



# Robert Nola as I remember him

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The New Zealand philosopher, Robert Nola (1940–2022), has died. He was a kind man, a good friend, and a fine philosopher. Here is how I remember him.

I first heard the name of Robert Nola in the philosophy seminar room in the early 1980s at the University of Otago where I was a student. Alan Musgrave presented a paper on Karl Popper's views on the theory-dependence of observation (Musgrave 1983). In that paper, Alan responded to points that Robert had made in a paper on the same topic (Nola 1983). Some years later, I met Robert in the Department of History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Melbourne while I was doing my PhD. Robert was visiting Melbourne HPS on sabbatical. I wrote my PhD thesis on semantic aspects of the problem of the incommensurability of scientific theories. I was especially interested in how the causal theory of reference proposed by Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam might be applied to this problem. It seemed to allow both continuity of reference and comparison between theories. But there was an issue of how the causal theory could be applied to theoretical terms that do not refer to observable entities with which one might have causal contact by way of perception or bodily interaction. The suggestion had been made that a descriptive specification of the natural kind to which theoretical entities belong might help fix the reference of theoretical terms. Robert thought that something other than specification of natural kind was needed. What was needed was specification of the causal role that theoretical entities play in producing observed phenomena (Nola 1980). This was a version of what came to be known as the causal-descriptive theory of reference. I drew on Robert's ideas about fixing the reference of theoretical terms in my thesis (see Sankey 1989).

Later, as I settled into teaching the philosophy of science at Melbourne in the early and mid-1990s, I encountered Robert's work on scientific method. He distinguished between first-level theories, second-level methods, and third-level meta-methodological theories (Nola 1987). That distinction was important, I thought, in dealing with problems of relativism raised by shifting or variant scientific methods. Ultimately, Robert and I worked on two book projects about the nature of scientific method. The first, *After Popper, Kuhn and Feyerabend: Recent*

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*Issues in Theories of Scientific Method*, was an edited volume that came out of an Australasian Association for the History, Philosophy and Social Studies of Science conference that Robert organized at the University of Auckland (see Nola and Sankey 2000a). At the conference, Robert and I spoke about how some of the papers might form the basis of a book. Later we invited additional contributions from philosophers not at the conference. Robert and I wrote a long survey of theories of method which served as the opening chapter of that volume (Nola and Sankey 2000b). Writing the survey made us realize that, while there were many textbooks in the philosophy of science, there were few general overviews of theories of scientific method. That realization gave rise to our next project, which was *Theories of Scientific Method: An Introduction* (Nola and Sankey 2007). Book covers and title pages can be misleading. They suggest we were equal co-authors. We were not. Robert was very much the lead author. His comprehensive knowledge of the subject-matter far surpassed mine, as did his capacity to produce long pieces of text at short notice.

I have three memories about the writing of that book. The first is that Robert introduced me to Skype. I would sit in my office in Melbourne. Robert would be in his in Auckland. We would both log into Skype. We would then work through drafts of chapters of the book, as if we were working together in the same location. The second is something that Robert said about how to think of methods. There are different methods for cleaning a fish. So too there are different methods for doing science. How did he know there were different methods for cleaning a fish? His father was a fisherman. Robert had spent time on fishing boats with his father and had learned different ways to clean fish while working on those boats. The third relates to music. I managed to get a small grant to enable Robert to spend time working on the book with me at Melbourne. He was sitting on the balcony of the flat at Ormond College where my wife and I lived at the time. I said I would put on Rachmaninoff's third piano concerto to play on the CD player. No sooner did the first note sound than Robert said "That's not Rach Three. That's Rach two." Not only had Robert studied mathematics and philosophy. He had also studied music.

Earlier this year I became aware of an episode involving the place of Māori belief-systems in the science curriculum in New Zealand, a letter written by a group of scientists and the Royal Society of New Zealand. Robert was one of the signatories of the letter (Clements et al. 2021). Complaints were made. Lawyers became involved. The Royal Society investigated but discontinued its investigation. Ultimately, Robert and one of the other signatories resigned from the Royal Society. He sent me notes that he had written about the episode. So far as I could see, the issues involved were standard ones from the philosophy of science about demarcation between science and non-science, and the role played by scientific methods in producing scientific knowledge. But these issues have now become enmeshed in complex problems of how to overcome past wrongs to indigenous peoples in our post-colonial era. I could not help but think that the concerns that Robert and I shared about rationality, relativism, and reality have not been laid to rest. New life is being breathed into these issues as we confront our colonial antipodean past. Perhaps in time new light may be shed as well. If so, Robert's work will have helped to clear the way.

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