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BEYOND BOOKS: THE RELATIONAL TURN



“What good is a book,” Nietzsche asks, “that does not even carry us beyond all books?”¹ Esa Saarinen is a philosopher whose thinking is grounded in books but whose work carries us beyond books to confront the most basic questions life poses. Philosophy for Esa is not merely a scholarly discipline but is an ongoing conversation that extends beyond the walls of the academy to main street, factory floors, boardrooms, bedrooms and family dinner tables. Far from breaking with the western philosophical tradition, Esa returns to its roots. He is a latter-day Socrates who roams the streets of Helsinki asking questions his professional colleagues are embarrassed to ask and thereby exposes the emptiness of what passes for philosophical discourse today. Alternatively, he is a Finnish Kierkegaard who holds up a mirror in which we are invited to see our lives anew.

Surveying Esa’s extraordinary career, it is possible to identify three distinct chapters in his work: 1. Academic philosophy, with special emphasis on analytic and pragmatic philosophy; 2. Public philosophy, which involves pedagogical experiments beyond the university; 3. Systems philosophy, which explores structural and systemic aspects of life. Though each of these areas of inquiry is distinct and requires specific knowledge and expertise, they are integrally related in Esa’s overall philosophical project.

I first met Esa in the late 1980s, when I attended a conference on Hegel at the University of Helsinki. At the time, he was a successful young philosopher having earned his doctoral degree at the age of 24, and a recording artist whose song lyrics had caused controversy in Finnish media. A rare combination, indeed! During our conversations that week, I was impressed not only by Esa’s philosophical insight and cultural sophistication but also his commitment to exploring the practical implications of abstract ideas. Though trained in the rigors of analytic philosophy, he was attuned to the importance of popular culture in a way that few academics are. He understood that for philosophy to be effective, the philosopher must know how to communicate with people about everyday concerns in multiple media. Esa understands that a good teacher must meet students where they are in order to take them elsewhere. Far from an authority figure who imposes ideas and provides answers, Esa, like his precursor Socrates, is a midwife who asks questions designed to bring truth to life in the people’s personal lives. Following Kierkegaard, truth, he believes, is subjectivity. Truth, in other words, is not an abstract concept but becomes real only insofar as it transforms the lives of individuals.

One of the distinctive features of Esa’s pedagogy is his sense of style. From the rock band to Mickey Mouse shoes, from velvet suits to signature black plastic glasses, his style is unmistak-

able and, indeed, has become iconic. This style is not an expendable accessory to serious work; to the contrary, style is integral to the substance of his philosophical vision and pedagogical mission. The sense of style informs Esa's personal fashion, music, writing, lecturing and even listening. He transforms philosophy into performance art by preaching the gospel of Joseph Beuys, "Everyone is an artist." To follow Esa is to realize the avant-garde dream of bringing art to life by transforming life into a work of art.

My intensive collaboration with Esa began in 1991. I was writing a book on twentieth-century art, architecture and religion and was working on a chapter on post-abstract expressionist art entitled "Currency." While writing about Andy Warhol's art, I had the idea of teaching a completely new kind of course by using tele-conferencing technology, which, at the time, was being used exclusively by businesses. To this day, I have no idea where the idea came from. I did not really understand teleconferencing but had heard about companies using it to hold meetings remotely. To learn more about it, I went to Boston, where executives at AT&T demonstrated it for me. As soon as I saw this technology, I realized it would be the future of higher education.

Perhaps because Esa was the most Warholian of philosophers or perhaps because of my memory of the rock band, I picked up the phone and called him. I remember the conversation as if it were yesterday.

"Esa, it's Mark. Been far too long."

"Right. Good to hear your voice. What's up?"

"Lots but that's not why I'm calling. I have an idea. Let's teach a course together next year."

"Great idea! Can you come here to do it?"

"No, but I don't need to. Let's do it using teleconferencing."

"Teleconferencing? Never thought of it. Dynamite! But how? How could we do that?"

"I have no idea."

"Explosive! Let's do it."

It was not easy but we did it and the effort was worth it in ways neither of us could have anticipated.

It is hard to remember how different the world was in 1991. What I was proposing had never been done. Neither Esa nor I had used email and neither the Internet nor the World Wide Web was a part of everyday life. Over the course of the following months, we designed a course and figured out the necessary technological requirements to offer it and sealed the deal during a meeting in the Copenhagen airport. It quickly became clear that we were thinking on the fly in more than a metaphorical sense. In the fall of 1992, ten students from the University of Helsinki and ten students from Williams College met for two hours each week in a course entitled "Imagologies." The aim of the course was to bring together theory and practice by reading philosophical texts that illuminated the educational experiment in which we were engaged.

The course was an extraordinary success and received considerable attention in national media in both the United States and Finland. It also proved to be a transformative experience for many of the students as well as for Esa and me. The biggest surprise in the semester was when the Helsinki students began the last class by announcing that they were all coming to Williams College for a week in January in Williamstown. In that moment, the virtual became real in the most

unexpected way. The week we all spent together was important in both personal and intellectual ways. Esa and I realized that we had done something important that had given us a glimpse of possibilities for the future that would transform not only education but the world and we felt obliged to share what we had learned.

Throughout the semester, we recorded our reflections in an ongoing email conversation that ranged from abstract philosophical speculations to the concrete implications of new media and technologies for the lives of individuals and societies. Looking back over our exchanges, we decided to gather our thoughts in a book. Once again, the question of style became urgent. Since we wanted to suggest the atmosphere in the tele-seminar on the printed page, we decided to compose the text from our emails and to use graphic design to convey the substance of our inquiry. We invented the word "imagologies" to evoke an association with "mythologies" and entitled the book *Imagologies: Media Philosophy*.² Our argument was that just as previous societies interpreted themselves and their world through governing cultural myths, so people today filter experience through images promulgated by various media. The extraordinarily creative design of Marjaana Virta successfully conveys the seminar experience and enacts the importance of images, design and style in contemporary culture. This book, like all of Esa's work, is as much performance art as philosophy.

The Helsinki seminar had a significant impact on all of our subsequent work. In the following years, I continued to explore the importance of media and virtual technologies in my writing as well as my teaching at Williams.³ I developed media labs in which students learned how to "write" and communicate in new ways. My work in these courses led to my co-founding of the Global Education Network (GEN) in 1999. The goal of GEN was to make available high-quality online education in the liberal arts, humanities and sciences to all people of all ages anywhere in the world at a reasonable cost. Though we failed, universities, colleges and private companies today are doing exactly what we envisioned over a decade ago.

Esa's career took even more surprising turns. Having become convinced of the importance of extending philosophical reflection and activity beyond the university, he courageously gave up his academic position and became a genuine public intellectual by putting into practice the lessons we learned in our seminar. A prominent presence in the Finnish media, Esa created an unprecedented platform from which to engage the wider public in philosophical dialogue. It is important to stress that this effort was informed by his creative interpretation of philosophers like Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Frederic Jameson, Paul Virilio and David Harvey. What Esa understands that these philosophers did not is that in our media age, writing is not limited to print and thinking must engage not only fellow philosophers and academics but all people.

It is only appropriate that one of the most important venues for Esa's new educational mission was Nokia. Under the leadership of Jorma Ollila and his colleagues, Nokia became one of the world's leading technology companies during the 1990s and early years of this century. Unlike most CEOs, Ollila understood that innovation requires an environment that encourages creativity and is impossible without employees whose lives as well as careers are rewarding. Esa and Jorma formed a unique alliance that led to transformative practices for businesses. Esa's lectures

and seminars for Nokia employees were extraordinarily successful and should serve as a model for other companies and organizations.

At the same time Esa was developing his innovative program for Nokia, he launched another unique venture that has also proven to be extraordinarily successful – the Paphos Seminar. In its seventeen-year history, the audience for this seminar has grown from 35 to 100 and to date over 3000 people from all walks of life have gathered on Cyprus for a week to discuss and reflect on philosophy, psychology and the good life. Esa's philosophy is profoundly existential. Unlike well-known existential philosophers like Kierkegaard, Sartre and Camus, however, Esa's thought is not grounded in melancholy, dread and despair but seeks to promote human flourishing by encouraging people to cultivate more positive virtues like pleasure, joy, beauty, hope, satisfaction and happiness. This project represents an explicit critique of traditional academic philosophy. In an essay entitled "The Paphos Seminar: Elevated Reflections on Life as Good Work," Esa writes, "There is an implicit negativism in academic philosophy, the poison of which the Paphos seminar seeks to avoid. The aim of the Paphos seminar is to celebrate life and humanity, not to languish or reify it. The fact that some aspects of life might be hard to define objectively does not prove them non-existent. I look for the work of Christopher Alexander on the 'sense of life' for inspiration, and acknowledge with enthusiasm the economic thinking of Nobel laureate Edmund Phelps with his emphasis on vitalism."⁴ Rather than concentrating on loss, lack and longing, Esa focuses on plenitude, abundance and excess. In good existential fashion, he avoids the abstract and focuses on the concrete. His lectures and seminars engage participants in a process of self-reflection through the exploration of everyday experiences to which everyone can readily relate. "A living, personally relevant philosophy of life," he explains, "is more than an articulation of that philosophy. For an academic philosopher, a striking feature of the Paphos seminar is that in its conduct, conceptualization does not get the privileged status it assumes with effortless superiority in academic settings. Recall that the aim is to inspire the actual living philosophy of life of each of the participants. Most participants are not that accustomed to conceptual thinking vis-à-vis the actual conduct of life, even if they might boast for their conceptuality in some specific fields of expertise."⁵

Though not immediately obvious to people who are not familiar with academic culture, this project and these statements require considerable courage for a professional philosopher. Throughout the history of the modern university, virtually no "serious" thinker since Plato and Aristotle has dared to consider questions of human happiness, contentment and flourishing. Esa is convinced that this oversight is a mistake and is not shy about criticizing his academic colleagues.

The way I see it, philosophy should serve human flourishing. To this effect, philosophy should break away from its academic and scholarly boundaries, take seriously its Socratic origins, and develop communicative strategies that work in the contemporary context.

Philosophy is the art of thinking and its chief instrument is reason. Each human being possesses the potential for thinking and for insight. Accordingly, philosophy should strengthen that capacity. Philosophy aims to contribute to the creation of a better life as a result of an individual's improved thinking.⁶

In the world of the university, pessimism rather than optimism is the currency of the realm. The measure of seriousness is the depth of despair from which the writer or philosopher speaks. Esa decisively rejects this point of view and bets on the positive rather than the negative. Though a lonely voice for many years, there is evidence that others are beginning to follow his lead. In the past few years, a growing body of literature on flourishing and the good life has begun to appear.⁷

But what about the third chapter in Esa's career? How does an erstwhile academic philosopher, public intellectual, celebrity and proponent of life philosophy end up being a professor at Aalto University, School of Science and Technology, Systems Analysis Laboratory? Upon careful examination there appears to be a logic to this move implicit in the earlier chapters of Esa's career. While always committed to his own brand of existential philosophy, our Helsinki seminar taught both Esa and me that the real marketplace of ideas is becoming virtual. To engage people in thoughtful reflection about important questions it is necessary to migrate from real classrooms and streets to virtual webs and networks. Philosophy, in other words, must become media philosophy. Within expanding global webs and networks, everything as well as everybody is connected. This is an ontological as well as a technological fact. In today's world, to be is to be related. This insight into the relationality forms the cornerstone of Esa's philosophy of life – holism.

One of the most enduring puzzles in the history of philosophy is the question of the relation of the individual to the group or, more generally, the part to the whole. Throughout much of modernity, the individual is privileged ontologically and axiologically. In other words, the individual is considered to be more real and more valuable than the group. When atomistic individuality is taken to be the foundation of reality, the whole (group) appears to be nothing more than the sum of the parts (individuals). This philosophical position ultimately leads to a pernicious ideology of competitive individualism that creates the contemporary fragmentation that poses the greatest threat to planetary survival. Esa rejects this position and poses a constructive alternative. Commenting on the dyadic system of the mother-child relationship, he writes:

The fundamental point is that intersubjectivity precedes subjectivity. Relatedness is prior to isolation. This amounts to a radical rejection of the 'myth of an isolated mind.' The dyadic system becomes the fundamental unit 'within which both interactive regulation and self-regulation can be defined, each affecting the other.' The 'patterns of expectation' amount to the 'anticipation of the partner's pattern in relation to one's own' and 'define presymbolic representation in the first year.'⁸

Rather than the individual being prior to the group and the whole being nothing more than the sum of the parts, the group, Esa argues, is a condition of the possibility of the individual; the part, in turn, is constituted by its place in the whole. In traditional philosophical terms, relations are internal and not external – internal relations within the whole constitute the individual as such. The individual can no more be itself apart from the whole than there can be a whole without the individuals that comprise it. This insight leads to what Esa aptly describes as "the relational turn" in philosophy.

The whole is a relational structure that is, in the final analysis, systemic. Contrary to Kierkegaard and in implicit agreement with Hegel, Esa maintains that any functional system constitutes and cultivates rather than represses and excludes individuality.

Let us recall that human life is fundamentally systemic at its core. Systemicity is at the heart of all life and all of reality – not only as phenomenon ‘out there’ but also as something that humans cannot help but engage with every moment of their actual lives. A person can live with some success without significant verbal, bodily, visual, mathematical, emotional, social, intrapersonal or musical intelligence. But without at least rudimentary abilities to maneuver intelligently within the systems of one’s environment, a human being is lost. There is simply no way to orient oneself in any successful way for any significant length of time, except in relation to and in contact with what is taking place systematically around oneself.

All human life is embedded and located in what is going on systematically, locally and globally. All human life takes place in the systemic process contexts of something-larger-than-onese. That something requires a constant and lively relating to. The success and survival of every human individual, for any significant length of time, calls for systems intelligence.⁹

I have quoted this text at length because it offers a concise summary of the fundamental insight that informs Esa’s most recent work.

If history has a direction, it moves toward increasing connectivity and, correspondingly, growing complexity and volatility. In the past several decades, the rate of connectivity has been accelerating as we become more and more entangled in worldwide webs and global networks. It is important to note that these networks are natural, social, political and economic as well as technological. Though real and virtual webs emerge without any overall plan, they nonetheless form a systemic totality that has a distinctive structure and operational logic. Human survival – personal as well as social – depends on what Esa and his colleagues describe as “systems intelligence,” which they define as “the ability to use the human sensibilities of systems and reasoning about systems in order to adaptively carry out productive actions within and with respect to systems.”¹⁰

Within these networks, part and whole are reciprocally related in such a way that each becomes itself in and through the other and neither can be itself apart from the other. All knowledge, therefore, is contextual. The individual cannot understand himself or herself apart from his or her place within the whole, and the whole is nothing other than the interrelation of its constitutive members. Though this insight is abstract, its implications are concrete. Esa makes this point clearly when he articulates his “philosophy for managers.”

My fundamental conception is that the benefits of philosophy for managers emerge from the ‘in-between’ of philosophy and managerial life. They are applied in nature, involve transformative dimensions, require seamless integration to managers’ attitudes, perspectives and actions, and should be judged on their merits in the actions and practices of that result. As I see it, philosophy for managers should benefit the manager in terms of:

1. Self-Leadership
2. Understanding Wholes
3. Activity in Complex Environments

The pedagogy of philosophy for managers, and the research supporting that pedagogy, should aim at increasing the manager’s skills and abilities in these three focus areas, in a way that can be readily translated into actions.¹¹

The philosophy for managers is, in effect, a philosophy for life in the wired world of the twenty-first century.

Esa and I launched the Helsinki seminar at a moment of optimism about the rich possibilities created by new media and emerging technologies in the early years of the final decade of the last millennium. With echoes of Marshal McLuhan's vision of the "global village" echoing in our minds, we imagined the possibility of a global classroom in which all people of all ages anywhere in the world could sit down around the table to discuss issues that truly matter. While aspects of that two-decade-old vision are becoming a reality today, the growth of global networks and the World Wide Web has taken a darker turn we did not anticipate. Paradoxically, the more connected we are, the more divided we become. The proliferation of media outlets is creating increasing "cellularization" in which individuals plugged into iPods cycling through customized playlists and groups listen to themselves in echo chambers where their own views are repeatedly reinforced and never questioned. Connected in their divisions, people cannot hear, much less understand, each other. This unexpected turn of events is occurring at the precise moment when the most pressing problems we face – climate change, global economic justice, possible pandemics, nuclear proliferation, species extinction – require systemic solutions. It is not too much to insist that human survival depends on moving beyond the book through a relational turn that will allow us to recover a sense of the whole. At this perilous moment, the style and substance of Esa Saarinen's philosophy of life show us a way to navigate the seemingly insurmountable problems we face.

About the author

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- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Esa Saarinen, "Philosophy in the 21st Century: Socratic Philosophy that Matters and Engages with People," ms., p. 1.

- 7 See, for example: M. Csikszentmihalyi and I.S. Csikszentmihalyi, *A Life Worth Living: Contributions to a Positive Psychology*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006; B.L. Fredrickson, *Positivity: Groundbreaking Research reveals how to Embrace the Hidden Strength of Positive Emotions, Overcome Negativity, and Thrive*, New York: Crown, 2009; and M. Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding for Happiness and Well-being*, New York: Free Press, 2011.
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- 9 *Ibid.*, 11.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 16.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 2.