

THE 13th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF



ISSEI

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University of Cyprus



The Ethical Challenge of Multidisciplinarity **Reconciling ‘The Three Narratives’— Art, Science, and Philosophy**

Marianna Papastephanou, Editor and Co-organizer of the 13th ISSEI, Nicosia, 02-06 July 2012, Cyprus

Dear Participants/Contributors,

I welcome you all to the 13th ISSEI conference e-proceedings in our Lekythos website and I thank you warmly for your participation. Your essays in this collection make possible the international and multi-disciplinary vision of the ISSEI. As delegates from all over the world, from countries too many to account here, and as contributors researching on various fields, topics and persuasions, you have, with your presence at the conference and your papers for this electronic edition, instantiated an embodied and non-toxic universalism.

On my part, as editor of the e-proceedings, I am grateful to my colleague Zelia Gregoriou for her brilliant organizational ideas and the heavy workload that she has undertaken. Special thanks are due to the University of Cyprus Technical Services as well as to the Library and Ms Vasiliki Koukounidou and her team who have made our Lekythos website a true receptacle of the multicultural and multidisciplinary character of the ISSEI. A Lekythos, originally, a decorated ceramic vessel used for storing olive oil, evokes the olive branch as a diachronic symbol of peace along with the fusion of episteme, utility, art, and the quotidian. But Lekythos being at times a part of funerary rites also evokes the interplay of eternity and finitude, the unexpectedness of what the future has in store and writing as a life operation of keeping thought in store. We hope that such

connotations of finitude and infinity, and symbolisms of receptivity, irenic academic creativity, inconclusiveness of human endeavour and openness to futurity energize multiple readings of our *Lekythos* e-proceedings.

As co-organizer of the 13th ISSEI, I am grateful to the organization committee for their efforts, and especially to Prof Heinz-Uwe Haus whose exceptional and indefatigable advice and energy had been a source of constant encouragement and inspiration throughout the preparation of the conference. Many thanks also to Neophytos Neophytou of the Cyprus Theatre Centre, to Mary Ioannides-Koutselini, the Head of the Department of Education, for her wholehearted commitment to this project, and to my friends and colleagues for their concern, participation and ideas.

I owe special thanks to: Prof Ezra Talmor, Ms Rachel Ben-David, Prof David Lovell, Edna and Avital, and all the other members of the ISSEI for their guidance and cooperation; as well as to Prof Cem Karadeli, the organizer of the previous ISSEI conference at Ankara for his advice and friendly concern. Many thanks are due to the team of Easyconferences for their valuable support and incomparably efficient problem-solving. The ISSEI and Easyconferences have jointly provided the ingredients that make such events realizable: *aporia* and *emporia* respectively. The perfectionism inherent in the ISSEI vision exposed us to an *aporia*, a daunting wonder, effecting a creative sense of no way and the need and desire to think of, and think in, new ways. Easyconferences supplied the *emporia*, the passages, the way toward the approximation of the vision, the practical opening of paths for the realization of the ISSEI project. Speaking of the ISSEI vision, vivid images of Sasha Talmor come to mind; her friendliness and inexhaustible energy had made the ISSEI a memorable experience for many of us in the past; and I dedicate this editorial to her memory. The vision of ISSEI involves a scientific ethic that can be summed up in the imperative to the thinker, the artist and the scientist: “keep going”, “make the humanities endure” and “persevere”. As Sascha so pertinently wrote in her article on “aesthetic judgement and its criteria of value” (Talmor, 1969), we may have been led to ask questions of truth in new ways; but the quandaries of thought and the vision that direct our efforts, for instance, when we explore the relation between the ethical and the beautiful, still urge us to continue our quest for truth.

But, what was exactly the 13th ISSEI framework to which you have so kindly and richly responded and contributed? In this editorial, I elaborate, briefly and from the

point of view of philosophy, my field, on the stakes of multidisciplinary. For, in the world of today, art, science and philosophy form a constellation which is suffused not only with prospects and creative impetus but also with challenges, tensions and ethical dilemmas.

Marketization exerts enormous pressure on the humanities with detrimental effects, while new modes of framing research relativize established patterns of academic activity. Such challenges, and many more along these lines, require imaginative and bold responses on the part of disciplines, which are now invited not just to react or adapt to new global realities but also to intervene in the shaping of a world in constant becoming. Yet, apart from the socio-political stakes, art, science and philosophy as modalities of thought confront ethical and epistemological quandaries that bear upon the relation they have to one another. To indicate some of them that implicate philosophy, we may borrow Alain Badiou's connection between dangerous realities and the failures of thought that generate such realities.

For Badiou, 'every empirical disaster originates in a disaster of thought. [...] every real and, in particular, every historic disaster contains a philosopheme that knots together ecstasy, the sacred and terror' (1999, p. 131). The glaring *philosophemes* that Badiou singles out comprise Stalinian Marxism's New Proletarian Man, Nazism's historically destined German people, and the civilized man of imperial parliamentary democracies. To them corresponds the ecstasy of the place (e.g. the German Land, Socialism's Homeland, the West) and the sacred of the Name (the Führer, the father of peoples, the Marketplace) (ibid, p. 132). We may employ this discourse to theorize less blatant disasters, some of which concern an obsessive and disproportionate encroachment on just one of the three narratives at the expense of all others. When art is the case in point, the corresponding philosopheme is a sacralised aestheticization; an assumption that art contains a mystical and transcendent quality and an expectation that this quality will unleash hidden redemptive and utopian energies. The ecstasy of the place of art (the artefact and its locus) along with the sacred of the Name (the exceptionalism of the artist) effect a pernicious self-enclosure where the world of aesthetic experience displays contempt for the world of the quotidian and its facticity.

But, if aestheticization presents a risk of exaggerated and hegemonic emphasis on art, scientism and positivism are no less dramatic in making the relation among the

three narratives uneven and lopsided. As Prof Peter Caws (our keynote speaker for whose presence at the conference we have been very grateful) has put it, “science has suffered from the immodesty of some of its enthusiasts” (2005, p. 157). The language of science has been notorious for its presumed ethical neutrality, its arrogant self-understanding, and its contempt for the worlds of subjective experience, normativity and ideality. The laboratory, science’s locus of ecstasy, along with the scientist, who incarnates science’s sacralised name of soteriological collective subjectivity, underlie the glorification of the quotidian realm of causality, scientific data and facticity.

For its part, philosophy can also be complicit in the terror of centripetal hegemony. The ‘queen of the sciences’ self-declaration has haunted the historical relationship of philosophy with the other two narratives (art and science), often leading its sacralised Name, the philosopher, to the role of the self-appointed prophet and the dogmatic arbiter of all truth. By contrast, philosophy can and should serve an interdisciplinarity that respects epistemological boundaries the very moment that philosophy struggles to learn from other discourses/disciplines, while maintaining a critical stance to their – as well as to philosophy’s own – operations. Jürgen Habermas (1990) describes this possibility as a shift of philosophy from the position of the usher of sciences to that of the stand-in and interpreter of sciences. For Jacques Derrida, when the context is that of inter- or multi-disciplinarity, philosophy names both ‘a discipline that belongs to the “humanities” and that discipline which claims to think, elaborate and criticize the axiomatic of the “humanities”’ (Derrida, 1994, pp. 1-2). And, for Badiou, ‘scientists, political theorists, artists and psychoanalysts [...] are all of them crucially reliant on philosophy when it comes to distinguishing knowledge from truth’ (Norris, 2009, p. 11). ‘The pincers of truth, which link and sublimate, have a duty to seize *truths*. The relation of (philosophic) Truth to (scientific, political, artistic or amorous) truths is one of *seizing*’. By “seizing”, Badiou means ‘capture, hold, and also seizure, astonishment. Philosophy is the locus of thinking wherein (non-philosophic) truths are seized as such, and seize us’ (1999, p. 126).

However, in reality, unresolved tensions between the language of the humanities and the language of empirical sciences as well as the old “Verstehen – Erklären” controversy continue unabated – plus contestations of hegemonic space among the humanities themselves. Academia often resembles a battlefield, and its intellectual warfare seems to be regulated, as I see it, by two opposing but

complementary pathologies: the one can be termed “stronghold fortification” and the other “frame demolition”.

I define as ‘stronghold fortification’ the kind of obsession with a discipline, research idea, framework or project that surfaces when one has given up the quest for truth for the sake of strengthening the calibre, resilience and influence of one’s discipline or of the given idea, framework or project within one’s discipline. The researcher working under the spell of such an obsession looks for, reads, supports, prioritizes and disseminates the work/ideas of like-minded people with whom she eventually collaborates and creates a subset of scientific communicative community. When confronting other disciplines or coming across a new idea/project that does not fall easily into (discursive) place, the researcher dismisses it as irrelevant to existing debates or as unsure of its direction. Any argument within such a context needs to be recognizable in its alliance, or to be part of an alliance in the first place. The walls of a position or of an academic field are fortified by narrowing the scope of their exposition (and responsiveness) to criticisms. A heavily fortified research programme unleashes ‘critical’ energies toward whatever seems to constitute its supposed radical other. More generally, stronghold fortification energizes an obsessive, onward march of increasingly narrow-minded academic circles whose cult becomes manifest in research agendas that perpetuate established positions at the expense of whatever seems not to be easily accommodated within the received point of view (Papastephanou, 2010). Ultimately, the philosopheme underlying stronghold fortification is dogmatism.

Now, the second pathology, that I have termed ‘frame demolition’, represents an eclectic and free-floating merging of discourses and disciplines into new, hybrid formations that promise more academic visibility. It satisfies the will for power and assists researchers to capitalize on societal praise of what can pass for innovative or socially beneficial research and sexy, new discourses. The researcher acts as a frame demolisher when she approaches the disciplines that offer her the conceptual means relevant to her research question, not so as to learn from them and, if needed, to reorient her research, but so as to spot the kind of discourse that will advance or justify what she already thinks about the issue. The epistemological demands: for more reading and for a deeper understanding of the targeted ideas; for respecting the different context within which the ideas operate and their resistance to just any kind of adaptability; and for a readiness to move in different directions if necessary are all bypassed (ibid).¹ The philosopheme

underlying frame demolishing practices can be described as a sophistic relativism and eclecticism.

When dogmatism is the outcome of the exaggerations of philosophical self-understanding the antidote may be the one that Badiou emphasizes, that is, *sophistiki*. As he puts it, 'the sophist is required at all times for philosophy to maintain its ethics. For the sophist is the one who reminds us that the category of Truth is void' (1999, p. 134). Yet, when relativism gains sway, Badiou becomes a spirited critic of modern sophistry, which he associates with some postmodern practices which display disrespect for epistemic claims and frames of the kind that I have described as the frame demolition that is so dominant today.

We may generalize Badiou's antidote to cover the cases of hegemonic monopolizations of validity and value that pertain to the other narratives too. For all, artists, scientists and philosophers, are potentially in danger of absolutizing their share of truth and of trying to fortify it, busy as they often are with locating and combating adversaries, raising walls against them or including them within the walls of their own disciplines. A sophist's reminder of the inconclusive character of truth, yet one that is cautious of its own dangers of sliding down to relativism, might be the ethical antidote to centripetal tendencies of all narratives.

To Badiou, 'the ethics of philosophy is basically to maintain the sophist as its adversary, to preserve *polemos* [war], dialectical strife. The disastrous moment is the one when philosophy declares the sophist *must* not be, the moment when it decrees the annihilation of its Other' (1999, p. 134). We must constantly be reminded, then, that, as Peter Caws puts it, "the operations of the human sciences are multiple and particular and distributed, and that all their objects come into and are sustained in being by separable and to a degree independent individuals" (2005, p. 167). Such individuals identify themselves either as artists or philosophers or sophists or scientists, whose "battles over academic turf" or their intellectual warfare constitute an ongoing challenge to think in complex ways about cognitive endeavour.

Interdisciplinary endeavours, exchanges and connections across modalities of thinking and disciplines should not succumb to stronghold fortification and frame demolition. The risk of eventually neutralising cross-disciplinary ventures the very moment that we supposedly glorify and celebrate the multiplicity of voices must be avoided. In the metaphor evoked by Lekythos as receptacle, rather than being at

war with one another, disciplines form a unity without closure and without losing their uniqueness. Instead of being placed in polemical conflict, instead of advancing in battle against one another, intellectual ventures within the irenic framework of controversy are stored together, made available to future research while attesting to an unknown future. Inter/multi-disciplinarity today heads fumblingly toward the dark paths of a world future and of a future world whose viability depends much on the light that this scientific/intellectual progression may shed on the way and on its own, at times destructive, ways. Through this prism, to the question about the 13th [SSE] theme I have responded with a short answer, aiming only to introduce the e-proceedings; the long answer has been given by your workshops, presentations, discussions, and now by your texts, that is, by your gift of thought to all of us, for which we are grateful.²

Marianna Papastephanou

Editorial Team:

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and

Co-editors

Zelia Gregoriou, University of Cyprus,

Mary Ioannides-Koutselini, University of Cyprus

Michalinos Zembylas, Open University, Cyprus

¹ Frame demolishers overlook that not everything can be copied from one context and transferred to another without serious consideration of the limits that the attachment to context may set. Nor do frame demolishers consider the possibility that the epistemological framework of another discipline, rather than being adaptable to your initial intentions, it may change your orientation or your way of asking your research questions.

² References:

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