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"It always takes two!" – Social work as eudemonic practice

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In the beginning was the translation.

I must confess – I was the one who began introducing all this talk of "Gelingen" to the German-language debate on ethics in social work.

It happened back in the early 1990 s, and what led to it was when I first became acquainted with British social work ethics in the late 1980 s, at a time when there was still no real equivalent terminology in German. In the English context, on the other hand, there was frequent talk of "the good life", of "happiness" in the socio-philosophical sense, and of "eudemonia" (ευδαιμονία) in the Aristotelian tradition. None of these key words was actually new to me, but I had in mind the notion – rather vaguely at first – that transferring these ethics to the problems of the social professions should be somehow "differently" organised. As a means of articulating these problems, of literally "putting them into words", the term that suggested itself to me – rather intuitively at the time – was "**Gelingen**". This turned out to be a great help to me in the German-speaking context, allowing for clarification and orientation. It was not easy, not undisputed, and not without severe criticism from many colleagues. But I continue to hold my ground, even though my own understanding has changed, has become richer and more refined. In all my attempts to communicate this notion to myself and others, translation problems were always also part of the issue.

In the meantime, it seems to me that "**translation**" is a central concept for the understanding of social work in general. It is a crucial category for the reconstruction of what takes place in the helping professions, not only in theory, but also and especially in interpersonal practice. Wherever communication and cooperation take place, problems of widely differing meanings, preconceptions, interpretive models, assessments and orientations arise. It becomes apparent that a shared or common language is indispensable, but that this is neither simply nor always there, ready for us to use. Consequently, working together, we ourselves must first find that language. Sadly, the social professions have hitherto seldom felt the need to appreciate this fact or to give it the attention it deserves in their theory and practice.

Understandably, the problem becomes further radicalised whenever we move beyond our own language zone and engage in communication in other languages, which always remain, to a certain extent, "foreign" languages. Now, you might argue that the word "good" is actually a very good word, a suitable and appropriate word for these contexts. And surely there is also a simple, clear translation of "good" in all languages. To this, I would reply by referring you to a phenomenon that is familiar in the field of linguistics: the phenomenon of "false friends". This is an everyday, omnipresent phenomenon in the social professions: and that is precisely where the problem lies. We all use words like "good", "just", "help", "practice"... but everyone understands something different when these are used. We seldom mean "something completely different", or the exact opposite, but often enough we assume that we understand others very well, and are then surprised and disconcerted when

we find ourselves faced with misunderstandings and incomprehension. This is precisely what is meant in linguistics by "false friends" – we regard the words we all use as "friends", but often enough they turn out to be unreliable, unfaithful friends, not quite up to the task. The fact that we fail to make ourselves aware of this phenomenon is a source of numerous conflicts amongst helpers themselves, between the various social support professions and, not least, in the relationship between helpers and their "clients". (Apropos: The fact that we have no suitable word either within or amongst our languages, with which we can "befriend" ourselves, to express the role of the "client", is further evidence of the problems mentioned. The same also applies, by the way, for the terms used to describe the helping professions themselves: "social worker" is not the same as a "Sozialarbeiter", is not the same as the person who does social work, is not the same as an "assistante sociale"...))

It is not enough simply to explain or define the social situation and behaviour patterns of those who entrust themselves or are entrusted to our care in our professions. We must appreciate them as individual persons in their specific circumstances, in their biographical situations, in all that is special about them, and with their specific problems... – in short: we must appreciate them contextually. This is impossible without apprehending, hearing, listening to how they understand themselves, what they themselves have to say to us, how they themselves perceive and describe their situation and their problems.

Talking of how human life can *gelingen* [turn out well] and, in this context, of the *Gelingen* [flourishing] of professional social practice, enables me to emphasise the open(ended)-ness, the non-defined and non-determinative nature of these mutual reflection and clarification processes.

The subjective nature of such processes – whereby I prefer to talk of person and personality rather than subjectivity – and the images articulated in them are neither accidental nor disruptive, but intentional and affirmed. That this always necessitates sitting down together and – no less essential, difficult and conflict-laden – tackling problems / coming to an understanding, is constitutive, and these in themselves are already elements of *gelingender* [well-functioning] practice. On neither side of helping relations and actions is it permissible to tear these reflection and action processes apart, nor may they be assigned to one of the partners alone. Both partners must be able – or, especially in the helping process, become able – to listen, to understand, to reflect and to criticise, and to exercise self-criticism too. Helping to do that and in doing that is in itself already help.

This is why I have come to model my thinking on the concept of the task of social work as a "hermeneutic of life choices". But: since we all experience and recognise ourselves as being already long since "oriented" any time we attempt to orient ourselves in such behavioural orientation; because our minds (and hearts) are always already filled with knowledge and values, full of images of ourselves and of our world; because we already long since know what is good and evil or bad – for these reasons, we must enlighten ourselves and each other as to what gives us "innermost cohesion", and what gives meaning to our lives and direction and shape to our actions. In my reflections on ethics in the context of the social professions, I have therefore also taken on board the notion of ethics as a "critical theory of ethos".

At this point, the question again arises more strongly than ever as to what purpose all this talk of "**Gelingen**" can serve. What issues does it allow us to address or to articulate? And

how are we then ever going to be able to express this in other languages? It should already have become apparent that I do not see the solution to this problem as lying in a simple translation process with the help of lexicons. But I would be a poor philosopher indeed were I not to answer this question too in a roundabout way. **This roundabout way in turn has the circuitous philosophical title "It always takes two - or why social work should be conceived of not as *work*, but as *praxis*".**

My theory is this – that however different they may be, the social professions and ethics share a task in common: that of equipping and enabling people to say ICH (I / ME). I associate an axiom with this: *the distinction between something and someone* should be fundamental for ethics and for social work, for their praxis and for their self-understanding. – Let me briefly explain.

People must conduct their own lives, make their own life choices, but they cannot, nor need they, do this *alone*. Themselves, but not alone! Both the necessity and the opportunity of helping action are inherent in precisely this discrepancy. As the self-aware subjects of their life choices, people are never isolated individuals. Isolation is in itself a social activity, but it is not of the essence of human nature. People are persons insofar as they take their sociality and their uncircumventable social makeup on board in their self-image and understand this as their own task or duty. The transformation of experiences into challenges and opportunities and avoiding seeing oneself as an object (*something*), as just a cog in the wheel, but as subject of one's own life choices (*someone*) – these are key functions of all life choices and of all forms of helping "intervention" in them. Those who are supported, counselled, assisted and encouraged in active helping processes are not the objects nor, consequently, the products, but co-subjects of that helping action. Nor are they "co-producers"! To talk in such terms would be to stick with the production paradigm, with the mode of thinking in categories of labour, production and product that is so exceptionally successful culturally in the modern world. The world of *labour* also knows *subject* and *object*. The latter is processed using the appropriate methods, with the appropriate tools and machines and accordingly to previously approved designs. The orientation of this work process as a production process lies beyond the process itself: in the product.

Praxis on the other hand is the name we give to those forms of action, which are not product-oriented, but which have meaning in and of themselves. They always comprise (at least) two agents, who interact with each other. In their praxis, people encounter each other as opposites rather than as objects, and such praxis does not have as its objective the manufacture of products, but far rather the development, maintenance and shaping of interpersonal relations and interpersonal skills.

People are co-subjects to each other. This is also particularly true of helping action processes, for they cannot be replaced or deputised as the subjects of their own life choices. People make their life choices under the generic conditions of the risk of failure and, consequently, with a constant orientation towards the *Gelingen* [success] of these choices. Human action is fundamentally action taken under conditions of uncertainty and a lack of knowledge. These are basic (existential) elements of human existence, which can and must be shaped, but they are not "simply" individual or systemic conditions, which in principle need to be removed using special methods applied by experts.

People are each other's opposites, not each other's objects. The distinction between something and someone is therefore absolutely constitutive for any thinking based on this proposition.

Professional competence must therefore include an appreciation of what it means to pose the question of life's *Gelingen* [succeeding, turning out well] from the perspective of a person who leads his/her life "from within" and who, in the course of his/her biography, has acquired a wealth of interpretive and behaviour patterns, the validity and efficiency of which are repeatedly shaken by biographical crises and experiences of failure. The resources required to lead a "good" life cannot simply be superficially acquired or borrowed, they must rather be consciously adopted and cultivated – in the process of personal help(ing).

People attend to each other and they bestow (things) upon each other. This fundamental communication finds its expression in word and action.

In our various languages, we have a whole list of verbs (doing words) and *actions*, which *cannot be conceived of as actions of a single or solitary person*. Very many actions are quite literally *inter-actions*, something that happens "between" persons. This does not mean that first the one acts, then the other, but that the action, the praxis (this also applies to the praxis of helping action), can only ever come about if at least two "players" (persons) interact with each other.

Existential activities such as helping, loving, sharing, giving, cultivating friendships are essentially activities which do not simply consist of individual acts, but which always have two protagonists, acting collaboratively and together. Giving is not giving where there is no corresponding accepting, when it does not elicit a response, and where no further sharing can follow.

Nothing is more dreadful or more tragic than fundamentally unrequited love. "I love." is incomplete as a sentence, because the action it denotes is incomplete: love – even tragic love – requires at least one person to reciprocate (or not). Speaking is another such activity. Speaking only makes sense from the perspective that there is someone to hear what is said, someone to answer, someone to pass it on, and even remaining silent presumes that some form of address or an answer is expected. Helping is yet another such activity, and "I help." is another such incomplete sentence, because helping always involves a person in need of that help, who can accept or reject the help offered, and who themselves can also help.

At an existential level, this "taking the role of the other" means recognising oneself in the other and the other in oneself. This mutuality underpins all social relations: it is impossible without the "other". This is why relations are neither inherently nor all along "good". Even fighting or warring is such an activity! Nothing that is human is simply from the outset or invariably good – this too is existential.

Now, for human communication and cooperation to *gelingen* [take effect] it is exceptionally important that one of the partners take the first step in approaching the other. With that, the action has not yet been carried out, to say nothing of whether it is certain to *gelingen* [show results]. But without this first step, it would never come about at all.

First-step actions are further complicated and rendered more paradoxical by the fact that, even though one makes an approach to the other person, this might still meet with their rejection, the other person might act in a way that does not accord with this shared action (helping, or giving or speaking), might not participate, and insofar the action may not *gelingen* [turn out well] at all.

There is a second, exacerbating element in the case of professional activities: the first step is a step towards the other, a bestowal. However, the structure of helping actions must also always include elements of a "first step back", allowing the other person (breathing) space, scope to act for themselves. A special skill, a special knack of professional action is therefore necessary in order that such paradoxical actions might be able to *gelingen* [succeed]. Often

we do not give those to whom we devote our attention any opportunity to accept or simply to reject the attention we give.

It is legitimate to expect to a greater degree of professional helpers that they master this paradox actively, constructively, and in a manner that is conducive to *Gelingen* [success], making an approach to the other person, but also leaving scope, because that person is a competent, although momentarily limited subject, but one who is absolutely capable of self-determination in his/her own life choices: a person.

For the same also applies to helping: "It always takes two!"

I hope that [*es mir gelungen ist*] I have succeeded in translating my views into your own thought horizons.

A collection of relevant "occasional essays", which may be of help in understanding the background to my philosophical approach, can be found under the following links:

http://dgsainfo.de/fileadmin/dateiablage/Download_FG_Ethik/HdL_Volz2011_Version2.pdf

or

http://www.pantucek.com/fremdtexte/volz_beitraege.pdf