

Sylvan's Box: a Short Story and Ten Morals

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Abstract The paper contains a short story which is inconsistent, essentially so, but perfectly intelligible. The existence of such a story is used to establish various views about truth in fiction and impossible worlds.

I still couldn't really believe it was possible. Richard dead. Never again would I see him. Never again would we talk, share ideas, problems, a bottle of wine. I changed down to overtake a slow-moving car in front of me. If he had been eighty, the victim of creeping senility, reduced to a rocking chair, it would have been different. But his vigor had been palpable. He was still in full cry, working on his numerous philosophical projects: the ultimate Australian iconoclast. I changed back up and moved over as I passed the car. Then there was his hobby—building houses. I don't mean designing houses. I mean physically building them. Every day he would write from about dawn till lunch time. Then he would go and carry bricks, move beams, dig foundations. It just didn't seem possible that this body had a heart that could give out. Suddenly. Just like that. But it had.

The journey from Canberra to his farm at Bungendore was a short one, at least compared to the 1,000 kilometers I had recently covered from Brisbane. The sun was going down, and it was the magic time of day, that time when the sun mercifully elects to hide itself for a few hours and the roasted earth heaves a sigh of relief. The twilight hues softened the Australian bush that Richard loved so much. And the colors of the sunset—pinks, lilacs, peaches—were reflected in the calm waters of Lake George. I would have to hurry or it would be difficult to find—let alone follow—the three kilometers of rough dirt track that led to the farmhouse.

By the time I found it, the light was almost gone. The headlights showed the boulder-strewn track that the poor little car would have to negotiate. The suspension didn't know what was about to hit it. The drive up the track seemed interminable. Often I thought that I had taken the wrong turn and ought to turn back; but eventually, on reaching the top of a particularly nasty stretch of track, I was rewarded with twinkling lights—driven by the massive solar-powered batteries under the house.

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Nick had heard the car and came out to meet me. “Hi, Graham.” “Hi, Nick.” We shook hands and looked at each other, sharing thoughts that neither of us needed to express.

“Come in. Have you eaten?”

“Not for some hours,” I said.

“Right, I’ll get something. I haven’t eaten yet myself. It’ll be a bit primitive, I’m afraid. I haven’t mastered the wood-fired stove yet. Put your bag in the bedroom. I’ll sleep on the couch in the lounge.”

The place was almost entirely as Richard had left it, expecting to return: the books, the small collection of wine that he enjoyed, the tools. All that was missing was Richard; and it was hard to believe that he was not about to walk in, after having been working on the property, and in his gruff and gentle voice say “So you found it all right? Want a glass of wine?” But he wasn’t.

There was one thing that was different about the place though. Nick had been busy. He had been working on Richard’s papers, many of which were now stacked up in boxes or simply in piles. In fact, the only way to get around was literally to traverse a path through Richard’s intellectual legacy.

“Please excuse the mess,” said Nick in his very English way, “but there is just so much of the stuff. The only way I have been able to get it into any order is to make a pile of the material for each of the topics that Richard was working on—after first noting where I found each thing. Richard’s filing system was . . . shall we say, original.”

Despite his protestations, Nick prepared an excellent meal. We also opened a bottle of Richard’s wine and drank to his memory.

“Thanks for coming down,” said Nick.

“I’m happy to do what I can,” I said, “You are the one that is doing all the hard work. It’s a hell of a job.”

“Well there’s certainly a lot more here than I had thought,” he said, “and I’ve so little time before I must go back to Canada. I haven’t really had time to look at any of it. I’m just trying to get things documented and in a fit state for people to work on. That pile over there is all on environmental ethics; there seem to be at least two books on the go there. That pile contains the working notes for a book on pluralism. That pile is all on paraconsistent logic; I don’t really know what’s there. The pile next to it contains stuff on Meinong and associated topics. Then that big mess over there is all on relevant logic. There are parts of volume two of *Relevant Logics and Their Rivals*, which Richard had been sitting on for years, and part of a newer book on the applications of relevant logic. The other piles are more of a mixture: correspondence, travel documents, building plans. And I’ve only just made a start on the stuff in his office at the ANU.”

“Right,” I said, and surveyed it all. “And what do you want me to do while I’m here?”

“Well, I’m no logician, so I’d like you to look at the logic material and tell me what you think is there, what might eventually find its way into print, who might work on it. That sort of thing.”

The thought of doing this was somewhat overwhelming at this time of night. And in any case, the day’s driving and the wine were taking their toll on me. I told

Nick that I would start in the morning and wandered off to bed. Nick settled down for the night shift. I was asleep within minutes.

I was awoken by the sun. Richard hadn't believed in curtains. I thought that I might as well get on with things. Nick was still sound asleep on the sofa, so as quietly as I could, I made myself a pot of tea and moved a couple of boxes onto the veranda. It was a beautiful day, warm but not yet hot. The sun shone on Lake George, which lay below us. The smell of the bush, mixed with the taste of the tea, both calmed and invigorated the senses at the same time. I started to go through the boxes. These had come from the pile Nick had described as "relevant logic." It was a real mixture: draft chapters, notes, papers by other people with annotations, the occasional table of contents. Examining all the material was rather slow going. Someone was going to have to do an *awful* lot of work on it.

A couple of hours or so later, I heard Nick moving around in the house and went back in. We had some breakfast and discussed what I had learned from the material.

"It's going to take most of the day to get through the material," I said.

"Okay, well I'm going to drive in to Canberra and get on with some things there," he said, "Will you be okay here?"

"Sure."

By the time that Nick left, it was already too hot to work outside any more. I decided to leave the rest of the material on relevant logic for later and have a look at the material on paraconsistency. Being smaller in quantity, it might be more manageable. There was the same mixture of notes and papers as in the other pile, but here there was also correspondence from me. I had forgotten all that. Memories came flooding back. My mind wandered off, reliving the past: all the times we had spent together; all the discussions we had had; all the joint work. Before I realized it, it was lunch time. I made myself a sandwich and carried on with the papers. It seemed to me that there wasn't anything very new in this particular pile, just the record of past work.

As I was putting the last batch of papers back, I noticed a small box located between that pile and the one on Meinong. It was too small to have papers in, I thought; maybe it contained some more letters. I picked it up and examined it. It was of brown cardboard of poor quality, made in a developing country perhaps. The lid was taped down, and on it there was a label. In Richard's own handwriting—under which dozens of typists had suffered over the years—was written *Impossible Object*. "Well, that explains the ambiguous place in Nick's categorization," I thought. There was very little else on the box except some print on one side. It was very faded and even more difficult to make out than Richard's handwriting. Just barely, I thought, I could perceive a date—maybe 1979.

Carefully, I broke the tape and removed the lid. The sunlight streamed through the window into the box, illuminating its contents, or lack of them. For some moments I could do nothing but gaze, mouth agape. At first, I thought that it must be a trick of the light, but more careful inspection certified that it was no illusion. The box was absolutely empty, but also had something in it. Fixed to its base was a small figurine, carved of wood, Chinese influence, Southeast Asian maybe.

I put the lid back on the box and sat down hard on an armchair, my mental states in some disarray. I focused on the room. It appeared normal. My senses seemed to be functioning properly. I focused on myself. I appeared normal. No signs of incipi-

ent insanity. Maybe, I thought, it was some Asian conjuring trick. Gently, I reopened the box and gazed inside. One cannot explain to a congenitally blind person what the color red looks like. Similarly, it is impossible to explain what the perception of a contradiction, naked and brazen, is like. Sometimes, when one travels on a train, one arrives at a station at the same time as another train. If the other train moves first, it is possible to experience a strange sensation. One's kinesthetic senses say that one is stationary; but gazing out of the window says that one is moving. Phenomenologically, one experiences what stationary motion is like. Looking in the box was something like that: the experience was one of occupied emptiness. But unlike the train, this was no illusion. The box was really empty and occupied at the same time. The sense of touch confirmed this.

Again, I put the lid on the box; I put it down. Then I wandered off to see if Richard had a bottle of Scotch. It seemed that he didn't, so a large mug of tea was the best I could do. Probably just as well. I sat sipping the tea for some time, rapt in thought. What I had discovered seemed so unlikely, impossible even—just as the box said. But there are many things in Heaven and Earth that are not dreamt of in your philosophy—Horatio. No doubt the thought that the earth, the most stable and solid thing in our experience (except for the odd quake and tremor), is spinning through space, must have been equally hard for people in the sixteenth century to get their heads around. Goodness knows what Newton would have made of time running at different rates—maybe even backward—with respect to our frame of reference. And *I* should be the last person in the world to be shocked by this particular discovery.

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of Nick arriving in the Land Rover and I realized that I was sipping cold tea. For some reason I panicked. What on earth was I going to say to Nick? All too quickly, he was coming through the door, another large batch of papers under one arm and some provisions under the other. "Hi," he said.

"Hi, Nick," I said, trying to appear as normal as possible.

"Had a good day?" he said. He looked at me quizzically: "Are you all right? You look a bit pale."

There didn't seem to be any point in dissembling. "Nick—have you found anything, er . . . odd, amongst Richard's things?"

"Well, can't say that I have. A few spiders used as bookmarks. That sort of thing. Is that what you mean?"

"Not exactly."

I went over and pointed at the box, now nestling comfortably between paraconsistency and Meinong again. "Do you know what's in this?" I said.

"No. I wasn't sure what it contained, so I just put it in an appropriate place until I had time to get back to it."

"Sit down," I said, and handed him the box. He looked at it, looked at me, and then started to remove the lid. My heart beat wildly. Maybe I was just about to appear an enormous fool; maybe he was just about to have me taken away and certified.

I watched him closely. In the space of a few seconds, his look turned from curiosity, to incomprehension, to sheer disbelief, mixed, I thought, with a little panic. That must be exactly what I had looked like. For some moments he stared at me, unable to say anything. After what seemed a rather long time, I managed to say rather

feebly, "Odd, isn't it."

"Yes, I've never seen anything quite like it," he replied, with the *sang froid* that had won the English an empire.

"Not bad," I thought, "for someone whose *lebenswelt* lies in tatters."

I left him alone for a while, so that he could put enough of it back together to at least have a sensible conversation. Maybe a walk in the bush, in what was left of the day's light, would help to put its events into some perspective.

When I got back, Nick was putting the finishing touches to a meal. "Let's eat," he said. We ate. There were a lot of silences at first, but soon the discussion started to flow. And then there seemed no stopping it. It flowed through many hours and bottles of Richard's wine. We talked about where the box had come from; we talked about why Richard had never said anything about it to either of us—or anybody else as far as we knew; we talked about what the existence of such an object meant, for logic, for metaphysics; we talked about how one might construct such an object. The discussion was, it must be said, on all counts completely inconclusive. Except one: we figured that Richard had probably acquired the box around, or just after, the date on its side, and that it was likely that he had picked it up on one of his many trips overseas. Richard had been a great traveler. There weren't many places that had universities—or that might even *conceivably* have had universities—that Richard hadn't visited. We guessed that he probably found it in Indonesia or Malaysia.

By the small hours of the morning we were talked out. Nick said that the day had had quite enough experiences in it and headed for the couch, finishing the last of a fine Hunter Valley Shiraz that neither of us was now in a position to appreciate properly. I did not feel like sleeping, so I took the pile of Richard's papers that Nick had designated *on Meinong* into the bedroom and began to work through them.

I was hoping to find something that would help answer the questions over which we had spent so long getting nowhere. By and large, I was disappointed. The papers contained chapters of *Meinong's Jungle*, notes for some essays on existence and impossibility—very old ones—some more correspondence with various people, including me, but nothing that cast any light on the issues of the moment.

The old letters did jog one relevant memory, however. When I first met Richard, we had disagreed over whether the actual world could contain contradictions. I thought that maybe it could. He thought that it was only nonexistent things (such as propositions and mathematical objects) that could be inconsistent, that contradictions were all "off-T" as he was fond of putting it ('T' being his name for the actual world). We had argued about this on and off for some years. He had never been able to persuade me that there was any reason why existence should imply consistency. I, on the other hand, had never been able to convince him with my arguments—largely stolen from Zeno—that things in a state of change, actual things, realized contradictions. But his attitude had changed in the early 80s, very suddenly and for no reason that I could fathom. When I asked him why, all he had said was "Maybe you are right." Naïvely, I had put this down to the attrition of my arguments. Now it seemed to me that there was a much more likely explanation. He had held the proof in his hands.

But this made another question even more puzzling. Why had Richard never said anything to me about it? Richard never minded admitting that he had been wrong—on the rare occasions that one could show it. And the box gave enough ma-

terial to confound the opponents of paraconsistency once and for all. So why the silence? As I pondered the issue again, the first rays of the morning light started to appear over Lake George and filter into the bedroom. Outside, the tenebrous shapes of the trees acquired a tinge of iridescence. I drifted involuntarily into sleep.

When I awoke, the sun was high in the sky. I took a cold shower and collected my thoughts. I had already stayed longer than I had intended. I needed to be back in Brisbane by tomorrow and would have to leave today. I collected the few things that I had brought with me, together with some notes by Richard on impossible worlds that I thought I might be able to edit into a finished article, and loaded them into the car.

When I returned to the house, I found Nick working on a pile of papers tucked in the corner of the room. "I think I know how it might work," he said.

"What?" I replied.

"You know, the box."

"Really? Tell me."

"Well it's only a rough idea, but it may be on the right track. I recalled something that you and Richard wrote many years ago. I think it was in one of the essays in *Paraconsistent Logic*. It was about quantum mechanics—and particularly, the two-slit experiment. Given the setup, a particle seems to do the impossible: go through both of two distinct slits simultaneously. You suggested that this is exactly what it *does* do. At the microlevel, inconsistencies can actually be realized. Well, suppose that that's right. And suppose that some way could be found to bring about the same effect at the macrolevel. I don't really know how. Maybe it's a bit like Schrödinger's cat. A macrostate is made to hold in virtue of some quantum event. But rather than the cat being dead and alive, the box is both occupied and empty."

"That's it?" I said, "It's a bit thin."

"Oh," said Nick, a little deflated, "Got any better suggestions?"

I had to admit that I hadn't. Nick's idea was a bit wacky, but any explanation, I reflected, would have to seem like that.

I reminded Nick that I would have to leave soon. As we ate breakfast the imminence of my departure raised a new question, one that, rather amazingly, neither of us had thought to ask till now: "What are we going to do?"

We immediately agreed that we should of course make the box public. It would be of major importance for logic, metaphysics, and, if Nick was right, physics too. And that was putting it mildly. There seemed to be no question about the matter.

But then we fell silent as each of us started to think about the possible consequences of such an action. As I spread marmalade on another piece of toast, I conjured up the images of life afterward. The incredulity with which the announcement would be greeted. The probability of being branded as cranks by large numbers of the profession. The media attention it would certainly draw. All the prying of psychologists, journalists, real cranks. Life would be altered irreversibly. Both our professional and our private lives would be changed, one way or another, and not necessarily for the better. Many people crave fame and fortune, but those who obtain it often live to regret it. I suddenly understood why Richard had said nothing about the box. It would have destroyed the peace that he loved so much: the tranquility of his farm in the bush, the solitude, the sun rising over Lake George, the singing of the birds.

And if Nick was right about the physics, this would just be the start of things. Who would take possession of the box? Whatever knowledge it yielded was the sort of thing that corporations would want to use to make enormous profits, that individuals would kill for, that governments would want to keep secret, that the military would want to use to make weapons. The apple of knowledge has often acquired a sour taste for humankind.

But then, it was also possible that whatever physical mechanism underlay the box would be discovered in time anyway, at least if paraconsistent logic were ever taken seriously by the scientific community. What was the point of trying to suppress it now?

Neither Nick nor I had spoken for some minutes. I did not need to talk to him to see that the same thoughts had been going through his mind. A look into his eyes told the tale. Doubtless, a look into mine told the same tale. The box was on the table between us. We both stared at it forlornly, as if we hoped that it, itself, would give us an answer. In a way, it did.

We stood up. I carried the box outside; Nick carried the box outside. I opened the car door; Nick picked up a spade and dug a hole. I put the box in the car; Nick put the box in the hole. I closed the door on the box, and locked it; Nick covered the box with dirt and stamped it down. We turned to face each other. Silently, we embraced. I got into the car and drove off into a world that would never be the same for either of us again.

* * * * *

Richard is Richard Sylvan (né Routley), who died suddenly in June 1996; Nick is Nick Griffin, his literary executor; and the visit to Bungendore actually took place in December of 1996. The rest of the events of the story, as hardly needs to be said, are entirely fictitious. But though fictitious, they suffice to make certain points. Before I make them, let us take an old-fashioned comprehension test on the story.

Question 1: In which country did the meeting take place? *Answer:* Australia.

Question 2: Was Richard at the farmhouse? *Answer:* No.

Question 3: Was the box empty? *Answer:* Yes and no.

Question 4: How many times did Nick leave the property? *Answer:* Once.

Question 5: Was the box shot off to the moon at the end of the story? *Answer:* No.

Other answers are wrong, or in the case of Question 3, at least incomplete.

Now for the morals. The first four of these concern the notion of truth in fiction. It is commonly claimed that an inconsistent fiction must be incoherent, or at least must be gerrymandered into consistency somehow, before one can make sense of it. In the light of this, the following can be noted.

(1) The story above concerns objects and events some of which are inconsistent. The inconsistency is no accident but is essential to the plot. Yet it is a coherent story.

There is a determinate plot: not everything happens in the story; and people act in intelligible ways, even when the inconsistent is involved. The end may be a little puzzling, but this is not because we do not know what happens then. The inconsistent happens.

(2) In particular, anyone who misapplied the principle of charity to interpret the story in a consistent way, would have entirely misunderstood it.

(3) As usual, in understanding the story one has to draw inferences—often non-monotonic ones—from what is explicitly presented, together with background information. (The fact that the meeting occurred in Australia, or that Nick left the property *only* once, is not explicitly mentioned, for example.) Clearly, however, the deductive canons employed here cannot be those of classical logic. If they were, we could infer from the description of the box that it was indeed shot off into space. The logic of this story must be paraconsistent. (Note that the appropriate logic of a story may well vary from case to case. One might tell a similar story, for example, based on quantum logic.)

(4) Nor can we simply break the information up into (maybe maximally) consistent chunks and infer from each of these. If we could, we would have to infer that the characters were astonished by the fact that the box was empty and/or by the fact that it had a figurine in it, which they most certainly were not. The logic employed is not, therefore, a nonadjunctive paraconsistent logic. (The inconsistent end might just be construed as a case where there are alternative consistent ends. But even here this is not quite right. The penultimate paragraph indicates that both ends are required together.)

The next five morals concern logically impossible worlds or situations (if one distinguishes between these two things). For the sake of discussion, I take an impossible world/situation to be one where something logically false holds. Which things exactly are logically false depends, of course, on what one takes the correct logic to be. However, according to most logics, including many paraconsistent logics, contradictions are logically false (though some may be true as well). Assuming this to be correct, the following can be asserted.

(5) There are, in some undeniable sense, logically impossible situations or worlds. The story describes (or at least, partially describes) one such.

(6) In particular, an impossible world/situation is (partially) characterized by information that contains a logical falsehood but that is closed under an appropriate inference relation. Even a classical logician may admit that there are impossible worlds in this sense—just one, the trivial world, in which everything obtains. To make things of more interest, the information needs to be nontrivial and the inference engine needs to be paraconsistent. This is exactly what the above story provides.

(7) Whether there is (I do not say ‘exists’) something, ontologically, that the inconsistent (and nontrivial) information (partially) characterizes, is another question. As far as I can see, any of the main theories concerning the nature of possible worlds can be applied equally to impossible worlds: they are existent nonactual entities; they are nonexistent objects; they are constructions out of properties and other universals; they are just certain sets of sentences. Of course, any use such a theory makes of classical logic and its semantics has to be replaced by a corresponding appeal to a paraconsistent logic and its semantics. In particular, any appeal to models of classi-

cal logic has to be replaced by an appeal to models of a paraconsistent logic.

(8) In any case, there is, as far as I can see, absolutely no cogent (in particular, non-question-begging) reason to suppose that there is an *ontological* difference between merely possible worlds and impossible worlds—any more than there is for supposing there to be such a difference between merely possible worlds which are physically possible and those which are physically impossible. To differentiate between some nonactual worlds and others would seem entirely arbitrary.

(9) Fictions are certainly not the only context in which impossible worlds—in whatever sense one takes to be correct—arise. Such worlds are also required to evaluate the truth of counterlogical conditionals. The story above is not an accurate description of my visit to Bungendore, but it is something like the actual visit minimally modified by the finding of the box—except for the end, anyway. (The exact mechanism of modification is far too tough an issue to be taken up here. Note, though, that it requires both an addition to, and a subtraction from, the truth, even paraconsistently. In reality I found no such box. This is a truth that has been deleted to construct the story: it is not the case that I both did and did not find a box.) If I had found the impossible box on my visit, would I have been stunned? Yes, of course; that's what the story says. If I had found such a box, would I have made a space ship and sent it into orbit. Certainly not; that's not what the story says.

Another possible place in which impossible worlds may turn up is in an analysis of belief. Suppose that you were naïve enough to have believed my story, as a child might have done. You would then have believed that Sylvan had possessed a box that was both empty and nonempty, but you would not have believed that he had a cow that both did and did not lay eggs. If we parse '*x* believes that *s*' as a relation between a believer and a proposition, we may then take a proposition, in very orthodox fashion, to be the set of worlds/situations in which *s* is true. This gives the required result. (Despite this, I doubt that impossible worlds are of much use in an analysis of belief; actual belief seems to have no determinate logical structure at all.)

The final point is less of a moral, more of an observation.

(10) An impossible world, as characterized above, is one where a logical truth is false, that is, its negation is true. There is nothing in this definition that precludes the actual world from being logically impossible. (All the logical truths may still hold there.) And once one agrees that there are impossible worlds, the question obviously arises as to how one can be so sure that the actual world is not one of them. There are, it seems to me, no good a priori reasons to suppose that it is not.

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NOTES

1. Sylvan's views on impossible objects *c.* 1980 can be found scattered through Sylvan [6].
2. The Zeno-esque arguments to the effect that changes may realize contradiction in the world, mentioned in the story, can be found in Priest [3].
3. The discussion of quantum mechanics referred to by the fictional Nick is on pp. 376ff. of Priest, Routley, and Norman [4].

4. The first four morals are aimed at the views of Lewis, expressed in “Truth in fiction,” [1], ch. 15. See especially pp. 274f. and 277f.
5. For further arguments against drawing an ontological distinction between possible and impossible worlds, see Yagisawa [8].
6. On the role of impossible worlds in the semantics of relevant logics, see Priest [5].
7. For technical details of using impossible worlds to evaluate counterlogical conditionals, see Sylvan [7] and Mares and Fuhrman [2].

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