



Nicholas L. Sturgeon

October 11, 1942 – August 24, 2020

Nicholas L. Sturgeon, Susan Linn Sage Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and Humane Letters at Cornell University, died on August 24, 2020, at Hospicare of Ithaca, from complications of Parkinson's disease. He was 77.

Nick was born in Santa Maria, California, the son of Galen H. Sturgeon, a geologist for Shell Oil, and Anna L. Sturgeon, a homemaker and later a social worker for Contra Costa County Child Protective Services. He received a B.A. from Carleton College in 1964, and a Ph.D. in Philosophy from Princeton University in 1972. In 1967, he joined the Sage School of Philosophy at Cornell as assistant professor of Philosophy. He became associate professor in 1975 and professor in 1983. He was appointed Susan Linn Sage Professor of Philosophy and Humane Letters in 2011. Nick was also a visiting professor at the University of Michigan, Johns Hopkins University, and the University of California, Los Angeles. He was awarded a Faculty Research Award in the Humanities by the National Endowment for the Humanities in 2005. He retired in 2013.

Nick served as Chair of the Sage School from 1989 to 1994. From the 1970s through 2009, he often served as either editor or editor-in-chief of *The Philosophical Review*. To mark his contribution to the high editorial standards of the *Review*, the issue published in January 2021 was dedicated to his memory. He was a member of the editorial boards of the journals *Ethics* and *Utilitas*. He served on many university committees. In the 1981-2 academic year he chaired the Writing Committee of the College of Arts and Sciences; this committee secured agreement on a wide-ranging reform of the Writing Program for first-year undergraduates.

Through his essays on ethics, beginning with 'Moral Explanations' (1985), Nick was a leading advocate of a position sometimes called 'Cornell Realism'. Other advocates included his colleagues Richard Boyd and Richard Miller. While each of them defended a distinctive version of moral realism, their collaborative work helped to form the reputation of Cornell as a center of research in ethics. They attracted able graduate students who later became influential

philosophers in their own right.

Nick arrived at his version of moral realism partly through seeing how the main objections to it could be answered. In his early work he argued against the non-cognitivist view that moral judgments are not capable of being true or false because they are not statements at all, but expressions of emotion or attitude. In his later work he discussed arguments that concede that moral judgments are statements but deny that they can be known to be true. According to one of these arguments, moral facts and properties that admit of moral knowledge would have to be entirely different from anything that a scientific worldview could recognize; they would have to be non-natural facts and properties. According to another of these arguments, moral facts and properties do not play the explanatory role they would play if they were real facts and properties; the best explanation of natural facts dispenses with any appeal to moral facts. Against the first of these views, Nick argued that moral facts and properties are natural; they are not strange facts or properties that are unknown to the natural sciences. Against the second, he argued that these natural moral facts and properties are explanatory of other natural facts. Facts about possession, need, distribution, and deprivation, for instance, may constitute facts about justice. Moral facts, so understood, explain other natural facts; facts about injustice, for instance, may explain the instability of institutions.

In defending these views, Nick often applied ideas in metaphysics, philosophy of science, and philosophy of mind to ethics. For example, drawing on his work on Locke, as well as on his collaboration with, and work by, Richard Boyd, Nick explained how moral properties are both natural and explanatory. If we are asking ‘What is water?’, we are not necessarily asking ‘What does the word “water” mean?’. We may be seeking the characteristics that genuine samples of water have in common (being H₂O). When moral philosophers ask, ‘What is the right?’ or ‘What makes right actions right?’, they are not confined to asking ‘What does “right” mean?’. They can also ask what features of right actions explain their being right. Nick also exploited non-reductive physicalism in the philosophy of mind, a version of which was also formulated and defended by his colleagues Sydney Shoemaker and Richard Boyd. According to this view, even if certain physical facts, properties, and events are sufficient for the existence of mental facts, it does not follow that the study of mind can dispense with distinctively mental properties (any more than economics can be reduced to physics, even though some physical facts are sufficient for the existence of the facts that economists study). Nick argued that the same is true of moral properties (right, good, just etc.) in relation to the underlying natural properties (mentioning persons, actions, and social relations) that are sufficient for the existence of moral properties.

Nick regularly taught various courses in normative ethics (especially the debates between utilitarianism and its critics), meta-ethics (the metaphysics, semantics, and epistemology of morality), and the history of ethics. The latter included a graduate class on Hobbes and the British Moralists, which led to an influential paper on Butler on nature and conscience, as well as to a well-known paper on Hume’s ethical theory, in which Nick argued that (contrary to a popular view) Hume is not an ancestor of twentieth-century non-cognitivism but is more plausibly understood as recognizing moral facts (though without being a moral realist).

Nick also regularly taught a course on the British empiricists, about which a former graduate

student said: 'Nick's presentations on Locke were brilliant. He modeled the method of interpreting and mining historical texts for their significant ideas right in the classroom. ... Generally, Nick would find that Locke created problems for himself by his own approach. Then he would follow Locke down the rabbit hole and come back up with all sorts of suggestive conclusions that related puzzling notions in Locke—like substance, real and nominal essences, primary and secondary qualities—in ways the reader had not before thought about'.

For many years Nick and Richard Boyd co-taught an undergraduate course on Science and Human Nature which discussed evolutionary psychology and its implications, and alleged implications, for ethics. Nick and Richard rejected any basic dichotomy between facts and values, and therefore acknowledged that scientific discoveries had ethical implications; but they encouraged a critical attitude towards the sweeping claims of some evolutionary psychologists about the moral and political implications of their discipline.

Students at all levels were impressed by his ability to present complex arguments clearly, without leaving out important details, and without losing sight of the main point. They were even more impressed by his ability to do all this without any written notes. His careful and sympathetic exposition of the case for each side of a given view made his own account all the more convincing.

In 2012, the Sage School held a conference in honor of both Nick and Richard Boyd. This resulted in a volume of essays, *Moral and Scientific Realism: Essays in Honor of Richard N. Boyd and Nicholas L. Sturgeon* (*Philosophical Studies* 172:4 [2015]), edited by Elizabeth S. Radcliffe (Ph.D. Cornell, 1985). A volume of many of his collected papers, edited by David Brink (Ph.D., Cornell, 1984), Terence Irwin, and Julia Markowitz, is being prepared for publication by Oxford University Press.

Nick was known for his intellect, patience, kindness, wit, and encyclopedic memory. One colleague remembers his "consistently sensible and illuminating voice in departmental meetings." Another colleague called Nick's writing "a model for how to engage in substantive and fruitful philosophical debate," and another remembered his arguments as "extraordinarily clear, luminous, [. . .] original, important, and right!".

In addition to philosophy, and his family and friends, his main interests included history (especially American history); baseball (he was a devoted San Francisco Giants fan and for a while had a dog named Willie McCovey); opera and classical music (he had an impressive collection of LPs and CDs; and he frequented the opera in Syracuse, Binghamton, and Glimmerglass, as well as CCO concerts); and cross country train travel, especially on Amtrak's California Zephyr, which traveled through the mountainous landscape he loved. He faced his Parkinson's diagnosis with characteristic grace and grew to love the community at his Finger Lakes Rock Steady Boxing class, many of whom rode the same Gadabout bus three times a week.

Nick is survived by his wife of 54 years, Joanne Sanderson Sturgeon; by their children Christopher ("Kit") Sturgeon of Ithaca and Erika Sturgeon Drezner of Brooklyn, New York; by their son-in-law Todd Drezner and their grandson Sam Drezner, both of Brooklyn, New York;

and by his sister Janet Sturgeon of Upland, California.

Written by Terence Irwin, Gail Fine, and Erika Sturgeon Drezner