

10 Years Later

An Interview With Daan Gijsbertse, the ESJP's first editor-in-chief

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This edition marks the 10th anniversary for the Erasmus Student Journal of Philosophy (ESJP). Looking back at the very beginning, Nathalie Kirch and Lara Rose Eikamp conducted an interview with Daan Gijsbertse, the founder of the ESJP. Daan currently works as a lecturer and senior policy advisor, giving strategic advice on remodelling education at Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences.

The Interview was conducted over Zoom and was transcribed by Kas Molenaar and Maximilian Gasser.

L: Did you think the journal would last this long?

To be honest, what I am more surprised about is that it wasn't founded ten years earlier. That it lasted so long was not because we were exceptionally visionary, but more because the ESJP is quite a simple idea that is not dependent on its original founders. When we founded the journal, the conditions that make this student journal possible were already in place: the character of the philosophy students, the values and ambitions of the faculty etc.. As long as they stay in place and remain relatively unchanged, the journal will probably also remain.

N: How many editors were you back then?

The group of people the ESJP started with consisted of four or five editors.

N: We do see that the ESJP has really grown then; we are now about sixteen editors.

Wow!

N: What do you think is the most important thing you've learned from starting the ESJP?

The most important lesson was not in terms of skills, but in realizing that when you really see a possibility and use things that are mostly already there (students already wrote essays, teachers already graded them), it can become very successful. The biggest lesson was that if you consider cost and benefit for all parties involved, an idea can become a reality. Of course, there were some hiccups or practical details, or maybe small political considerations (for example, whether the Erasmus School of Philosophy should commit itself to a student journal that bear its name). I think the biggest challenge for the first editions was to actually get professors to send in nominations. The ESJP was not something that was established, and students and professors did not know it – it was just two sheets of paper that outlined the plan, that was all there was. But we managed to get to some action. All in all, this process showed that you can be optimistic about plans to start an initiative, and that, with the right people, this can be easy to accomplish. Overall, founding the journal was not an uphill battle in any way.

N: Did you have specific selection criteria at that point? What did you think made a paper worth publishing?

That is a good question. One was definitely “does it add value for the reader?” – and value could mean different things! For example, a paper should be somewhat original (though summarizing a complex philosophical work can also be valuable!), and the quality should be good, it should be readable. If it wasn’t readable enough, we would consider giving the author some feedback to rewrite it. We would also, of course, try to see if the subjects that were covered were not all the same. We didn’t want to be a journal that was only publishing works on one of the four pillars of the school at that time (cultural philosophy, history of philosophy, practical philosophy or theoretical philosophy). We wanted the topics to be as widespread as possible.

Though, we also faced one really big problem in the beginning! If you look back at those first editions, we, the editors, used to be the people that got nominated the most. I think, if you look at the all-time record of publications in the ESJP, you are definitely going to find people that are on the editorial board. That was really difficult for us to deal with. You don’t want to create the impression that you are organizing some kind of platform for yourself to stand on and to beat your chest with saying “look how great we are”. At the same time, the way we organized the selection procedures – the double blind peer reviews, etc., as well as having an independent jury for the Pierre Bayle Trophy – ensured that this would not become an issue.

L: So you tried to circumvent publication bias by making sure there was a large spread from all the four pillars, having the double blind process instituted as well as external awards?

Yes. For the external awards, that was very easy. That committee of the Pierre Bayle Trophy was fully organized by teaching staff, so there was nobody from the editorial board on it. But, to be honest, I think the biggest publication bias we needed to fight at the time was to make sure that all the teachers who gave courses would consider students for nomination at the ESJP, and would have a good idea of the level or the quality that we were looking for. Otherwise, good quality papers graded by one teacher might just not be nominated and go into the archive. At the same time, another teacher who likes the fact that students are promoted by the ESJP might over-nominate essays from her students. I think that was the biggest challenge with respect to publication bias.

We had one person, the secretary, who would be the only person to know all the names of the authors. One of my essays for instance was published, but another one was nominated and refused. That does show that we did not only publish the people we knew. Sometimes, I think we were even more strict in evaluating papers than the teachers who would nominate them.

L: Do you think that people who got published already wanted to go towards academia or do great things in the world of philosophy?

Yes. I think that many of those who were published in the first editions of the ESJP have gone on to become quite successful in terms of their academic careers. I believe that they would have definitely arrived there without the journal as well. But maybe, sometimes, a person would just get a little bit of a nudge or a boost of confidence from being able to publish in the journal. It challenges people who are a bit more ambitious

to also see that their course papers could amount to a bigger podium than just the professor reading it, if they write something that's interesting. So, the journal functions as a small steppingstone that helps people towards a more high profile academic career.

Back in the days, the idea of publishing something was far removed somewhere in the second year of a PhD-project. At that time, the Erasmus School of Philosophy was really small. Sometimes, teachers were very flexible and would say: "Okay, we are still going to do the readings around this topic, but we are also going to focus on publishing an article." I thought "well, this is quite fun, actually, this is how it should be all the time. Why not organize something to make sure this is possible on a regular basis?"

N: The journal has several main goals. The first one is to provide students with the possibility to realize their first official publication. The second one is to provide the editors with the opportunity to gain editing experience. The third one is to bring academic writing closer to the students of our faculty.

Very nice! That sounds great. And then, for the Erasmus School of Philosophy, to show what kind of awesome students they have – hopefully.

N: Right, that's another one!

On top of that, students get to see each other's work and maybe start discussions about that – not just to pass a course, but because they are genuinely interested. I truly hope that people who promote our faculty see the journal as something that shows that for the students, studying Philosophy is about more than just passing courses. You're actually trying to produce something that is of philosophical value.

L: Your message seems to be that you don't have to be a visionary or a great person to build something that is long-lasting or that is visionary, and that the success of an initiative has a lot to do with the environment and support systems.

I definitely agree. You do need the vision. But you don't need to see yourself as somebody who is a great visionary, or very exceptional in order to build something.

L: I think that's a really beautiful message, actually. It's modest, but it's also really realistic.

Yeah, and I think that some of the study associations, especially at the business school where I studied, were really resume building experiences. Obviously, if you're part of an association, you're not doing this not to put it on your resume. But I think you cannot really reduce what's happening within the journal to those kinds of personal and rather trivial benefits. It's quite understandable if you want an academic career, for example, to go the extra mile – but I think you will find that there is something to the experience in the ESJP that is more valuable than this kind of resume building.

L: Is it okay if we ask you some personal questions?

Yeah, sure!

L: We heard that you were studying business as your primary study, and that you did a double degree. It would be interesting to know why you chose to study philosophy and why you think it might be a good idea for students in general to study philosophy?

Before I studied Philosophy, I was studying business. I always did a lot of reading besides my business studies, in areas like psychology and sociology, and I tended to drift more and more towards the philosophical texts. At some point, the people who knew me from my business studies heard about the double degree program and immediately thought that I should do it. So, they advised me to check it out. I went to an introductory lecture, I think it was given by Awee Prins – I'm not sure if he still teaches – and I really liked it. When I started the courses I thought "this is much more my topic than business".

In terms of skills, I would say there's two things you really get from philosophy. One is conceptual clarity: you learn to spell out the structure of texts and to distinguish between different lines of thought expressed in a text, even if it is formulated in a vague way. That is a useful skill in many situations and professional contexts, because there's always a need to get to the heart of a matter. Another skill you gain, which is way more important, is to be critical and able to problematize if necessary. When there is little variation in the way people think, and there's something about the thoughts and assumptions which is inefficient, immoral, or might not be good in some other way, then you are really good at teasing out those kinds of things, putting them as a problem on one page. That won't make you popular everywhere. Though, I would say learning to be critical is really valuable. There's tons of other stuff, but I think those are the two main things that philosophers bring to the table in the world outside of philosophy.

N: One last question: who is your favourite philosopher?

A philosopher whose works I really value is Michel Foucault. His take on the interaction between practice and theory, or regimes of truth and social practices, which mutually influence each other is really useful to understand both how we can affect change, and how theories support perceived impossibilities.

On the one hand, people must engage in different ways on the level of theory and practice respectively. Sometimes, we must start at the level of thought. But if we have to think differently about some issues, we might rather have to start at the level of action. If some ideas are really outside of the normal flow of thought or the concepts, then, at the level of action, simply doing, for example, something new might work a lot better than just continuing to argue.

At the same time, looking at the big problems of our time, at the things we seem to be unable to solve, you can use Foucault to show that the perceived impossibility to change is usually embedded in theoretical thought. An example is economics and the climate crisis. There has long been an axiomatic conviction that businesses cannot eliminate the negative environmental effects of their operations when and where that does not maximize their profits. I think that there, you can use Foucault to show that the regime of truth has created a false perception of impossibility that can be displaced. Not by saying "the theory is wrong, here's a new theory". But by looking at how these assumptions are contingent upon the historical emergence of specific managerial and governmental practices that may and can very well be changed in ways that would dissolve this apparent impossibility.