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Immediate understanding of situations in philosophical practice

1. How to understand life immediately

Let's begin with a sentence of Søren Kierkegaard: "It is perfectly true, as the philosophy says, that life has to be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards. A proposition which, the more it is subjected to careful thought, the more it ends up concluding precisely that life at any given moment cannot really ever be fully understood; (...)"¹ Reflecting on this regarding philosophical practice we come to a central question: Is it possible to understand the now concerning part of someone's life, the situation somebody is in, *immediately*? – Or is Kierkegaard right and any given moment is more or less a riddle?

If someone looks back, reflects on his knowledge and life experience – or if philosophical practitioners do this together with a client – one can try to understand life, can try to understand the meaning of certain situations biographically, one can try to see patterns in life and by dialog or inner dialog work out the context of somebody's life. But even when looking backward, one begins here and now. One is forced and compelled to immediately understand the actual situation in this very moment. The question remains whether *immediate understanding* – without reflection, without looking backward – is possible and if it is possible, what it is. This understanding can't be based on reflection in the normal philosophical sense because that needs time. In a century where everything seems to become quicker one often forgets that real reflection is as slow as it was in antiquity.

If understanding would be based on reflection and thinking only, we would hardly get any further. Then Kierkegaard would be definitely true. But for normal life – and for a big part of philosophical practice as well – reflection and thinking are not needed because other ways of understanding help us to deal with the situations we are in. Reflection and thinking are an essential part of philosophical practice, but they are not necessary for the immediate understanding of situations. If life has to be lived forward, as Kierkegaard says, this is only possible if we have this immediate, not-reflective understanding of the life situation one is in. Otherwise one would not be able to do anything.

Immediate understanding of life situations can't be reflective, but it is a form of bodily awareness and action. The subjective body of someone (in German phenomenology "Leib") has the capacity to immediately get into contact with the whole situation and act out of this form of realization. The bodily action out of awareness of the situation can be so immediate and complex that one wonders how this can be possible without reflection. Just take the well-known example of a car-driver who totally unforeseen gets into danger but is capable to immediately react in the right way and therefore doesn't have an accident. How can he in parts of a second realize the dynamic situation as a whole, judge it, find out the suitable ways to act and do it? – What he does is not just a reaction because the situation is totally new and therefore he has no suitable reaction patterns as an advice how to react. Also there is not enough time to analyze the situation. Nevertheless in most cases he will be able – if there is a possibility to prevent the accident at all – to successfully deal with situation because as a car driver he is used to feel as one with his car. The philosopher Hermann Schmitz calls this phenomenon "Einleibung", a term which is very difficult to

¹ S. Kierkegaard, *Die Tagebücher*. Dt. von Theodor Haecker. Brenner-Verlag 1923, S. 203; engl. transl. by D.S; Journals IV A 164 (1843).

translate into English.² This feeling as one with something is very common: if someone often uses a tool or plays an instrument he more and more gets into the situation of using it and doesn't distinguish himself from the instrument – it is felt as belonging to the own body. Or take the example of driving a bicycle: to drive it is just possible if one bodily can become one with it. When the felt difference between me and the machine doesn't exist any longer.

But these are just special ways of *Einleibung*. *Einleibung* is the fundamental way of perception at all. Because generally we do not perceive single data, but our momentary life situation as a manifold wholeness. We are able to concentrate on just a small part of this manifold wholeness but nevertheless this is the basis. By using the term *wholeness* I refer to the insight of Hermann Schmitz that a situation is a “chaotic manifoldness”³ which does not contain a definable number of single data, but is a wholeness. This term shows that our perception is not constructing a model of reality out of perceived data – because with the overwhelming number and multiplicity of them that wouldn't work – but works on the basis of synesthetic totalities in form of impressions of situations. So everything perceived changes the impression of the whole, usually undiscernible, but from time to time just a subtle difference can change the whole impression. The bodily perception of this connects it to the feelings and to immediate situational understanding. This understanding is just an understanding of totalities – as every situation is. If we want to understand details we have to pick them out, separate them from the situation (as far as possible).

That is what we learn from being a little child onwards: understanding situations, know what they mean for us, for our life, understanding life as a situation in which we are. Later on we begin with abstract knowledge, with reflection as well. We never stand still in learning to understand situations because we have to conduct our life, we can't just help with knowing facts and data, but rather we are compelled to understand life, to understand others, to understand new different and difficult situations.

Everything has its meaning as it is embedded in situations. If one wonders, one takes a step aside – as if it would be possible to not be in a situation⁴ – and looks at a thing or a person or a fact as such, as if they were not embedded in the chaotic manifoldness of a situation. When Aristotle says, wonderment is the starting point of philosophizing,⁵ he shows that normally we don't really reflect on the things of the world – because they belong to well-known situations we are accustomed to. Even if from another point of view the same things might be very peculiar and cause questions – for the one who is accustomed to this situation the things are normal, have their meaning or just belong to the situation as a whole. Sometimes it takes long, until the peculiar really becomes a problem.

If Aristotle is true then philosophizing starts when we begin to look to accustomed situations *as if* they were strange and unfamiliar. So philosophizing is somewhat strange, always. Because it speaks as if all this everyday understanding of each other and of situations wouldn't exist and as if we had to make long, difficult and puzzling reflections in order to understand the world – or even ourselves. This counterintuitive basis of philosophy clearly shows the paradoxical nature of philosophical insights. They have nothing to do with immediate life experience and understanding, but with theoretical knowledge and analysis.

So, as Kierkegaard says, in order to understand life with reflection or by philosophizing on it, you have to look from now back to the past, but life has to be lived by understanding its challenges immediately, bodily subjective – in the way I described as *Einleibung*.

2. Understanding in Philosophical Practice

It seems easy to agree that every healthy human being has an immediate understanding of life situations independent from reflection, but what does this mean for philosophical practice?

² Hermann Schmitz, *Der unerschöpfliche Gegenstand*, 2007: Bouvier Verlag, Bonn, 3. Aufl.; 3.2.2, S. 137 ff.

³ chaotische Mannigfaltigkeit; see Schmitz (2007), 2.5, p. 65 ff.

⁴ The longing for this is the real Archimedean point, and it is the arché of philosophy and science. But life is different, without any method to lift the world from the hinges. One is midst in it. While philosophy tries to look from the outside and analyze situations, practice means staying within in an experienced way.

⁵ Aristotle, *Met.* I, 2, 982 b 18f.

If we agree that philosophy and especially science tries to find a point distant to the situation it researches, let's say a sort of analytical Archimedean point, in order not to get involved in the situation and therefore gain objectivity, then "practice" means to remain within the situation and acting out of it in an experienced way. These are two very different ways to deal with the world, theoretically and practically. And along with them go different ways of understanding, the understanding mainly based on theoretical reflection on the one hand and the immediate understanding based on bodily awareness, on *Einleibung*. Which way of understanding is predominant in philosophical practice?

If philosophical practice wants to take its base, philosophy, serious it cannot be the immediate understanding. If wonderment is really the starting point of philosophizing, as Aristotle says, we have to wonder about those things we immediately seem to understand in everyday life. Philosophy makes life complicated at first.

But the understanding of what is happening in philosophical practice, especially in counseling, is misled by seeing it as a rational dialog only. A dialog is never rational, we may be just able to focus on the rational part of it in a more or less successful way. It cannot be fully rational because the bodily, the emotional, the awareness and the acting part (and others) of it don't cease to exist. So rationality is, as the old Greeks saw it, mainly *concentration* on a certain way of understanding the world.⁶ So even the concentration needed for reflection is bodily. No separate *nous* is ruling the rest. Thinking is a bodily occurrence.

Immediate understanding takes place as one of the subjective body, which includes the perception of moods and the perception and feeling of emotions. Even in philosophical practice one cannot hinder that reflection is just a small part of understanding. As the action of thinking is experienced bodily as well, for instance as concentration, as relief (when we find a solution), as attraction and so on, these experiences can be used as a guide to a clear grasp of personal situations. Hereby they can be of methodological value in philosophical practice.

3. To open new ways for *Einleibung* in Philosophical Practice

There are three important reasons to visit a philosophical practice or events of it: curiousness, interest and need for orientation. These three groups of people come with different anticipations. It's nice to have people coming out of curiousness, but they won't stay. Even if they make positive experiences they may come one, two or three times and then stay away – at least for long. Sometimes they come back for longer after several years, but then it's not curiousness any more but real interest which guides them. The people coming out of real interest for philosophical thinking are our main customers. They often stay long or come back after a while. They are the backbones of a philosophical practice. The people who are in need for orientation mostly come to us for consultation. They in most cases have experienced a puzzling situation which first disturbed their immediate understanding of life and thereafter the reflective understanding of it as well. But in most cases they already tried to analyze the situation themselves. So in the dialog with a philosophical practitioner they will not present the puzzling situation itself, but the not entirely successful analysis of this situation as well. Therefore what they want seems to be a better analysis of this life situation. But the real problem is deeper. The real problem is that the momentary life situation can't be understood immediately. The client is not able to entirely get into it, he can't feel as one with it, the *Einleibung* is not fully possible, he might feel like one who wants to ride a bicycle but fails again and again. So just analyzing the life situation of the client is just *one* part of the assistance a philosophical practitioner can offer. "Analyzing the life situation" I understand in a very broad sense of an open dialog about the meaningful aspects.

But let's take the example with the bicycle: can anyone else really be of some help for someone who wants to learn riding it by just using words? Can this person do more than just encourage the driver to try? So is the task of the philosophical practitioner another than encouraging?

To boost someone's courage is a worthy task, nevertheless most philosophical practitioners won't see themselves mainly as coaches. They would trust in the relevance and impact of the dialog much more. The

⁶ For the old Greeks the power of thinking was situated in the diaphragm, because they felt it after longer concentration and reflection; see H. Schmitz, *Höhlengänge*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997; p. 92 f.

dialog opens an inner space and structures it, insights become possible and this helps to confront with the new, foreign, puzzling experiences because some orientation regarding it has been found.

But the strange, unfamiliar experience might remain unfamiliar and puzzling. Some terms to describe and to grasp it in a general way might not be enough for a deeper change, the alien or even weird which hinders the *Einleibung* resists to cease. Unnecessary to say that most really philosophical problems are like this: since millennia people are puzzled by them, but despite of many suitable terms, concepts and answers which have been found they remain puzzling and odd.

There are answers which have the effect that our diaphragm relaxes, we can breathe freely again and feel satisfied. Such rare answers are called “solutions”. Sometime we can at least abolish misunderstandings and thus clarify the problematic setting. Also there are answers in the form of small narrations like jokes which allow us ironic distance to the situation and deeper understanding of its existential impact at the same time. They might be the summit of what can be reached if the problem or question is a really philosophical one. They allow the diaphragm to relax and us to breathe deeply again – and they allow us to really feel why a certain situation puzzles us. In this special way it is possible to teach someone how to ride a bike mainly by words – so to say. Understanding an existentially meaningful situation means to get into contact with all levels of our existence, means to feel its relevance as well as to realize how it touches me bodily as to grasp it with reflection.

4. The Adventurous Experience of what is Strange

Let us now have a look on what hinders the immediate understanding, the *Einleibung*. What is it, that is weird, alien, strange and puzzles us? – The stranger is strange because he is unfamiliar to me. The stranger, the strange situation, the strange environment – all are just existential because of the need not to get alienated from oneself. One needs to keep up one’s identity. It might be interesting and even lustful to widen the borders of it, to experience different states of consciousness where the borders of strange and normal are different – for instance with alcohol or other drugs. But coming back to the normal state of life, one should be able to feel acquainted and familiar with one’s own life situation and slip into one’s usual identity again. That normally is no problem, just similar as in the morning when one wakes up and might need some time to become the one who one is. This is *Einleibung* as well.

Einleibung is not only perception of the world around us but it allows us to feel as one, as not alienated from oneself and the world. So immediate understanding is the usual way of feeling familiar with the world and with me. But inner growth is just possible if one feels at unease, if alienation creeps in the bones and limbs. Then one is urged to move on in a different way, urged to open up to new perspectives, urged to ask questions, urged to make explicit the reasons of this uneasiness. Without all the weird, strange and alien experiences we just would remain to feel comfortable and stay stupid. Stupid, but lucky – that is not the way human beings can be human. In order to be able to lead a life we are urged to confront with the strange and gain a new understanding of our situation. We have to integrate the troubling experiences somehow and – if we succeed – make a new step in the development of our personality. Then we might feel comfortable again – for a while.

The main challenge for this – I want to call it “deep learning”, because it needs this deep impact on all levels which enables a real change – is to make the jump from description and analysis of the situation to the meaning of what touches me within this puzzling, alienating experience. This meaning is what is needed to do the crucial step, to act in the way that suits the situation.

Human life is a continuous challenge to build up and ensure one’s identity, a challenge often seen as a quest, an adventure with deep impact on one’s personality. One of the best known literary quests is the Quest for the Holy Grail. The remarkable characteristic of it is that one can’t be sure whether it really exists and how it can be found. So perhaps one is in search of something which is just imagination. Nevertheless, the quest for the Holy Grail is existential, because the Holy Grail is equivalent to the meaning of life and therefore the main orientation of a person. Therefore it is told that the Grail brings the life force back to the community.

As philosophers we know, that questions where solutions easily can be found, usually are not philosophical questions. The real philosophical questions often remain open despite of all the reflections that have been made about them. That is equivalent to the Search of the Holy Grail, which shall not be found easily as such, because it is the quest itself which generates meaning. One can only be on a really existential meaningful quest for something which does not exist or cannot be reached easily. It is our longing that guides us, and the longing brings us into contact with our borders and with the alien, the strange, the unfamiliar beyond our borders.

This longing lets human life become an adventure: because it has no fixed meaning, it urges us to search, to remain on an unsecure path, to pursue the quest, to be adventurers...

As philosophical practitioners we are used to open questions, used to keep questions open in order to strengthen the personality. Seemingly fix answers may be good walking sticks on the path of life – at least for a while. But they don't help with new orientation. Orientation in life for all of us is a quest, and philosophical practice is a *métier* to assist in it. We are no wizards, not even wise men or women, but we are experienced in being on the quest for wisdom as life needs it.

Any experience of the other will be a liminal experience, and even if it appears as dangerous it will be helpful for the building up and structuring of the personality. As a liminal experience it befalls me, it irritates me, it arouses anxiety. It brings me to a vital threshold. If this can be consciously crossed, the personality can grow, can be widened and rooted. Philosophical practice can assist to do so.

What is experienced as irritating is the strange, the alien, the unfamiliar within me and without. As nobody completely knows and understands himself, as furthermore all of us are changing all the time, we are always confronted with the other in ourselves. But if anyone is a ship of Theseus,⁷ what then is the basis of identity, the basis of experiencing oneself as oneself? – The basis for that is subjective bodily experience; it allows to experience and make borders and allows to experience others as unfamiliar, alien or strange. If the subjective bodily experience is severely disturbed, endangered or annihilated (as in developmental phases, existential crisis, illness or death), identity is at risk.

Now it is vital to strengthen the subjective bodily experience again by building up relations to the worrying, frightening other. As philosophical practitioners we can be of some help to integrate the other conceptually in the order our client already has. The order builds up from bodily experience, but can be reached with words and thoughts as well. Here philosophical practitioners are challenged to find the appropriate words and terms together with the client. If that is possible it strengthens the subjective bodily experience by relating the other to it in an understandable way acting in relation to it becomes possible.

In order to understand the irritating, alien other one has to understand how oneself is irritated. So the starting point should be the irritation as it is bodily experienced. The main polarity of bodily experience is tightness on one hand and vastness on the other.⁸ In this irritating experience these two can be found mainly as anxiety and longing. The experience of the other generates anxiety, it generates tightness. One can focus on it and ask, where exactly it is felt, whether there certain fears which can be named, one can ask what especially in the alien situation arouses fear. If the tightness of the anxiety looses and it becomes clearer what it is about, one can change to the other side and ask for the deep longing of the person, which up to now has been covered by the frightening situation. This allows the person to focus on the other as well, because there couldn't be any longing without any other. But now it is the positive other I long for, not the endangering other I fear. The getting into consciousness of this positive other strengthens the personality by re-orientating. Our deep longings are the main directions we have in life, and therefore speaking about them means taking them serious and strengthen the personality.

Now the philosophical dialog about these experiences can root them: the former irritating situation, the experience of something dangerous, weird, becomes one of the experiences of life and can be understood, as relations to it have been build up. As the philosophical dialog is grounded on subjective bodily experience, the identity of the self is strengthened.

⁷ Plutarch, *Vita Thesei* 23.

⁸ Hermann Schmitz, *Der unerschöpfliche Gegenstand*, 3.1.4; S. 121 ff.

One may ask whether this is still philosophical practice or not therapy. It is, so to say, theory. A theory that tries to explain how philosophical practice may function. It should not be seen as a how-to-do guide. For me one of the main questions was: As human beings are not only cognitive beings, but mainly bodily and emotionally driven ones, and even as cognitive beings are not *only* rational ones – how then can a métier based on rationality like philosophical practice be successful? How can we get through to the whole person? – I think, in all of the successful ways of philosophical practice we must have found a way that allows us to touch the person as a whole, to let the words become vital subjective bodily experiences as well. More than that, all those existing ways of philosophical practice must have the impact that they strengthen immediate understanding again, because they open up and relax bodily as well. If it were not like this, philosophical practice would not be enriching for these persons, would not support the process of orientation in life. But this it can do, because it embraces the whole person.

I am sure that you as participants or guests coming from all over the world to this conference on philosophical practice in Bern have brought with you enough interest and enthusiasm, so that the conference will be an affecting, embracing experience for all of you.

Further Literature

- The up to now only publication of Hermann Schmitz in English is the following essay: <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11097-011-9195-1> .
- Bernhard Waldenfels, Grundmotive einer Phänomenologie des Fremden, 2006: Suhrkamp-Verlag, Frankfurt a.M.