

# Simo Knuuttila

\* 8.5.1946 † 17.6.2022



Professor Emeritus of Theological Ethics and Philosophy of Religion Simo Knuuttila died unexpectedly in the morning of 17 June 2022, while sleeping at his home in Helsinki. He was 76 years old, born in Peräseinäjoki, South Ostrobothnia, on 8 May 1946.

After matriculating from Seinäjoki Lyceum in 1965 Simo Knuuttila began his studies in theology and philosophy at the University of Helsinki. He wrote his master's thesis in theology in 1969 on New Testament exegesis, but the conservative Lutheran Church refused to ordain him as a priest. In 1971 Knuuttila joined the team of Research Professor Jaakko Hintikka, whose group of logicians and historians of philosophy formed a Centre of Excellence even before this concept was known in Finnish science policy. Hintikka's connections to Stanford University in California and his editorship of the journal *Synthese* opened doors for young scholars to connect with leading international names.

Hintikka, who had discovered possible worlds semantics in the 1950s, thought that Aristotle had a hidden assumption which identified the "possible" as that which happens sometimes. In his doctoral dissertation *Time and Possibility in Scho-*

*lasticism* (1976) Knuuttila took it upon him to go carefully through all theories of modality among medieval scholastics. Besides the Aristotelian statistical model, he found the idea that God's omnipotence would be limited if there were no unrealized possibilities. In the late 13th century, Duns Scotus formulated a new semantics, which rejects the principle of plenitude by allowing alternative possibilities which are never realized. Scotus also made a distinction between logical and real possibilities, a theory opening a new study of the laws of nature.

After defending his doctoral thesis in theology, Knuuttila acted as a researcher of the Academy of Finland in 1976–1980 and as Professor of Practical Philosophy in 1981 in Helsinki. He would have been a strong candidate for this position in the Faculty of Social Sciences, but preferred the Faculty of Theology where the students learn Ancient Greek and Latin. In 1981 Knuuttila was appointed Professor of Theological Ethics and Philosophy of Religion and soon became the most visible and prominent scholar of this faculty. He edited the collections *Reforging the Great Chain of Being* (1981) and *Modern Modalities* (1988) and summarized his

pathbreaking studies on the history of modal logic in *Modalities in Medieval Philosophy* (1993, 2nd ed. 2020). Thereafter he concentrated on the history of philosophy of mind and theories of emotions: *Emotions in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy* appeared in 2004.

In 1994–2009 Knuuttila served as Academy Professor at the Academy of Finland, and led two Centres of Excellence of about twenty researchers: History of Mind in 2002–2007 and Philosophical Psychology, Morality and Politics in 2008–2013. He supervised, in a demanding but encouraging manner, dozens of doctoral theses in theology, philosophy of religion, and history of philosophy. His students edited an international Festschrift entitled *Mind and Modality* (2006) for his 60th birthday.

In the late 1970s Simo Knuuttila participated in a project translating Plato's dialogues into Finnish. In 1989–2008 he was the leader of a similar project, which produced nine volumes of translations and explanations of Aristotle's philosophical works. He himself translated *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Prior Analytics*.

Knuuttila's status as a leading expert on ancient and medieval philosophy and systematic theology is evident in his numerous writings in important handbooks and his active participation in international organizations: Société Internationale pour l'Étude de la Philosophie Médiévale (board member 1987–1997), Institut International de Philosophie (Vice President 2009–2011) and Academia Europea. From 1998 to 2001 he chaired the European Science Foundation research network

Early Modern Thought, which aimed to prove that the birth of early modern philosophy around 1600 (e.g. the individualistic conception of a person) can be traced back as far as the 14th century nominalists.

Knuuttila's style is compact, historically uncompromising, and conceptually extremely precise. His sharpness as an analytic philosopher was complemented by his knowledge about Gadamer's hermeneutics, learned as an exchange student in Kiel in 1967–1968. The history of philosophy is not just "doxography", but the scholar has to reveal the background assumptions of old texts and changing meanings, which presupposes consciousness of one's own starting points and the results of contemporary philosophy.

Knuuttila was editor of The New Synthese Historical Library since 1995, Dean of the Faculty of Theology in 1991, member of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters since 1988 and its President in 2004–2006. His recognitions include the Award of the Finnish Cultural Foundation in 1998, the title of Professor of the Year 2002 awarded by the Finnish Union of University Professors, the Swedish Gad Rausing Prize in 2008, and the Finnish Science Award in 2011.

Simo Knuuttila retired from his chair in 2014, but was active in research until the last day of his life. He combined deep theoretical thinking with enjoyment of lively conversations with colleagues and students. Simo's Aristotelian virtues, wisdom, an original sense of humour, and a generous character, are missed by his family and many friends.

*Ilkka Niiniluoto*