Fifty Years Erasmus School of Philosophy

**An address by Awee Prins**

Dear Friends,

I obviously consider it an honour and a privilege to have been asked by the Dean and Board of our Department to briefly address you on this memorable, if not commemorative day.

There is of course, if not primarily, a quite prosaic reason for me being invited to speak at this festive event, as I am currently the eldest member of our staff: the ‘Nestor’ of ESPhil. Perhaps, in times of our current Dutch retirement policy, a too eloquent title for a grim existential predicament, more accurately depicted by Shakespeare: “Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans everything.”

**Fifty years of survival**

Today, we celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Erasmus School of Philosophy, and even, if I have read an early announcement of this festive event correctly, “Five decades of excellence and camaraderie.” Don’t worry, I will not comment, nor dwell on this latter qualification (I want to, but I won’t!), but I *will* address *and* question the shown camaraderie of the Erasmus University towards our fine institute over the past five decades.

One may argue (and I do!), whether we are indeed celebrating our 50th anniversary today, or whether we are commemorating fifty years of more or less ruthless attempts to reorganize, reduce, or even abolish our department.

I will only be able to “highlight” some of these attempts; rest assured there were – if not many – more.

Mind you, the first years of ESPhil, then called the ‘Central Interfaculty’ were wonderful. Dutch Law had it then, that a university could only be named and acknowledged as such, if it fostered a department which had philosophical reflection as its core business; also connecting and supporting all philosophical reflection and passions in the surrounding faculties. So, at it’s get go, the Erasmus University owed its status if not very existence to philosophy…

Money was not an issue in those days: the Central Interfaculty had a staff of seven full professors, eight associate professors and five assistant professors. Because of our mission as Central Interfaculty there were of course students and staff members of other departments who attended our classes with great enthusiasm, and some even aspired ‘Double Degree’ graduation.

In a recent article in Erasmus Magazine our former student and now esteemed colleague, historian Ronald van Raak, expressed his disappointment about the lack of a full-fledged philosophical education in those early years of the Central Interfaculty. But indeed, there was a full-time program! – although the numbers were so small that even an expert historian could easily overlook them.

In 1974 there were two first-year full-time students at our department, three in 1975, and again three in 1976… Even in the strictest crisis-ward of any mental institution you will not find such an intense staff-to-client-ratio, although one may consider a more academic comparison: it was a bit like EIPE *avant la lettre*…

Happy days.

And although small in numbers, we were a special bunch. The very first students were Rolf de Folter, who later became General Manager of a major hospital in the Netherlands, and Bernard den Boogerd, in later years, until his retirement, head of the student counselors, here at Erasmus. In the second year there was, next to yours truly, a flamboyant diamond salesman on cruise ships, whose name I forgot and who vanished from the earth in the third year, and Sietske Altink, in later life a regarded advocate of ‘De Rode Draad’, a union supporting the emancipation of sex-workers in Rotterdam.

The years of the Central Interfaculty were happy years, inspiring and adventurous years, but when the Central Interfaculty – for reasons beyond me and everyone else in the department - was abolished and turned into an independent Department of Philosophy, an awkward hostility and animosity towards philosophy at Erasmus University began to rise. Remarkably, this animosity came first and foremost from other EUR-departments.

A curious proof can be found in the documented minutes of the University Council. An as annoying as notorious adversary of our department over the years was Drs. Maat, a rather insignificant member of the then Department of Economics, but also long-time member of the University Council, who as a latter-day Cato, proclaimed at the end of every single meeting of the University Council: “Furthermore, I insist that the Department of Philosophy must be abolished.”

Why? Why has the Department of Philosophy from it’s get go encountered such animosity?

Well, in my humble, but accurate, assessment, the main reason for our constant predicament - and I apologize to bother you with finance and logistics, but it is important for historical understanding and may help with future negotiations – and the perpetual Achilles’ heel of our fine department was and is the financial model used at the Erasmus University: fixed-rate funding.

The financing of each department at Erasmus University consists of a very modest fixed rate (‘vaste voet’) for each of its departments, and it is up to the departments to sustain themselves through reeling in as many students as possible.

Now, one may argue, this is typically ‘The Rotterdam way’. In the ‘Gateway to Europe’ we approach things in terms of large quantity and tonnage… But this ‘massa is kassa’ (‘mass is cash’)-ideology of EUR-financing could inherently prove to be fatal where smaller departments were concerned.

Now, over the years, consecutive Executive Board’s at EUR have generously and with dedication supported our relatively small department, by means of so called ‘tailormade financing’ (‘maatpakfinanciering’), but because of it being constantly debatable and negotiable, this tailormade financing in fact proved to be a fragile benevolence, and placed the department of Philosophy in constant peril, as it always allowed, if not invited, other departments as soon as they themselves got into any peril, to challenge - and this happened again and again! - the so called ‘preferential treatment’ and ‘favored position’ of the Department of Philosophy.

But there may perhaps also be another, more spiritual or deeply psychological reason for the lack of admiration, sympathy, and support from our fellow faculties. Allow me to share a personal diagnosis.

In the 1970’s a law was passed in the Netherlands, which stated, that children were no longer obliged to financially support their parents. (For those interested, it was a legal side issue of the introduction of the AWBZ [the General Law on Exceptional Medical Expenses]). Of course, this societal decision to abolish the obligation to support one’s parents is something to think about, especially for those interested in sociology or the end of civilization. My humbler point is this. Perhaps, the very development as articulated by this law, can be retraced to the academic world, where the sciences were tempted, if not invited to no longer feel obliged to take real good care of their mother: Philosophy, the mother who brought them into this world, cherished them, and raised them to fruition.

It’s just an intuition, but there may be some unfortunate truth to it…

This questionable lack of care and dedication towards philosophy as an indispensable voice within academia, was also expressed on a national level, when soon after the independent Departments of Philosophy were established, one of the many ‘committees’ chaired by Liberal politician Henk Vonhoff, claimed, there were too many departments of philosophy in the Netherlands. One of the rhetorical framings presented was, that the Netherlands are like a big city, with a department of philosophy in every suburb.

Only six of the Dutch universities would be allowed to keep their Department of Philosophy, depending on a mishmash argumentation of them being considered ‘classical’, or ‘geographically indispensable’. As you may have guessed, the Erasmus University qualified on neither of these criteria.

All seemed lost.

Now, here’s a wonderful anecdote. The then dean of our Department Jan Sperna Weiland managed to arrange through his connections in The Hague and in cahoots with his close friend Wim Deetman, that the debate and decision concerning this bill would be scheduled in the late afternoon of the very day the Dutch House of Representatives would go on summer leave.

Picture this: with a clear view on a splendid spread of enticing appetizers and alcoholic beverages, the members of the House of Representatives were bombarded (this was part of the cunning plan!) with last-minute amendments and critical comments, which caused the majority of the parliamentarians to grow more and more weary of the debate dragging on and on, so they decided to vote against it.

True story!

Back to the internal EUR-trouble with the unfortunate tailor-made financing of our department, which – and I trust you agree - entails a wicked psychology: if you annually receive 300K ‘extra’, and you exceed this by a 100 or 200K, it is as if you haven’t cherished your gift enough…

In 2003 the Department gave in to the pressure. Then Dean Theo van Willigenburg (he wound up in jail soon after, but that had nothing to do with the reorganization) gave in to the demands and agreed to a substantial cutback.

Seven members of staff who were over fifty years old were let go, with full payment until their retirement. All of them – I still recall – suffered from the humiliation; much personal hardship was caused. But the departmental balance sheet was in order and those still in office had to work harder than ever.

By the way, one of those who had to leave, started a Centre for Oriental Studies and Meditation, soon to discover that training people in ‘emptiness meditation’ and introducing them to the void, quite amply seemed to fill his own wallet…

But that is a consolation beside the point.

Skipping some other, minor catastrophes, in 2013 we really found ourselves in dire straits.

I’ll give you a gist of the worst that we have been up against. As we again ‘exceeded’ our budget, the Erasmus Executive Board had its administrative advisor calculate in a report with the treacherous title ‘Of value’ (‘Van waarde’) that if the Department of Economics could serve five thousand students with twenty million euros, the Department of Philosophy, which received two million, should serve five hundred students (instead of the three hundred and fifty then studying at our department). Apart from the questionable administrative reasoning (anyone can see that some variables, like basic support services, are omitted in this equation), there is something else very wrong in this complacent exercise in calculating thinking.

The report summoned an inevitable reorganization, due to the – and I quote – “structural suboptimal average cost-benefit range” at the Department of Philosophy. The Department of Philosophy was ‘losing money’, as if we were a poorly run company.

But let’s not be mistaken: no Department at EUR ‘earns’ any money; it’s all ‘money given’! And *only* within the chosen framework of the internal allocation of this ‘money given’ at EUR. Financial deficits – pardon me: ‘a suboptimal average of cost-benefit range’ - can occur.

Remarkably, the department found its own ‘staying power’. Due to the extremely clever PR-policy of “salesman-philosopher” Bart Leeuwenburgh (I use this qualification in his case and in his case only with the highest regards!) we managed to double, if not triple the number of our Double Degree students. We remained ‘in business’; and let’s not forget that today we are also celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of our Double Degree-education; we have managed to still be a Central Interfaculty at heart and in practice…

**My – futile – attempts**

Now, looking back on my own attempts (I have been Dean of Education for over twelve years) to safeguard the futures of ESPhil, I humbly congratulate the current Board of ESPhil on their excellent accomplishments. I don’t have a full overview of our financial situation, but over the past six years (precisely the period that I have stopped meddling with departmental affairs, – hence the idiom of my ‘humble congratulations’!), no threats of cutbacks or reorganization have emerged: we are indeed doing very well!

Apparently, my ways of trying to convince consecutive EUR-Boards of the indispensability and crucial merits of ESPhil could be - *and were!* - improved.

I’ll just give you some examples of my futile attempts.

Ad nauseam, I have assured the Executive Boards: “Don’t forget! ‘Erasmus’ is not a brand; Erasmus is a philosopher!” (“Erasmus is geen merknaam, Erasmus was een denker!”).

Another one-liner, which I still cherish, was: “The Department of Philosophy is ’A pearl farm amongst fish auctions’”; it sounds better in Dutch: “Een parelkwekerij tussen de visafslagen.”

The next one I must do in Dutch (we have an embarrassing track-record at Erasmus when it comes to translations). At the time ‘Amerikanismus’ hit Academia, the EUR-slogan was “De universiteit van denkers en doeners.” A PR company charged fifty thousand euros for turning this into “The university of thinkers and doers.”

So, I’ll stick to Dutch. Erasmus MC has as its slogan: ‘Denkers die doen’ – a fine motto! But we at ESPhil, are: ‘Denkers die *ertoe* doen’

Speaking of Erasmus MC, the following discussion I once had with one of the Executive Boards may amuse and interest you. Erasmus MC, which, from the perspective of the EUR financing model of fixed-rate funding is also somewhat vulnerable, receives an annual extra funding of eighty million euro for its ‘werkplaatsfunctie’, also called its ‘laboratory’ function.

Should, I argued, the Department of Philosophy not also receive such an additional structural funding, of say – always good to be modest – one million euro annually? Obviously, the Department of Philosophy also has its own ‘werkplaatsfunctie’. We are also a permanent workshop, a laboratory of constant experimenting, be it not with blood tissue and urine samples, but with concepts, perspectives and new modes of thinking; a laboratory experimenting with new views on identity, intersubjectivity, justice…

Of course, a structural acknowledgment of this unique trait of our department would solve the whole damned debate on tailor-made financing!

Unfortunately, I didn’t succeed. But enough about me and my futile attempts… it’s time for congratulations!

**Congratulations!**

The current Dean and Board of ESPhil are doing a very good job, for example in forging new and strong alliances, most recently with the prestigious Convergence Program, making us – finally – “too big to destroy”.

**But also, just** take a look at our current Master’s in Philosophy. As we all know, almost all philosophy is ‘past’ philosophy; it’s all: “Philosophy Then”. But here, at ESPhil, we offer you the Master “Philosophy Now”!… Wonderful!

And who wouldn’t drop everything they were doing in order to enroll in a Master called “Societal Transitions”! “Societal Transitions”… “Open Sesame”! I quote: “This Master trains you to become a leader who can interpret transition dynamics and intervene to influence the speed and direction of transition processes.” Again: Wonderful!

But that’s not all! I have always told my students to be extremely cautious, suspicious even, whenever they would find someone talking about ‘values’. Which philosopher today would – after Nietzsche - even consider to articulate ‘values’? I honestly never thought I would live to see the day that ESPhil confidently and in good spirits would embrace values. But we do! And mind you, not just any values…. ‘*Erasmian* values’!

Now, please don’t get me wrong; I don’t criticize. Perhaps it’s a good thing to rephrase the old saying: “Fools rush in, where angels fear to tread”, into: “The shrewd step in, where Heideggerians fear to tread”!

And only two days ago, Sandra Meeuwsen told me that soon an “Impact Centre” for Sport & Philosophy will be established at ESPhil!

ESPhil’s future’s so bright, you have to wear shades!

**Final words**

It is clear that I still urge and insist that the way our School is perceived, defined and financed should be revised. Of course, I’m glad and proud, that we – unlike almost all other departments of philosophy in the Netherlands - have succeeded to remain independent and have not become part of a larger Humanities Department, but we are not a department amongst others.

Hub Zwart has very justifiably noted that “Philosophy has never been one discipline among others”. Hub also quoted Kant’s view that philosophy should adopt a critical role vis-à-vis other faculties.

In line with Hub, I also think that the way we conceive of critique nowadays, (that is, ‘unchallenged from the outside looking in’) is no longer the way to go.

Perhaps ‘Stirring thinking’ (‘loskloppend denken’) is what surrounding departments need from us (I may get back to this in my farewell speech in September!); or also, what Heidegger at the beginning of *Being and Time* has called: ‘Krisis-fähigkeit […], more recently and more inspiringly articulated by Donna Harraway as ‘Staying with the trouble’.

Or, again in my own words, re-writing a famous phrase by Dylan Thomas (we both used to appreciate a stiff drink, and I named my eldest son after him, so I think he would have forgiven me): “Do not go gentle into that good Light; ’Rage, rage, against the denying of the Night.’”

Philosophy, that most undisciplined of all disciplines is not about solutions, not about problem-solving. It’s all about staying with the trouble.

Perhaps this is what we truly are (and I’m not talking about finance here!): the Erasmus School of Staying with the Trouble…