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Finnish Philosophy at Home and Abroad

Jaakko Hintikka

Recent years have seen a tremendous growth in international scholarly communication, especially perhaps in Europe. On the one hand, the technical means of communication have undergone a major revolution. Scholars and scientists can communicate almost instantly via phone, fax and especially by e-mail, and post their results on their websites instead of having to wait for months and sometimes years to have them published. On the other hand, various institutional frameworks have been created for the purpose of fostering international scientific communication and cooperation. These institutional arrangements have typically been supported by responsible governments. One unspoken or spoken motive (among others) in encouraging international exchanges – especially in the humanities and social sciences – is the expectation that the new technical and institutional improvements in communication not only facilitate research and scholarship but directly or indirectly contribute to the discussion of important cultural, educational and social issues in the different participating countries, and perhaps even help people and peoples to cope with them.

Do these efforts serve their purpose? Are the institutional arrangements needed? Obviously it is hoped that new institutional frameworks and other new means of cooperation and communication will enhance scholars' knowledge of what is going on in their field in other countries, and prompt discussions around issues of international significance. This is expected to help scholarly and scientific research and also to bring international discussion to bear on cultural, educational, social and political problems in one's home country.

This is all very well. However, in the midst of such rapid new developments in the technology of communication and travel, it may be a good idea to stop for a moment, look back and ask how international awareness and discussion of transnational issues was managed in the past. In what respect do we need improvements, and what kind of improvements?

Material for an interesting test case is provided by a volume published in 1996 by the Philosophical Society of Finland. It consists of the minutes of the Society from its

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founding in 1873 until 1925, edited by Juha Manninen and Ilkka Niiniluoto and published by the Society under the title *A Laboratory of Thought*. The minutes of a local society do not perhaps sound like exciting reading but in reality they are little short of fascinating.

The Philosophical Society of Finland was founded by Thiodolf Rein in 1873. He was at the time the only professor of philosophy in Finland. Originally the Society was little more than a discussion club for students of philosophy, organized rather like an informal seminar, but under Rein's guidance the Society slowly became a lively forum for philosophical discussion and for the dissemination of ideas.

Reading the minutes of the Society, one easily begins to wonder how institutional arrangements can be improved from what was already going on in a distant small country some hundred years ago. Not unexpectedly many of the presentations and debates at the Society's meetings dealt with perennial philosophical problems, such as the ideas of classical philosophers from Socrates to Hegel. But quite often the discussions dealt with current issues and developments of the day. They did not restrict themselves to the well-known figures of the time, such as Wundt (meetings on 2 Nov 1888, 3 March 1890, and 11 Oct 1907), Lotze (25 Oct 1889, 5 May 1893), Spencer (10 Feb, 16 March and 6 April 1888; 25 April 1890, 21 April 1893, 29 Sept and 13 Oct 1893), French positivism (21 Nov 1879), Eucken (18 Nov 1892, 8 Nov 1912) and Nietzsche (17 April 1899). A large number of other thinkers (not just philosophers) were discussed, as well, including Boström, Buckle, Keim, Taine, Carlyle, Preger, Pontus Wikner, Lombroso, Dühring, Otto Pfleiderer, Guay, Hebler, N. Schulmann, F.A. Lange, Goldstein, Metchnikoff, Ellen Key, Gustave Le Bon, A. Thomsen, Vitalis Nordström, Tolstoy, Spengler, pragmatists, Höffding and Tagore.

Furthermore, and more interestingly, a large number of social and political issues were debated, and these were frequently introduced by Thiodolf Rein himself. Even after disregarding issues primarily of theology and religion, these topics include socialism, democracy, labour relations, religious freedom, the emancipation of and the rights of women, the productivity of labour, the death penalty, politics and morality, nationalism and civil servants, universal suffrage, law and the Jewish question, liberalism, religion and morality, utilitarianism, punishment, suicide, natural law, representative government, socialism and individual freedom, religion and the state, youth and philosophy, pacifism, women and philosophy, the prospects of the League of Nations and international arbitration, Tolstoy and bolshevism, elitism and democracy, and imperialism.

This was by no means a bad list of socially important topics to have been discussed in a remote, fairly conservative country operating under tsarist Russian censorship. It may also serve to remind us that some of today's most hotly debated topics have in fact been discussed before. The repeated attention to women's issues may or may not be connected with the fact that the Society's active membership included Finland's first female university graduate (Master of Arts) Emma Irene Åström (1847–1934), and first female PhD, Tekla Hultin (1864–1943), who on 11 November 1889 spoke on the question, 'Does the growth of culture bring about happiness for humanity?'

Ideological discussions at the Society gained colour and poignancy from the presence of a number of unusual characters among the active members of the Society.

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They include the radical philosophy professor Rolf Lagerborg (1874–1957). Lagerborg was a true radical by temperament and by conviction, especially in philosophical and religious matters. His books include (to give their titles in English translation): *In One's Own Eyes and in Others* (subtitled *A book about self-knowledge*), *French Lifestyle*, *On Truth in Religion and in Spiritual Life*, *Morality in Flux*, *What We Can Know about the Soul*, *Look Happy*, and *Xanthippe*. The tenacity of Lagerborg's convictions was put to the test when he discovered to his horror that, according to the civil law of the land, he could be legally married only by undergoing some religious ceremony or other, which would have violated his principles. The resourceful philosopher nevertheless managed to tie the knot legally by invoking a clause in the criminal law that had allowed a judge to punish an unmarried couple who had indulged in sexual relations by declaring them to be married.

For all his radicalism, Lagerborg was not the most politically active member of the Society; pride of place belongs to the former member who more than any other made an impact in world politics, albeit not primarily in philosophy. This was Otto Ville Kuusinen (1881–1964), who moved to Russia in 1918, became a prominent marxist theoretician and eventually a member of the Praesidium of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist party, and was apparently the last old bolshevik. It was Kuusinen who on 16 March 1903 spoke to the Society on 'Socialism and individual freedom', defending marxist ideas. Did he make any impact? The minutes record that 'it was generally opined that in contemporary society the status of the highly touted idea of freedom is entirely dubious. But there was no consensus as to how freedom would fare – or fares – in a socialist country.'

The rich gallery of unusual personalities in the Society included Arvid Järnefelt (1861–1932), a member of the legendary Järnefelt family, brother-in-law of Jean Sibelius, distinguished novelist and radical Tolstoyan and pacifist. On 17 March 1893 he addressed the Society on the punishment of crimes, arguing on Christian grounds against the entire societal institution of legal punishment.

Ideological debates were not performed to an empty gallery, either. The Society included a large number of important and influential members of Finnish society, including a future president of the country, J. K. Paasikivi (1870–1956) and its future prime minister Edwin Linkomies (1894–1963). The minutes indicate that the future president took part in the discussion of Arvid Järnefelt's paper. Somewhat earlier, one of the leaders of the radical wing of the Finnish language movement, Jonas Castren (1850–1922), had been an active member.

Rein started the Philosophical Society of Finland and inspired much of the general discussion at its meetings. However, in the beginning the topics and discussions bore more of a resemblance to undergraduate seminars than learned conferences. In the mid-1880s, the scholarly level of the discussions rose dramatically. This was due to the active engagement of a few philosophers with a strong interest in the behavioural and social sciences – initially Hjalmar Neiglick (1860–89) and Edvard Westermarck (1862–1939).

Edvard Westermarck was in his time a major international figure in ethics and social anthropology whose book on ethical relativity prompted a short-lived epithet 'the Einstein of Ethics'. Westermarck's approach was an evolutionary one. In his anthropological work he relied on massive data about different kinds of societies,

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while his ethical concepts owe a lot to 18th-century British moralists. In fact, he seems to have been one of the last writers to use the term 'sympathy' in its 18th-century naturalistic sense, denoting simply the transfer of emotions of any kind, positive or negative, from one person to another. Even though his evolutionary approach and pre-sociological anthropology are no longer in fashion, I had hoped it would not be necessary to explain who Westermarck was or what he was like; but recently I read an encyclopedia entry which claims that Darwinian ethicists were by and large in the service of imperialistic governments, that they looked down on 'primitive' people, and extolled Victorian Christianity. Westermarck, who was probably the most prominent representative of the evolutionary approach to ethics in the world, can be most briefly characterized as the diametrical opposite of such typecasting. For one thing, he opposed Christianity because it was not sufficiently altruistic in its teachings.

You may be forgiven for not having heard of Neiglick, who died before he was even thirty. Those of you interested in this brilliant figure and who can read Swedish will find an instructive account of him in G. H. von Wright's 'Hjalmar Neiglicks filosofiska insats' (*Societas Sientarum Fennica, Commentationes Humanarum Litteraum* vol. xiv, no. 2.), where Von Wright calls Neiglick's death 'one of the most bitter losses that has ever hit the cultural life of Finland'. Most of the work that Neiglick had time to accomplish he did in Leipzig, on the psychophysics of visual perception, under the auspices of no less a figure than Wilhelm Wundt. In Leipzig he came to know, besides Wundt, Emile Durkheim and the Danish psychologist Alfred Lehmann. One can only speculate about the career of Neiglick had he not died so young.

Another notable figure in the Society was Yrjö Hirn (1870–1952), whose early work in the field of aesthetics is somewhat analogous to Westermarck's.

At a later date colour as well as substance were lent to the activities of the Society by its one-time secretary Eino Kaila (1890–1958). Kaila became the most influential philosopher in Finland in the first half of the 20th century. A first-rate psychologist too, he lectured to the Society frequently on psychological topics. Especially memorable, and a good indication of the quality of presentations to the Society, is Kaila's controversy with Rolf Lagerborg, which was integral to the central European controversy between phenomenalistic and realistic philosophers of science that culminated in the famous Mach–Boltzmann *gigantomachia*. Kaila, because he worked briefly in Vienna in the early 1930s and took part in the Vienna Circle discussions, is usually bracketed with the other logical empiricists – a term which seems to have been coined by Kaila himself. It is therefore of interest to see Kaila defending realism up against Lagerborg's Machian phenomenalism.

Philosophers like Kaila attracted other interesting people to the Society. The minutes of the meeting on 19 November 1920 refer to a talk by a member of the Society who is described as a 'student', that is, an undergraduate. The talk dealt with 'Synthetic processes in the light of psychological experiments', and the 'student' speaker was Ragnar Granit (1900–91) who became a physiologist, moved to Sweden and won the Nobel Prize for physiology in 1967. Another talk I would like to have heard (if I had been born early enough) was by Hans Ruin on 17 March 1922 under the title 'The psychological mystery of modern painting'. Much later Ruin published (in Swedish) an interesting book on the same topic called *I konstens brännspegel* (1951).

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But what is the moral of this fragmentary story? Awareness of the international scene was possible by whatever old-fashioned means were available to the members of the Philosophical Society of Finland a hundred years ago. It was not so difficult for the good members of the Society to keep up with what was going on in their field internationally and to discuss those developments in a well-informed manner. However, those members of the Society who made an impact internationally, and who tended to make the most significant contributions in their home country, were not just following developments in the wider world: they worked personally with scientists and scholars from other countries. Westermack was a professor at the London School of Economics, Yrjö Hirn worked in England and other countries, Eino Kaila spent time in Vienna, and even Neiglick had time to work in Leipzig. Among the later presidents of the Society, G. H. von Wright did research in Cambridge and was a professor there after Ludwig Wittgenstein. Without such personal working contacts it is doubtful whether these intellectual leaders would have made the impact they did. Although the evidence I can offer is merely anecdotal, perhaps developments in international scientific and scholarly communication should focus anew on the different modes of personal communication and cooperation. The main unresolved question to my mind is whether technical means such as phone, fax and e-mail can serve the same function as face-to-face personal interaction.

These points can perhaps be illustrated by the instructive case of Eino Kaila. This brilliant, charismatic philosopher never achieved an international status commensurate with his influence in Finland. I believe this is largely because during two important periods of his career he was deprived of day-to-day working contacts with other major philosophers interested in the same problems. Nor could Kaila's correspondence with the leading logical positivists fully compensate for this philosophical isolation. Kaila had wide-ranging interests in philosophy, psychology, literature and theatre. The central focus of his philosophical ambitions was nevertheless the philosophy of contemporary science, both from an epistemological perspective and as the subject of an updated *Naturphilosophie*. Unfortunately, when Kaila first put his mind seriously to these problems in the 1920s he was professor at the new Finnish-language university of Turku with no-one else around who was working seriously on the same subject. Kaila did some high-quality work, such as his monographs *Der Satz vom Ausgleich des Zufalls und das Kausalprinzip* (1925), *Die Prinzipien der Wahrscheinlichkeitslogik* (1926), *Probleme der Deduktion* (1928), *Beiträge zu einer Synthetischen Philosophie* (1928) and *Der Logistische Neupositivismus, Eine Kritische Studie* (1930). Such topics are extremely difficult to work on alone, especially for someone without a higher education in mathematics or a science, and immeasurably easier to work on with others. In the late 1930s and 1940s, when Kaila had already visited Vienna and was teaching in Helsinki, well-known events intervened to make personal international contacts difficult for him. These included the flight of the logical positivists to America and the onset of World War II.

Hence the tentative conclusion from these sundry stories has to be that personal relationships and personal contacts are of continued importance.

Jaakko Hintikka
Boston University

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