

On Wisdom in Philosophical Practice ¹

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Dear Colleagues!

It is the first time for me to visit your big country. I am a newcomer in America, and of course I am glad that this „International Conference on Philosophical Practice”, which is already the third of its kind, as a significant event gave me the opportunity to visit the States and New York. Therefore I would like to thank you for your invitation in several respects, and I enjoy doing so.

By admitting my lack of experience on your continent I also confess that, as an „Old European”, it is only by rumour that I know about American customs and traditions. One of these rumours which are peddled in Germany deals with the local customs in the conference milieu. From several sides I have been given an advice which I should urgently follow: I should begin with a joke or at least with an intelligent statement guaranteeing applause, in any case with something easy and pleasant, due to the custom. A friend of mine said to me: „Gerd, be aware of your terribly German style to attack your audience immediately with the full seriousness and heavy weight of your topic. You better don't do this in New York”.

By now I hope that you take this little prologue story for the supposed greeting debit, and that you release me from the inevitable opening joke. I even have to ask you explicitly to do so, because when I was working out this lecture in Germany, that I am presenting you here in a shamefully miserable English (I feel like a severely disabled person invited to dance) – when I was working out this lecture I was not at all in the mood for any serenity – on the contrary. You will soon see why.

Now please imagine that somebody comes to you for counselling who explains to you the following problem: Since weeks, he has been working on a lecture called „On Wisdom in Philosophical Practice” which he soon has to hold as the opening lecture of the „Third International Conference on Philosophical Practice”. This might be an honour, and he does appreciate it, but at the same time it is a catastrophe for him. In short: He is at his wit's ends (you often hear this phrase in counselling). The situation is desperate.

Now, what would you do? You certainly would ask him about the meaning of this project and how it came to take this unhappy course. Besides, I think it would be better not to ask your visitor about the „why”, nor to tempt him to give any interpretations and explanations or reasons, but rather to invite him to tell the story in detail simply by asking „How did it all come about?”. I think it would also be better to be prepared for the case that your visitor overhears or even ignores this little hint and nevertheless doesn't reveal the whole story but comes up with an interpretation of it. This interpretation shall make the misery „understandable” and is supposed to „save” his somehow shattered standing. But do not take this for more than it is – take it as a little challenge for your calmness. It is the ABC of all wisdom to know that we are merely inhabitants of this world, not its conquerors, and that things often turn out to be different from what we thought them to be, especially when we deal with human beings who follow their own ideas. In such cases, things demand from us to agree to the way they go.

The „interpretations”, however, that the visitor confronts you with – take them just as anything else that human beings do in order to put themselves in a better light. In other words: Make sure not to put them on the scales of truth. But this was only a marginal remark.

Now, your visitor, whom I asked you to imagine, starts explaining that he „really” is a „professional lecturer” and that he has had many years of routine in his profession, so that his difficulties don't seem to be understandable or even credible. But so be it.

And our visitor goes on explaining that his difficulties that have piled up to a monstrous mountain are, of course, self-made. He has overburdened his project with exaggerated ambitions, and now it has failed. In other words: He simply has taken on too much. It would also be nonsense to put into a lecture of one hour which should be subject of a whole monography.

I hope that up to now you have not been tempted to comment on that! A lay man, tempted by the confession of „exaggerated ambitions”, might come up with some general „wisdoms” ... It might be true that one of the so-called „Seven Wise Men” (some of the still disputed counts even go up to seventeen), a man called „Chilon of Lakedaimon”, once said:

„Not too much of anything. Prosperity belongs to moderation.”²

However, on the one hand it is not necessary to remind the visitor of this general rule, because he himself already

¹ Translated by Patrick Neubauer.

² „Leben und Meinungen der Sieben Weisen. Griechische und lateinische Quellen”, transferred and explained by Bruno Snell, Munich, 4th edition 1971. P.9.

hinted at it, and on the other hand it is not more than a general rule of cleverness. But how often does wisdom lie in the very exception to rules of cleverness! And, finally, you don't know yet whether the difficulties that the visitor wants to describe are of such a kind that he wants to overcome them in any case. For it might be *clever*, for the sake of an easy life, to avoid problems and difficulties, but the question remains whether the voice of *wisdom* advises the same. As opposed to cleverness, wisdom lacks the security of a measure from which to decide, and herein lies the kinship to philosophy. Therefore, if you are looking for a measure, better stick to Mister Montaigne's advice. He says:

„Wisdom has its deformities and needs moderation just as folly does”³

because only then will you hold back your ideas and for the moment rely on listening, which is the soul of any dialogue.⁴

Your visitor is now going to tell you what it is all about concerning his special ambitions, of which he supposedly is a victim. Because up to now he has primarily defined the young movement of philosophical practice by using negations, which undoubtedly has been right and advisable.

It is always like this: Just as the spirit usually knows in the first place what he does *not* want (Hegel), so it is the first and justifiable step of introducing philosophical practice to distinguish it from others.

The intention was, first of all, to reject questionable expectations and to avoid natural and common confusions. So what then had to be done? First of all, philosophical counselling had to be definitely distinguished from psychological-therapeutic psychohygienics, from theories about the soul and its guidance. The difference towards Christian spiritual welfare had to be made clear, and, finally, the philosopher's practical probation in dialogue with human beings, who challenge him with their problems, had to be distinguished from the milieu of academically enclosed philosophy with its nursing of traditional texts. All this was undoubtedly necessary in order to prevent severe misunderstandings and misjudgements, which everything new has to face because it is measured in comparison to what is already known.

Now, however, the visitor is convinced that time has come to take the second step. Having carefully declared what philosophical practice is *not*, he now has to say *what* it actually is and how it can be characterised.

What is its destination? What is its task? How does it orientate itself? What ground does it rely on? What tradition does it come from? In what kind of profile does it recognise itself? – and so on. And precisely this is what he wanted to do in his lecture. He was quite aware of the fact that he wouldn't be able to pursue this challenging project if he hadn't had the courage this time to keep closed all side doors and to keep down all his doubts with which he usually blocks himself. He was quite aware that this time he just had to care about the outline and not about details.

I don't really like to interrupt this imaginary report, but I would like to make a remark „from offstage”: At this point, by consciously using a casual remark, I probably would have tried to confirm the visitor in his still unstable intention to go on in detail. Never forget that most people are not used to have a concentrated listener who is ready *to let himself be interested*. Therefore it shouldn't surprise you if your visitor suspects you to be merely another ordinary listener who just keeps listening for a short while, and probably only does so in order to achieve the right to have his turn. Thus, quite probably your visitor might by now use a phrase like „All this doesn't interest you anyway. I should make it short.”. And then you might answer: „On the contrary: Take your time to calmly develop the subject, and give me the time that I need in order to follow you”.

And then I might ask if there was something like a main thesis that puts forward the basic intention and hints at that what has to be expected.

And there really is such a thesis that our imaginary visitor can present, whereas ... I might as well do it myself, as you already know, because it is quite obvious *whom* I have sent to your counselling practice ... Here now the main thesis. It goes as follows:

„For actually *all* questions which philosophical practice is asked there is just *one* single answer from which all further insights can be derived. All further inquiries are founded in this answer and are thereby justified by it. The various statements made by philosophical counselling are unified by this answer into a consistent and common profile. This comprehensive answer is:

Philosophical counselling is the strive for practical wisdom.

This information qualifies the counselling as *philosophical*, determines its *orientations*, makes understandable its sceptical stance towards theoretical *knowledge claims*, explains its careful *relation to the problems* that it is confronted with, remarks on the thoughtful *self-relation* of the philosophical counsellor and on the relation towards his visitor. – In short:

Wisdom is to be introduced as the key notion of philosophical counselling.”

I would like to put in a suspicion here. You might not have had any difficulties with your strange visitor, except for the curious (although constructed) fact that he explains to you *your* very business.

3 3rd book, 5th part.

4 Cf. the author's „Eingelassenheit – oder: Zuhören ist die Seele des Gesprächs” in: *texten+schreiben* 1/92.

But you might have asked yourself why *I myself* am unfolding the whole subject in such a complicated and entangled way, rather than presenting directly what I have to say.

In this case I had to ask back: Do you remember what your visitor said to you in the very beginning? He said that the work on his lecture had become a catastrophe, and he was at his wit's ends. You do remember, and, asking for some further patience, I just have to add the reminder of the French moralist *Joubert*:

„There is not enough wisdom ... in those of our judgements and feelings that are not filled with patience.”⁵

One question: Can you imagine that your visitor might really want to tell you something about his lecture which he has already half rejected? And wouldn't that be understandable? Ideas with which he has gone pregnant for quite a while – and now threatened by abortion, the *finis* of demolishing his ideas: That is no matter easy to swallow for anybody, no matter that could just be passed over in order to proceed with the agenda.

Furthermore (allow me to add this little piece of theory): Philosophical practice generally is the place for talking over once more what has been rejected and censored, in order to closely examine in a kind of revision once more the rejected as well as the mechanisms of rejection. And the result quite often is that finally the rejecting judgement has to be rejected... – According to this idea I might have asked our visitor if he might not have brought with him his still fragmentary lecture and if he might not want to read some parts to me. Maybe I could understand then better why his work had stagnated ...

And just as one might have expected, he brought his typoscript and said: „Well, why not? If you want, here is the puzzle ..., a bunch of pieces, hardly put into a certain order. But some explanations are necessary. The lecture was meant for an academic audience, so that one might allow oneself a certain ruthlessness, which you of course avoid when explaining it face-to-face to just *one* person, don't you?” I think we will agree with him ...

„Well”, he said, „wisdom as the key notion of philosophical practice, that's the point. And this is meant in the most serious way. That is:

I maintain that in philosophical practice, philosophy as practical wisdom comes back to 'itself'. Or: As philosophical practice, philosophy renews its primary and original impulse in order to fulfil it in a new territory. I quote a passage that connects to this thesis:

This undoubtedly very self-assured positioning of philosophical practice within the notion and history of philosophy finds its first justification in looking back at its origins: What philosophy sought – already since its early markings by the ›Seven Wise Men‹, stronger however and better reflected in the figure of Socrates –, what philosophy has sought was not primarily ›pure‹ knowledge, but a conscious, that is an acceptable condition and form of life. Philosophy dealt not only with cognition but, more demanding, with the successful life. Philosophy in the tradition of wisdom was the necessary effort to learn ›how to live‹, or, in a Socratic way, it was the ›care for the soul. Animals are what they are by nature, but we only become human beings just in so far as we are becoming wise – this as a summary of the basic idea how ancient philosophy was instructed.⁶ Wisdom was seen in awaking from everyday thoughtlessness and in becoming aware of oneself, in order to achieve a life which was not just lived down somehow, but which, as a life which is ›led‹ by us, deserves our agreement and allows us to say ›yes‹ to ourselves.⁷ The knowledge concerning life and practice, which promised to lead to such a consciousness and which was already sought by the ancient philosophers, is a kind of knowledge that can be described as „knowing about”. Wittgenstein will say later:

„A philosophical problem has the form: 'I don't know about.’”⁸

I add a further question: „What is it that matters?”, and I declare that philosophical practice connects to those philosophical traditions which were sensitive for such questions.

What now follows is unfortunately a rather complicated passage, namely a distinction, suggested by *Wolfgang Wieland*, between different *kinds of knowledge*. I appreciate this distinction because it allows for a naming of the *condition of the effectivity of practical philosophy*. Thus, it will become clear in how far a certain way of thinking is of practical concern. And at the same time it will become plausible in how far wisdom matters as an *insight that is shaping life*.

Now, I quoted Wittgenstein who said that philosophical problems had the form of „not knowing about”. And I myself added that a further representative question was about that „what matters”. Reflected in these two phrases, although quite generalised, are the form of the problem as well as the shape of the question with which visitors enter philosophical counselling. They are irritated by experiences, they had to realise that they treated important questions in the wrong way, they are about to see that they got stuck „on things which do *not* matter”, they somehow don't know how to go on in life, they might have the feeling of being on the wrong track, they might feel

5 Joubert, in: „Französische Moralisten”, edition Fritz Schalk, Munich 1974. Vol. II, p.246.

6 Cf. for example Pierre Hadot: „Philosophy as a way of life”, London 1995.

7 Not before long I treated this relation extensively in: „Lebensform und Therapie”, in: Neue Rundschau 2/97. Cf. also the author's „Lebenskunst. Sieben Annäherungen an ein vergessenes Wissen”, in: „Weisheit”, ed. Alaida Assmann, Munich 1991, pp. 231-238.

8 Wittgenstein: „Philosophische Untersuchungen”, WA I, p. 302.

overtaxed, they might have realised that they had put the weight of their lives in the wrong scales or that they haven't yet found their „true weight of life”, and so on. And now the question that we have to ask ourselves: How do we respond to all this? I will proceed with the next passage from the lecture which unfortunately, as I already mentioned, is rather „academic” in style ...:

In any case we are not looking for *theoretical knowledge* about facts but rather for *practical knowledge* that allows us to put *ourselves* into a certain relation to these facts. Dealing with the reported difficulties, you don't ask: What do I know about them?, but rather you ask: What kind of stance can I take towards them? What is asked for is a reasonable attitude towards life's risks which were revealed biographically, not what could objectively be said about them.

To use another pun: You don't ask *what* you should think but *how* you should think in order to master life. Or, in terms of Wolfgang Iwig's distinction: The content of communication in philosophical practice is not *propositional* knowledge that could objectively be addressed as „*knowing-that*”, but it is a *non-propositional* knowledge, that in a certain sense could be called „*knowing-how*” and that I want to describe as „*knowing-about*”.

The main difference between these two forms of knowledge is the following: Whereas propositional knowledge is a kind of knowledge in the form of statements for whose validity it is of no importance *who* puts them forward, or if at all they are put forward by somebody, the non-propositional knowledge of „knowing about” would always be „*knowledge of someone who knows*”. Precisely through this it becomes part of the history of wisdom, which always has been thought of as the *constitution of a particular person*. The knowledge of the wise is *incarnated* knowledge, which is witnessed by a certain way of life. Thus, it doesn't express itself in statements, but statements are at best used to speak *of* it and *about* it. Whereas propositional knowledge is *claimed* and *justified*, nobody gives an *account* of his non-propositional knowledge: It is the knowledge of the one who knows. And it is a kind of knowledge which is not only shaped by the one who knows, but which the other way round also shapes him. Thus, *changes of non-propositional knowledge also change the one who knows*.⁹

It is this often ignored connection which justifies the possibility of a practical effect of philosophy. By transporting not only knowledge or facts but *insights*, philosophy changes him who gains insight by its help. Whereas the theoretical perspective puts an eye on something, philosophy changes the view itself. A changed insight makes things appear in a different way, because they are seen „with different eyes”.

Now, when you say that in philosophical practice „insights are exchanged”, this expression should not be understood in the usual way, that is that the one explains his attitudes to the other and vice versa, which merely would lead to a „back and forth” of opinions and theoretical fragments. Rather, in philosophical practice the visitor's insights are developed, examined, broadened, evaluated, challenged, deepened, sometimes dramatised, sometimes joyfully diminished, sometimes modified.

However, the visitor changes himself in the meantime: By looking at the world in a different way, he has become someone who now has different perspectives. Having become someone who looks at things in a different way, who hopes and fears in a different way, he himself has become somebody else. This however is not the goal of philosophical counselling – the goal is only the clarification of the insights he expressed: we are only allowed to work on them. We might experience that he becomes somebody else, but this is entirely his business. Philosophical practice resists all those current attitudes which aim at changing man.”¹⁰

Your visitor, however, hardly believing that you have been listening attentively to the whole complicated passage, now even dares to ask you whether he might not present another two short chapters, because only then would he be able to explain why his whole work had crashed.

And if you now agree to this, he will explain what else he had in mind: His question had now become on which *particular* philosophical tradition philosophical practice, with its self-understanding as practical wisdom, could connect with. This also meant to explain why certain other traditions, that could have been taken into consideration as well, do not allow for such a connection. „The chapter”, he says, „has a heading”. It is:

„b.) Philosophical practice does not administer knowledge – connection to the heritage of Pyrrhonist scepticism”

And now the corresponding text, supposed you agree that he continues:

It won't be a surprise for you when, within my attempt to connect philosophical practice to the eldest traditions of wisdom, I will now hint at the Greek-Roman Stoics. Certainly the Stoics, like no other philosophical movement,

⁹ Cf. Wolfgang Wieland: „Platon und die Formen des Wissens”, Göttingen 1982.

¹⁰ As I developed in detail in my opening lecture „Zur Mitte der Philosophischen Praxis” at the „Second International Conference on Philosophical Practice”, Leusden/ The Netherlands 1996. English translation in the conference reader.

thought of wisdom as the highest idea of human perfection, and sought it in the example of the wise man. At least one can say that, for instance, Seneca's „moral letters” can be read as an early form of philosophical counselling. But although I do respect this extremely serious human self-understanding, I do think that a direct connection is hardly possible today: We definitely have lost contact to the core conviction of the Stoics that philosophical thoughtfulness unfolds the „recta ratio”, which is the right „reason in harmony with the prevailing unity of Zeus, logos, and physis”.¹¹ We also have lost contact to their conviction that true care of the self leads to harmony with „universal reason” and to perfect tranquility. Rather, the history of philosophy shows that all the vigorous attempts to gain eternally true knowledge of the eternal truth, and to prevent all damaging doubts, have failed.¹²

The *Pyrrhonist scepticism* however presents itself as definitely more up-to-date. Just as Epicureanism and the Stoics, it was primarily guided by a *practical motive*, although they didn't link *wisdom* with secure knowledge, but just in the opposite way with *theoretical resignation*. The very attempt of reaching certainty in life by achieving truth was here seen as the reason of that uncertainty which overcame the „higher valued among the human beings”, because what they were looking for, a reliable truth, could not be found without any doubts and contradictions.¹³ Thus, Pyrrhonist scepticism developed towards that other kind of wisdom, namely to live with the indeterminacy of the question of truth, and to achieve the longed-for tranquility of the soul and „sea-like calmness of the mind”,¹⁴ by temporarily suspending judgement. Since then, wisdom for us has not been the possession of truth but rather the achieved insight that we do not possess a life-guiding truth without doubts and alternatives. *Wisdom connects with the hidden truth, which invites us to carefulness and modesty*, and not to an obvious and supposedly valid truth, which would lead to dogmatism and to the clouding of perception.

Such an attitude is represented in Walter Benjamin's wise advice not to give advice, but rather to make him, who came in order to *discuss with us, find* for himself that what is of advice for him. I want to recommend this wise warning to any philosophical counsellor:

„*Don't give advice against.* – He who is asked for advice should first of all explore the opinion of the questioner, in order to confirm it. Nobody is easily convinced by somebody else's cleverness, and few would therefore ask for advice if they had the intention of following something that is unknown to them. It rather is their own decision, already made inside, that they want to hear once more from outside as somebody else's ›advice‹. This recall is what they are actually asking for, and they are right in doing so. For it is the most dangerous thing to set into action something decided just ›for oneself‹ before letting it be filtered by speech and its reply.

Therefore he who seeks advice is already partly helped, and if he has in mind something wrong, it is better to confirm him sceptically than to contradict him convincingly.”¹⁵

Having finished this quote, your visitor might put aside his typoscript which he read, and starts looking at you. Can you imagine why?

I think he wants to check whether you have understood what he now thinks to be your task. I say it again in my own terms: He wants to see whether he has found a *wise* counsellor, wise in terms of *the tradition of Pyrrhonist scepticism*. How could such a counsellor be recognised? He could be recognised as wise – by the way in accordance with Benjamin's advice – if among the multitude of opinions he does not try to decide in favour of his own conviction *à tout prix* (at all costs), but if he rather is able to view his conviction from the perspective of the other and postpones the decision which side is the true one, and by doing so he keeps the judgement suspended. The average person, as it is well-known, puts the other's conviction underneath *his* own and doesn't endure any conflict. As you know, the sceptics called this rare virtue, which has to be expected from the philosophical counsellor, „epoché” and looked upon it as *the virtue of the wise*.

I would like to add: Nobody enters a counselling session and continues it if he can't rely on the *wisdom of the counsellor*. What could there be to present to the other, whose advice I am seeking, if he didn't try with all his powers to look for the truth of what I am thinking?

At this point I can't help presenting to you one of the *pensées* of the wise *Pascal*. His suggestion wonderfully connects to Walter Benjamin's advice. Pascal says:

„If you want to be successful in replying to somebody and in showing him that he is wrong, you have to pay attention to the perspective from which he views the matter, because seen from this point of view, it often turns out to be true. What you have to acknowledge this truth, but you also have to show him that point of view from which it is wrong. With this he will be content, because he now realises that he has not

11 Ernst Bloch: „Über den Begriff der Weisheit”, in: Complete edition, Vol. X. P.362.

12 For my estimation of the role of the Stoics in philosophical practice cf. my lecture „Schicksal und Charakter. Für die Philosophische Praxis ist vieles von Schopenhauer zu lernen”, in: Zeitschrift für Philosophische Praxis, 1/95.

13 Sextus Empiricus: „Grundriß der pyrrhonischen Skepsis”, Frankfurt 1985. P. 96.

14 Ibid., p.95f.

15 Walter Benjamin: „Illuminationen”, Nr. 318.

been wrong, but that he just forgot to consider it from all sides.”¹⁶

By now I might have meddled too far into this imaginary dialogue, which our half made-up visitor might have had with you – although, in order to justify myself, I might mention the fact that my own side remarks neatly fit into his ideas.

Furthermore: This is what philosophical counselling is like: It does happen that several voices interfere, for example when you are counselling couples, where you have *several voices* trying to get attention. This leaves the counsellor under the responsibility to give each voice the space it deserves and yet have an eye on the integrating whole. This calls for an attitude which is not common among philosophers, although there is a great model for it: Mister *Montaigne*.

The next chapter of the lecture, from which we have already heard some passages, is dedicated to this wise sceptic. And as we will soon learn: It is not by incidence that the whole project started to stagnate precisely in this chapter, and your visitor found no other solution from this dilemma than to address a counsellor – or to choose to present the lecture in such a way you are hearing.

But now let us allow him to read to us this small chapter as far as he has finished it. After that, we will see how to go on. Here now the text of the chapter, entitled:

„c.) Philosophical practice as proving of the philosopher,
and philosophy only comes second – connection to Montaigne”

The modesty demanded by the tradition of Pyrrhonist scepticism does *not* call for a complete withdrawal of the person, as it has become our academic habit of avoiding to say „I” – confer also psychoanalysis as absence of the analyst. Just on the contrary, it admits its own *subjectivity*, as well as it acknowledges the subjectivity of the other. And what is decisive is: The stressing of the importance of subjectivity is everything but a frivolous denial of truth or the drifting into a joyful arbitrariness. It only denies the idea that what should be true in a life-guiding sense can be true in a non-subjective way, especially because the question that matters can only be answered with regard to one particular life, with its particular circumstances and its unique biographic conditions. To put it in Hegelian terms: Truth does not decide *over* the concrete but has to find *itself within* the concrete. In order to do so, it gives priority to the concrete ... According to Walter Benjamin, „wisdom is only that advice which is woven into the substance of the lived life”.¹⁷

The model of such an attitude and learned scepticism, that has been achieved maybe just one more time, namely by Nietzsche, is without doubt Montaigne, the most self-willed among all masters of reflecting life. An indication of such a fine carefulness are remarks like the following:

„I don't want to say what should happen in the world; there are enough others to do so. What I want to say is what I am doing.”¹⁸

This limiting confession could be used as motto of his „Essais”.

Another reason why he is a model for philosophical practice is his saying that *life* with all its vagueness is the primary substance, on which all *philosophical reflexion follows only as second*. His maxim could be summarised as follows: Not living as it is thought philosophically, but thinking over philosophically that what is lived. Whereas formerly philosophy was *instructing*, as it still was for instance for Epictet, it now has become an attitude of attention and watchfulness that reflects on life. Montaigne's mode of thinking is not one of „*thinking for*” but rather of „*thinking over*”.¹⁹ Montaigne's question of an actual practical concern therefore is not „What should I do?” but rather „What am I doing?”

This corresponds to the following *principle of ethical reflection*: *The test of life is whether it can serve as an example*. Not whether I do what I think, but whether I can think what I do, is the decision to be made. Montaigne says:

„Besides, I have made it my rule to dare to speak out what I dare to do [...]. He who makes it his duty to say everything would also make it his duty to do nothing about what should be kept silence.”²⁰

Thus, Montaigne on the one hand relates to the tradition of philosophy as the art of living:

„Our great and marvellous masterpiece is to live rightly. All other things ... are merely appendages.”²¹

On the other hand, philosophy gets a different position, namely in the second row, where it belongs, especially as philosophical practice: The living and failing of the the visitor is the first and unstable ground, which we should not fear, whereas our doubts and correcting reflections on this life are merely second. We are not supposed to say how he should live, but we are asked to make him get to know himself and his own way of living, that is to enlighten

16 Pascal: „Pensées”, Nr.9.

17 Walter Benjamin: „Illuminationen”, Frankfurt 1980, p.388.

18 Montaigne: „Essais”, ed. by J.D.Tietz (1753/54), Zürich 1992, Vol. I., p.342. (1st book, chapter XXVIII).

19 In my lecture „Bauen Wohnen Nachdenken”, forthcoming soon as university print of the FHS Lippe/ Detmold, I developed this distinction between „thinking for” and „thinking over” in detail.

20 Essais III/5.

21 Essais III/13.

him about himself as far as possible.

So far, dear colleagues, you would have been informed by your visitor about his unsuccessful project. However, now his work got stuck in this particular chapter on Montaigne, whereas at the same time it was his remembrance of Montaigne which gave him the idea to present this disaster to you as philosophical counsellors.

Can you now guess where the problem lies – or at least *one* of the problems that are by now entangled like an unsolvable knot? While working out my lecture I had to endure a severe private catastrophe, or better: I was attacked by it – half creeping at me, half leaping at me. Anyway, I was thrown out of my usual path, and sometimes I even had problems recognising myself. My future became beyond estimation to me, and the most self-evident perspectives broke down. There were no new perspectives anymore which needed courage and confidence. I was even afraid of any new perspective, just as one is afraid of everything unknown in desperate situations. We have a term for such edgeless situations of being expelled from any center: We call it *crisis*.

Shattered in crisis any concentration, blocked the gates through which ideas usually flow in, paralysed the usual inner flight of thoughts, withered away the confidence which in better days makes us reach our goals.

But what would it have meant now to recommend Montaigne as one of the mindful and courageous forefathers of philosophical practice and its particular wisdom, but at the same time to lead a life according to two books: on the one hand a „public” life, cold and correct, without blood, flesh, and bones, without faith and catastrophies, without any joy and grief, without any fear and hope, without hesitations and high spirits, without sadness, anger, disappointments and anxieties, no word about this tiring back-and-forth between anguish and resignation, the heart’s voice not being allowed to speak anyway, and the soul wrapped up in bandages ... – thus, the life on the one hand in a „*scientific*”, academic, dry book, bereft of all personality, a book which would be decent and could be shown around –

and then, on the other hand, a private book, closed, concerning only the ridiculousness of this very person, whose text shouldn't interfere with the first one, a book which would fall under the verdict of „being off-topic”, that would at best irritate the subject, that would merely break the trains of thought, in short: a book that would merely be annoying, disturbing and unfruitful?

Concerning this twofold way of life, it would of course mean to be ashamed of that second text, as far as it appears, which it shouldn't: just as „perception” once spoiled the philosophers' pure cognition, so does now the private life spoil the pure train of thought. All this I don't have to explain further.

But now I would like to ask you: How do we, *as philosophical counsellors*, think of this old philosophical „law of purity”? And a further question: Is it *wise*? And how does somebody think about this, if his traditional image of the wise man has been revolutionised by Montaigne? And finally: How can we encourage our visitor in a credible way to present his life problems and biographical entanglements uncensored, that is not to sort them out according to their value and dignity? Everything what is considered as not being worth to be thought over remains without language, is an experience lost and therefore can't enrich us. How could we stand for all this in a credible way if we led our life according to the principle that only those parts should be made visible which meet other people's expectations, whereas the rest would have to remain silent?

So far the one side of my problem, which undoubtedly was the heaviest burden for me and which first of all needed that calmness without which works like this do not develop: It is the „private” side that finally, as you have seen, by reflection ceased to be „merely” private. With a „trick”, if you like, I have integrated into my work those powers which obstructed it. This is how you expell demons philosophically ...

But a further problem followed directly: Originally I had planned, in proper chronology, to link Immanuel Kant's rehabilitation of the notion of wisdom as the destiny of philosophy with his *notion of the „world”*. Kant's notion of the „world” is his confirmation that the urgent question „Why should we philosophise?” should be answered according to the „usefulness” of philosophy, in what respect it would be a „theory of wisdom” and in how far it would be the subject of „the practical philosopher”, who had to prove himself as „a teacher of philosophy by teaching and by example” and who would only by doing so really be „an actual philosopher”.²²

And, of course, I wanted to mention Kant's understanding of wisdom, as he explains it in his „anthropology from a pragmatic point of view”, where he declares that „strictly speaking, wisdom is asked too much of human beings, but, nevertheless, not even as the slightest portion” it could be „poured” into somebody else. Rather, everybody has to „bring out wisdom by himself”, so that „the rule to achieve this” could only entail „three guiding maxims”: „First, to think for oneself; secondly, within dialogue to put oneself into the other's position; thirdly, to think at any time in accordance with yourself.”²³

But confronted with these words, which are wise and highly welcome for the philosophical counsellor, and which furthermore are spoken by the highest authority, I sank into deepest resignation: How much time and how much staying power would be necessary to correct the Kantian terms in such a way that they would properly describe the

²² Kant, introduction to his „Logik” from 1800, A 24.

²³ Kant: „Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht”, A 123.

tasks of philosophical practice without betrayal or dangerous ignorance? That would go far beyond the dimension of any lecture, so much for certain. And above all: How could I still get to Nietzsche, of whom I indeed think that like nobody else he took up and perfected the tradition of an understanding of wisdom, opened up by Montaigne, that today guides philosophical practice?

Well, I tried to consult myself with this dilemma and finally remembered that somewhere in the fifth book of „The Dawn” I had read some aphorisms, which appeared to me as documents of Nietzsche’s decisive break-through to a so far incomprehensible figure of philosophy, to an understanding of philosophy which on the one hand corrected the philosophical tradition with the utmost courage, and which on the other hand gave a new definition of the philosopher as a wise man – and both in such a way that a new figure of philosophy emerged, which now is needed as philosophical practice.

I looked it up, and I not only did I find the corresponding passages, but furthermore I found an argument against the otherwisely honoured Kant, that at once made understandable to me my own discomfort with the quoted above passages from Königsberg. – I quote:

„If you compare Kant and Schopenhauer to Plato, Spinoza, Pascal, Rousseau and Goethe concerning their soul and not their mind, it is of disadvantage for the ones mentioned first. Their thoughts do not represent a passionate history of the soul, there is no novel, no crisis, no catastrophe and no death hour to be guessed, their thinking is not at the same time an involuntary biography of a soul, but of a *bead* in the case of Kant, and of the description of a *character* in the case of Schopenhauer [...]”²⁴

What Nietzsche finds lacking in the philosophical biography of „those two Germans” are not the „big” events coming from outside, but „the destinies and shiverings that befall the most silent and lonely life, which has leisure und which burns in the passion of thinking”.²⁵

You see that by now the decisive answer has been prepared that we have to give when asked how the philosopher in philosophical practice should be thought of as „wise”, when the general thesis is that wisdom is the key for understanding philosophical practice, a key which also allows to find out whose destiny it is to engage himself as philosophical counsellor. I quote Nietzsche again: Concerning the question what „it means today to live philosophically” or to „be wise”, Nietzsche explains the „wise man”:

„Shouldn’t he personally have tried a hundred ways to be able to estimate his own value? Enough, we think that one should have lived totally »unphilosophically« in today’s terms, especially not as a shy man of virtue, in order to judge the big problems from experience. [...] - The wise man has for too long been confused with the scientific person, and even longer with the higher-religious one.”²⁶

Whom does Nietzsche put in instead? He puts in „the man of the most encompassing experiences, who bundles them up to general conclusions”.²⁷ And elsewhere he says:

„The wisest man would be the richest in contradictions, the one who had senses for all kinds of human beings.”²⁸

I will quote another passage from „The Dawn”, Nr. 432, that has an eye on our „proceeding” in philosophical practice – in order to avoid the misleading term „method”.

But first a comment in case you think I am quoting too much. Why shouldn’t I want to say in my own terms that what has to be said, if I agree with Nietzsche? In case this is your question, I reply: On the one hand it has been my intention to explain to you on what traditions philosophical practice can connect itself to – and here I present to you: Nietzsche’s revolutions of philosophising. On the other hand I wanted to hint at sources from which you can draw far more for your work than

I am able to develop here. Read for example aphorism Nr. 449, in which Nietzsche introduces his dream of being a philosophical practitioner – which, as you know, had not yet been possible at that time: it hardly could have been thought of.

But now back to the announced Nr. 432, which sketches the proceeding of philosophical practice with proper images:

„Researcher and attempter. – There is no method in science which alone guarantees general knowledge! We have to try things out, and sometimes we have to be evil against them, sometimes good. We have to feel justice, coldness and passion for them. One talks to them as a policeman, the other as a priest, a third one as a curious wanderer: Sometimes by sympathy, sometimes by raping, you will get something out of them. One is led forward by the respect for their secrets, the other is led by indiscretion and mischief in explaining secrets. We researchers are all conquerers, discoverers, seafarers, adventurers of a bold morality, and we have to endure that we are being looked upon as evil.”²⁹

²⁴ Nietzsche, critical edition Vol. III, p.285f. (Nr. 481).

²⁵ Ibid., p. 286.

²⁶ Nietzsche: „Unpublished works from the 80ies”, critical edition Vol. XI, p.519.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., ed. Schlechta, Vol. III, p.441.

²⁹ Nietzsche, critical edition Vol. III, p.266.

What Nietzsche had realised and what has become the ground for our work is the insufficiency, if not falsity, of all *general* statements about man: Man is real as this very particular individual, and he is honoured as such. A way of behaviour, that might be good and adequate for somebody, might be wrong or even ridiculous for somebody else. By the way, this has been the ABC of knowing human nature since

La Rochefoucault and the French moralists, and Nietzsche saw that not having recognised them was the reason for the *practical* failure of all the other „*teachers of morality*“. Nietzsche says that „the generally poor success of the teachers of morality“ finds its explanation in the fact that they „all too easily wanted to put up rules *for everybody*“.³⁰ What should we look for instead? We should look for „the most personal question of truth“, according to Nietzsche whom I will now quote for the last time:

„What actually is it what I am *doing*? And what is it that especially I want to do with it? This is the question of truth, which in our education nowadays is not taught and therefore not asked; there is no time for such a question.“³¹

Since philosophical practice was founded 16 years ago, we can reply: Yes, there is time for such a question now, and philosophical practice *is* that institution which offers it the space it needs. Nietzsche called it „the question of truth“, I suggest calling it the actual *question of wisdom*, which necessarily is a *very personal* question, or, in more distinguished terms, an *existential* one. To raise this question again is the task of philosophical practice. And it belongs to its *wisdom* that it has to find an answer ever anew in any singular, particular case. As this kind of wisdom, it has to prove itself.

I might have stopped here. But I want to leave the last words to a philosopher whom I have admired and loved for a long time – and only a pedant might object that it is impossible to admire and to love somebody at the same time. But who cares about pedants anyway?

Thus: In his „On the notion of wisdom“, Ernst Bloch has defined the *instructions for a today's philosophy of wisdom* in such a way that a more pointed motto for philosophical practice could hardly be thought of:

„Wisdom“, says Bloch, „is a *characteristic*, as unobtrusive as unavoidable, of a *learned and unified practical philosophy*“. And further: There have to be wise persons in order to prevent „a movement from becoming routine and practicistic. They are the ones who keep knowledge moving.“³²

In the future, there will be nothing more important for the still young movement of philosophical practice.

30 Ibid., p. 167 (Nr. 194).

31 Ibid., p. 170 (Nr. 196).

32 Ernst Bloch: „Philosophische Aufsätze – Zur objektiven Phantasie“, Frankfurt 1969, p. 388f.