

What, if anything, is Swiss philosophy?

Lauener Prize for Young Talents in Analytic Philosophy 2005

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Henri Lauener, who died three years ago, was quite a remarkable fellow. He was unique in many respects: not just in his unforgiving, but warm and caring personality, in his variegated and refined tastes, but also in his philosophical opinions, which he defended with characteristic verve and rigour. I am deeply honored by having been awarded the Lauener Prize for young talents in Analytic Philosophy. I would like to talk shortly about a topic dear to Henri Lauener's heart, and perhaps also to yours: Swiss philosophy.

The question I will ask and answer is the following: What, if anything, is Swiss philosophy? I will try to do so following, as well as I can, Lauener's example: be as harsh and unforgiving as I can, not watering down the perhaps unpleasant truth, but also keep my eyes open to what good seeds there may be in the dry Swiss soil. This means that I will talk not just about Swiss philosophy as it is, but also about Swiss philosophy as it could, and I think: should, be.

Let me first say that I am only talking about what I know and that all my claims should be taken to apply only to that very limited field. I have first-hand experience of only two cantonal universities, Berne and Geneva, of only some branches and none at all of our federally funded research institutes.

Switzerland is a small country, and therefore automatically suffers from comparison to its much bigger, and *grander* neighbours. But Switzerland is also independent – almost always has been – which makes such an unfavorable comparison less pressing. Also, "Switzerland", as I will use the term in what follows, includes its emigrants and – more recently – its immigrants as well. Indeed, it is its imm- and emigrants that account for much of Swiss philosophy. But let us use, in good Swiss tradition, "Swiss philosophy" as a brand name for a product that may also be manufactured, at lower costs perhaps, somewhere else.

What, then, is Swiss philosophy and what could it be? Let us start with the positive side: Swiss philosophy, especially in recent years, has been more active, and globally more visible, than it probably ever has been. I spare you the self-congratulatory list of our recent achievements – let me just mention the Lauener foundation as one laudable example (though their invitations could be sent off a little bit more in advance). The negative side, however, follows suit: on the atlas of the philosophical world, Switzerland does not exist. This is not, as we perhaps would like to think, due to its size. Lauener would be the first to mention Finnish, Kiwi and Australian philosophy as prime examples of what comparatively small countries can achieve with comparatively limited resources.

The non-existence of Swiss philosophy, if we may call it thus, is due, I think, to a rather remarkable lack of courage. Please let me not be misunderstood: I am not blaming anyone in particular. In fact, it is a characteristic of Swiss philosophy, and one of the roots of its comparable weakness, that no one in particular is responsible for its current situation. But again, this has to be qualified: I am not advocating any chain of central command leading up to some grand leader responsible for everything. But I think that it is an error on the Swiss' behalf to mistake democracy and federalism for lack of accountability. Let me explain and make an example.

But first, let me add some extra caveats. In doing so, I am not following Henri Lauener's example – he was famous, and respected, for not hedging his claims, being as outspoken as is humanly possible, and sometimes also, alas, for multiplying his enemies beyond necessity. But I hope that I will still be behaving enough like a bull in a china shop to redeem reception of the Lauener price. Here, then, are the caveats: I am not in favour of privatising Swiss universities, nor am I an uncritical enthusiast of the American or Anglosaxon model. I am not in favour of any substantial increase in immatriculation

fees, nor do I advocate a numerus clausus or any other kind of entrance test for the BA. I do not think that centralisation or nationalisation will solve all problems of the Swiss university system and I do not underestimate the considerable difficulties this would involve.

Also, I am fully aware of the many assets of Swiss university education. First of all, we dispose of one of the best raw materials available world-wide: our twenty-year olds are among the best-educated. They speak several languages fluently, know the essentials of German, French, English and Swiss literature, they know what the integral of the logarithm of 5 is and how much weighs a mole of helium atoms. They are well versed in history, geography, biology, physics and trigonometry, sometimes even in law, economics, Latin and psychology, and they know what the principal causes of global warming are and care to do something about it.

Excellent raw material is not the only asset of Swiss philosophy. Another, and equally important one is money. The Swiss National Science Foundation, compared to similar institutions of other countries, is rather generous and spends its money wisely and in non-bureaucratic ways. The cantonal universities, despite recent cuts and continuing lamentation about future ones, are still very rich – if you doubt this, just cast your eye on one of the many marvellous new university buildings in any one of the Swiss university cities. The salaries of Swiss academics – though they could, of course, be even higher than they are – are very competitive world-wide. Very few jobs in philosophy in the world earn you a higher salary than that of an ‘ordinary’ professor in Switzerland.

Excellent input and lots of money for processing it would lead you to expect a rather remarkable output. There must be reasons, therefore, why this is not the case. The most important one, in my view, is the above-mentioned lack of courage. Institutionally, this translates into a odd inversion of bureaucratic incentives. If some Swiss philosophy department, say x , provides high-quality education to its students, as some do, this is invariably *malgré lui*. x has no institutional reason whatsoever to be good or even to aspire to be good – rather to the contrary: the better x is, the more time it will have to spend on an increasing number of students, hence the more work its professors and other teachers will have to do. As they will not get any material rewards for this extra effort, any willingness on their part to become better can only be seen as a curious desire for self-sacrifice, which fits rather oddly into our protestant culture.

To formulate it harshly: Appointment to an ordinary professorship in Switzerland is a form of early retirement. Some retirees, of course, continue to do good work. But this is not because and perhaps even despite no-one requires them to do so. The same is true of other positions in the hierarchy of Swiss universities. The university of Geneva is an organisation with more than 5000 collaborators and a budget of over 600 million Swiss francs per year. The professionalisation of Swiss universities is unavoidable, or, at least, unavoids, and it means that more and more funds are channelled into administrative and so-called ‘technical’ overheads. At the ‘*faculté des lettres*’ in Geneva, for example, the number of assistants and maître-assistants has increased from 1997 to 2004 by 1, while the “*personnel administratif et technique*” has increased by more than 25%.

But there are plenty of other institutional reasons as well. The most important of it is size – especially on the level of MA and graduate education, each and every project undertaken in any Swiss university is in constant danger of extinction because of lack of students. Because graduate students who are not also assistants of some sort have little reason to involve themselves in the institution at all, no ‘graduate program’ in philosophy of any Swiss university by itself exceeds the size of 10 – given the variety of topics in philosophy, this means that everyone works entirely on their own. Even on the BA level, Swiss faculties are too small to ensure high-quality teaching in all relevant areas of philosophy. Even the largest faculties often do not contain any specialists in logic, probability theory, meta-ethics or medieval philosophy.

This is also due to the third main institutional problem of the Swiss university system. Swiss academic careers are punctured by a big black hole – if you start your studies at the age of 20, get your MA at 25, you may, if you are lucky, get an assistantship for your doctorate you will be expected to have finished by 30. Then, the big black hole looms: except for some very short-range lectureships, there are (almost) no positions in the system other than those of the ‘ordinary’ professors, for which you need not apply before 40, with two monographs and at least 50 publications in your pocket. There

is no shortage of applicants for these jobs, of course; but those are not always the best, or even the best-qualified, but those who are the most enduring and not afraid to wait until their time might come. Not all of our problems are institutional, however. I even think it would be a serious mistake to concentrate solely on the institutional side, neglecting the more important shortcomings in our scientific culture. I think that Swiss scientific culture is somehow schizophrenic: we both over- and underestimate ourselves. We overestimate ourselves in that we generally have a complacent attitude towards our own achievements and do not see any urgent need for change. Very few professional philosophers in Switzerland even *try* to get published in journals that are undisputably the most important and reputed of our discipline. We underestimate ourselves too, however: philosophers in Switzerland generally like to take a rather dim view of their own institutional and personal possibilities and of those of their students. As placement records are not taken into account in the evaluation of departments – which, as pointed out before, is quasi non-existent anyway – and quite often not even exist, the success of their students is not generally taken to contribute to the success of their teachers.

What, then, could Swiss philosophy be? Very much, Henri Lauener would have said, who was deeply impressed by the success stories of Finnish, Kiwi and Australian philosophy that managed to get a much higher stake in the world-wide market of ideas and those who have them than their size would make you expect. Switzerland could do in philosophy what it has very successfully done in other areas: take advantage of its unique – central but calm – position in the eye of the storm to copy the best achievements of its competitors and avoid their worst errors, living up to its reputation of reliability, high-quality craftsmanship and wise compromise. Achieving a greater autonomy from its neighbours not just in the political and economical, but also in the cultural domain, it could become for the exchange of ideas what it already is for the exchange of money: a market place, a bank, and a factory. Switzerland could build on its many advantages, not just its excellent natural resources and its money, but also on some home-made success-stories like the Federal Institutes of Technology and the Swiss National Science Foundation. It could take advantage of its high salaries to get the best people into Switzerland, and to profit from the expertise of its many excellent expatriot philosophers, teaching all around the world. Philosophy is a discipline in which very little money can make a big difference, not just because it is small, but also because it requires no expensive equipment (not even a paper basket, as the popular joke goes) and because philosophers generally value recognition by their peers higher than money. Switzerland as a whole could follow the example of NYU and of Rutgers, universities that experienced in recent years that an investment in philosophy pays off very well in terms of general academic reputation.

Swiss philosophy should treat its smallness as a virtue – radical changes are much easier to implement, monitor and control in a small country, where universities are not politicised, well anchored in their local communities and where politicians are generally rational and not too eager to interfere with interior affairs of their universities. Our independence from the European Community may also be an advantage in this area, giving us much less reason to imitate our not very successful neighbours Germany and France and allowing us to cooperate autonomously with the leading centers of contemporary research.

Much would have to be changed in Switzerland, though. All Swiss philosophy departments together make up for the size of one – graduate studies especially are unthinkable in Switzerland without a much tighter cooperation between the cantonal universities. Such a coordination would ideally be supervised and controlled by a national body, and financed by national funds. It could take the form of a national graduate school for philosophy, with a joint programme, joint supervision and high-quality courses in different Swiss cities. Such a graduate school, if properly done, could also help to monitor the performance of the cantonal departments – their funding could in part be determined by how many of their candidates get a meritory stipend for graduate work.

Monitoring is an important issue in itself: contrary to what many seem tacitly to believe, it is just not true that quality of philosophical work is not measurable. Measuring it would not necessarily mean bureaucratic overkill, though there is an obvious danger. But there is in philosophy a generally agreed on ranking of academic blindly peer-reviewed journals publication in which gives a simple and objective measure of excellence in research. Excellence in teaching could be measured by the graduate

school output.

One of the changes most urgently needed in Swiss philosophy is transparency. There is very little communication between the different universities, curricula and course schedules are not normally available on the web, job offers are not widely announced and not normally published in official directories like 'Jobs for Philosophers' or the big philosophy email-lists, but only hung out on paper in some dark corners of some departments and perhaps in some German or French newspapers.

Another thorny issue, to which the Swiss are particularly sensitive, concerns language. Throughout our university system, and often for understandable reasons, there is much resistance to English, or the bastard version of English Swiss people are likely to speak. People associate English with American foreign policy and McDonalds and consider it unfair to us to have to express ourselves in a language which is not our own. While it is understandable, I think such a position is extremely harmful. I also would prefer to be able to address you in Latin or Esperanto, but, hélas, this is just not how it is: English is unavoidable, especially in philosophy and in higher university education, whether we like it or not. The sooner we acquiesce to this unavoidable fact, the better we will be able to survive. In today's philosophical scene, as I see it, it is a deplorable waste of money and energy to publish a serious article, a book, or even to write a PhD thesis in any other language than English. It does not make sense to teach graduate courses in other languages than English, and even BA students must be required to read literature in English. Everything else is wishful thinking.

Bigger institutional changes would be necessary as well: the job structure would have to be revised, the salaries of professors cut in half and used for tenure-track jobs. Appointments should not be temporary, but for a reasonable middle-term period, say 10 years, and conditional on satisfactory academic performance. They should not follow thematic or historic denominations that are very difficult to change but be open, so as to complement in the best way possible the faculty already in place.

Instead of increasing the administrative overhead of our universities, much more power and autonomy should be given to the departments themselves and to the national graduate school – they know much better how the available funds are best used, whether for new jobs, new books, new offices or new computers. They should have their own accountability, their own webmaster-ship, design their own courses and set down their entry requirements. The administrative bodies of our universities could then be much leaner, and professional management could also make it much more efficient. The position of head of department, which is now a purely administrative position where people buy into the duty of attending boring meetings for a slight reduction in their teaching duties, would have to be made much stronger, more powerful and thereby more responsible. It is the head of department who should be responsible for temporary appointments and bear responsibility for the overall academic performance of his or her department.

Let me end with a remark specific to philosophy. Times and again, and particularly in connection with the question who would be in power in the situation I just imagined, the old issue of analytic versus continental philosophy is brought up. It cannot be emphasised enough that there is no such thing: there is only good and bad philosophy, and a very high percentage of good research even on such 'continental' figures as Descartes, Kant, Hegel and Heidegger is done in the Anglo-Saxon world. Neither is there any such discipline as the 'history of philosophy'. The history of philosophy, insofar as it is a matter of philosophy, is the careful and historically informed reading of philosophical texts. Such reading, whether of old or new texts, is obviously required for any field of philosophy. What usually goes by the name of 'history of philosophy' is neither history nor philosophy, but history of ideas, and this, I think, can safely be left to journalists and cultural critics. The only sensible division of philosophy is into its subdisciplines, such as ethics, metaphysics and epistemology and there is no question of pursuing them either 'analytically' or 'continentally'. Henri Lauener used to say that there is only soft and hard philosophy. Soft philosophy, he might have added, is not the real thing. So let us get together and do the real thing and thereby see to it that there is some such thing as Swiss philosophy.