

Ilkka Niiniluoto

“**Philosophers try** to analyze concepts and present arguments for their views, but the greatest beauty in philosophy lies in constantly asking questions about all kinds of matters. That is the heritage of Socrates. He would go around the squares of Athens and challenge people by asking ‘what is justice’ and ‘what is knowledge’. And he wasn’t satisfied with the answers he got, but continued to challenge people. That, to me, is the heart of philosophy”, says Academician of Science, philosopher Ilkka Niiniluoto.

The Finnish Academy of Science and Letters awarded the 2021 Academy Award to Niiniluoto. The Academy Award is the most prominent recognition awarded by the institution and is given to a member for especially meritorious scholarly work. Awarded since 1945, the award is worth 30,000 euros.

Professor Emeritus Niiniluoto is one of the best-known Finnish philosophers in the world. He has worked not only as Professor of Theoretical Philosophy and Asso-

ciate Professor of Mathematics, but also as the Rector and Chancellor of the University of Helsinki.

Niiniluoto has also written extensively on the philosophy of science, among other topics. Science, to him, means a passionate pursuit of clarity, above all.

“Science is the search for truth, and philosophy is the pursuit of clarity and understanding, in particular. I’ve always enjoyed trying to make sense of large wholes, and in philosophy you can try to conquer areas such as what is science or technology or art, forming an overall view of things, as it were, for yourself. It’s about specifying and clarifying concepts, that is, analytical purpose and the synthetic structuring of research fields”, says Niiniluoto.

Niiniluoto has always spoken on behalf of the university as a beacon of civilization whose core purpose is to teach critical thinking. He says that in this time of disinformation and fake news, we need science and universities that maintain a strong belief in the power of truth and honesty.

“The greatest beauty lies in constant questioning”



“We must constantly fight for truth, because it faces strong opposing forces in the world, such as ignorance and the conscious misleading of people. I believe in the power of schooling and all-round education. The better educated people are, the better equipped they are against disinformation”, says Niiniluoto.

The strategy of the University of Helsinki talks about the key challenges of humanity, a sustainable relationship with nature, sustainable economy and a just society. There are plenty of such grand challenges.

“The world is currently pretty much in disorder because of COVID and the new war. Universities try to promote pure sci-

ence as if knowledge has an inherent value in itself, but universities as beacons of civilization also need to be able to apply knowledge to tackle the world’s problems. This firmly underlines the value of such universities also in our day and age”, says Niiniluoto.

Academic freedom suited Niiniluoto well when he was a student, and he completed courses in three faculties: the then Section of Mathematics and Science, the Section of History and Philology and the Faculty of Social Sciences. During his long career, Niiniluoto has become known as a bridgebuilder between the humanities and the sciences. According to the classic thesis by Charles Percy Snow, humanists – or

literary intellectuals, as he called them – and natural scientists are incapable of communicating with each other.

“Snow may have been exaggerating a bit. As an author and a chemist, he himself possessed such a duality, and actually he was most concerned about humanists not understanding the new opportunities offered by science. There are many fields and many ways to try to bridge this gap. The university itself is such an institution: *universitas*, the unity of the sciences. In universities, researchers in different fields have to come together to establish common goals and develop an interdisciplinary approach. Solutions to the major problems of the world – such as global warming – require such cooperation between disciplines”, says Niiniluoto.

He remains an active philosopher. Among other things, he is currently working on a collection of philosophical writings entitled “Beauty, Truth and Justice”.

“I’ve tried to remain active even as an

emeritus. But naturally you find yourself repeating and developing certain ideas that you’ve been working on for decades. For example, I’ve studied the concept of verisimilitude in the philosophy of science for quite a long time, but I’m still inspired by how large research domains are structured”, says Niiniluoto.

If the academician could travel in time, which philosopher would he want to meet and what would he ask them? Niiniluoto laughs. He then names one of his all-time favourites, the American Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914).

“One of the key terms coined by Peirce is abduction, a type of inference that proceeds from effects to causes. He gave a lot of examples of this from everyday life and science, but his descriptions were quite vague and complex, and they are still the subject of hot debate. Perhaps I could go to Harvard to meet Peirce and ask him what he actually meant with that abduction thing”, says Niiniluoto.

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