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In memoriam - Jordan Howard Sobel (1929 – 2010)

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Published in:
Theoria: a Swedish Journal of Philosophy

2010

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Rabinowicz, W. (2010). In memoriam - Jordan Howard Sobel (1929 – 2010). *Theoria: a Swedish Journal of Philosophy*, 76, 192-196.

Total number of authors:

1

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THEORIA, 2010, 76, 192–196
doi:10.1111/j.1755-2567.2010.01077.x

Obituary
In memoriam: Jordan Howard Sobel (1929–2010)

by

WLODEK RABINOWICZ



A FINE PHILOSOPHER AND a good friend, Howard Sobel, died on March 26 this year. His death was a loss to many Swedish philosophers who both loved and admired him. While he lived in Toronto in Canada, Uppsala was his intellectual “home away from home.” In recent years, Sobel was a regular visitor to the philosophy department in Uppsala where he gave courses and attended research seminars every Spring term from 1999 onwards. In recognition of his contributions, he was awarded an honorary doctorate by Uppsala University in 2003.

His first visit to Uppsala, by the way, took place as early as May 1986. On that occasion, he delivered a series of advanced lectures on decision theory, ~~as well as being~~ an opponent at Jan Österberg’s defence of a doctoral dissertation on ethical egoism. Many of us who were present at the defence still vividly recall this event. Sobel was unyielding in his criticisms, despite (or perhaps because of) his great

1 appreciation of the quality of the thesis. Later, he published detailed comments on
2 Österberg's book in *Erkenntnis* in 1993.

3 Sobel returned to Uppsala to spend the whole academic year 1997–1998 and the
4 Spring of 1999 as a research fellow at the Swedish Institute of Advanced Study.
5 Needless to say, on several occasions he also was invited to lecture at other Swedish
6 universities, in Lund, Stockholm, and not least in Umeå, where he delivered the
7 Burman lectures in 1998.

8 Sobel's first contacts with Sweden go as far back as the end of the 1960s; at that
9 time, he read Lars Bergström's groundbreaking dissertation *The Alternatives and*
10 *Consequences of Actions* (1966) and the two of them engaged in a lively corre-
11 spondence. Even earlier, in 1965, *Theoria* published his paper on "Generalization
12 Arguments", in which he criticized some of the claims made by Marcus Singer in
13 *Generalization in Ethics* (1961). This was in fact his first ever publication in a
14 philosophical journal.

15 Generalization arguments in ethics were the subject of Sobel's doctoral disserta-
16 tion *What If Everyone Did That?*, done under the supervision of Richard Cart-
17 wright and William Frankena, which he defended at the University of Michigan,
18 Ann Arbor, in 1961, the same year as Singer's book came out. After the defence and
19 a short stay as an instructor at Princeton, he went on to UCLA as an assistant
20 professor and then to the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. In 1969, he
21 moved to the University of Toronto, first as an associate professor and then, from
22 1976, as a full professor. There he remained until his retirement in 1995.

23 *Theoria* was fortunate enough to be one of the outlets for his philosophical
24 work throughout the years. As late as 2008, it published one of his very last
25 papers, on the paradox of the liar. For the complete list of his *Theoria* publica-
26 tions, see below.

27 On a personal note, my own contacts with Sobel date back to the early 1980s.
28 They began with an extensive correspondence on causal decision theory and in time
29 led to a life-long friendship, after I visited him and his wife Willa during their stay
30 in Cambridge in 1985. Sobel's seminal work on decision theory and game theory
31 and his subtle discussions of the conceptual framework of utilitarian and contrac-
32 tarian theories in ethics were a major source of inspiration for my own work in these
33 areas. His version of causal decision theory still seems to me unsurpassed, on a par
34 with the classical contributions by Allan Gibbard and William Harper, David Lewis
35 and Brian Skyrms and the more recent work by James Joyce. His early papers on
36 decisions and games are collected in the volume *Taking Chances* (CUP, 1994),
37 which in my view is indispensable reading for anyone who is interested in the
38 problems of rational choice. There is also a difficult and challenging book manu-
39 script *Probability, Chance and Choice – A Theory of Rational Agency* (1978,
40 revised 1980), which unfortunately has never been published. It is available on
41 Sobel's website, www.uts.utoronto.ca/~sobel/. The manuscript deserves close

1 study: it contains an astonishing wealth of insights into the foundations of decision
2 theory.

3 Sobel continued to work on rational choice in the 1990s, even after his intimate
4 engagement with causal decision theory came to an end. From that later period one
5 might especially mention his work on the assumptions needed to justify backward
6 induction as a method of solving choice problems in games and decisions. The
7 presuppositions of this influential approach require philosophical analysis. Sobel
8 was one of the first researchers who had undertaken this task in a serious way. His
9 work on cyclical preferences and money pumps also deserves to be mentioned in
10 this context.

11 Connections between issues in rational choice and the problem of free will are at
12 the forefront of his fascinating book *Puzzles for the Will – Fatalism, Newcomb and*
13 *Samarra, Determinism and Omniscience* from 1998 (University of Toronto Press).

14 As for Sobel's study of utilitarianism and contractualism, one has to go to a series
15 of papers published in the 1970s, 80s and early 90s, in such journals as *Inquiry*, *Nous*,
16 *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, *Theoria*, *Dialogue* and *Philosophical Studies*.
17 Unfortunately, his contributions in this area have never been collected in book form,
18 but their influence on the philosophical debates of that period was important. They
19 were widely read by moral philosophers with consequentialist leanings, not least in
20 Sweden, and much discussed. An issue that I especially come to think of in this
21 context concerns our predictable deviations from an optimal course of actions and
22 the normative relevance of such deviations for our current decisions – a problem that
23 Bergström already had taken up in his dissertation. To give an example that comes
24 from a later paper by Frank Jackson and Robert Pargetter:¹ should I undertake an
25 important task that I am well equipped to perform (say, to write a review of a new
26 book), if I am convinced that I am not going to deliver? Or should I rather decline the
27 assignment from the beginning? Many of us unfortunately recognize this predicament
28 from our own experience! Sobel's treatment of the issue can be found in
29 "Utilitarianism and Past and Future Mistakes" (*Nous*, 1976).

30 Sobel was always deeply interested in logical methods. One of his special
31 interests concerned logical paradoxes. Another was the application of logic to
32 philosophy of religion. In 2004, Cambridge University Press published his *Logic*
33 *and Theism – Arguments For and Against Beliefs in God*. Since the subject is one
34 I am not very familiar with, let me refer to a review by Nicholas Everitt: "This is
35 an outstanding work in the philosophy of religion. It is immensely scholarly,
36 meticulous in its attention to detail, both textual and philosophical, hugely well-
37 informed in the relevant literature, bold where it needs to be bold, yet carefully
38

39
40 1 F. Jackson F. and R. Pargetter, "Oughts, options, and actualism", *Philosophical Review* 95 (1986),
41 pp. 233–55.

1 nuanced where qualification is required” (*Philosophical Books*, 47, pp. 380–3).
2 Everitt is the author of *The Non-existence of God* which appeared the same year as
3 Sobel’s volume.

4 The book on logic and theism was recently followed by another treatise, *Walls*
5 *and Vaults – A Natural Science of Morals. Virtue Ethics According to David Hume*
6 (Wiley, 2009). Hume had long been one of Sobel’s pet projects, along with three
7 other main figures in the history of western moral philosophy: Plato, Aristotle and
8 Kant. On Sobel’s website there are book-length drafts on each of these three
9 philosophers: *No Light Matter – Socrates and Plato on Justice; Ends and Means –*
10 *Aristotle on Happiness and Virtue*; and *The Mystery and the Glory – Immanuel*
11 *Kant’s Philosophy of Morals*. There is also an extended draft dealing with the
12 history of twentieth-century metaethics: *Good and Gold – A Judgmental History of*
13 *Metaethics from G. E. Moore through J. L. Mackie*. It is to be hoped that all this
14 material will eventually find a publisher. Sobel’s approach to the great stars of
15 moral philosophy is consistently stimulating and subtle in its attention to the
16 argumentative structure of their work: “bold where it needs to be bold, yet carefully
17 nuanced where qualification is required”.

18 The sheer amount of unpublished material gives some indication as to how active
19 Sobel was as a philosopher up until the time of his death. He will be missed by his
20 readers, colleagues and friends.

21 22 **Sobel’s Publications in *Theoria***

- 23
24 “Generalization Arguments.” *Theoria* (1965), 32–60.
25 “Utilitarian Principles for Imperfect Agents.” *Theoria* (1982), 113–126.
26 “Expected Utilities and Rational Actions and Choices.” *Theoria* (1983), 159–183.
27 “The Law Student and the Teacher.” *Theoria* (1987), 1–18.
28 “Plato’s *Crito*: A Question of Agreement.” *Theoria* (1994, published in 1996), 1–26.
29 “‘Hoist With His Own Petar’: on the Undoing of a Liar Paradox.” *Theoria* (2008), 115–145.

30 31 **His Publications in Swedish Philosophical Festschrifts**

- 32
33 “An Employee’s Quandary” (1996). In S. Lindström, R. Sliwinski and J. Österberg (eds),
34 *Odds and Ends: Philosophical Essays Dedicated to Wlodek Rabinowicz on the Occasion*
35 *of His Fiftieth Birthday*, pp. 192–203. Uppsala Philosophical Studies, Uppsala.
36 “The Naturalistic Fallacy and Hume’s Law” (2003) In K. Segerberg and R. Sliwinski, *Logic,*
37 *Law, Morality: Thirteen Essays in Practical Philosophy in Honour of Lennart Aqvist*, pp.
38 213–226. Uppsala Philosophical Studies 51, Uppsala.
39 “On Nearly Believable Liars” (2003). In K. Segerberg and R. Sliwinski (eds), *A Philosophi-*
40 *cal Smorgasbord: Essays on Action, Truth, and Other Things in Honour of Frederick*
41 *Stoutland*, pp. 247–262. Uppsala Philosophical Studies 51, Uppsala.



- 1 “On Gödel’s Ontological Proof” (2006). In H. Lagerlund, S. Lindström and R. Sliwinski
2 (eds), *Modality Matters: Twenty-Five Essays in Honour of Krister Segerberg*, pp. 397–
3 421. Uppsala Philosophical Studies 53, Uppsala.
- 4 “‘Objective Prescriptions’, a Possible ‘Patch’ for Universal Prescriptivism.” In T. Rønnow-
5 Rasmussen, B. Petersson, J. Josefsson and D. Egonsson (eds), *Hommage à Wlodek:*
6 *Philosophical Papers Dedicated to Wlodek Rabinowicz*. Lund. [[www.fil.lu.se/
7 homageawlodek](http://www.fil.lu.se/hommageawlodek)]



Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited	
Journal Code: THEO	Proofreader: Elsie
Article No: 1077	Delivery date: 24 June 2010
Page Extent: 5	