

Letter on Synthese Special Issues

We have concluded our investigation of the reasons a special-issue article of Synthese, which caused offense to people in the community, was published without our approval. We have also concluded our deliberations on the future of special issues in Synthese. Before sharing the results with you, we would like to affirm, once again, our commitment to feminist and LGBT values, our responsibility for every article published or accepted for publication in Synthese during our tenure, and our dedication to high professional and humanistic standards in our editorial work.

To our great surprise and dismay we have discovered that 6% of the special-issue articles accepted for publication in Synthese in the last two years were not sent to the editors in chief for a final inspection and decision, comprising in total 13 articles. These articles were sent to production based solely on the recommendation of guest editors, in violation of our explicit instructions to send each article approved by a guest editor to the editors in chief for a final decision. This oversight occurred due to human error in handling the editorial manager system used by Springer, our publisher. An underlying reason is that the process of sending papers approved by guests editor to us (editors in chief) was manual rather than automated, leaving room for human error by employees handling a large number of submissions to diverse journals. We would like to stress that we have double-checked the twelve articles we did not know about and they all meet the established standards of Synthese.

It is, however, clear that this situation is unacceptable, and we are determined to do everything within our power to prevent it from recurring. Since the editorial manager system that serves Synthese is used for all Springer journals (and by others publishers as well), it cannot be easily changed to fit the needs of an individual journal. We have studied the system's capabilities, and in cooperation with the Springer editor who oversees Synthese, we have revised the procedure concerning Synthese articles. Although some steps in the process still require human involvement, the step of sending each special-issue article approved by the guest editors to the editors in chief is now fully automated, so that no human action is needed. In addition, we have made sure that the person who handles the Synthese editorial manager operations is fully aware of the need to be especially vigilant with respect to special issues. Still, human error in some stage of the process is always possible, and for that reason we have instituted regular checks of the systems to find out whether any special-issue article was sent to production without our approval. These checks will be conducted every three months, and we will closely follow their results and initiate further adjustments according to need.

But the question of special issues goes beyond the technical procedures and we have taken this opportunity to deliberate on the future of special issues in Synthese. The question of special issues has engaged the philosophical community recently, and we hope our deliberations will contribute to the general debate. We have asked ourselves three questions: (1) Do special issues make a worthy contribution to the development of philosophy and to the philosophical community? (2) What are the risks involved in publishing special issues? (3) What is the balance of (1) and (2)? Without going into great detail, here is a brief summary of our conclusions:

We believe that special issues do make a valuable contribution to philosophy and the philosophical community. A special issue offers an opportunity to develop, investigate in depth,

and/or examine, from multiple perspectives, a special philosophical topic or the works of a particular philosopher or a philosophical movement. Special-issue papers are subject to the same standards and the same double-anonymous review procedures as all regular Synthese papers, to ensure high quality. In our experience, special issues are often of an especially high quality, as reflected in their high ranking both in terms of readership and in terms of citations.

Special issues are usually initiated by members of the philosophical community, often in association with a significant conference or workshop. As such they reflect the present interests of the community and take the pulse of philosophy today, so to speak. They give young researchers an opportunity to gain experience as editors, often in cooperation with more senior members of the field. They help in obtaining sponsorship for conferences, encourage serious contributions to conferences, and lead to further development of ideas presented in professional meetings. In a sense, they give the philosophical community partial ownership of its journals. To further enhance this feature, we will open all new special issues to submission by anyone in the community.

But inevitably, special issues involve risks. The main risks are due to the fact that the editors in chief must relinquish some of their responsibilities, placing them in the hands of guest editors who, in certain cases, may not have much experience, whom they don't know personally, and whose standards might differ from theirs.

After weighing the contributions and risks involved, we have reached the conclusion that the contributions outweigh the risks, provided appropriate measures are taken to minimize the risks. We have further concluded that it is very important to make the review process of special issues transparent, so concerns by members of the community are allayed.

As a result of these deliberations we have decided to end the moratorium on special issues in Synthese, while taking measures to reduce the risks involved and explaining our procedures to the public. A detailed description of the review process for special issue papers has been posted on the Synthese webpage. Here, we will limit ourselves to a few clarifications (some of them were already in place, but it is important to re-emphasize them):

- (i) Special issues are initiated by members of the community through a formal proposal that includes a detailed description of the proposed topic, justification of its value and relevance, evidence of the readiness of guest editors, a list of committed contributors, and abstracts of their papers.
- (ii) Each special issue will be accompanied by an open call for papers, so that anyone in the community can contribute to a special issue. Guest editors will distribute the call for submissions widely. In response to these calls, potential authors will have five months to submit their manuscripts to a special issue.
- (iii) The acceptance process is subject to the same high standards as all other Synthese articles.
- (iv) All submissions undergo a double-anonymous review. Two acceptance recommendations by qualified reviewers are required for an acceptance recommendation by the guest editor.

(v) Junior guest editors are encouraged to team up with more senior guest editors and vice versa.

(vi) The final decision on each article approved by the guest editor is made by the editors in chief.

We would like to add that in Synthese there is no competition between general submissions and special-issue submissions. A general submission article is NEVER rejected because there are too many special-issue articles to leave room for it. Each submission to Synthese, either general or special, is accepted or rejected on its own merits.

As we open our journal to new special-issue proposals, we are committed to closely supervising these issues, further improving our procedures, monitoring our editorial manager system and team, being open to the community's concerns, and drawing lessons from past mistakes. We are only human and cannot promise we will never make mistakes, but we are committed to doing our best to contribute to the development of philosophy and benefit the philosophical community.

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