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Which Way to Go?

How I Became the Philosopher of Orientation

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Philosophies originate from individuals and their circumstances. Thus they are somehow accidental and temporal. But they become philosophies only by capturing basic features of their time in concepts and thoughts, as Hegel put it. If their concepts and thoughts are plausible, we would add today, they give orientation. For this, persons who develop philosophies need their own sound orientation, which means: an overview of human life, a clarification of the leeways of thinking and acting, and prospects for the ways on which people can go and get through their lives. To this end, philosophers must keep some distance from life, in order to attain a free and comprehensive view of it. Yet, to elaborate theories, propagate ideologies, and design utopias that transcend the realities of life seem insufficient for our time. We are tired of them; there have been too many of them already. Today, philosophy is expected to remain on the ground, stay realistic. It will be most plausible if people can live along with it. Orientation is a primary need of life. My way led to a philosophy of what orientation itself is. It precedes all theories, ideologies and utopias.

The way was not scheduled, the route not paved. It did not follow a predefined pattern, had to run off the main streams, and yet was rather inconspicuous. It was due to many random opportunities and happy coincidences and only became apparent over time, even for myself. I gradually realized that it is an important art of life to use coincidences as opportunities and even turn hardships into virtues. Every time, this is a piece of successful orientation. My life – like the lives of most people – attained its own meaning step by step. The way of my life, seen from the end, was the development of a philosophy of orientation, and my life was a life for this philosophy of orientation. At the age of 77, I try to describe how I became the philosopher of orientation: due to which actual conditions, with the help of which coincidences, but also with which goals in changing situations.

When I was born, in July 1946, World War II had been over for a year; so I was a child of peace. This peace was a liberation and an entirely new beginning. Germany had completely destroyed itself politically and economically. Many cities laid in

ruins and ashes. Millions of men had been killed or had become prisoners of war. The women who had remained at their places, had to keep their families alive and clear the rubble, if they had not likewise fallen victim to bombs or executions. There was a lack of everything, the black market flourished, everyone had to find out how they could help themselves. The vast majority of the German people had believed in the National Socialist propaganda of 'final victory' with 'miracle weapons,' even as the catastrophe had become clear. Now a great disillusionment happened. People were faced with stubborn realities, and these were terrifying. The horrors of the mass exterminations organized by the Nazi regime were made public by the victorious allies and shown to everyone in photographic documentations. As a child I found such booklets at home. My parents were neither members of the Nazi party nor committed Nazis, but also not avowed opponents of the regime. They took things as they were. Almost the whole elite, including scientists, judges, physicians, pastors, priests, artists and academic philosophers, had joined Nazism and failed appallingly. Now, there was nothing left to believe in and no one to trust. The Allies, previously known only as enemies, had taken over public administration. They brought democracy that in Germany had failed between the two world wars and led to Adolf Hitler's takeover of power. So Germans had a hard time imagining the gain the new democracy brought. It was a situation of total disorientation, called 'zero hour.' But life had to go on, peace was there, and one could start anew. It was a situation of fundamental reorientation.

In my hometown, Ludwigsburg, a medium-sized city of then about 40,000 inhabitants in southwestern Germany, things were going a bit better, a first happy circumstance in my life. In the Baroque period, the dukes, later kings, of Wuerttemberg had built a hunting castle near the capital city of Stuttgart that eventually reached the dimensions and beauty of a German Versailles. The town around was shaped like a chessboard and included large parks and broad, long and sometimes double avenues lined with lime, chestnut and beech trees. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, more and more barracks were built, also on large rectangular areas. And there were many military hospitals. Perhaps because of these circumstances – one does not know it exactly – the town was largely spared from destruction at the end of World War II. The barracks were used now by the occupying forces, first by the

French ones, then by the US Army, but also as internment camps for Nazis and members of the Wehrmacht. Later, the Central Office for the Investigation of National Socialist Crimes was established in a former prison.

As little children, we found the American soldiers friendly: they threw chocolate and chewing gum to us from their jeeps and trucks. Families received packages of food and clothes from CARE (Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere) in the USA. People entertained their own vegetable gardens; mothers took sewing classes to make warm clothes out of old army coats and the like; craftsmanship was needed everywhere. My father in particular, a technical manager of a composing and printing shop, had a lot of skills. As a conscript, he had trained radio operating, but because of a stomach surgery he was not called up to the front until the end of the war. He also escaped the raids, by which German men were recruited as forced laborers and minesweepers for the victorious countries. We do not know the details; they were scarcely talked about, then and later. Everyone was severely traumatized; whether they were personally culpable or not, they had a lot to hide and be ashamed of the terrible things that had happened in the Third Reich and which were now becoming known in their full extent. My sister Ursula or Uschi, one year older, born on the day the French troops occupied our hometown, and I grew up in a public order that was entirely provisional and in intellectual terms entirely hollow. We did not feel the spookiness of it; it was the environment into which we grew. No one explained it. We had to learn to orient ourselves.

Our parents, Hermann and Elfriede Stegmaier, both of whom came from modest backgrounds, provided for us as best they could, with great efficiency and reliability. Under the rigid pressure to save money in the first post-war years, no luxuries were possible for our family; they were not even thought of, even if others began to flaunt them again. One always had to get by with the simplest things. I did not feel any envy. On the contrary, to learn the art of helping and asserting yourself proved to be a good dowry. If you were, as a boy, in danger of being beaten up, you had to defend yourself, if you had desires beyond the basic necessities of life, you had to earn your own money. As a boy of about eleven years, I wanted nothing more than an electric model railroad, not alone to play with but to design track and circuit

diagrams, arrange the layout in different ways and create ‘landscapes’; if you like, these were first experiments to explore multiple possibilities of orientation. My mother discovered a side job for me: delivering weekly magazines. I seized it and after some time of well-organized delivery practice, had my model railroad run and over the years was able to steadily expand it. In school without any problems, I was able to help others, learning to teach at an early age. Later I earned money by tutoring. I was always busy; I didn't know boredom, except sometimes at school and during obligatory family walks on Sunday afternoon.

Practices of orientation outdoors I learned and developed with the Boy Scouts. Above all, we made trips and journeys, again with the simplest means: We moved on foot or with bicycles, rarely with (expensive) trains, camped somewhere in a forest close to a brook, cooked our simple meals at provisional fireplaces in pots brought along. It soon fell to me to find out the most convenient routes to our destinations. I discovered my special orientation skills. Not talented for athletics and ball games, this made me happy. For the first time, I could prove myself in finding and giving orientation.

By the time, the so-called ‘economic miracle’ (*Wirtschaftswunder*) came: Through a currency reform introduced in Western Germany in 1948 by the new provisional governments formed under Allied control, everyone received a small basic capital, a so-called ‘bounty’ (*Kopfgeld*), with which they had to get by (the new banknotes were printed in the USA). Now the regular economy flourished through a free market and grew continuously for decades. In the 1960s people in Western Germany lived more and more carefree, enjoyed an ever-increasing prosperity that made it easy to forget everything else, including the fact that many old Nazis had re-established themselves in government agencies, courts, universities, and in the newly-formed army, the *Bundeswehr*. Yet, things were overshadowed by the so-called ‘Cold War,’ which time and again could become a nuclear world war, the center of which would be Germany. One remembered Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Nuclear weapons continued to be upgraded. Furthermore, there were a lot of wars in the world. People felt prosperity, consolidated by a well working democracy, in the midst of an unprecedented existential insecurity. In the neighborhood, the

communist, Soviet-controlled 'German Democratic Republic' had to renounce the Western economic and political achievements for 40 years, till people managed to free themselves in 1989.

Baptized as a Protestant, I, like most of my friends I grew up with, lost faith, when I was supposed to be 'confirmed' in it at the age of 14. The Gospel had fascinated me early on, especially Jesus' enigmatic sentence cried out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The doctrines of the churches, however, disappointed me all around the better I got to know them. But this made me free to recognize different religions: In my later career I had close friends among Jews, Catholics and Protestants, some of whom held high office. I found trust elsewhere. Throughout my life, I stayed free from fanaticism and hatred in all other things as well. I had close friends, first in my neighborhood, then at school and with the Boy Scouts, later during my studies, and in my professional career, but only few whom I particularly appreciated; I could never get enthusiastic about mass events of any kind. My friends rarely disappointed me. So I trusted more and more in personal relationships, which feed from mutual appreciation, than in general doctrines and organized groups and societies ruled by laws. Later I experienced that even collectives such as work teams, commissions or political parties only do their best if the personal relationships were right. My like-minded young friends and I didn't need any big stages; we were hardly attracted by rock festivals and the like; we enjoyed our own parties with our girlfriends. At that time, most young people were rather shy and reserved; drug use came up only gradually; we were still largely protected from it. We learned a lot from each other talking about our experiences and readings; deeper conversations with parents and teachers were rare; one was taken less seriously than youth today. At that time, a skepticism may have grown in me against all overvaluations of the collective and generalizations as such, let alone universal ones which carries so many dogmatisms and ideologies and relieves you of your own assessments. I may have learned then that orientation is always tied up to personal conditions and decisions for which each and every one is responsible, and that every generalization, which is of course indispensable in all functional systems of a society, is only accessible through individuals and represented by them in one way or another. This proved to be crucial for the philosophy of orientation.

My generation grew up with writers like Thomas Mann, Stefan Zweig, Hermann Hesse and Franz Kafka, but also Bertolt Brecht who were famous in Germany and in the rest of the world. We also liked the great Russian novels, especially by Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. I myself likewise loved the French, read numerous volumes of Balzac's *Comédie humaine*, some novels of Flaubert and Zola, but also Gide, Camus, and Sartre. From them, you could learn a lot about real life and the disenchantment of illusions (Balzac titled a major work *Lost Illusions*). On this trail, I discovered Theodor Fontane, whom I loved all my life because of his sincerity and simplicity and his narrative style rich in perspectives, and then Thomas Bernhard, an Austrian author whose merciless, often downright furious sense of reality made a strong impression on me with each new play or novel he published annually since 1960. In addition, there was a great deal of biographical, psychological, and historical stuff that the city library offered. But of course we also watched American movies, danced rock 'n' roll – I loved dancing all my life –, listened to jazz; American culture (or what we understood by it) dominated the West. Our *Gymnasium* remained committed to the classical curricula – Goethe, Schiller, and so on. At my school, the Friedrich Schiller *Gymnasium*, whose forerunner, a Latin School, was attended by the national poet Schiller himself. I learned more Latin than English and French; in those days there was little need and opportunity to actually use the modern languages. During the higher classes, between the age of 16 and 19, we got very instructive teachers. Then I was happy with the school: with an outstanding German teacher, Brigitte Wittenburg, a multilingual native of Baltic Germany, who was equally proficient in the Western and Russian literary canons and knew how to teach them with aplomb; with a physics teacher, Professor Franz Bader, who continuously updated the standard textbook for the high schools to the state of the art of science and tested the respective issues with us, and with my first philosophy teacher, the school's principle Dr. Albert Stollsteimer, who used the introduction to philosophy of Karl Jaspers as a textbook. Again, it was the personalities who made their subjects strong and thus gave me orientation.

At graduation, I won prizes for achievements in German among other things, and now wanted to study the subject, but primarily philosophy. No one urged me to do

so; on the contrary, I was understandably advised against it: there was no job description for philosophy. As alternatives, I considered road and bridge construction and logistics, i.e., planning, control and optimization of flows of traffic, people, goods, and information, both practical and down-to-earth aspects of finding and creating efficient paths. I didn't realize such contexts at the time, but the alternatives still fascinate me today. I was not interested in acquiring wealth and fortune. To this day, I don't care much about that; I could and can get along well with little means. So I stayed quite independent in this respect as well. In philosophy, there is a great role model here: Socrates, one of its founding fathers, in contrast to the dominant wisdom teachers of the time, the Sophists, expressly refused to earn money with philosophy. Thus he could be incorruptibly committed to the search for truth. Nevertheless, choosing philosophy as a profession was a high life risk, and Socrates *had* a job to sustain his family: as a stonemason. But I was lucky here again. At the University of Tübingen, which I attended not only because it was near to my home, but also because it could boast very renowned professors in many subjects at that time, a career field for graduates of philosophy was created just at the time when I began my studies, in 1966: philosophy was to become a proper teaching subject at the *Gymnasium*, and for this, university-trained teachers were needed. Together with the subjects German and Latin, which I had learned at school so long, I could acquire the so-called *Staatsexamen* (state examination), which would ensure me a sufficient livelihood. Philosophical careers at universities were extremely unlikely in the German-speaking countries, then as now, dependent on many coincidences, as was to become apparent in my case as well.

At the University of Tübingen and elsewhere, at that time one was primarily concerned with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, whose Nazi legacy was ignored; there were several lectures and seminars on Heidegger at the same time. One professor, however, seemed outstanding to me: Karl Ulmer. He approached Heidegger's philosophy with a conceptualization of his own, in order to get beyond the existentialist touch of *Being and Time*, which Heidegger himself also wanted to get rid of. But Ulmer did not go in Heidegger's new direction who wanted to discover the original sense of 'being.' Ulmer knew him personally for a long time.



Serving as an officer in World War II to avoid having to join the NSDAP (that was one of the few ways to escape it), he, partly at the front, partly on home leave, wrote his habilitation thesis on “Truth, Art and Nature in Aristotle,” and from there reflected on the question of technology, a major theme of Heidegger’s as well, in the present. After the war, Heidegger hired Ulmer as his assistant at the University of Freiburg, but was himself banned from teaching. Thus Ulmer was able to develop his philosophizing independently from Heidegger and did so. First he published an assessment *On the subject of philosophy*, then a compact interpretation of Nietzsche’s philosophy, which clearly differed from Heidegger’s, and after that headed for a “philosophy of the modern life world” which was oriented to the real state of affairs. He could not use the title “world orientation” that was already occupied by Karl Jaspers, but in a different sense. Thus, in Ulmer’s courses I experienced a new kind of philosophy in the making, against the background of a deep confrontation not only with Heidegger, but also with the entire history of Western philosophy. From Karl Ulmer I learned the courage to reorient philosophy from the ground up. He mentored students such as Ernst Tugendhat. In 1970 he accepted a call to the University of Vienna, but soon thereafter fell seriously ill. When his death was near, he entrusted his entire philosophical legacy and library to me.

Long before, I witnessed the height of the anti-authoritarian student protests, which in Germany emanated from West Berlin and Frankfurt am Main. Vienna, where I studied in 1968, a magnificent city full of great architecture, art, music, and theater gave rather little thought to politics. I appreciated the movement that was shaking up modern, but already encrusted societies in much of the world, and in Germany was to further unravel its Nazi past. I welcomed their struggle for the de-cramping of everyday lifestyles, for unrestricted civil rights, for de-discrimination of minorities, and against manipulation of any kind. As a student of philosophy, I studied some important writings, especially by Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Fromm. But I soon recognized their own resentments and manipulative tendencies, resulting in untrustworthy ideologies, and I doubted the belief that one could reform the whole society from the universities. The activism of the protesters, which later

degenerated into terrorism, was not my cup of tea. Activism brings with it an extreme one-sidedness of orientation.

I returned to Tübingen for Karl Ulmer's sake and finished my studies with a thesis that was to help me decide between continuing research either in philosophy or German literature. I tried to philosophically interpret a new play, *Kaspar* by Peter Handke, who was stirring up the literary world at the time and has recently been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, by means of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, which now intrigued me far more than Heidegger's writings. The subject of both was orientation through language. Kaspar Hauser, an alleged prince who, as one guessed in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was to be excluded from the succession, was locked away in a dark room until he was 16 years old. Suddenly set free, he had to learn to orient himself in language and through language in society. The subject was very exciting for me, but more in its philosophical than literary aspects. Although I subsequently met Peter Handke in person and had the prospect of an assistantship in German studies, I decided to follow the path of philosophy. It was only much later that I became acquainted with the ancient story about 'Hercules at the Crossroads,' told by the sophist Prodikos of Keos, which, in the time of modern enlightenment, Moses Mendelssohn took as a model to introduce the concept of orientation into philosophy.

Now I wanted to learn what philosophical orientation has been based on so far, in order to then clarify how it works today. To write a dissertation on this huge topic I received two scholarships at once, one from the University of Tübingen and one from the most renowned foundation for students in Germany, the *Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes* (German Academic Scholarship Foundation). This encouraged me to undertake the great task. I accepted the second grant after having been denied it at the beginning of my studies. For over two thousand years, the foundation of human orientation was the metaphysics of substance. In Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, *ousía* (Latin *substantia* or *essentia*) was the timeless cause of all what could happen to it, its temporal changes or its *accidentia*: substance was thought of as an absolute hold in life. The result of the dissertation was that the concept of substance moved with time itself: first in Aristotle's metaphysics itself, then in

modern times. Here, in Descartes, the Aristotelian substance-accidens-relation became a substance-substance-relation, a thinking substance was opposed to a corporeal substance, yet both made dependent on a third, the divine substance that deprived the other ones of their independence. Through the identification of the substances the nature of their self-sufficiency changed. In Spinoza there was only the divine substance left, God, who has created nature as a whole, could not be separated from it, but was to manifest himself in it. This led to the substance-relation-relation in Leibniz, who now thought of all alleged substances or monads as restricted and different perspectives on what appears to each of them as the world as a whole; only by God's previous determination were they assumed to be aligned to each other. Thus, the former notion of absolute independence became the notion of complete relationality dependent of the omniscient and almighty God; the metaphysical concept of substance proved to be a concept in flux, and this flux turned it into its opposite, the perspectives of individuals. This is where later the philosophy of orientation started, without a metaphysical ontology or philosophical theology.

In philosophy, we no longer think of the world in terms of an omniscient and almighty God. Therefore I asked myself how our understanding of the world is now thought of and what has fundamentally changed in it. I tried to give the answer in my habilitation thesis, which at that time in the German-speaking countries qualified scholars to become professors. The fundamental changes in philosophy decisive for the 20<sup>th</sup> century were achieved, I supposed, by Wilhelm Dilthey and Friedrich Nietzsche; William James and Charles Sanders Peirce I got to know only later. The two Germans, to a large extent independently of each other, decidedly broke away from Platonic-Aristotelian as well as from modern metaphysics and sought to understand how people now come to terms with the world without an unconditional, divine support. They started directly with life, which is constantly changing and can only be understood to a limited extent – 'understanding' itself in a sense of recognizing life under constantly changing conditions of life. This kind of understanding had meanwhile become so complex that it could no longer be grasped by a 'theory' or rational 'epistemology' (*Erkenntnistheorie*). According to Dilthey, one now had to proceed from a 'self-interpretation of life' (*Selbstausslegung*

*des Lebens*), in which everything, including concepts, is interconnected, interdependent, and in motion that it can never be completely overlooked and foreseen indeed. As a counter-concept to the concept of substance I coined the concept of fluctuance. According to it the attributes of all that there is can shift with the time in such a way that it finally becomes something completely different. So an ontology as a doctrine of a *fixed* sense of being was excluded. Herein Nietzsche's concept of the will to power, understood as a continuous process of interpretation of each by all the rest, clearly fitted. Dilthey and Nietzsche dealt in this way of orientation as our kind of understanding the world, but used the term only at the margins. And so did I in my *Habilitation* thesis.

It was still a long way to a philosophy of orientation. It was a path full of surprises and again some strokes of luck. I was now heading for an academic career. In the German-speaking countries at that time, it was almost exclusively via an 'assistant' position with a 'full professor' at a university (today, the paths are more varied). A full professorship usually included such a position, and when it was filled, one had to wait. I could wait, for I had my *Staatsexamen* and was now teaching German, Latin and philosophy at a Gymnasium. For training I was assigned to one of the best schools in Stuttgart, for further testing to one of the most difficult, and finally I was entrusted to train teachers in my turn. So for eight years I had the opportunity not only to teach school students knowledge, but also to teach teachers methods of communicating knowledge. Then I sought new challenges and took a leave of absence from teaching.

Without income. With what I had earned in the meantime, I could live well for quite a while. I had decided early on, at the age of 12, to lead my life alone as soon as that became possible, not without love, but without long-term partnerships, and so I now had no family to feed and was completely free for philosophy and the intensive work it requires. Many even of the great philosophers did not marry. They needed the seclusion for days, weeks, and months to concentrate on, coordinate, and deepen their far-reaching thoughts, especially when it came to ripping open and cultivating the whole field of philosophy anew. They did not lack contacts and in

this sense they were by no means lonely. They were only alone with their thoughts, which, the more significant they were, the more time they needed to find an echo.

All the time, I wanted to keep my feet on the ground. I again and again worked on a family's farm in stables, fields and in forests and experienced how the three sons grew up. The farmer Hermann Schweizer, who had to take over the estate at a very young age, soon became a friend and remained so to this day, revealed an incorruptibly clear sense of judgment from which I learned a lot; his wife Agnes offered me a steady second home. Later I became friends with the mayor of a small community near Greifswald, Frederic Beeskow, who had studied philosophy with me. He introduced me into the conditions and possibilities to act politically in a way that is close to the citizens. In addition, I traveled a lot, first to explore Europe, then the USA, and finally many other parts of the world.

The opportunity for a comprehensive philosophical world orientation, initially as Jaspers took it: as an orientation about the basic scientific facts of the present world, arose when I met Wolf Häfele. Häfele, a physicist, was a leading researcher at the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis in Laxenburg near Vienna, which, with the participation of all relevant disciplines, was to investigate the concrete living conditions and possibilities of mankind on earth in the decades to come with new methods, especially the design of exemplary scenarios. The focus was (and still is) on energy supply, climate change and the carrying capacity of the earth for a rapidly growing world population. People from East and West worked closely together also during the Cold War. Karl Ulmer had established the contact with Wolf Häfele; both of them wanted to integrate the philosophical dimension with its highly developed conceptualizations into grand research syntheses. They started a periodical dialogue, which I took over after Ulmer's death in 1981. In the meantime, Häfele had become the head of the German Nuclear Research Center in Karlsruhe and an advisor to the German *Bundestag* and government on future nuclear energy policy, which was then a high priority in Germany, too. He became a member as well of the U.S. Academy of Engineering as of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR and several others, and participated in the committees preparing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Exchanging views in person over

a period of years with a man of such physical, ecological, and political expertise on the conditions of humanity's future was a first rank privilege for a fledgling philosopher. The more our conversations progressed, the more our plan matured to publish them in a form that displayed the different perspectives and, at the same time, could be easily read by all interested parties. This form was just the dialogue. So we worked out our oral dialogues in several steps for the written form and published them under the title *Conditions of the Future. A Scientific-Philosophical Dialogue*. The overall plan, going back to Ulmer, was to identify corresponding levels of abstraction in the developments of the natural sciences on the one hand, primarily physics, and philosophy on the other hand since their Greek beginnings, and to bring them down to a few and easily overlooked leading terms. On the side of physics, we began with the physical substance in Aristotle and continued in the modernity with the four steps matter, energy, information, and patterns of information networks. On the side of philosophy, they corresponded to the Aristotelian metaphysical substance, which culminates in the divine thinking of thinking itself (*noesis noeseos*); in modernity followed the steps method (Descartes), absolute spirit (Hegel), interpretation (Nietzsche) and individual (existential philosophy). We had to demonstrate firstly the reasons for the sequencing of these abstractions, secondly for the correspondences between the scientific and philosophical abstractions of a time, and thirdly the leeways which were opened by them for organizing the humans' life in the respective period. The dialogue resulted in a basic orientation for the present and the near future. The future of a growing mankind proved to be possible.

The book was published in 1987. My *Habilitation* followed in 1990. It was made possible by Professor Josef Simon, who – a new stroke of luck – had become Karl Ulmer's successor in Tübingen and was later called to the University of Bonn. There he gained a second assistant position and offered it to me. Besides tasks in teaching and research I had to take over the editing of the *Allgemeine Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, which was published on behalf of the *Allgemeine Gesellschaft für Philosophie*, which united academic and non-academic philosophers from the German-speaking countries across school boundaries. Thus I had to overlook the ongoing developments in German-language philosophy as a whole and consider its

specific directions. Josef Simon himself, in sovereign knowledge of the entire philosophical tradition that was still peculiar to this generation, had, after Hamann, Herder, Humboldt, Peirce, Wittgenstein, Cassirer, Quine and Goodman, made the philosophy of language the basic discipline of philosophy, and from here drew a new picture also of the philosophies of Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche. He gathered his exciting and groundbreaking insights in a philosophy of the sign. So, he happened to become my second great philosophical teacher, with whom I again undertook many things together like summer schools for the *Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes*. Josef Simon also created lasting peace to the three previously quarreling philosophy departments in Bonn, thus enabling an intensive exchange also among the assistants of the various chairs, most of whom later became full professors themselves. I remained closely connected with Josef Simon until his death in 2016.

With the *Habilitation* my preparatory years were over; I now had to think, research and teach entirely on my own responsibility. The issue was clear now: orientation. In my inaugural lecture in Bonn as a so-called *Privatdozent*, a professor without appointment, I dealt with Immanuel Kant's treatise *What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?* Kant had written it 1786 in order to decide the long-lasting controversy on Spinozism or Pantheism, the question whether God is everything or nothing, with the means of his *Critique of Pure Reason* of 1781. Here, he made use of two quite simple and yet crucial insights that remained on the margins of his transcendental philosophy and therefore received little attention. Already 1768, he had discovered that the distinction of left and right, which we need everywhere in life, not only for geographical orientation, but also for handling things and for reading and writing, is neither a matter of perception nor of thinking: one can neither see left and right themselves nor define them by logic. The distinction of left and right thus precedes the basic distinction of Western philosophy, namely perception and thought, which Parmenides and Plato had established and on which Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* was still based. Like the distinction between left and right the question of the existence of God which is also neither perceptible nor provable or refutable by mere reason exceeds its possibilities. In both cases, as Kant stated, "need must stand for insight" (*Bedürfnis für Einsicht*). Kant's focus was: people have the indispensable need that they, if they constantly act morally and

thereby prove themselves worthy of happiness, are allowed to believe that their practice will indeed one day be rewarded by happiness, while they experience that good people so often fare badly and bad people well. Therefore, according to Kant, it must be alright to believe in a God who ensures that good people will also fare well, even if it is in a life beyond. For this purpose, Kant introduced the concept of a ‘reason faith’ (*Vernunftglaube*): By that he included in his concept of a pure knowledge of reason its opposite and thereby made it paradoxical. He called this ‘orienting oneself in thinking.’ Thus he unwillingly made reason a part of the more comprehensive orientation, of which it has only limited disposition. The concept of orientation became a founding one. It had first been metaphorically brought into the play of philosophy by the famous Jewish Enlightenment philosopher Moses Mendelssohn when he was pressed by engaged Christians to comment on the Spinozism of his friend Lessing, the great poet of the Enlightenment – Spinozism, however, was considered a condemnable atheism at that time. In the course of the public quarrel Mendelssohn died, and Kant, for his part a friend of Mendelssohn, felt obliged to bring the dispute to an end; his further personal motive was to prove the convincing power of his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Nevertheless, he did not rebuild the *Critique* in its second edition of 1787 based on the insight that reason needs orientation in crucial issues. But this became clearer and clearer in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century’s philosophy and from that I developed the philosophy of orientation. Now it is clear that reason is only one of the means to find one’s way in the world and to cope with its demands.

This inaugural lecture was only the beginning. The greatest stroke of luck for my university career became – no one could have imagined it – a world-historical event in the years around 1990: the collapse of the Soviet Union as a result of Michael Gorbachev’s new policy of *glasnost* (transparency) and *perestroika* (transformation). Both terms together mean – a happy coincidence again – ‘reorientation out of insight.’ One consequence of the Russian reorientation was the reunification of Germany, and with it institutes for philosophy in East Germany were able to leave behind the official Marxism-Leninism and to reorient themselves, too. The young generation of students was hungry for that. Immediately after the ‘the turn’ (*Wende*) I went to East Germany, to Greifswald on the Baltic



coast, which hosts a very old university and enjoys a very wide horizon over land and sea. After a few guest semesters there, during which I had to prove myself in face of a critical audience, I was appointed founding director of the new Institute of Philosophy and have remained there to this day. I built a house for myself in a quiet corner of a peaceful village south of Greifswald based on my own design and surrounded it with native trees and shrubbery. Here, barely visible and at a sufficient distance from friendly neighbors, I could think and work undisturbed. Guests were always welcome.

Part of my university team were former assistants speaking fluently Russian and Finnish. We soon organized a *North and East European Forum for Philosophy* and initiated a dialogue between nearly all institutes of philosophy around the Baltic Sea, from both the former Soviet and the Western dominions. Nobody wanted Marxism-Leninism anymore. This was an outstanding orientation situation unique in university history: having to reorient oneself philosophically in one fell swoop and being faced with a plurality of existing philosophical approaches between which one had to decide under time pressure. So the concept of orientation immediately proved practical relevance. We observed and accompanied the philosophical reorientations in the different countries by a project of empirical philosophy research, as we called it: Under which conditions does who decide for which philosophical orientation? We were supported by several research funding organizations. The project of philosophical orientation became an international one, at first fruitfully limited to the Baltic Sea region.

Thus, it was time to elaborate the philosophy of orientation as a whole and thereby to explore its connections both to earlier philosophies and to contemporary sciences and social realities. In 2008, after a long period of maturation, the *Philosophy of Orientation* was completed in a volume of 800 pages.

My extensive Nietzsche research also flowed into the foundation of the philosophy of orientation. Nevertheless, one could not simply follow Nietzsche. So many of his discoveries and suggestions led further – but just the most famous ones like the thoughts of the overman, the eternal return of the same or the idea of future philosophers as masters of the earth rather not. An international circle of Nietzsche

scholars, among them Karl Ulmer, Michailo Djuric, Josef Simon, Friedrich Kaulbach, Wolfgang Müller-Lauter, Mazzino Montinari, Robert B. Pippin, Günter Abel, Volker Gerhardt and Tilman Borsche, had discussed such questions during the 1980s in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia. In the course of these discussions, we developed a new image of Nietzsche that took contemporary philosophy further and from which philosophers such as Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz and, above all, Kant and Hegel could be understood in a new way. In 1999 I was, together with Josef Simon and Günter Abel, elected one of the editors of the internationally renowned *Nietzsche-Studien* and then directed the journal for altogether 18 years. With Nietzsche's leading thesis of fundamental nihilism, according to which the highest values had become devalued, everything was up for new philosophical decisions, right down to the basic concepts. This nihilism challenged philosophers to reorient themselves from the ground, and the concept of orientation proved to be able to turn the abysmal nihilism and horrifying relativism into something positive, plausible for everyone. We can live with nihilism through our own orientation.

After 1994, an international Nietzsche research center developed in Greifswald. Doctoral students from a total of 15 nations prepared their doctorates here. Many of them were successful, and I used to celebrate their graduations with them in their home countries, including Brazil, Tajikistan and Dagestan. The worldwide interest in Nietzsche led me again to the USA as well as to Russia and China. Andreas Urs Sommer, already at that time a mature Nietzsche researcher with his historical perspectives, who later edited a huge commentary on Nietzsche's published works, joined the Institute of Philosophy as an assistant.

But Nietzsche was not all. At the same time, I thoroughly examined the most innovative philosophical approaches of the 20<sup>th</sup> century regarding their significance for the philosophy of orientation. Alfred North Whitehead impressed me with his radical process philosophy, Emmanuel Levinas with his philosophical actualization of the Jewish tradition, Jacques Derrida with his new concept of the concept which includes unavoidable deconstructions and disseminations of the meanings of the concepts by using them, Gilles Deleuze with his idea of rhizomes, roots of thinking branching out chaotically in the underground, Michel Foucault with his concept of

discourses about the human life-world arranged according to power relations, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who oriented himself in his *Philosophical Investigations* to the everyday use of language and the forms of life in which it is embedded, particularly by his late notes *On Certainty* in which he raised the question of certainties in human orientation as such, and, last not least, Niklas Luhmann with his sociological systems theory which proved to have enormous significance for philosophy and with its leading distinction of system and environment, which emerged as a specification of the distinction of orientation and situation. They all elaborated their approaches more or less inspired by Nietzsche, but still largely independent from him. Furthermore, Martin Heidegger had explicitly addressed human orientation as the circumspection (*Umsicht*) of not only recognizing one's situation, but also of a concerned dealing (*Umgang*) with the respective life world.

All these approaches encouraged me to further develop the philosophy of orientation. For all who contributed to it, orientation is no longer a matter of unconditional certainties, which, as one has learned in the meantime, are nowhere on hand. Yet, it owns specific certainties that are sufficient in each case for successfully acting and getting through constantly changing circumstances. With the philosophy of orientation we become more modest and courageous at the same time: renouncing last certainties, we need courage to our own decisions in changing situations and dangerous crises; if we are successful in mastering such crises, we get routine and become calm. In our orientation we are always dependent on fearless findings and challenged to courageous beginnings. But we are also capable of them and today can justify this philosophically.

This message came across more and more, also in the USA. It was a last great stroke of luck that someone discovered it on the way via a contribution of mine on "Nietzsche's future" and subsequently in 2019 established a *Foundation for Philosophical Orientation*, based in Nashville, Tennessee: Mike Hodges. In the meantime, many young people here are working together with commitment. They let us expect that the philosophy of orientation will embark on new paths of philosophical, political, economic, and everyday thinking. In 2023, the year in which I am writing this now aged 77, we find us living in a time of several very

serious crises which overlap in a way that it could become a crisis of orientation as a whole. We do not yet foresee how we can find new certainty of orientation in the general disorientation. But we can confidently assume that this will happen within the framework of the philosophy of orientation. My life would be fulfilled, my way successfully gone, if it would happen. But all human orientation is open to surprises and must remain so.

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