, and was a sports correspondent to the *Daily Express*. He also wrote novels and poems under the pen name *James Keys*.

George Spencer-Brown died in Wiltshire, England, on August 25, 2016, at the age of 93.

I personally owe G. Spencer-Brown a deep debt of gratitude, because without some of the calculus of indications theorems and innovative applications to logic published in his groundbreaking book, *Laws of Form*, my life's work, documented in my books and other writings, especially *Infinite Continuity* and *Transcendental Physics*, and in *Reality Begins with Consciousness*, and a number of articles, papers, and books written in collaboration with Dr. Vernon Neppe, would have been much more difficult, if not impossible.

In keeping with his statement in *Laws of Form*: “*Although all forms, and thus all universes, are possible, and any particular form is mutable, it becomes evident that the laws relating such forms are the same in any universe,*” I believe this understanding should serve him well in any universe in which he now might find himself.

EDWARD R. CLOSE