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Philosophical Practice
opens up the trace of
„Lebenskönnerschaft“

Philosophische Praxis
führt die _____
„Lebenskönnerschaft“
im Schilde

Lecture for the
„6th International Conference on Philosophical Practice“, Oslo, July 2001

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

You probably won't know the German compound noun „Lebenskönnerschaft“ – and this is good. Precisely for this reason I have recently introduced this neologism as a word creation. Just like twenty years ago when I decided to bring into discussion Philosophical Practice, I was looking for an „unoccupied“ term which was broad and not yet defined, a term which could point the way and link necessary considerations, required programs and new experiences

However, I appreciated that at the same time this virgin term could easily be connected to honourable traditions: At that time, in the case of Philosophical Practice, it could be connected to the original tradition of a philosophy interested in practical proving which strived for a way of life worth respecting. Nowadays, in the case of Lebenskönnerschaft, it could be connected to the highly noble philosophical term of „virtue“ – for what else are virtues than a praiseworthy mastery and trained, developed, practised, perfected „right capacities and good abilities“? Thus, the new terms allows us to renew traditions which have been worn out or went down or which have lost their former reputation by a new spirit going different ways, they allow us to bring them back again into discussion and to equip them with a fresh significance – whereby I take it for granted that such attempts of reanimation are meaningful, desirable or maybe even necessary. To justify this assumption in a convincing manner is the task of the actual introduction and application of new terms, which since long happens with regard to Philosophical Practice whereas with regard to the newborn term Lebenskönnerschaft this work has merely started with my most recently published book.

Here, at the opening of the Sixth International Conference on Philosophical Practice which very kindly has been organized by our Norwegian friends and colleagues, I would like to make another small contribution to this work of introducing and establishing. Hence my title:

„Philosophical Practice opens up
the trace of Lebenskönnerschaft

So much, as it is right and proper, for the introduction. And now, as announced, some considerations which could give a first profile to the term Lebenskönnerschaft (English you may say: „life mastery“ ...).

I would like to recall Nietzsche's „last man“ who has „invented happiness“. What will he be doing when he realizes that he is unhappy in contradiction to his destiny? He will go to psychotherapy. „I have forgotten how to blink“, he says to his therapist and asks how it could have come this way. He is depressed and discouraged. Something must have happened, he says to himself, something must have happened to me, something must have gone wrong in my life. But what? „I have forgotten how to laugh“, the last man says. And he doesn't even know how to mourn. – Therapy can start now.

Nietzsche's „last man“ will not be visiting the Philosophical Practice. Who shows up there doesn't want to be treated or cured. He is looking for clarity about himself. „I have been trying very hard, but I failed. For sure I am making something wrong. I just ask: what“. He doesn't complain to be someone prevented from life, but – implicitly - confesses to be someone who up to now hasn't understood how to live right. He wants to learn. As a guest of the Philosophical Practice, he is welcome.

What is the difference?

Whereas the client of therapy assumes that life is something which „normally“ succeeds as long as he is not hindered or exposed to bad influence, the visitor of the Philosophical Practice has a feeling that life has to be led, to be mastered if it shall succeed. If it is lived down automatically, worn out in the prosaic routines of everyday life, thoughtlessly entangled between here and there, life becomes grey, boring, distracted, shallow and finally a deadline expired without meaning. What is lacking in such days which are just lived down is the weight which – like the keel of a boat – makes us walk upright; what is lacking is the middle in which we rested like a door in its hinges, the tension in which our ambitious goal has put us.

Without counterbalance and without demanding much from oneself, life becomes the slave of our small, ridiculous wishes, stumbles to and fro and dreams of better days just as if those fall from heaven. The decision which was necessary is postponed, the beginning which should be made has to wait again, and unnoticed the moments pass, one after the next.

Meanwhile the one question is locked out which is destined to put us into a philosophical unrest: This is the question what originally or finally matters or what life would be like if we understand it seriously. Only he whose life is shaped as an answer to this question reaches a serenity which owes itself to calmness and an easiness which owes itself to well-considered understanding. Philosophical Practice is in its service. Philosophical Practice has Lebenskönnerschaft in mind. – And now you might ask: Not the art of living? – My answer is: No.

What is the difference?

In order to quickly clear up possible misunderstandings and to lock out confusions, I will give Lebenskönnerschaft a first rough profile by contrasting it to the presently popular „art of living“. This is a detour which has become necessary after the term which I had raised fifteen years ago from its century-long slumber - by the way, on an ISPP colloquium – has meanwhile gotten into bad company and lost its philosophically ambitious character due to its popularity. (So much for hinting at the term's historiography). And now for the decisive distinction:

„The idea of the art of living is happiness; the idea of Lebenskönnerschaft is to deserve happiness.

The expert of the art of living shapes his life; the life master (Lebenskönner) proves himself.

The expert of the art of living makes his way, the life master stands by that what is right.

The expert of the art of living is flexible, the life master is upright.

The expert of the art of living gives his life a meaning, the life master fulfils it.

The expert of the art of living is looking for life's curiosities, the life master wants to be cured from a dull, wrong and poor life.

Whereas the former knows how to turn a necessity into a virtue, the latter stands for virtue in time of necessity.

The expert of the art of living flees the shadow and is looking for the light, the life master flees the twilight and is looking for light and shadow.

Whereas the expert in the art of living gives an answer to the question of life, the life master is looking for the question to which life is an answer."¹

But maybe the decisive point still hasn't been made yet. And that is: Lebenskönnerschaft is more than a prudent or even wise care for oneself; it rather is a practically proved knowledge of the world. Nobody is a life master who is not able to estimate the conditions in which his life has to be proved.

This doesn't mean „to cut one's coat according to one's cloth ...“ This is a task for the clever prudence which uses the means for any kind of purpose: To get its merit, prudence just takes the situation as it is. The intellect, voice of the prudence, adjusts to the world, says Joubert: „Wisdom seeks harmony in heaven“. Wisdom, however, is the guide of Lebenskönnerschaft, and its task can't be defined in a more demanding way.

For the third time: What is the difference?

Lebenskönnerschaft is not primarily looking for success, and especially does not chose any means to reach this goal. Rather, Lebenskönnerschaft reflects on the purposes. Thereby, Lebenskönnerschaft resists the currently ruling cynicism who cooperates with the bad reality. Lebenskönnerschaft does not run with the pack just as Socrates did not dance to the tune of his judges. This is the meaning of „seeking harmony in heaven“. Lebenskönnerschaft tries to live in such a way that it can take responsibility for itself in front of the last authority, even if it is the farrest. And if we don't know anything about this authority – as probably is the case, at least with us –, the life master anticipates its hint, to which he is enabled by remembering. We may not know what is right and wrong – the best however knew this and acted in accordance with their knowledge. The life master finds his measure in those who were the best, who were examples and who were straight, whose disobedience was their destiny, whose doubt about the course of things rooted in their belief in what was right. In this way he is devoted to virtue, which was another term for excellence, and freed himself from the half-and-half mediocrity of the socialized human animal. He takes a small path and a narrow door. By doing so he escapes irresponsibility, in which we are kept no longer by the authoritarian word from above but rather by the friendly and broad shallow babble which lulls us to sleep on the stages of public opinion. Opposed to this drifting of opinions the following is valid: Philosophy is the courage to think differently – which does not mean: arbitrary. Our thoughts are justified neither by the charm of the differing nor by the appeal of the merely interesting but rather by

¹ Aus: Gerd B. Achenbach, Lebenskönnerschaft, Freiburg-Wien-Basel 2001

connecting to the longest thread of the developing thinking, which is present to him who remembers as the history of mind.

So much up to now for a first clarifying approach. But now the question: What problems does Philosophical Practice invite by looking together with its visitor for the trace of Lebenskönnerschaft rather than merely aiming at health or at the absence of disturbances and reasons of mourning?

In practical respect, Philosophical Practice is again confronted with the old problem that Socrates already dealt with, namely the question if virtue is teachable. Now the question is: Can Lebenskönnerschaft be conveyed in counselling?

I believe that the first thing necessary is the courage to realize that and in how far we are amateurs, in which respect we are dilettantes and to what degree we are beginners. To this belongs the understanding of ourselves as learners. It is just the same as with virtues: It is difficult to make them plausible if their counterparts, the vices, have vanished and become useless. Precisely this has happened. And this at first impedes the promoting talk of Lebenskönnerschaft. Can we even have a single thought of Lebenskönnerschaft if we are not allowed to examine whether there are failures, non-masters? And would this not imply – watch out for a long list - that a whole battery of vices, that unteachability, stubbornness and beastliness, envy, malice, spitefulness, resentment, cynicism, laziness, sluggishness, inattentiveness, reservedness, lack of understanding, dullness, dawdling, narrow-mindedness, rawness, silliness, the ridiculous and narrow, pedantry, short-sightedness (I am not talking about the eyes behind the glasses), that arrogance, unreliability, insincerity, falseness, lack of control, distractedness, rage, moodiness, a sharp tongue, groundlessness and meanness, intriguance, egoism and injustice, that egocentrism, egomania, self-opinionatedness, gossip, heartlessness, ruthlessness, depravity, carelessness (where it doesn't belong), delay (where decision and action would be necessary), that the inability to forgive, to forbear and to goodwill, that nonsensical and inability to cope with life, that cowardice, mistrust, dogmatism and fanaticism, petty-mindedness, greed, conceit, stupidity and unimaginativeness, that (to use a higher register again) rashness, futility, thoughtlessness, foolishness (a term which obviously has died out – which holds true only for the term) and folly (of which the same can be said) ... - can we even have a simple thought of Lebenskönnerschaft if all that could not be named anymore?

With this long list I had the following in mind: I wanted to make plausible that Philosophical Practice demands from the practitioner the ability to make his guest aware of the wrong, the confused and the misleading without discouraging him or forcing him to „defend“ himself or to save his honour. In how far such an ability can be achieved is a question which asks for long discussions unanswerable within the frame of this timely restricted lecture. Maybe just a hint instead: Only he who does not confuse his guest with his obvious reality or – to put it in a more poetic way – only he who is able with a calm stability to see the other „as God has meant him to be“ – in the nowadays demanded worldly version: how he could meet his „destiny“ – is allowed to enlighten in a way which unavoidably will be understood as criticism and

objection. But here, one thing is helpful: The wrong, as the misguided and less true, loses its heavy weight under such a perspective, it becomes the stuff from which comedies are made, and so it offers itself as a field for humour. Humour already cooperates with the potential mastery of the guest if it makes his inability appear as a comical reality.

As I said: This is a difficult chapter which needs an exhausting treatment. But that much is certain: Philosophical Practice will have to answer the question how a beneficial criticism is possible, and that is a naming of the wrong which does not paralyze but strengthen confidence, which does not discourage but encourages.

And now a second point: If we suppose it were possible to make our guest realize the wrong – would this at the same time mean that the old question was decided whether *Lebenskönnerschaft* is teachable?

First of all: We can't make anybody a life master. We can only help him to become one. And therefore the question: What are we able to do for it?

I will take an example. How does one become a chess master? For sure, knowledge of the teachable rules alone won't be sufficient. The knowledge of the right, good or even the best moves is not simply one of „allowed“ moves. I think it is useful to mention this *en passant* in order not to confuse our striving for *Lebenskönnerschaft* with what is presently *en vogue* as „ethics“, because here what is at stake is often the question what is „allowed“ and what isn't. Correct in this way of differentiating were all those moves which don't offend the rules. But: These are simply not the good moves. And a master will say: The move you just made is correct but still it is wrong. Why? Because there would have been a better one. Maybe he could even say: „Look, this is the only good move in your situation.“

So far we have the impression that chess is an excellent example for questions concerning *Lebenskönnerschaft*. A life master is not somebody who only does what he is allowed to do. This would be a boring, narrow-minded and pedantic person.

Also we won't say that a life master simply is somebody who sticks to that what is demanded from everybody. We might praise him for that, but we actually expect such correctness as „self-evident“ just as we expect a gambler not to cheat. Up to now it still is a question of rules, moral obligations, duties, regulations which manners demand, about customs which have to be considered etc.

However, *Lebenskönnerschaft* means more than that: namely understanding what a good life is – and would it be the same if somebody said a chess master understood how to play well?

Yes and no. The difference is the following: In the case of chess it is already decided what is played, due to which rules. It is furthermore clear what is at stake - namely winning in the end. But this is differently in the case of life. The even more important difference is another one: Chess, even if it seems to be a good example at first sight, still is ruled and decided by just one ability; let's call it the intellect. Pure rationality and calculation decide. That's why it was possible to design computer programs against which even good players don't have the slightest chance. *Lebenskönnerschaft* however is not a question of strict, consequent thinking and

rational calculations. Or are we going to call someone a life master who says he knew quite well why he should be glad – but still he isn't? And now the question which concerns us: How would we „teach“ him to experience gladness?

Someone else says he doesn't love life. Does anybody know an argument which „convines“ him, so that he will improve his attitude and start loving life from now on?

Is it clear what I am aiming at? What is lacking in all this attitudes relevant for life is not a knowledge that could be taught in form of sentences or of teachable insights. What, then, is lacking? And, whatever it is, would not the philosopher in the Philosophical Practice be competent for that what is lacking, which means for an other knowledge beyond a mere knowledge of objects and sentences? May I add here that with our striving for Lebenskönnerschaft we are finding back to an (almost forgotten) task of philosophy which asks of her more than insights or theories which might be true or wrong, a task which can be expressed in the following question: How do we „reach“ a human being?

Aristotle has said with just a slight didactic exaggeration:

„We don't want to know what courage is but be courageous, we don't want to know what justice is but be just – and we rather want to be sane than to know what sanity is ...“¹

Philosophy which is dedicated to such a highly demanding task can be recognized by questions of the following type. I quote Paul Feyerabend:

„Of what use is an argument which leaves the people unmoved?“²

A corresponding aphorism of Hans Kudzszus runs as follows:

„Where we haven't convinced a brain we weren't able to convert a heart.“³

Do you hear how this tone reflects the problem which is our question? Who talks in such a manner asks how one becomes good – or what would prepare for him the way to Lebenskönnerschaft. And presently I am discussing what kind of „knowledge“ or philosophy or philosopher might be helpful. What is Philosophical Practice able to achieve in this respect, and how?

We know the answer of Socrates as traduced by Xenophon. The question of justice was answered by him every day, the master explained to Hippias, – „not with my words but with my deeds I demonstrate it“.⁴

And I would like to add that this was the only convincing lesson. The pupils of Socrates made an experience, with an impressive living example they saw and experienced what Lebenskönnerschaft is, they lived it through with him, and this did not remain without an impact. To come back to the quotes from above: Socrates had an effect by „converting the hearts“ which prepared the brains to incorporate „arguments“ in an appropriate manner. What he said gained weight because it didn't leave people „unmoved“. – In short: The person

¹ Aristoteles, Eudemische Ethik, I, 5

² Paul Feyerabend, Wider den Methodenzwang, 1978, S. 38

³ Hans Kudzszus, Ja-Worte, Nein-Worte, 1970, S. 42

⁴ Xenophon, Erinnerungen, IV, 4

witnesses the matter.

And this holds true not only for him but for all „leading human beings“ (as Jaspers called them), for Confucius, for Buddha, for the Nazarenian, for Franz of Assisi and for others whom we owe an idea of what is possible for human beings because they were what they said, because – no need to shy away from this allusion – their words became flesh.

To dare a conclusion: What reaches a human being are figures and stories. They make understandable what wisdom means – and this in a way which doesn't „leave one unmoved“.

If the question is how *Lebenskönnerschaft* can be achieved within Philosophical Practice I will answer – even though in a still very unspecific way: By examples and by stories. Walter Benjamin has called these the actual medium of advice. I quote:

„Every true story contains its open or hidden use. This use might be a moral, at another time a practical instruction, at a third time a saying or a life rule – in every case the narrator is a man who has advice for his listener. If 'to have advice' begins to sound a little old-fashioned in our ears, it is due to the fact that the teachability of experience vanishes. As a result of this we don't have advice for ourselves and for others. Advice is not so much an answer to a question but rather a suggestion concerning the continuation of a story (which is about to unfold itself). In order to reach the advice you would first of all be able to tell this story. (Leaving aside that a human being is open for an advice only as far as it explains his situation). Advice, woven into the cloth of lived life, is wisdom.“¹

You can count this passage to the guidelines of Philosophical Practice. By the way, I have quite correspondingly put stories in the centre of my book on „*Lebenskönnerschaft*“, because *Lebenskönnerschaft* is a pupil of wisdom, and what *Lebenskönnerschaft* learns are stories. Why? Because stories help developing a sense for the individual, for that which is incomparably true.

As far as we develop this sense, we support our capacity to know of and about life and finally to master it exemplary. This is the way towards *Lebenskönnerschaft*.

Once more, I would like to give an example. How does one „learn“ to compose? Just listen to Beethoven's symphonies! Not one which wouldn't stand for itself, which wouldn't have its own and unique character. The masterpiece of art, it says, is *sui generis*, not a „case of“ a general kind (or rule), but rather a „case for itself“. Science may strive for a „theory of the symphony“ – the important musician composes this one.

But now for the question which concerns us (with regard to *Lebenskönnerschaft* and how we can become life masters): What has enabled the composer to his work? How did he become a master of music? He will hardly have composed his one symphony according to a „theory of the symphony“ or due to a catalogue of rules „how to compose a symphony“. He does not orientate himself to such a scheme. (The result would be nothing than a mass product).

No, he has taken another way (leaving aside skill, gift, and – how it was once called –

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Der Erzähler*, in: *Illuminationen*, 1980, S. 388

genius). He has listened to and studied a lot of masterpieces, he knows all of the important works - in fact as individuals. He knows, in other words, examples without using them as patterns, and of course he won't „copy“ that what he admires. Beethoven has looked very carefully at the way Bach and Mozart and Father Haydn composed. And what has he made out of Bach and Haydn and Mozart? Beethoven!

In this way we learn to live by those who lived excellently. Such people have always been called and respected as „wise“. Philosophical Practice orientates itself to them. By them, the trace leading to Lebenskönnerschaft is opened up.