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Robert C. Scharff, Professor of Philosophy, COLA, travels to Italy

Robert C. Scharff
robert.scharff@unh.edu

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University of New Hampshire
Center for International Education and Global Engagement

Robert C. Scharff

Professor of Philosophy - College of Liberal Arts

Professor Scharff traveled to Italy in July to present a paper at the 2010 International Symposium in Phenomenology in Perguia. The conference theme was "Nature, Science, Technics."

Professor Robert Scharff

I spent two weeks in Italy this summer because of an ill-considered decision. About fifteen years ago, my department found itself without staffing for our popular Science, Technology, and Society course. Both regular instructors were going on sabbatical, and there were no logical replacements. So, instead, our chair resorted to the illogical. I have no background in either science or engineering; and I have no training in ethical or social theory. But I teach and publish on Martin Heidegger. In his later writings, Heidegger has some very critical things to say about technology. Therefore, I am qualified to teach Science, Technology, and Society. In fact, this seriously tenuous line of reasoning led to a wonderfully fortunate accident. I now teach the course regularly. My colleague, Val Dusek, and I have since edited the best known Philosophy of Technology anthology in North America and Europe. And the majority of my recent speaking invitations have been directly related to my growing reputation in the relatively new field of Science and Technology Studies (STS).

One of these invitations made me eligible for a CIE International Development Grant. In September, 2009, I presented "Why Heideggerians Can Love their Laptops without Guilt" (soon to be published in Swedish) as part of the annual Faculty Seminar Series at the School of Computer Science and Communication of the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm. While I was there, my host asked if I would like to give a revised and extended version of my talk at the 2010 International Symposium in Phenomenology, in Perguia, Italy, July 12-17, where the theme was to be "Nature, Science, Technics." I'm not sure that I let him finish asking before I said yes.

The ISP symposium is a model of what a small international summer institute should be. In conversations among the 40 or so attendees, one could hear French, German, Italian, Norwegian, Danish, Finnish, Portuguese, and oh yes, English. Philosophical interests were as shamelessly plural as the languages used to express them. No one was looking for a job. There were no academic show-offs (well, maybe one). If asked, everyone would no doubt have self-identified as a "phenomenologist," but this is a notoriously contested label. Moreover, making specifically technological phenomena a major topic of inquiry is a relatively new philosophical activity even for phenomenologists, so what exactly a "phenomenological" study of technology is, remained happily unclear. Hence, everyone was eager to discuss the question of how it is to live in a technoscientific world; but observers would have failed to find among us the common set of principles of an established school. Finally, although I would rather not dwell on the matter, I can say on the basis of personal acquaintance that the age-range of the participants spans at least six decades.

Several papers raised issues about that double-edged sword we call information technology (IT), which promises to give us all the facts that anyone might want about anything, and also too much of it. [There is a prayer in the Rgveda that displays spiritually the attitude many of us now share "informatically": Oh Lord, thank you for the plentiful rain. Now stop it."] Two papers discussed the inseparability and mutual interdependence of today's science and the new technologies, and thus emphasized how dated are the old pictures of science (as coming first, producing knowledge, and being affected only by own "rational" decisions) and of technology (as coming later, and being merely engineering or "applied science"). Two more papers raised ecological issues; another discussed the nature of scientific measurement, then and now; and still another spoke in praise of the glorious world of film and recording media opened up by the new technologies of imaging and sound. Finally, an acquaintance of mine read part of a chapter from his new book (released by MIT just a few weeks earlier), and he and I had a third opportunity to trade insults over our differing interpretations of Heidegger, following earlier exchanges in New York and Dresden.

The conference site, Hotel Sacro Cuore

In general, as is certainly appropriate in a Mediterranean milieu, the presentations proceeded at a leisurely pace—no more than 2-3 a day—and if discussion of one paper ran a little long because it was interesting, that was considered a bonus, not a breach of schedule.

The local Umbrian wines were wonderful. The views from the Casa Sacro Cuore were spectacular. The high-90s temperatures were neither.

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