

Some Changes in Editorial Policies

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Two significant changes are being made to *Topoi*'s editorial policies, effective immediately: submissions for so called “extra-topos” articles are no longer accepted and will be replaced with a new article type, i.e. open commentary, while an Advisory Board is being created to support the editor-in-chief in evaluating and selecting proposals for new thematic issues. In what follows I will briefly illustrate the nature and rationale of these changes, and then take the opportunity to comment on what kind of editorial oversight *Topoi* uses for special issues—which, in our case, constitutes the totality of all the issues, thus making the matter especially important.

1 From Extra-Topos Articles to Open Commentaries

Topoi, as its name implies, is organized in thematic collections, assigned to guest editors. The journal, however, has always been open to consider also “extra-topos articles”, that is, submissions that were not tied to any of the ongoing thematic issues. This was done because, as my predecessor and founding editor Ermanno Bencivenga put it, the journal did not want its structure to become its own straightjacket. This is still a valid concern, and always will be, yet I believe there are better ways to ensure *Topoi*'s flexibility. Thus from now on extra-topos articles will no

longer be accepted for consideration, and instead we will activate a new category in the online submission system for open commentaries.

Let us first see why extra-topos articles turned out to be a less than ideal option. The main problem stems from the very structure of the journal: precisely because *Topoi* is organized in thematically consistent issues, the addition of a single article outside of the current topic looks extremely odd and quite out of place. The fact that scholars interested in the journal are aware of this fact has two further consequences, both undesirable. On the one hand, publishing one's best work as an extra-topos article is definitely not a good idea, so most extra-topos submissions end up being, not surprisingly, of lower quality than the average: this in turn leads to a very high rate of desk rejections, which are always disappointing for all parties involved. On the other hand, in the rare instances in which a very good contribution happens to be submitted as an extra-topos article, we are proud to publish it, but also aware that the authors are not getting enough out of the deal: while all published extra-topos articles are excellent pieces of scholarship, their citation record is nothing to brag about—again, not surprisingly, since *Topoi* readers are not looking for that type of article in our journal.

This is why extra-topos articles are now being replaced with open commentaries. An *open commentary* is defined as a brief paper (no more than 3000 words) that directly and critically engages with one or more articles previously published on *Topoi*. “Engaging” means not just mentioning in passing a certain article, but rather making it the main focus of the new contribution. This format will justify the publication of the accepted commentaries on *Topoi* rather than anywhere else, ensure that attention to past issues does not fade over time, and still leave ample freedom of choice to potential contributors—in its 35 years of

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publication, *Topoi* has covered virtually every topic of philosophical interest, so authors will not suffer from lack of options. Submissions for open commentaries will be made via *Topoi*'s Editorial Manager and rigorously peer-reviewed, after an eligibility check performed by the editor-in-chief. While I hope to keep desk rejections to a minimum, they may still occur whenever the submitted contribution does not match the required format (e.g., it is not a commentary, but rather an autonomous paper in disguise), or fails to meet minimum requirements of academic quality.

2 *Topoi*'s Advisory Board and the Selection of New Issue Proposals

For a long time, new issues of *Topoi* were assigned to guest editors by invitation from the editor-in-chief, typically after consulting with the Editorial Board. Over the last few years, however, we started receiving an increasing number of unsolicited proposals for new issues, most of which turned out to be of excellent quality—indeed, some of the issues I am most proud of having seen published originated from this type of proposals. For some time this influx of new ideas could be handled without a formal selection procedure, due to the lucky combination of three factors: the high quality of the incoming proposals, as mentioned; the fact that the journal was deliberately pursuing an editorial policy of expansion, so it was eager to welcome suggestions for generating valuable content; and the proactive role played by the Editorial Board in supporting the editor-in-chief in evaluating these proposals. Now, however, we find ourselves in the enviable position of having to keep our own growth under control: at present *Topoi* has no less than 20 thematic collections at various stages of preparation, and as a result our backlog has been steadily increasing. To avoid that it grows too much, measures will have to be taken, including a more restrictive policy in accepting new proposals for thematic issues. Assuming the quality level of these proposals is unchanged from the past, this will mean refusing to host even excellent collections, but this is simply something we cannot avoid at this point.

Therefore, to ensure that the selection process remains absolutely fair and rigorous, a new Advisory Board has been created: this consists of six members of the editorial board, plus the editor-in-chief, and their task will be to evaluate new proposals for issues of *Topoi* and decide whether to accept them or not. The current Advisory Board will stay in charge for 5 years, and I am proud to inform readers that the following scholars have accepted to serve on it from 2016 to 2020: Carla Bagnoli (Università di Modena e Reggio Emilia), Zoe Drayson (University of California at Davis), David Godden (Michigan State

University), Francesco Guala (Università di Milano), Fenrong Liu (Tsinghua University), and Anna Marmodoro (University of Oxford). These colleagues have been selected based on the quality of their scholarly achievements, the complementarity of their research interests and backgrounds, and their continuous commitment to the good management of the journal. I welcome this opportunity to thank them for accepting my invitation and taking upon themselves this key responsibility, and I look forward to working with them in shaping the future of our journal, together with the rest of the Editorial Board.

3 A Policy of Trust

Recently, a very prestigious philosophical journal, *Synthese*, attracted much criticism due to the publication of an article that included passages found to be homophobic, sexist and offensive by several readers, as well as being irrelevant to the argument made in the paper.¹ Whether these charges are confirmed and what the consequences will be is not something I am interested to discuss here. What matters for *Topoi* is the fact that the incriminated paper appeared in a special issue, and this led to widespread questioning on the degree of scrutiny characteristic of special issues—so much so that the editors of *Synthese* later announced a moratorium on special issues for their journal.² This is how Justin Weinberg at *Daily Nous* phrased his doubts on the whole process: “What is the actual level of editorial oversight regarding special issues of journals? Are articles in special issues at *Synthese* (and elsewhere) peer reviewed? [...] Is the opportunity cost of special issues worth it? Think of all of the articles that *Synthese* rejected in order to make room in its publication schedule for this issue and ones like it”.³

¹ The incident was first described and discussed quite thoroughly on two philosophical blogs, *Daily Nous* (<http://dailynous.com/2016/01/20/hey-did-you-know-logical-pluralism-is-connected-to-homosexuality/>) and *Feminist Philosophers* (<https://feministphilosophers.wordpress.com/2016/01/20/homophobic-and-sexist-rant-in-synthese/>). Further contributions were later made by Catarina Dutilh Novaes (<http://www.newappsblog.com/2016/01/in-defense-of-journal-editors-who-make-mistakes.html>), Eric Schliesser (<http://digressionsnimpresions.typepad.com/digressionsnimpresions/2016/01/when-journal-editors-reject.html>), and Jonathan Jenkins Ichikawa (<http://blog.jichikawa.net/2016/01/no-more-free-labour-by-me-for-synthese.html>). The author of the incriminated paper, Jean-Yves Béziau, also commented on the whole affair (<http://www.jyb-logic.org/synthes1>), although this did not help much in clarifying the matter.

² Source: <http://dailynous.com/2016/01/27/statement-from-synthese-editors-moratorium-on-special-issues/> (last consulted on March 1, 2016).

³ Source: <http://dailynous.com/2016/01/20/hey-did-you-know-logical-pluralism-is-connected-to-homosexuality/> (last consulted on March 1, 2016).

In the wake of similar incidents, I believe it is in the interest of the whole scholarly community for prominent journals to clarify how editorial decisions are made and where responsibilities lie. Besides, the matter of how special issues are handled, and whether they are even worth publishing, is of course of capital importance for a journal like *Topoi*, which publishes only special issues. For the sake of brevity, from now on I will discuss the matter as if the choice of assigning a special issue to certain guest editors is made autonomously by editors-in-chief, whereas in reality the decision is reached after some collegial deliberation (as it will happen in the new Advisory Board I just introduced, for instance). However, putting my considerations in terms of editors-in-chief and guest editors simplifies the exposition without changing its substance, so I will avail myself to that abstraction.

Following the recent *Synthese* affair, the received wisdom on the proper oversight of special issues now seems to be that:

- (A) Editors-in-chief are fully responsible for everything that gets published in their journal, therefore...
- (B) Editors-in-chief should personally check every single article of a special issue (or of any issue, for that matter), either by reading it directly or by reviewing the peer-reviewing process (should we call it “meta-reviewing”?), to ensure nothing unacceptable gets published.

I happen to agree completely on (A), while utterly disagreeing on (B)—which, as I shall try to explain, does not follow from the former at all. That editors-in-chief are responsible for what is published in the journals they manage is the necessary side-effect of their editorial authority: to paraphrase one of the notable philosophical aphorisms of our age, “with great editorial powers come great editorial responsibilities”. But the fact that editors-in-chief *are* responsible does not entail anything on how they should go about making sure these responsibilities are properly met. Minutely checking on every paper and/or its peer reviewing process is certainly one way of doing it, but I am not convinced it is the best one—even assuming, as charity requires, that this policy is actually implemented by any real editor-in-chief, and it is not just a rhetorical fiction. For one thing, in journals with a wide scope of interests, as it is certainly the case with *Topoi*, editors-in-chief are bound to be glaring incompetent on a significant proportion of the articles accepted for publication, not due to any shortcomings on their part: asking them to be the ultimate authority on whether these articles should be published or not is risky, unfair, and irresponsible. While this problem can be attenuated by outsourcing some of that authority to a wider pool of editors (which is why our new Advisory Board presents a rich variety of competences, by

the way), this still ends up granting editors-in-chief and their cohorts even more power than they already have. Yet the considerable power yielded by editors is the second favorite target of those who criticize the current system—the first being the alleged incompetence/dishonesty of those editors, whenever something like the recent *Synthese* affair appears on the horizon. The list of lamentations against all-powerful editors is as familiar as it is reasonable, insofar as it identifies real dangers inherent to the system: the power of making or breaking careers at a whim, the possibility of favoritism and connivance, the unavoidable leverage an editorial position grants in dealing with other colleagues, and so on. Precisely because these concerns are reasonable, those who harbor them should think twice before invoking more power to editors as a solution to the (very rare, apparently) publication of materials of unacceptable quality. Finally, and most pertinently to special issues, having editors-in-chief double-checking and second-guessing acceptance decisions already made by guest editors is a sure sign of distrust towards the latter, as well as of poor confidence in the work of reviewers. Unfortunately, it has been proven time and again that distrust breeds sloppy work and deception, as much as trust promotes virtuous behaviour and due care. Granted, trust is something to be earned, but guest editors are selected (assuming editors-in-chief are doing their job properly) precisely because they are to be trusted for the task at hand, based on a variety of considerations—scholarly competence, professional integrity, past experience, level of motivation, and more. Once this trust is rationally given, it should not be withdrawn later on, unless something new comes to light. Thus as a general rule editors-in-chief should not spend their time looking over the shoulder of the same guest editors they appointed.

Trust is indeed the solution adopted by our journal to guarantee proper quality of all guest edited issues, that is, *all* issues. Once guest editors are assigned to put together an issue of *Topoi*, they experience no further interference from the editor-in-chief or any other member of the Editorial Board, as long as they comply with the journal rules in terms of peer-reviewing procedures, thematic scope, formatting guidelines, length constraints, etc. While the editor-in-chief still reads the majority of the accepted articles, this usually happens during proof-reading (since that is indeed a process where more eyes are always valuable) and it is not intended as a final check on the merits of accepted contributions. In fact, guest editors of a *Topoi* issue are directly in charge of accepting or rejecting papers: as long as this happens within the guidelines set by the journal, i.e. based on anonymous and fair peer reviewing, the editor-in-chief never intervenes in the process.

This trust is risky, as any true form of trust is: it could be abused by guest editors, either malevolently or due to sheer

incompetence, and then the editor-in-chief and the rest of the Editorial Board would probably fail to notice the problem until too late—that is, until something that should not have been published actually is published. In light of such vulnerability, however, the very fact that this trust has never been abused so far⁴ conveys an important lesson: trust cultivates trustworthiness. Precisely because our guest editors are acutely aware of the responsibility placed in their hands, as well as of our trust in their ability to handle it, they feel inspired and even obliged to live up to it. Having an editor-in-chief policing their every move would destroy this virtuous attitude and ultimately lead to a less satisfying outcome.

To be clear: opting to trust our guest editors rather than turning our journal into a Panopticon does not alleviate in the least the responsibilities of the editor-in-chief, if and when something goes wrong. It does change the nature of that responsibility, though: under the constant monitoring approach, editors-in-chief are expected to closely check each and every article, so if something spectacularly subpar gets published, they are blamed for failing to detect it; under the trust system we propose, editors-in-chief are expected to select wisely their guest editors, so when something fishy gets published, they are blamed for their poor choice of guest editors—namely, for having chosen someone who let it happen. The potential for blame is there either way, as it should be: as mentioned before, it goes hand in hand with the considerable powers editors wield.

Since constant monitoring and trust ensure the same level of accountability for editors-in-chief, the question of what system should be preferred must be adjudicated on different grounds. I believe an argument could be made for the superiority of trust in terms of cost effectiveness, but this is not my reason for favoring it when it comes to *Topoi*. It is rather a choice on what kind of world we want academia to be. Constant monitoring of special issues by editors-in-chief is a policy predicated on the assumption that guest editors, left to their own devices, would either

connive with unscrupulous authors or simply lack the ability to detect them. In fact, the former is usually the preferred hypothesis: when something goes wrong, a sort of conspiracy theory frame of mind spreads like wildfire in the academic community, with people sadly shaking their heads and lamenting the corrupted ways of high-power scholars—curiously, even when the incident does not in fact involve anyone with any significant amount of power. It is exactly this frame of mind that I find most corrosive of a healthy academia, even more than the occasional mishap that whips it into a frenzy; or, more accurately, the main damage these mishaps inflict to our scholarly endeavor is exactly to corroborate that climate of mutual suspicion. And since constant monitoring embraces that suspicion, rather than fighting it, I cannot abide it as a sensible policy for keeping journals honest.

Trust is better, without being more lenient, and certainly without being naïve. The incentives against misbehavior are still in place: if something unworthy gets published, the guest editors who accepted it are rightly criticized for failing to exert the necessary oversight, and the editors-in-chief are justly blamed for selecting guest editors who were not up to the task, while the whole journal suffers a blow to its reputation. The crucial difference, however, is that here guest editors are granted the power to make their own decisions, with no strings attached. That power, and the fact that it was granted, makes all parties accountable, as well they should be. But it also signals mutual trust in each other: this, I argue, is the default attitude we want to have among fellow scholars, rather than the opposite. Until proven wrong.

Reference

Paglieri F (2015) Reflections on plagiarism. *Topoi* 34(1):1–5

⁴ Incidentally, the extended plagiarism recently discovered in an article we published in 2007 was most definitely *not* a case of a guest editor abusing the trust placed in him by the journal: as it was discussed at the time (Paglieri 2015), plagiarism rather constitutes a fraudulent practice enacted by an author with malicious intent, and as such it is a breach of the basic trust all scholars should (and do) have in each other. The only culprit is the plagiarist itself, and this is where all the blame must be placed in similar instances.