

Introduction: Some Personal Reflections

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With the perspective afforded by time, Richard Sylvan, *né* Routley (1935-1996), will, I believe, come to be seen as the most important Australasian philosopher of the 20th Century. This is not at all to denigrate his currently better known compatriot contemporaries: a number of these made highly significant contributions to philosophy. But what set Richard apart was the originality he deployed and the scope of his vision. He made original contributions to logic, metaphysics, the philosophy of language, value theory, environmental philosophy, political philosophy. Moreover, though he never wrote anything that integrated all of these, it is clear to those who know his work that his views on all these matters formed part of an overall and systematic philosophical picture.

Richard's work is not as well known as it could be for a number of reasons. One is that he paid no heed to contemporary philosophical sensibilities. He delighted in taking unpopular views, articulating and defending them. He was in his element demolishing the views of his opponents. In other words, he was asking to be ignored, particularly since he was working in an outpost of the philosophical world. He did not have the prestige of an Oxford, Princeton, or Paris, behind him to force people to take note. Next, Richard's work was not always user-friendly. It was exemplary in clarity and argumentation, but he did not have the literary style of a Quine or a Ryle. His work could often appear heavy and laboured. Third, the work was often not easily accessible. He distrusted professional publishers, their connection with "the establishment", and their profit-driven motives. Hence, much of his work appeared in typescript form in in-house publications and pre-prints that never got beyond the *pre* stage. (His work predates the current era, when computers and programs such as Latex can produce elegant documents in-house.)

Exploring Meinong's Jungle and Beyond—or *The Jungle Book*, as it be-

came known to Richard and his friends—fits neatly into this picture. When Richard started to write on the topic, the view that some objects do not exist was about as unpopular as it is possible to be—just a shade short of insanity. As Ryle said of Meinong’s view in an article in the *Revue de Metaphysique* in 1973: ‘*Gegenstandstheorie* is dead, buried and not going to be resurrected’. Richard coined the term *noneism* for the view that Meinong—and incidentally, all the great medieval logicians—held, that some objects do not exist. Richard was one of the small band of philosophers (and to my mind the most thoroughgoing of them) who worked to bring noneism back from the dead; and he set about it with the intellectual power of a steam-roller.¹

The Jungle Book collects the many papers he wrote on the topic, pulling them together from a number of places, of various degrees of accessibility. The result is the thousand-and-some page book—termed coyly, ‘Interim Edition’—which appeared originally in 1980. It was published in-house and distributed from Richard’s office at the Australian National University (ANU), by himself and his research assistants. Both the length of the book and the fact that it is in typewriter font make it particularly hard to read. (I suspect that the number of people who have read the whole thing can still be counted on the fingers and toes of a normal human being.) The manuscript never went through the mill of professional editing. It would certainly have benefitted from this, by being cut down to get rid of the repetitions, being reorganised so as to structure the material better, and having some of the weaker parts removed. Still, what it gave us was Richard’s uncensored iconoclastic and creative brilliance.

The book was highly influential amongst Richard’s friends and colleagues, but the circumstances around its accessibility mean that it never achieved the distribution and uptake it deserved. So I’m delighted that it has been possible to have the book reappear in the current multi-volume Latexed form. It will make the work much better known, as is its desert—though I have no doubt that were Richard to come back from the grave, since the work is being published by Springer, he would veto the project.

The first of the four volumes contains the core of Richard’s noneism: what eventually became his Princeton PhD thesis—submitted many years after he left prematurely because he didn’t like the place. The fourth volume

¹By the way, I often meet philosophers—especially non-native-English speakers—who mis-pronounce the word—or at least, who pronounce it in a way that Richard did not intend. Say the English word *none*, and just stick *ism* on the end. In other words, don’t pronounce the middle *e*.

contains an appendix of the original book, ‘Ultralogic as Universal’. This is an important essay in its own right, and well worth the republication, though it has little connection with the rest of the book. I think that the reason Richard appended it was simply his somewhat optimistic desire to make it more accessible. The other two volumes, of which this is the first, contain the other chapters. These are on a variety of themes with nothing much in common except noneism. There was no way to cut these chapters up in a systematic fashion to produce volumes with greater integrity, so the contents of each are patently diverse.

That does not mean, of course, that the essays in the volumes lack interest. They certainly do not. But it does mean that it is hard to write an editorial introduction to the essays of the usual kind. So I decided not to try. Just read the essays! What I have decided to do instead in the rest of this introduction is to say a bit more about Richard himself.

I well recall the first time I met him. This was at the first conference I ever attended after I moved to Australia from the UK in 1976. It was a meeting of the Australasian Association for Logic in Canberra at the ANU. Richard and the other ANU logicians of course attended the meeting. I gave the paper which was to be published a few years later as ‘The Logic of Paradox’. As I was leaving the session, I recall hearing someone saying (not to me), ‘What a seditious paper’. That was not Richard’s reaction. As we were walking up the stairs to the Coombs Building tea room for a break, Richard turned to me and said ‘So you’re a dialectician, are you?’ ‘Dialectician’ was the word he was using for what is now called ‘dialetheism’, a word that we junked soon afterwards because of its heavy intellectual baggage. At any rate, so started our close friendship and collaboration which was terminated only 20 years later by Richard’s untimely death. Richard was not a dialetheist at the time I met him, but he had been playing with the idea. Targetting the very big apple of the Principle of Non-Contradiction greatly appealed to his iconoclasm.

Richard was already a noneist when I met him, though. I was outraged by the idea. My Quinean orthodoxy told me that this really was beyond the pale—much more so than dialetheism! So although we saw many things in very much the same way in our collaboration, noneism was not one of them; we argued about it a lot. In the end, I had to agree that all the Quinean objections that I thought were so devastating were just lame. I didn’t become a noneist at that time, though. There was still the question of how to address the characterisation problem in a satisfactory way. The

characterisation problem is this: under some condition or other, a thing has the properties it is characterised as having (the Characterisation Principle). Everyone, noneist or otherwise, accepts this, but no one can accept it in full generality. It leads in a two-line argument to triviality. The problem was how best to accommodate the Principle in a noneist context. The various suggestions for doing so mark the crucial difference between current Neo-Meinongians. Richard struggled with the problem in the *Jungle Book*, though he never really solved it to his satisfaction. Indeed, he was still wrestling with it in his final essay on noneism, ‘Re-exploring Item Theory’ (pp. 546-81 of Volume 1 of this edition of the *Jungle Book*).

I finally became a noneist when I found a solution to the problem which satisfied me, and which resulted in my own *Towards Non-Being*. Unfortunately I did not find this till some years after Richard’s death, so we never had the pleasure of arguing about it.

Richard and I argued a lot; but there was never anything confrontational about the arguments. We were both interested in the other’s ideas, and intent on getting to the bottom of things in a collegial fashion. This was the way that Richard argued with people with whom he was intellectually sympathetic. Arguments could be quite different with people with whom he was not.

When it came to disagreement, Richard was no shrinking violet. He could be blunt in saying that an idea didn’t stack up. This could be, and sometimes was, interpreted as personal hostility. And indeed, Richard didn’t have much time for people whom he thought were intellectually closed-minded. So bad blood could easily develop. And at the ANU, it eventually did. In the heyday of the Canberra Logic Group—the group of logicians which formed around Richard and Bob Meyer—the chair of the Department was Jack (J. J. C.) Smart. Jack, being a committed Quinean, disagreed with Richard’s views deeply, but the two always got on well together. On his retirement in 1985, Jack was replaced by Frank Jackson, and for reasons that are not part of the story here, Richard and Frank did not get on well together. Matters went from bad to worse. And after all the other logicians in the Department left it to found the Automated Reasoning Project, Richard found himself completely isolated in the Department. (Why Richard didn’t leave with the other logicians was never entirely clear to me.) By the end of his life he had become entirely alienated from the Department. After his death, when someone else moved into his office, the copies of the *Jungle Book*, which filled its long back wall, were simply disposed of.

Richard's tensions in his personal relationships with other people could be exacerbated by the fact that he did not have the mannerisms which put people at their ease. Most people, when they chat with others, do things with their words, tone of voice, and body language, which serve to put them at their ease. When these are not forthcoming, it is naturally interpreted as hostility. Richard had none of these mannerisms. This was not normally due to the fact that he felt hostile, however. He was in fact, a rather shy person, and I think that social graces did not come easily to him. I must confess that it took me a few years to realise all this about Richard; and though our relationship was never anything but friendly, it was not till I finally did so that I felt completely at ease in his company. Indeed, once you came to understand all of this about Richard, you came to see a very different side of him. Under his rather tough exterior, Richard was a genuinely warm and caring person. This bred loyalty and affection in his friends, close colleagues, and students. Indeed, as a supervisor of graduate students—there were no undergraduate students in the Department—Richard was everything one could wish for: conscientious, supportive, friendly. Students or groups of them would often go out to his home on Plumwood Mountain, where they would work with him on the land whilst discussing philosophy, before they adjourned to the house for something to eat and a few bottles of good Australian red wine.

Richard loved the land. He was a committed environmentalist, and he and his first wife, Val Routley, made important contributions to both environmental ethics and policy, such as in their book *Fight for the Forests*. He cared greatly for the rain forest around his house on the mountain, as he cared for his graduate students, and for philosophy. It is no accident that the cover of the original jungle book was a photograph of Australian rain forest. The term 'Meinong's jungle' was coined, as far as I'm aware, by William Kneale in his book *Probability and Induction*. It was meant, I am sure, as a put-down: jungle = tangled mess. Richard, however, adopted it as a term of love: jungle = complex and integrated eco-system. He was greatly at home in sylvan environments, both those of existent trees and those of non-existent objects.