

Ilkka Niiniluoto

PHILOSOPHY IN FINLAND:  
INTERNATIONAL CURRENTS AND NATIONAL CULTURAL DEBATES

Philosophy is originally a product of Greek higher culture, which has been practised in Finland primarily as an academic discipline. According to a tradition starting from J. V. Snellman, Finnish philosophers have, besides their own research work, participated in public cultural debates and political life. In a small nation many leading thinkers have become generally well-known public figures.

From 1313 onwards Finnish students attended the medieval University of Paris, where they had a chance to learn the scholastic way of integrating Christian theology and Aristotelian philosophy. In the sixteenth century the Finns studied the humanism of German reformation and the Renaissance philosophy of nature. In the Academy of Turku, founded in 1640, philosophy had a significant position in the basic studies, which included conceptual distinctions and the art of thinking (theoretical philosophy) as well as moral virtues and political principles (practical philosophy). During the Turku period, which ended when the university moved to Helsinki in 1828, Finnish philosophers did not gain notable original achievements, but their role was primarily to support learning and transmit new academic currents to the academic community. Among them one can mention Cartesianism based on the ideas René Descartes and Francis Bacon's experimental research method at the end of the seventeenth century, and along the eighteenth century Christian Wolff's rationalism, John Locke's empiricism, Samuel Pufendorf's doctrine of natural rights, and Immanuel Kant's transcendental idealism.

Snellman: from Hegel to national awakening

It was eventually the breakthrough of G. W. F. Hegel's doctrines in the 1830s that created the opportunity to the Finnish Johan Vilhelm Snellman (1806-1881) to make an important contribution to current international philosophical discussions: in his doctoral dissertation on the "idea of personality", written in 1841 in Tübingen in Germany, he participated in the debates on the philosophy of religion within the Hegelian school.

The Imperial Alexander University in Helsinki adopted the Humboldtian model of university education, and thereby the humanities - in particular philosophy and history - replaced traditional theology as the centre of academic life. Still, Snellman's essay on academic studies and freedom, written as a docent in 1840, was considered as too radical, and he did not gain the position as professor until 1856. In his Hegelian theory of state in 1842, Snellman emphasized the realization of historical reason through a "national spirit" linked with own language and culture. Thereby he provided a theoretical foundation to national awakening which he championed in journals that he established and edited. After his professorship in 1856-1863 Snellman was

appointed in the Finnish senate as the chief of national finance bureau (in current terminology, the minister of finance) and through his many activities he improved the position of Finnish language and the economy and government of Finland (at that time, an autonomous Grand Duchy under Russian regime). Snellman has been traditionally honoured and praised as the “national philosopher” of Finland, whose statue is placed in front of the Bank of Finland. The latest edition of his collected works comprises 24 volumes.

Hegel’s complicated system of logic has sometimes - apparently with a good justification - been belittled by pointing out that one cannot use it for building computers. But nevertheless it has managed to speed the formation of Finland as an independent nation state. Snellman is an example of the fact that a philosopher can employ an abstract system of thought in his activities to influence in a significant way the surrounding society outside the academic circles.

Wilhelm Bolin (1832-1920) was an advanced but lonely representative of philosophical materialism, which differed from the German idealism of Snellman. Bolin did not gain the chair of philosophy after Snellman, and he worked for four decades as the chief librarian in Helsinki. Bolin became internationally known as a friend of Ludwig Feuerbach and the editor of his collected works.

Snellman’s chair - at the time the only professor in philosophy in Finland - was inherited in 1869 by his faithful disciple Thiodolf Rein (1838-1919). Rein wrote an excellent biography of his teacher, but also encouraged open discussion about novel trends in philosophy and psychology. Rein’s pupils Hjalmar Neiglick (1860-89) and Arvi Grotenfelt (1863-1941) visited in the 1880s Wilhelm Wundt’s new laboratory in Leipzig, and defended their doctoral dissertations in experimental psychology. As a member of nobility, Rein participated in the parliament and defended there liberal and progressive politics and Finnish movement. He acted as the rector of the university in 1887-96 and later as vice chancellor.

Thiodolf Rein founded in 1873 the Philosophical Society which in the beginning functioned as professor’s seminar for advanced students. Gradually the topics of presentations included, besides classical philosophical issues, topical social questions, such as the position of Finnish language, nationalism, women emancipation, civil marriage, democracy, and peace. Among speakers one finds in 1906 the young Otto Wilhelm Kuusinen (1881-1964), lecturing on socialism and individual freedom. Later he moved to Soviet Union and became a leading politician and Marxist-Leninist in the Communist party. The minutes and protocols of the meetings of the Philosophical Society for the first five decades have been published as a book *Ajatuksen laboratorio* in 1996.

The minutes of the Philosophical Society illustrate also vividly how the philosophers in Finland gradually learned to discuss with each other not only in Swedish but also in Finnish. During different periods the Finns have studied philosophy in Latin, German, Swedish, French, and English. To teach philosophy in Finnish and to translate classics into Finnish were relatively late reforms, which as projects succeeded the publication of Finnish folklore and novels. Pioneering works in the 1880s included Rein’s textbooks on logic and psychology and the publication of the first Plato translation *Phaidon*.

The professionals of academic philosophy in Finland have continued their research work first mainly in German and then in English, and the impact of the Swedish-language community of Finns has been very strong in philosophy. But it has also been important that it is possible and permitted to think philosophical thought also

in one's native tongue in Finnish. The yearbook of the Philosophical Society of Finland has been published since 1926 with the title *Ajatus* ("Thought").

Westermarck: from evolution of to criticism of religion

Rein's work as professor of theoretical philosophy and as president of the Philosophical Society was continued by his nephew Arvi Grotenfelt, a specialist in German philosophy of history. He participated in sobriety and peace movements, and served also as the chairman of the parapsychological society of Psychic Research.

Edward Westermarck, who was appointed professor of practical philosophy in Helsinki in 1906, was already an international celebrity on the basis of his studies in the history of marriage (1889) and the origins of moral ideas (1906-08). He was at the same time professor of sociology at the London School of Economics and did anthropological field work in Morocco. Westermarck's pupil Rafael Karsten (1879-1956) studied Inca culture in Peru and Gunnar Landtman (1878-1940) Papuans in New Guinea. Practical philosophy maintained for a long time the reputation that is investigates "the marriage habits among Papuans".

Westermarck adopted in the 1880s the British empiricism and naturalism associated with the theory of evolution - instead of German idealism that still dominated in Finland. He had lively debates on several themes with Rein in the Philosophical Society. Westermarck supported the infantry troops for Finnish independence ("jäkärit") and participated in the negotiations on Åland in the League of Nations. Together with his pupil and friend Rolf Lagerborg (1874-1959) he acted in the beginning of the century in a radical anti-clerical association Prometheus. With intentionally scandalous behaviour with his fiancée Lagerborg succeed to legalize civil marriage in Finland. Westermarck's last book *Christianity and Morals* (1939) was so biting attack against unhealthy Christian ascetism that its already complete translation into Finnish was published not until 1984.

Kaila: logic and deep mentality

Through Eino Kaila's (1890-1958) charismatic personality philosophy gained again a prominent position in the 1930s. He visited in 1929, 1932, and 1934 in the Vienna Circle which developed a new scientific outlook. As professor of theoretical philosophy in Helsinki, Kaila - whose father was the archbishop of Finland - directed the critical canons of logical empiricism against traditional metaphysics and religion. According to his standards, they lack empirically testable "real content", but from the perspective of dynamic psychology of needs, outlined in *Persoonallisuus* ("Personality", 1934), they can be understood as expressions of "mental insurance policies" against the fear of death.

In his book *Syvähenkinen elämä* ("Deep-mental life", 1943), which reflected the moods of war time, Kaila opposed the scientific and artistic personalities rooted in his own mentality. Originally written as dialogues for the radio, the work concludes that the meaning of life is in "deep-mental manliness" or heroism in the sense described in J. L. Runeberg's poems. Kaila's polemical ideas received opposition both from the right-wing Christians (K. S. Laurila) and from left-wing Marxists (Tuure Lehén).

Kaila's heritage in the participation in public cultural debates was continued by many of his students. Oiva Ketonen (1913-2000), who became Kaila's successor in theoretical philosophy in 1951-77, moved from mathematical logic and philosophy of science to university politics. He chaired in 1966 a committee, appointed by President Urho Kekkonen, for a frame law concerning the Finnish network of higher education and universities. After receiving the title of Academician in 1980, Ketonen was busy with lectures and writing on the ethics of science, philosophy of medicine, health, and the fate of human beings.

Georg Henrik von Wright (1916-2003) combined in his career influences from Eino Kaila and Ludwig Wittgenstein. The young von Wright's period as professor at the University of Cambridge in 1948-51 was the real international breakthrough of Finnish philosophers. After returning to Finland von Wright, together with his studies in philosophy of science and philosophical logic, published in *Nya Argus* eloquent essays on the works of Leo Tolstoy and Feodor Dostoyevski, Oswald Spengler's and Arnold Toynbee's philosophy of history, and myths about the utilization of knowledge. They reappeared in 1955 as a collection *Tanke och förkunnelse* (in Finnish in 1961). Since the late 1960s the Academician became famous for his well-considered public statements against the war in Vietnam and arms race, and in favour of freedom of thought and human rights. The collections *Humanismen som livshållning* (1978, in Finnish in 1981) and *Vetenskapen och förnuftet* (1986, in Finnish in 1987) aroused heated debate in the boom of Finland and Sweden: von Wright questioned the prominence of instrumental reason and the goal of continuous economic growth associated with the scientific-technological way of life, as they lead to the pollution of nature and eventually to the misery and possible destruction of the humanity. His cool pessimism and criticism of the myth of progress is yet tuned with a deep awareness of a cultural change where the last hopes of mankind are the use of scientific reason and the visions of good life in the humanist tradition. In unofficial polls in newspapers von Wright was elected as the leading intellectual in Finland in 1989 and 2002.

### Academic and participatory philosophy

Kaila was an appreciated member of a new international philosophical movement in the 1930s, and he is still mentioned in the histories of the Vienna Circle, but after World War II he lost his contacts to the analytic philosophy that had moved to Anglo-Saxon countries. In the latter half of the twentieth century, Finnish philosophy has been in the forefront of analytic philosophy thanks to Kaila's students G. H. von Wright and Erik Stenius (1911-1990), von Wright's student Jaakko Hintikka (b. 1929), who has been mostly active in the United States, and their students. Philosophical logic, philosophy of language, philosophy of science, action theory, philosophy of law, and history of philosophy have been strong areas of Finnish philosophers. Finnish philosophers move actively around the world, publish their research in international journals and book series, and Finland is a popular site for international meetings and conferences.

At the same time the field of philosophy has become more and more diverse and versatile even in Finland. Besides analytic philosophy new research has emerged in neo-pragmatism and phenomenology. Metaphilosophical reflection on the nature and tasks of philosophy and on philosophical schools has intensified. New topics and special areas of "applied philosophy" have emerged, taking their starting points in

developments within science, art, culture, and society. Examples include debates on pseudoscience, information society, artificial intelligence, the development of technology, new dimensions of the arts and media, feminism and gender differences, welfare state and justice, applied ethics and professional ethical codes, the limits of medicine and bioethics, animal rights and the value of environment.

When philosophers have stepped out of their chambers, demand for philosophy has also increased. Philosophy has been a popular subject in the open university. "Life-stance education", taught since 1985 for non-religious students in schools, has contained a lot of philosophical material, and since 1995 philosophy has been an obligatory subject in high schools. Eight rival textbooks appeared soon from different publishers.

After the classics translated in the early twentieth century, a more quiet intermediate period was changed to a lively activity in philosophical translations in the end of the century. The visibility of participating philosophers in the public created new demand for publications also outside the academic circles. Many Finnish philosophers have regarded as their duty to publish works and essays in their native languages and thereby to influence the position of philosophy in their home country. Foreign colleagues often are surprised to see that in a small language area - and often published by small companies - one can find translations of, among others, Heraclitus, Plato, Aristotle, Lucretius, Cicero, Seneca, Augustine, Thomas of Aquinas, Descartes, Spinoza, Pascal, Leibniz, Locke, Hume, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Feuerbach, Marx, Mill, Nietzsche, Bergson, Peirce, James, Dewey, Russell, Husserl, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Camus, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Kuhn, Popper, Habermas, Rawls, Foucault, Derrida, Arendt, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Kristeva, Deleuze, and Irigaray.

The projects of international and national philosophy are this still going strong in Finland. For the lovers of wisdom the intellectual market provides essays, textbooks, new classics, the yearbook *Ajatus*, and the youthful journal *niin&näin* published in Tampere.