

At Harvard, one realizes the immense support for education

Miloš Ševčík, Deputy Head of the Department of Philosophy at the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts of the University of West Bohemia, and at Charles University too, devotes himself to aesthetics. His work in this field led him to a prestigious conference at Harvard University in the USA in 2013, where he has returned three times since then. The difference, however, is that while Miloš Ševčík had to ask for his first participation in the conference, the other participations were based on invitations by the organizers. We can say that Miloš Ševčík represents not only himself at Harvard, but also two Czech universities and the whole of the Czech Republic.

I have found some definitions of aesthetics, but it is best to ask you directly. What do we imagine under this discipline?

Aesthetics is now a traditional philosophical discipline because the way of thinking about individual aesthetic phenomena is as old as philosophy itself. Since the beginning of philosophy, we have found reflections on beauty and harmony, and many other topics have been added to them throughout the modern era. Officially, however, aesthetics originated in 1750, when German philosopher Baumgarten published the *Aesthetica*, in which he first defined the field that aesthetics deals with. Since then, this field has been established in universities. First in the Central European region, later in others.

So the science of beauty?

The definition of aesthetics is not easy – if it is to be accurate and short, it is tautological; that is, aesthetics is the science of aesthetic phenomena. Aesthetics has traditionally been regarded as the science of beauty, but it soon became apparent that beauty is not the only phenomenon it is dealing with because there are many others. Thus, aesthetics encompasses a wide area which, in addition to beauty, can be described as the noble, the comical, the sense of taste, imitation, catharsis. It does not focus solely on art, although the philosophy of art is an important part of it, but it includes, for example, a wide area of aesthetics of the environment, especially nature or the environment created by man.

You studied aesthetics at Charles University and practically right after your studies you started to

work there. In addition, you also joined the Department of Philosophy of the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen. Why did you decide to take up a job position also in Pilsen? Do you come from here?

I have a nice relationship to West Bohemia: my father was born in Klatovy. But that's just one part of the answer. The focus of the Pilsen Department of Philosophy has long been very broad and includes a number of philosophical disciplines, which, to such an extent, may not even have developed in other departments in the Czech Republic; aesthetics was one of the traditionally supported disciplines. For some time, there was even a separate section of aesthetics; aesthetics is still a very important part of the curriculum in bachelor and follow-up master study. Several people deal with aesthetics here, so it can be developed; it is the environment of the Pilsen department that puts aesthetics in the wider framework of other philosophical disciplines, which creates a challenge to think about the relation of aesthetics to other disciplines, especially disciplines supported here, such as different types of art history. That is why Pilsen was interesting for me: I can deal with more issues here than if I dealt solely with aesthetics.

And how did you get to the famous Harvard in 2010 as an expert in aesthetics from two Czech universities?

It was a mere coincidence. I became interested in what was happening abroad, where and which research centres were close to what I myself did, and thanks to that I got to the World Phenomenology Institute, whose important area of activity is research into the philosophy of art – fine arts

and literature. I was wondering, why not sign up and go to the World Phenomenology Institute's annual conference at Harvard University in the USA? At that time, I started to work on a research project concerning the philosophy of art developed by Jan Patočka, and I offered a lecture related to this area. My offer was accepted and I went to the first conference.

How did Harvard impress you?

I had already been at a number of international conferences and obtained various scholarships by that time, so it wasn't a big shock or surprise for me. It was, however, my first trip to the United States. When you are there, you realize the enormous level of support that education gets there. Just come to the campus and see what a serious matter the education there is. Meetings with new people can create some nervousness; on the other hand, everyone was dealing with a similar field as myself, so I quickly made contacts that could be developed in the future.

So your first visit to Harvard was at your incentive, but the others were not.

Later, in the last two years of the conference, I was invited to attend the conference and send drafts for lectures. On the last occasion, I was asked to join the editorial team of two journals published by the World Phenomenology Institute with German publisher Springer. The offer was interesting and compelling: these are respected journals, known in a wide philosophical environment.

I wonder how you feel when you are going to such a prestigious event, because you actually represent your school and your country there. Is it a responsibility?

You are right in a way because, from a more distant point of view, you are truly perceived as a representative of your country, although it may sound ridiculous to you. I think that from their point of view, I was really a suitable person who could inform them about the movement in the area of philosophy in the Czech Republic, as well as some wider cultural-scientific philosophical context. It is the same with lecturers from other countries. The Institute is trying to build a network.

What did participation in Harvard conferences give to you personally? Is it the contacts you have already mentioned?

It is certainly experience: one encounters other practices concerning the manner of presentation or discussion. Moreover, these visits have interesting effects, mainly in the future. The last such effect was this year's visit of the prominent Canadian philosopher Marie Antonios Sassine, who also works closely with the World Phenomenology Institute. She was willing to come to Pilsen and give two lectures at the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts. I hope that this cooperation will develop further; we are considering a joint

Czech-Canadian project or publishing projects. Next, the World Phenomenology Institute is not only organizing conferences at Harvard, but is also trying to organize a conference abroad every four years. We have been saying for some time that it would be nice to organize it in the Czech Republic; Pilsen seems to be quite a nice candidate for such an event. It would be very attractive both for us and many participants from abroad.

And all of this is due to personal contacts of a person with a person, not an institution with an institution.

It is on a personal level that the best contacts are always made. You will learn what other people are doing, what their interests are, how they approach yours or where they intersect. They are people who are really involved in thinking and research; it is interesting for them to meet people with whom they can discuss these matters. Personal contacts are a natural environment for the creation of joint projects, whether grants or publications.

And this is probably true for academics as well as students.

Undoubtedly. ●



PhDr. Miloš Ševčík, Ph.D.

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Dr. Ševčík graduated from the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in the field of aesthetics and philosophy, and later postgraduate studies in aesthetics. In 2004, he started working as an assistant professor at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University, and since 2012 he has been Head of the Department of Aesthetics. In 2004, he also started working as an assistant professor at the Department of Philosophy of the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts of the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen.