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In memoriam Simo Knuuttila

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*In memoriam Simo Knuuttila*

Born on May 8, 1946, in Peräseinäjoki (central Finland), Professor emeritus Simo Knuuttila died at home in Helsinki, on the 17<sup>th</sup> of June 2022, at the age of 76 years. He is survived by his wife, emerita philosophy professor Marja-Liisa Kakkuri-Knuuttila and two adult children.

Knuuttila studied Theology (MTh 1969) and Humanities (MA 1971) at the University of Helsinki, with brief stints abroad – Kiel (Germany) 1967-68, Uppsala (Sweden) 1969. He defended his PhD dissertation at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Helsinki on May 29<sup>th</sup>, 1976 on *Time and Possibility in Scholasticism (Aika ja Mahdollisuus Skolastiikassa)*, which comprised four separately published works: two journal articles in the Finnish journal *Teologinen Aikakauskirja* (issue 79, 1974), one chapter in *Reports from the Institute of Philosophy, University of Helsinki* (1976), and a book entitled *Aika ja modaaliteetti aristotelisessa skolastiikassa* (in the Series *Annales Societatis Missiologicae et Oecumenicae Fennicae* 28, 1975). Years later, he would recall these early beginnings, remarking:

“I found my topic [of the PhD dissertation] very interesting. It related to the philosophical debate of its time and shed light on how the assumptions underlying modal logic have changed in the European tradition of thought. As modal concepts play a central role in argumentative thinking, it was useful to read more than just sources on logic. In fact, I leafed through a large number of medieval works and read in some detail the passages where the words *possibilitas*, *possibile*, *neccitas*, *neccesse*, etc. appeared. There was a certain excitement about this, perhaps a bit like fishing.” (“Pidin aiheistani erittäin kiinnostavana. Se liittyi oman aikansa filosofiseen keskusteluun ja valaisi sitä, miten modaalilogiikan perustana olevat oletukset ovat muuttuneet eurooppalaisessa ajatteluperinteessä. Kun modaalikäsitteillä on keskeinen sija argumentatiivisessa ajattelussa, oli hyödyllistä lukea muutakin kuin pelkästään logiikkaa koskevia lähteitä. Itse asiassa selailin suuren määrän keskiajan teoksia ja luin hiukan tarkemmin ne hohdat, joissa esiintyi sanoja *possibilitas*, *possibile*, *neccitas*, *neccesse* jne. Tähän liittyi oma jännityksensä, ehkä vähän samanlainen kuin kalastuksessa.”, my translation), Simo Knuuttila, “Toteutumattomia mahdollisuuksia etsimässä” (“In search of unrealized possibilities”), in M. Roinila (ed), *Miten meistä tuli filosofian tohtoreita*. Suomen Filosofinen Yhdistys, Helsinki 2010, pp. 48-9.

Simo Knuuttila was Full Professor of Theological Ethics and Philosophy of Religion, at the department of Systematic Theology of the University of Helsinki from 1981 until his retirement in 2014, at the age of 68 (according to the regulations of the University). During his tenure, he was appointed Academy of Finland Professor for three consecutive periods (1994-2009). In addition, he was Docent of Practical Philosophy at the University of Helsinki (briefly Acting Professor in 1981) and Docent of History of Ideas at the University of Oulu from 1977 onwards. He also took on some administrative roles and positions of trust, namely Vice Dean of the Faculty of Theology (Helsinki) between 1987 and 1990; acting Dean of the same Faculty in 1991; Chairman of The Finnish Academy of Science and Letters (2004-2006); Chairman of the Finnish Theological Literature Society (2001-2008); and member of the board of the SIEPM between 1987-1997. For the SIEPM, he contributed in numerous ways, namely to the organization of the 8th Congress held in Helsinki in August 24-29, 1987, as Chairman of the Program Committee.

His career was several times the subject of national and international recognition, having received the prestigious *Gad Rausing Prize* for research in the humanities in 2008, awarded by the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, the *Finnish Science Prize* in 2011, awarded by the Ministry of Education and Culture, and *The Annual Award of the Finnish Union of University Professors*, as *Professor of the Year* in 2002.

While Professor at the Faculty of Theology, he became the leader of two large scale research projects – called Centers of Excellence – of the Academy of Finland: the first, the *History of Mind Research Unit*, from 2002 to 2007 and the second, the *Philosophical Psychology, Morality and Politics*, from 2008 to 2013. Both Centers employed dozens of young and senior researchers, organized numerous seminars and conferences, and contributed to put Helsinki (and Finland) in the academic map in the field. Many of the researchers employed or associated with these research units have since become respected scholars in their fields, in Finland and abroad.

Among his numerous publications, one must mention several edited books: *Logic of Being* (Reidel 1986), edited with his mentor Jaakko Hintikka; *Reforging the Great Chain of Being: Studies of the History of Modal Theories* (Reidel 1981); *Modern Modalities* (Kluwer 1988) – this last in the Series *Synthese Historical Library*, of which he was to become the editor in chief; (with Pekka Kärkkäinen) *Theories of Perception in Medieval and Early Modern Philosophy* (Springer 2008); and (with Juha Sihvola), *Sourcebook for the History of the Philosophy of Mind* (Springer 2014). But it was the publication of two monographs that brought him worldwide recognition among peers in the field of history of philosophy and sedimented his role as a key figure in medieval philosophy scholarship: *Modalities in Medieval Philosophy* (Routledge 1995) and *Emotions in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy* (Oxford University Press 2004).

Although his contributions to international scholarship are immense, Knuuttila also played a key role in the development of history of philosophy in Finland, namely by taking on the role of Chairman of the Commission for the translation of the complete works of Aristotle into Finnish (1987-2007), having translated himself the *Nichomachean Ethics* (*Nikomakhoksen etiikka*, Gaudeamus 1989) and written commentaries on others: *Metaphysics* (*Metafysiikka*, Gaudeamus 1990), *Physics* (*Fysiikka*, Gaudeamus 1992), and *Prior Analytics* (*Ensimmäinen analytiikka*, Gaudeamus 1994). (He explains in his own words the project of translating Aristotle in “Aristoteleen teosten suomentamisesta” in *Teologinen Aikakauskirja* 95 (1990), 198-200.) He also wrote numerous introductions and commentaries to the Finnish translations of Plato (e.g., *Notes on Plato’s Gorgias* in *Platon, Teokset* 2, Otava 1978).

His research interests were wide-ranging, by any measure: from ancient and medieval theories of modality to philosophical conceptions of time to the logic of will in Augustine and late medieval thought to philosophical theories of emotions. He always found something original to say and a new perspective from which to examine the thought of a given thinker. Above all, his scholarship is characterized by an almost unique combination of a systematic, analytic approach and careful historical exegesis. He applied this method to both philosophical and theological questions and problems, and led his readers (and students, disciples, colleagues) to ponder where the distinction between philosophical approaches to theological problems and theological answers to philosophical questions lays when considering medieval sources.

He also paid close attention to the way one should approach historical sources and our duty to make these sources relevant to contemporary debates when they really have something meaningful to contribute. He formulated his own view on the matter, in what one may call the ‘Knuuttila school of history of philosophy’:

“If it is thought that anachronism is best avoided by not relating historical texts with what is historically later, the results are absurd in many ways. How can we study Plato’s concept of justice, for example, without having any idea of what justice might be? In such studies, there is usually a more or less conscious preliminary conception of justice with the help of which the authors identify texts in which Plato treats questions related to what we call justice. Suppose that our initial model of justice includes elements A, B, and C, usually associated with the notion of justice. We may notice that Plato does not discuss C at all, but he connects A and B with D, which does not occur in our contemporary concept of justice. This is a rough sketch of how historical concepts are created from systematic historical knowledge. A more painstaking account would also include how and why the concept of justice was later changed. If the purpose of historical reconstruction is to bring to light past philosophical ideas on their own terms, the interpreters certainly succeed better in this attempt the more they master systematic philosophy and the more they become conscious of their own modes of thinking. The reason for this is that the historical ideas are actual in the horizon of the interpreters.” (Simo Knuuttila, “Recent Approaches to Scholasticism and Sufficient Reason”, S. Knuuttila and I. Niiniluoto (eds.), *Methods of Philosophy and the History of Philosophy*. Acta Philosophica Fennica 1996, [145-53] p. 145)

History of philosophy in general and medieval philosophy is not a treasure trove to be pillaged for our own contemporary philosophical concerns but rather a pool of conceptual resources that must be appreciated on their own right by those who know what to look for and how to do a proper search

while respecting the context in which those sources were produced. And to know what to look for requires a deep, serious understanding of philosophical questions, terminology, methods, and debates.

Knuuttila acted on his own pronouncements, and it is easy to find that combination of analytic and exegetical skills in his own works. In both the *Modalities* and the *Emotions* monographs, he carefully investigates the historical developments of these areas of inquiry. In the *Modalities* (as well as in the early *Aika ja modaliteetti*), he focuses on the ancient origins and most significant developments in Ancient Antiquity and the Middle Ages (up to the fourteen century) of the notion of modality, in particular “the statistical interpretation of modality” (from Hintikka), that is to say an extensional interpretation of modal terms according to which “what is necessary is always actual, what is impossible is never actual and what is possible is at least sometimes actual” (Knuuttila 1999). His study shows the ways in which by the thirteenth century, modal notions were being applied to explain being, change, causation in natural philosophy and metaphysics in addition to logic. At the same time, he also showed that debate about possibilities and the application of the so-called Principle of Plenitude – according to which “no genuine possibility can remain unrealized” – which led, among other things, to a basic distinction between natural and divine possibilities: Not only divine possibilities may be impossibilities in the natural realm, but also it is not possible for human intellects to know what those unrealized possibilities are. By the fourteenth century, a new intensional theory of modality comes to full blossom (its roots being found at least in the twelfth century, namely in Peter Abelard), starting with John Duns Scotus and continuing with William of Ockham and John Buridan among others, giving rise to theories of epistemic logic and deontic logic, and new principles of modal logic, including modal syllogistics (which Knuuttila analyzes in the last chapters of *Modalities*). Among the most consequential ideas he identified in Duns Scotus’ theory of modalities was that of the existence of simultaneous possibilities, meaning that whereas some are true in the actual world, others are alternatives to them as logical possibilities. What this synchronic interpretation entails is a rejection of determinism in that that not all possibilities will be actual and thus that the Principle of Plenitude (from Lovejoy) fails to apply.

His later studies about the ancient and medieval theories of emotions received critical acclaim and contributed to the resurgence of the topic in the field of history of philosophy. His book on *Emotions in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy* provided a wide scope, systematic analysis of the development of philosophical psychology from Plato to Jodocus Trufetter. Like Knuuttila himself remarks in the Introduction, his aim was not to produce a “doxographic exposition” but rather to offer a philosophical investigation into ancient to medieval theories of emotions, focusing on the place emotions occupy in the different models of the soul and its powers especially in the post-Avicennian Aristotelian tradition. Of special importance in this study, in addition to unveiling the emotion theory of less well-known figures, are the focus on the early medieval theory of first motions, which apply Stoic emotion theory to Christian doctrine of sin, and the role of subjective feeling and religious feelings in historical debates on emotions. Knuuttila has convincingly showed that whereas Stoics did not consider first motions or *pro-passions* as emotions proper because they took place before any judgment and thus assent had been given, later thinkers, such as Augustine, did consider them as emotions, which could lead to sinful behavior if voluntarily assented to. Building on this insight, later medieval authors developed complex theories of degrees of assent, as Knuuttila shows in detail, in addition to tracing the debates about the moment in the cognitive process voluntary assent took place – which was essential to evaluate one’s sinfulness or sinlessness.

I have the honor of having been supervised by Knuuttila, who played the role in characteristic systematic, rigorous, and demanding way. Like me, every one of his colleagues, students, friends will have stories of their own to tell about their interactions with Professor Knuuttila. In private correspondence following the news of his death, colleagues kindly shared with me some of them, which emphasized his dry, witty sense of humor, sharp intellect, gentle manner, and the kind way he gave advice, offered support, and above all encouragement to young scholars. He knew that philosophers are in it for the long run, that there are no simple and especially definitive answers, but only hard work and the need of an inquisitive, humble, and honest nature. As a scholar and a teacher, he displayed all those

attributes, and his criticism was always constructive and forward looking. He always thought from the perspective of how something can be understood and said in a clearer way (even when it is not easy), because it is more important to get closer to the truth than to be right. In doing so, he puts us in the right path, and he will be sorely missed.

José Filipe Silva (Helsinki)