

Dr John Charles Harsanyi

The degree of Doctor of Science in Economics (honoris causa) was conferred upon John Charles Harsanyi at the Economics ceremony held at 11.30am on 27 October 1995.

Citation

Presented by the Vice-Chancellor and Principal Professor D McNicol

Chancellor

I have the honour to present Dr John Charles Harsanyi for the conferring of the degree of Doctor of Science in Economics (honoris causa).

Dr Harsanyi was born in Hungary in 1920, and studied philosophy and sociology at the University of Budapest. Upon migrating to Sydney in 1950 he engaged in manual work to support himself. Indeed, there was a succession of many different short-term jobs, owing to what Harsanyi himself describes as a "lack of manual skills".

During 1951 and 1952, Dr Harsanyi also undertook course work in economics in this University and then wrote a thesis on 'Inventions and Economic Growth' for which the University awarded him the degree of Master of Arts in 1953.

In 1955, while serving as a lecturer in the Department of External Studies in the University of Queensland, he published an important paper on ethics and interpersonal comparisons of utility, in the University of Chicago's Journal of Political Economy. No doubt this publication helped to persuade the Rockefeller Foundation to award Dr Harsanyi a fellowship for study at Stanford University. There he received a PhD degree in 1959 while making a start on what was to become his life work. Only a few years later, Dr Harsanyi took up a position at the University of California at Berkeley. In due course, he became Flood Research Professor in Business Administration and Professor of Economics.

In 1994, Dr Harsanyi was awarded the 1994 Nobel Prize in Economics, which he shared with two others.

The field in which Dr Harsanyi has made his mark is 'the theory of games', a term that seems playful. But to hear a practitioner define a game has a sobering effect. A game is any situation in which a set of actions by different people translates into outcomes which affect them all. Game theory seeks to show how such interactions work. It is hard to find a social phenomenon which game theory cannot address. For driving in traffic, for decisions to rebel, raise prices, have children, give to charity, join a union, and manufacture a product, we can now draw on a single model of analysis: the theory of games. Although not the first to work in game theory, Dr Harsanyi is the person who developed its unifying assumption, the so-called Harsanyi doctrine. He has helped to promote game theory with inspiring tenacity and marvellous clarity of mind.

Chancellor, I have great pleasure in presenting Dr John Charles Harsanyi for admission to the degree of Doctor of Science in Economics (honoris causa).