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Richard Sylvan [*né* Routley] on Nonexistent Objects

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Introduction

"On the June 16th, 1996, Richard Sylvan died of a sudden and unexpected heart attack. His death, at the relatively young age of 60, robbed Australasia of one of its greatest philosophers, arguably the most original that it has ever produced.
Richard was born Francis Richard Routley at Levin, New Zealand, on 13 December, 1935. He changed his name to Sylvan -- much to the confusion of a number of people -- when he remarried in 1983. After studying at the Victoria University of Wellington, he took a job at the University of Sydney, in Australia, where he lived for the rest of his life. He had several other jobs in Australia, including one at the University of New England, where, with Len Goddard, he trained a generation of Australian logicians. In 1971, he took up a position at the Australian National University, in Canberra, where he worked until his untimely death.
Richard was a most unusual person -- by any standards. He would rise at dawn, write philosophy till lunch, then pursue his hobbies, like building houses or tending the forests that he owned, till the sun went down, when he would open a bottle of wine and relax. To those who did not know him well, he could appear blunt, aggressive, and he could certainly be a difficult person for university administrators to get on with. But those who got to know Richard well knew that he was a shy, caring, and warm person. For this he was loved by his many friends and students (not disjoint collections). One day, a biography will be written; but this is not it.
Richard made major contributions to many areas of philosophy: relevant and paraconsistent logic, Meinongianism and metaphysics, environmental ethics, to name but the most important. To others, these might seem a rather disparate collection, but for Richard they were all part of one seamless whole; solutions to (and the generation of) many philosophical problems presupposed particular solutions in areas others viewed as far a field. Many philosophical areas, he thought, suffer from the narrow scope of their authors' concerns.

Another of Richard's philosophical trademarks-in fact, perhaps the major one-was taking up grossly unpopular views and defending them doggedly. If relatively few people were ultimately persuaded by him, all had to admit that the views were not as silly and easily disposed of as they had hitherto thought." (p. 1)

From: Dominic Hyde & Graham Priest, "Editors' Introduction" to: *Sociative Logic and Their Applications*, Aldershot: Ashgate 2000.

"Richard Sylvan (né Routley) was undoubtedly one of Australasia's most wide-ranging and systematic philosophers. The astonishing breadth of his philosophical work includes writings on logic, metaphysics, philosophy of language, epistemology, environmental philosophy, social philosophy, political philosophy, ethics, philosophy of science. philosophy of mind and computation theory. A major reason for this intellectual diversity was his view that 'received logical theory and mainstream philosophical thinking involve ... fundamentally mistaken assumptions'(1) These mistaken assumptions were, in fact, seen as so fundamental that nothing less than 'logical revolution' and the abandonment of 'the main philosophical positions of our times' was called for. 'The same mistaken philosophical moves ... appear over and over again in different philosophical arenas ... in metaphysics, in epistemology, in the philosophy of science, ... in ethics. in political theory, and elsewhere, in each case with serious philosophical costs.' (2) This view, coupled with Sylvan's desire to set things straight, led him to work in all these areas and more. His usual method of work was to rise at dawn and write until lunch. This philosophical writing (decipherable to only a select few until typed by one such) amounted to a considerable body of work. By my reckoning at the time of his death in June 1996 he had published as sole author, joint author or editor, 10 books, 16 booklets and nearly 200 articles in academic philosophy -- as well as numerous unpublished articles and articles contributing to general intellectual debate on social policy and environmental matters. In addition to the wide-ranging nature of this profile outpouring of philosophy, Sylvan's work was also distinctive in character. As noted, he thought that mainstream philosophical thinking was doomed to failure and the theories he argued for were accordingly unorthodox and often highly innovative. (3) Moreover he took the view that philosophy ought to strive for uniformity in its resolution of problems.
'Virtually every philosophical problem has a range of potential resolutions. A coherent philosophy selects and develops its resolutions uniformly, with connected solutions for related problems, not a different sort of solution for every (sort of) problem. (4)
Accordingly, his work is characterized by the attempt to develop and apply these unorthodox theories in a wide range of contexts. Thus his work represents a broad, uniform and unorthodox approach to philosophical problems. Though making a contribution to philosophy (and intellectual life more broadly) well beyond his writings in logic and metaphysics, a survey of Sylvan's work will show that the majority of it concentrates directly on issues in these two areas, and where it does not hear directly on them it typically presents them as having central underlying import. One reason, of course, was his acceptance of the idea of the centrality of logic to philosophy (see Routley 1980, iii) and one has only to look at the Essays gathered together in Sylvan (2000) to see just how seriously he took this idea. (...). However he was also keen to emphasize the importance of metaphysics to all reaches of philosophy and, with the possibilities opened up by research in non-classical logic, substantial developments in metaphysics were there to pursue and pursue them he did." (pp. 181-182)

Notes

(1) Routley, 1980, III.
(2) Routley, 1980, II-III.
(3) He himself wrote in Routley 1980, VII, that it is pleasant to record that much of the material [of Routley 1980] is now regarded as far less crazy and disreputable than it was in the mid-sixties, when it was taken as a sign of early mental deterioration and of philosophical irresponsibility."
(4) Sylvan and Hyde 1993, 1.

References

Routley, Richard. 1980. *Exploring Meinong's Jungle and Beyond. An Investigation of Noneism and the Theory of Items*. Canberra: Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University.
Sylvan, Richard. 2000. *Sociative Logics and Their Applications. Essays by the Late Richard Sylvan*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
(4) Sylvan, Richard and Hyde, Dominic. 1993. "Ubiquitous Vagueness without Embarrassment". *Acta Analytica* 10 (1): 7-29.

From: Dominic Hyde, "Richard (Routley) Sylvan: Writings on Logic and Metaphysics", *History and Philosophy of Logic*, 22, 2001, pp. 181-205.

Routley's Noneism

" Noneism was created by Richard Routley. According to him the universe is a realm that comprises nonexistent objects. In this universe are included, beside real objects, sets that are contradictory or even absurd, and objects that we can think about, or imagine, but that are beyond the limits of reality. For instance, propositions like "the Squond is square" and "the Squond is round", in which Squond is an object that is square and round, are quite legitimate. Of course the Squond does not exist but - and this is the important point - it can be thought. Examples of less aggressive insolence, are more than abundant. For instance "the fairy Wandolina is very gentle" or "Zeus is the most powerful of the Olympian gods" are expressions fully understandable. The noneist system complies the three conditions to be metaphysical theory.
1. It encompasses the whole world, physical and mental,
2. it offers explications of meaning, and explanations of facts, and
3. it is not empirically corroborable.
That it contains objects with certain properties that are described by unverifiable propositions, is essential in an noneist universe. We have just shown two of them. This unverifiability is quite different from the one we find in physical theories. In these theories, when a new fact is discovered, its corresponding proposition must be deduced from the premises that are valid in the system. (*) This means that it must be explained, and to explain a proposition P, means that P must be logically deduced from previous theorems of the system (every axiom is a theorem). (**) This deduction is ordinarily done utilizing classical logic. Some physicists pretend that the only way to deduce quantum propositions, is by means of a "quantum logic". But this is a farfetched methodology, because the reasons they expose to justify their claim, are based on the fact that the De Morgan laws are not valid. But these laws are invalid, because they are identified with the addition of certain states that have nothing to do with logic.
I dare to qualify noneism as a metaphysical theory, because it complies with conditions 1, 2, and 3. That it complies with the first, is evident. Condition 2 is also complied with because noneist theory explains many facts. For instance, how is it possible that a child of five or six years, understands perfectly well a fairy tale. The only explanation of this miraculous fact is that, as the tale advances, the child is apprehending objects that do not exist. This apprehension must not be confounded with imaginative objects. The objects the child imagines do not exist, but they are viewed as subject dependable. On the other hand, the objects we apprehend listening to the story are not subject dependent. The child does not invent them, he (or she) sees the images that the story is suggesting. Different children can "see" different images, but the images that a child has will have a certain structure, and the structure will be the same for all children (and, of course, for all adults). Moreover, if a child "sees" that color Ci is adjacent to color Ck, the other child will "see" other colors Di and Dk but in the same order, that is Di and Dk, will be adjacent.
The third condition is also complied by the system: non-verifiability with respect to sensory objects, and this non-verifiability is absolute. It is assured by definition. We qualify it as "metaphysical", applying a frequent procedure in pure mathematics. If we define a complicated concept having definite properties, say, {A, B, C, D}, then, on behalf of easiness, we devise another concept that includes the first one, but has a note E, (there can be more than one) present in {A, B, C, D, E}. A classical example is the concept of zero. We can develop set theory without employing it. But as the theory advances, it becomes frightfully complicated." (pp. 33-35)

Notes

(*) The word "system" is used in its usual meaning. This meaning is quite different from the way it is employed in physics, in which it means an object.

(**) We say "axioms" because, in mathematical physics, the propositions from which all others must be deduced, play the role of axioms. With the exception of constructive mathematics, some axioms of geometry (for instance, the axioms of "betweenness", and finite set theory, all the axioms are hypothetical propositions. The truth probability of a theory increases through corroborations of its explanations, or through the verification of its predictions.

From: Francisco Miró, "Does Metaphysics Need a Non-Classical Logic?", in: Paul Weingartner (ed.), "Alternative Logics. Do Sciences Need Them?", New York: Springer 2004, pp. 27-39.