

In search of the good life – hopes, wishes and reality

*Introductory lecture: International Forum:
"The good life from the perspective of the social professions"
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... every life viewed from the inside would be a series of defeats too humiliating and disgraceful to contemplate
(George Orwell)

In the programme résumé for this event, we read that "no generally applicable answer to this existential question ... can be deduced ... from human nature. Each person must answer this question for themselves within the conditions and norms of their society."

At first sight, this may seem perfectly self-evident¹. On closer examination, however, we see that the problem is deeper-seated. It is not just a matter of not having a single universally valid answer. Even the manner in which the question is asked – however "existential" it may be – has no natural or eternally valid form, but is likewise dependent on the context of the culture that forms the interpretative horizon for reflection and action. Not only the *answer* but – before that – even the *question* about the good life is conditioned by time and place. Because the words and terms in which the question is posed and the answer is given are subject to the conditions of contingency. With our subject, in other words, we are standing on shaky ground in a double sense of the word.

I In search of "the good life" from a historical perspective

¹ zumal die Aussage die Äquivokation zwischen "der Mensch" im Universalsingular, als "Menschheit" und im Individualsingular, das heisst als Einzelner offen lässt.

In order to illustrate this, permit me to use this lecture for a short flashback on the various ways in which this question has been asked – restricting ourselves to the horizons of western thought.

1

The philosophical tradition of Greco-Roman antiquity enquired after the good life or, to be more precise, the good *per se*, the greatest good (*summum bonum*) and the common good (*bonum commune*). From this perspective, the well-being of the whole takes priority over that of the parts, of individuals and their respective well-being:

"... true statesmanship [must] at all costs give prior attention to the common good and not to that of individuals – for the common good holds states together, whereas the interests of individuals are divisive in their effect ... and it is in the interests of both commonwealth and individuals ... when common interests are served more than personal interests"².

Based on this assumption, the lives of individuals can be described as good and happy, as congenial and felicitous, when they recognise the true order of things and when they assume and fulfil the place assigned to them in that order. According to Aristotle, a person's prowess, their ἀρετή, consists in the realisation of their potential in the place assigned to them. The good life and the virtuous life converge. Any such orientation of society towards an ultimate objective and purpose presupposes a cohesive conception of the world and a hierarchically structured ("stratified") social order based on it.

2

This understanding survived into medieval Christianity³. Admittedly, the emphasis moved from the *bonum commune* of the worldly commonwealth (the Greek *polis* or the Roman *res publica*) towards transcendence, to put it succinctly: from the state to God (to the kingdom of God). The good life was no longer even sought in the "earthly vale of tears", but beyond the bounds of time and space in an eternal life. But the connection between the good and the virtuous remained. A virtuous life is the path to salvation. More precisely, a godly life on the one hand and divine grace on the other were believed to bring delivery from the flawed, 'fallen' and 'sinful' world of mortality.

However widely the emphases placed by the ancient and the medieval worlds or, later, by Catholicism and Protestantism in Western Europe may have differed from

² Platon, Gesetze. 875; vgl. Aristoteles, Nikomachische Ethik 1094b-10.

³ vgl. Thomas von Aquin, Summa Theologiae I-II, Quest. 57, arts. 6 und 7; Quest. 90, art 2.

one another, they were all at a very far remove from the concept, as expressed in the draft programme of our conference, that "each person must answer the question about the good life for themselves". Not only would it not have occurred to the ancient philosophers and the theologians of the Middle Ages to pose the question about the good life in such a way; such a thought would surely have struck them as absurd, as dangerously boastful hubris (ὑβρις), if not as blasphemy, profanity.

3

This changed, not so much abruptly as fundamentally, with the demise of the ancient western worldview and its hierarchical, gradualist concepts of order. The "great chain of being"⁴, in which every creature is assigned a specific place, was shattered.

"Once the human self becomes detached from its cosmic and transcendent moorings, the good can hardly be more than what [Thomas] Hobbes calls it: 'the object of any man's appetite or desire'"⁵.

This change did not come about by chance, as if it had suddenly occurred to people for the first time after millennia, enabling them to 'see the light' and to reflect on their own instincts, motives and desires. It is far more the case that an epochal broadening of horizons and a diversification of reality and choices of action due to an increasing social division of labour meant that individuals' lives and experience had become so contextually varied that their concepts of humanity, the world and truth, and their understandings of the meaning of life and the purpose of existence, diverged far too widely to still be able to serve as the foundation for a universally binding social order.

Gradually, and despite massive opposition repeatedly flaring up, a particular insight – which John Rawls described in the late 20th century as follows – gained general acceptance:

The processes of secularisation and modernisation render the pursuit of happiness in terms of the realisation of the good life, as a goal for society as a whole, increasingly difficult and ultimately impossible⁶. Universally binding hierarchies of value and quality, with a *summum bonum* as their summit, fade away.

⁴ Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*

⁵ [Leviathan I, 6, S. 120] zitiert nach Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press 1993. S. 143

⁶ "The diversity of doctrines - the fact of pluralism - is not a mere historical condition that will soon pass away. It is ... a permanent feature of the public culture of modern democracies (John Rawls, *The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus*. In: *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* Vol. 7, no. 1, 1987. S. 4). "... no one any longer supposes that a practical political conception for a constitutional regime can rest on a shared devotion (a.a.O., S. 5).

*"Civil society can no longer constitute the 'good society', a fact of which it is aware, nor can it promise the 'good life' any more"*⁷.

But, there is never loss without gain! The counterpart to the demise of the concept of the *bonum commune* in the "good society" is the rise of the freedom of the individual. For, if the whole can no longer be intended or desired, then consequently the individual parts gain precedence over the whole.

John Stuart Mill asks:

"For what is the peculiar character of the modern world – the difference which chiefly distinguishes modern institutions, modern social ideas, modern life itself, from those of times long past?"

to which his answer is:

*"It is, that human beings are no longer born to their place in life, and chained down by an inexorable bond to the place they are born, but are free to employ their faculties, and such favourable chances as offer, to achieve the lot which may appear to them most desirable"*⁸.

The revolution in mindset inherent in the rise of the concept of liberty sets each and every individual free for the destiny that appears most desirable to them, seeking their "Glück" (*happiness*) and, with a little "Glück" (*good luck, fortune*), finding it. The close relationship between the good (the good life) and the virtuous gives way to the conjunction of happiness and success. Although reliant upon favourable circumstances beyond our control, this success is nevertheless primarily dependent on our own talent, abilities and achievement: we are all *architects of our own fortunes – hands on* – a truly 'manual' understanding of "Glück" (*happiness, good luck, fortune*). What was once a matter of the *recognition* of a predetermined order has now become a question of the development and realisation of respective personal conceptions or blueprints, a matter of *action*, specifically of capacity and labour. It is only once thus placed at our individual disposal that the happiness question actually appears really important, indeed central for people's conduct of life, conditions under which a new property emerges: that of individuality.

It is only in this historic and cultural context, that is, in the modern context of thought and action, that the statement in our draft programme suddenly takes on the sense which appears so increasingly self-evident to us today: the self-fulfilment of the *self-made man* – in Protestant work ethics still bound to and supported by a transcendent, otherworldly destiny and the concept of divine election.

⁷ Niklas Luhmann, Individuum, Individualität, Individualismus. In: Ders., Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik. Studien zur Wissenssoziologie der modernen Gesellschaft. Frankfurt: suhrkamp 1989. S. 199.

⁸ John Stuart Mill, The Subjection of Women (1869). In: J. St. Mill: Three Essays. Ed. by Richard Wollheim. Oxford/ New York: Oxford University Press 1995. S. 445.

However, these architects of their fortune are by no means so individual or solitary. They enter into alliances, form a *contrat social* and create a commonwealth, a state, which corresponds to this wholly new conception. In the modern state, at least insofar as it thinks of itself as free and/or liberal, the pursuit of happiness is raised to the constitutional level, becoming a criterion for the legitimacy of the political system and of government:

*"We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal⁹, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute new government ..."*¹⁰.

*"The states unite the people, so that through this union and in this union each individual person is better and more certainly enabled to enjoy their share of happiness. – The sum of the individual happiness of all the members is the happiness of the state. Apart from this there is no other. All other happiness of the state whereby individual members, however few they may be, suffer or are forced to suffer, is tyranny in disguise"*¹¹.

This fundamental subservience of the state to the interests of the individual survives down to the present:

*"The foremost task of the state and of politics in general consists in meeting the needs of individuals"*¹².

When it comes to the actual shaping of happiness, however, and of filling the term with life, then that is no more the business of the state than it is the business of a servant to question the Why and Wherefore of his master's orders, which must be simply taken as *given*. Accordingly, modern social theory exercises wise restraint and/or indifference:

*"A moderate universalism ... starts with the a priori assumption of the forms and conceptions of the good life as given"*¹³.

⁹ Die moderne Freiheits- und Gleichheitsidee sind gleichursprünglich: Wenn das Recht jedes Einzelnen auf Rechte verkündet wird, dann verlieren Rangordnungen zwischen den Einzelnen grundsätzlich ihre Legitimation. Dennoch besteht zwischen diesen beiden Postulaten moderner demokratischer Verfassungen ein bis heute ungelöstes Spannungsverhältnis.

¹⁰ Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776.

¹¹ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Ernst und Falk. Gespräche für Freimaurer (1778). Hg.v. Ion Contiades. Frankfurt: Insel 1968. S. 19. Selbst die sanftesten Reiche geraten unter den Verdacht der Tyrannei, in moderner Terminologie des Totalitarismus wenn sie den Primat der Teile / der Einzelnen nicht anerkennen.

¹² Michael Walzer, Zivile Gesellschaft und amerikanische Demokratie. Berlin: Rotbuch 1992. S. 169.

In other words, the forms and conceptions of the good life become "private concerns":

Liberalism ... divides social life into different domains of relevancies. Stressing the heterogeneity of the 'public' (political) and the 'private' (citoyen and homme) this view is peculiarly suited to modern pluralistic societies, in which there is no general agreement about ideals of the person"¹⁴.

4

While the modern state withdraws, then, from all determination of the material form and/or content of happiness, this by no means implies that people are left alone in their newly gained freedom to develop and realise their respective desires and goals by themselves. That other great system of action, which becomes differentiated and develops a life of its own in the process of modernity, the capitalist economy – for good reason also known as private enterprise – helpfully stands alongside individuals in their avowedly entirely private *pursuit of happiness*.

Neither the goal nor the measure of "*any man's appetite or desire*" is to be found in some perennial, inner human nature, but "appetite" can be aroused and steered, increased and refined: cultivated; and "desires" can be infinitely extended. In short, the modern economy sets about the task, not only of satisfying people's newly discovered and/or recently legitimated demand for happiness, not only of stilling hunger or of quenching thirst. Instead, the pursuit of happiness is propelled and increased: to forever more new realms, to staggering heights and to unprecedented depths. Even if modern capitalism is not the inventor of the wish machine, it certainly does fire it into top gear, milking *appetite and desire* to the utmost limits.

Especially as of the middle of the 20th century with the development of the capitalist economy towards a market economy, the production of consumer goods and the provision of services, the quest for the good life – more correctly: the "better and better still" life – experienced an unprecedented boom. Happiness lay now in the overabundance of goods for one's individual material consumption, for the psycho-physical enjoyment of earthly and/or mortal life in the here and now of the "thrill-seeking socie-

¹³ Martin Seel, Plädoyer für die zweite Moderne. In: Die Aktualität der 'Dialektik der Aufklärung'. Hg.v. H. Kunemann/ H. de Vries. Frankfurt 1989. S. 52. Das kann möglicherweise so weit gehen, die Grundlagen der einmal in der Verfassung gesetzten Ziele in Frage zu stellen, wenn es dem demokratisch gebildeten Willen der Bürger entspricht: "*Mit allen statischen Regulativen setzt die zweite Moderne auch den Gedanken einer linearen Annäherung ans gute und befreite Leben außer Kraft*" (a.a.O., S. 41. M. Seel, Plädoyer für die zweite Moderne, S. 52.

¹⁴ Charles Larmore, Patterns of Moral Complexity. Cambridge 1987. S. 124.

ty" – where I order "*an instant coffee, subito please!*" – always more and more, and never enough ...

This new orientation of major industry towards "any man's appetite or desire" as the promotion and pampering of body and soul also finds verbal expression in a modified and increased usage of "good" words such as "well-being" or German neologisms such as "wellness"¹⁵. *Well* is a clear sign that *the good* (in the old sense) has once again undergone a change in meaning. Jean Baudrillard speaks of a "*revolution of well-being*"¹⁶. At the core of this revolution lies the *aestheticisation* and *commodification* of the good life, happiness in personal fulfilment, in the *self-design* of the creative worker, the *designer self*, which is hedonistically created and *styled*. The individual is encouraged to seek self-fulfilment, to exploit and/or exhaust his/her potential, to maximise up to the point at which one's own life becomes a work of art(ifice).

The good life relocates and/or is redefined from being the notion of self-fulfilment as the unfolding of 'dormant' attributes and abilities, inherent and hidden within the self, to become the notion of infinite self-improvement: *self-enhancement*¹⁷. The self is drawn into the spiral of permanent growth, not only conducting life analogous to the way in which a businessman runs his firm, the individual *is* his firm, which is geared

¹⁵ "Wellness" has been an English word for a long time, although it was rarely used until Dr. Halbert L. Dunn "introduced the concept of wellness (or high-level wellness) in a series of twenty-nine lectures he gave at the Unitarian Church in Arlington County, Virginia in the late 1950s. Those lectures provided the basis for his book, *High Level Wellness*, which was published in 1961" (quoted from Wikipedia reference-linkHalbert_L._Dunn). "The modern concept of wellness did not, however, become popular until the 1970s" (quoted from Wikipedia reference-linkWellness_(alternative_medicine)). The whole wellness thing expanded to mean many things beyond which Dr. Dunn first intended it to, but it appears that he is responsible for the use of this word in particular rather than any other word. It makes sense that he would use a less common word to refer to his specific type of health and well-being that is distinct from the other generic words." <http://www.englishforum.ch/family-matters-health/45379-origin-word-wellness.html> (letzter Aufruf 14.10.2015).

¹⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London: SAGE 1998. S. 50: "The 'Revolution of Well-Being' is heir to, or executor of, the Bourgeois Revolution, or simply of any revolution which proclaims human equality as its principle without being able (or without wishing) fundamentally to bring it about. The democratic principle is then transferred from a real equality of capacities, of responsibilities, of social chances and of happiness (in the full sense of the term) to an equality before the Object and other manifest signs of success and happiness. This is the democracy of social standing, the democracy of the TV, the car and the stereo, an apparently concrete but, in fact, equally formal democracy which ... corresponds to the formal democracy enshrined in the Constitution. Both of these, one serving as an alibi for the other, combine in a general democratic ideology which conceals the absence of democracy and the non-existence of equality."

¹⁷ vgl. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-enhancement>

"Self-enhancement is a type of motivation that works to make people feel good about themselves and to maintain self-esteem. This motive becomes especially prominent in situations of threat, failure or blows to one's self-esteem. Self-enhancement involves a preference for positive over negative self-views. It is one of the four self-evaluation motives: along with self-assessment (the drive for an accurate self-concept), self-verification (the drive for a self-concept congruent with one's identity) and self-improvement (the act of bettering one's self-concept). Self-evaluation motives drive the process of self-regulation, that is, how people control and direct their own actions. There are a variety of strategies that people can use to enhance their sense of personal worth. For example, they can downplay skills that they lack or they can criticise others to seem better by comparison. These strategies are successful, in that people tend to think of themselves as having more positive qualities and fewer negative qualities than others. Although self-enhancement is seen in people with low self-esteem as well as with high self-esteem, these two groups tend to use different strategies. People who already have high esteem enhance their self-concept directly, by processing new information in a biased way. People with low self-esteem use more indirect strategies, for example by avoiding situations in which their negative qualities will be noticeable. There are controversies over whether or not self-enhancement is beneficial to the individual, and over whether self-enhancement is culturally universal or specific to Western individualism."

to permanent maximisation and/or growth – or to collapse, just like the capitalist economy itself.

For their happiness on this hazardous journey, individuals have at their disposal not only vast accumulations of material objects, goods, commodities and *gadgets* of all kinds, but also human helpers, counsellors and therapists, trainers and coaches, doctors, medicine men, healers, shamans and seers as well as the veritable libraries of advice, remedy, counselling and self-help literature, which they produce. That is the world of good “Gelingen”, of better-and-better “Gelingen”.

Apropos: I was surprised when I read the word "Gelingen" in the title of our event. In my own usage, the question as to this “Gelingen” does not extend nearly as far as to encompass the whole good and happy life; it has a 'technical' connotation to it: a stunt or trick, a cake, perhaps a theatre production or a dinner invitation can “gelingen” – or not, as the case may be (the perennial shadow of “Gelingen” is failure¹⁸). I went on to ask myself, what exactly the equivalent for "Gelingen" actually is in other languages: In English, it is "to succeed", "to turn out well" or even: "*enhancement*", for which the translators of this project (initially) opted.

I then entered search words such as "*wie gelingt*" and "*so gelingt*" in *Google*¹⁹. The resultant hits led me with great consistency from technical concerns – such as "*Wie gelingt alternativer Hochwasserschutz?*"²⁰ [How does alternative flood prevention work?], "*So gelingt der Umstieg auf Windows 10*" [How to switch successfully to Windows 10], and "*So gelingt Firmen das Comeback*" [Successful comeback strategies for firms] – to the technical details of homemaking, which, since time immemorial, have always required every recipe and prescription imaginable: ("*Wie gelingt Baiserhaube?*" [How can meringues turn out well?] on CHEFKOCH.DE²¹ or "*So gelingt Pizzateig*"²² [How to make a good pizza base]). The search then led from the kitchen into the bedroom and, preferably, straight out again with advice on "*Wie gelingt eine gute Scheidung?*" [How to achieve a good divorce] – This I found on BRIGITTE²³ – women’s magazines, of course, continue to be the leading authority on these and all related topics²⁴. It is indeed – somewhat unexpectedly for me – the minor and major "life themes" which form the core of the "Gelingen" question, all the way to the ques-

¹⁸ siehe oben Fussnote **Fehler! Textmarke nicht definiert.**

¹⁹ "Gelingen" oder "gutes Gelingen" führt nicht weiter als bis zu den Wörterbüchern; das engl. Äquivalent zu "wie gelingt" oder "so gelingt" wäre eher "how to"

²⁰ www.mdr.de/echt/video298700.html

²¹ www.chefkoch.de/suche.php?suche=wie+gelingt+baiserhaube&wo=1

²² www.pizzateig.org/pizza-rezept/

²³ www.brigitte.de/liebe/.../wie-gelingt-eine-gute-scheidung

²⁴ Dazu immer noch der kritische Klassiker: Ehrenreich, Barbara/ English Deirdre: For Her Own Good: Two Centuries of the Experts' Advice to Women 1978/ revised New York Anchor Books 2005.

tion of happiness: "*Wie gelingt ein glückliches Leben?*"²⁵ [How can I achieve happiness in life?].

Yes, it is true: This "Gelingen", the technical and strategic *how-to* question, in search of *know-how* learning, wanting to know how I should change a tyre or bake a cake, has become "... the norm, against which people measure their lives"²⁶. In other words, the promise of happiness when technology and social technology (or *social engineering*) "gelingen" [succeed, turn out well, bring enhancement] thus becomes metamorphosed from an offer people are given into a demand placed on them.



For Jean Baudrillard, at the end of the *revolution of well-being* there is the insight that the human right to (a good) life – the constitutionally guaranteed entitlement which citizens of a modern, free and liberal state have to their respective personal *pursuit of happiness* – has turned into a duty, an economic performance which each individual is required to produce:

*"... consumerist man ... regards enjoyment as an obligation; he sees himself as an enjoyment and satisfaction business. He sees it as his duty to be happy ... euphoric and dynamic. This is the principle of maximizing existence ... by systematic exploitation of all the potentials of enjoyment. ... He must constantly see to it that all his potentialities, all his consumer capacities are mobilized. If he forgets to do so, he will be gently reminded that **he has no right not to be happy**"²⁷. "*Happiness, written in letters of fire behind the least little advert for bathsalts or the Canary Islands, is the absolute reference of the consumer society: it is the strict equivalent of salvation*"²⁸.*

Baudrillard is of the opinion - and I believe he may well be correct – that "consumerist man" is the heir and business successor to the puritan businessman, the operations manager and life manager:

²⁵ Wie gelingt ein glückliches Leben? - BRIGITTE-woman.de woman.brigitte.de/leben-lieben/.../glueckliches-leben-1023849/ Am Ende verschwimmen in der Perspektive des "Wie-Gelingt-&-So-Gelingt- Business" die Grenzen zwischen Beruf und Familie, Arbeit und Leben, Profis und Laien zunehmend. Mit Angeboten wie "So gelingt Familie. Hilfen für den alltäglichen Wahnsinn" (Eia Asen, erschienen 2013 in der Reihe Carl-Auer-LebensLust !!! im Auer Verlag) richten sich männliche, aber auch immer mehr weibliche Experten an Familien, in der Regel Frauen, aber auch zunehmend an Männer. Bei Versprechungen wie "so gelingt der Start in die Kita", oder "der Schulanfang" können sich die ebenso Empfehlungen an die privaten Personen, resp. die Kinder und Eltern richten wie an die Kindergärtner und Lehrerinnen. Vor allem in social networks wird die Sender-Empfänger-Relation unklar: Hier stellen mehr oder weniger erfahrene Laien anderen ihre mehr oder weniger guten Ratschläge zur Verfügung, für die sich auch sozial Berufstätige durchaus interessieren dürften, wie zum Beispiel für: "Wie gelingt Integration?"(heuteplus - ZDFmediathek - ZDF ...www.zdf.de/ZDFmediathek/beitrag/.../Wie-gelinkt-Integration%253F).

²⁶ vgl. Programm-Entwurf der Tagung

²⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London: SAGE 1998. S. 80

²⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London: SAGE 1998. S. 49. Diese Art der Erlösung soll bereits im Diesseits stattfinden in dem Versprechen forever young and beautiful and sexy - Sexualität anstelle von Tod als Signifikant im gamble on transcendence - um Erlösung.

"The puritan regarded himself, his own person, as a business to be made to prosper for the greater glory of God. His 'personal' qualities, his 'character', which he spent his life producing, were for him a capital to be invested opportunely, to be managed without speculation or waste.

Whereas the ascetic puritan businessman's investment was in the *well-being* of his soul (in the sense of salvation) beyond his finite body, the consumer who enjoys wellness invests her cosmetic measures in next Monday's job interview, which – if it is successful (*gelingt*), that is, if it gains her a fixed-term placement for the next x months / years – should secure her economic existence for the time being.

Capitalism has undergone a transformation, which is essentially only a switch of emphasis from production to consumption, both of which remain joined to each other as two sides of the same coin, and both of which converge in the concept of investment. Be that as it may, the laws of economics remain the same, and the human agents, that is *we* – although in the meantime *we* has long since ceased to mean *we all*, but far more only a few – inhabit the "inside world of capital", of that capitalism, which, on the other hand, produces more *outside*, more exclusion, more segregation and rejection, more *uberisation* than ever before.

This means the reification and objectification, the computation and calculation of the search for the good, its transformation from a question of being / existence / life to a question of having – having objects, consumer goods, commodities, which we ourselves in turn become – a question of services which we must perform, more of them tomorrow than today, in the permanent escalation, the never-ending advance of higher, faster, further – just like all the cogwheels and machines in this operation.

So, how do we get from here to the question of our conference?

II The good life from the perspective of the social professions

Our agenda over the next few days explores the lives of people in their everyday circumstances (section 1), in their physical and mental health and/or illness and disability (sections 2, 5, 11), the lives of children and life with children (sections 8 and 10), as well as life in international comparison (namely, Russia / Germany) and in the global coexistence of genders and cultures (sections 3, 4, 6, 7 and 9 on music). It closes with a reflection on the religious (and spiritual) dimension (section 12).

So to speak as the “thirteenth fairy” *not* (at least not expressly or perhaps expressly / intentionally not?) invited to the banquet table of our forum are the topics of age, dying and death. And, lastly, lurking there in the shadows: the ancient spectre of “class”, the question of the – notoriously unequal – distribution of life’s goods between rich and poor and, moreover, the problems of social inequality between givers and receivers, that is, the question of the comparative poverty / (under)payment of the social professions as female occupations.

To be fair, no conference can deal with every single aspect of a subject, and it certainly cannot plough all the furrows of a field as wide as that of social work. And so this is not meant as a reproach, but rather as an observation, which strikes me as relevant, and to which I now append the theses of my lecture:

1

The fact that age, dying and death are missing from the list of subjects is symptomatic of the false, illusionary perspective of the good, the good life, happiness and “Gelingen”, which can be traced through the entire history of western thought from the very beginning to the present day. In this lecture, I have very sketchily traced the move from eternal and good order down to technical perfection (enhancement). No matter how different these conceptions may be, one thing they have in common is the illusion of overcoming / transcending or eliminating the conditions of finitude, of going beyond boundaries and/or limitations.

Fleeing in the face of contingency can take the form:

- of anchorage in a transcendent order, which is perfectly true, good and beautiful, guarantees the unity and integrity of knowledge and being, and promises redemption, eternal life (presence, light without shade)
or
- of dynamic perfectibility instead of static perfection in a temporal infinity, to which the linear progress of the Enlightenment leads, based on labour / achievement / struggle, and leading to emancipation of humanity from all chains and to a future mastery of inner and outer nature
or
- of a momentary and mundane surrogate salvation, “bath salt” deliverance, promising eternal youth and beauty, not for the whole of humanity, but just for me alone here and now in my bathtub of bliss, my body-and-soul selfie, which is infinitely improvable and, especially, open to beautification (enhancement):
“the strict equivalent of salvation”.

2

In contrast to religion and metaphysics, and to technology and social technology, social work has as its aim not salvation and redemption, but healing and support. To this end, it is essential to work from the assumption and conditions of contingency. Existence in general, but especially human life and knowledge, understanding and action, are all subject to the conditions of contingency.

What is contingency?

Arbitrariness, something can be or not be, be this way or otherwise, although neither absolutely free nor self-determined, but

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Conditionality, dependence on something other / outside, which for its part is also arbitrary and dependent, that is, not absolutely necessitated and determinate

=

Contingency is something, which is neither necessitated nor impossible, which exists neither fully nor not at all, which is neither wholly heteronomous nor wholly autonomous, but rather "not only, but also", oscillating within the confines of time and space:

Contingency has a temporal dimension:

incipience / bornness

+

transience / mortality

=

weaknesses: randomness (fall of the dice) + frailness (decline / decay) = finitude

Hitherto, every single living thing / human is and has been born and mortal: fleeting, transient: not of this world → Alterity 1: the "infinite finitude" (Schelling) – that is the engine that drives the wish machine

Contingency has a spatial dimension:

Particularity, the infinite folding of each individual in upon themselves: "*je ne suis pas tout*" (Pascal), I am not "master of my own house" (Freud), lack of unity: fragmentation / fragility – the individual is *not* in-divisible (in-dividuum), has no stable identity

+

Plurality: "*nous ne sommes pas tous*"; lack of integrity of the many / vulnerability

Particularity + plurality in the sense of multiple and varied, both as being 'folded' on one's self, and also as multiple social and cultural spatial differences

=

Discrepancy / discord / antagonism / conflict with one's self and with others → Alterity 2: alienness, lack of order / chaos / *bellum omnium* ...

3

From the perspective of the illusory notion of perfection and perfectibility (wholeness / unity / eternity / presence / light / infinity), the conditions of contingency appear as deficient, as "curtailment of being", as weak and sick, as dark and dirty, pain and struggle. This false view results in a contempt for life in its particularity and plurality – in that hostility towards the body which is present with us still, covertly so in the latest *wellness* body cult.

This contempt of weakness affects not only those who are directly and visibly afflicted, but also those who care for them. This is where the low esteem for social work is rooted: those who clear away others' mess are themselves messy; those who stand alongside others in their weakness are themselves weak. Social work is life and limb service: slave labour, women's work, "underling's" duty.

4

Social work is care work; it arises out of conditions of contingency; and it encompasses every possible aspect of existence:

It is these very conditions of contingency, that is: natality, morbidity and mortality, randomness and frailness, precarity and volatility, the weaknesses of life, which give rise to the primary necessity for caring. Caring is concerned with the major life limits of beginning/birth and end/death and with the perils that lie scattered between them: accidents, illness, disability – occurrences which, even within lifetimes, render the constant presence of the limits manifest, at each and every moment and for all living beings. Not only the unalterable (that is, if only in a negative sense, 'certain') limits of life and death and the unsure transitions between them demand attention, care and action, but also the growth, development and evolving, the formation and shaping of life *en route* between growth and decay, all fall under the focus of caring. The tasks involved relate to the body and its day-to-day maintenance (nurture, care) as well as its restoration (regeneration, recovery: recreation) and transmission (sexuality, gen-

erativity: procreation). Although so closely aligned to 'matter', to the 'material' world, the scope of life care nevertheless extends beyond the body. In the form of nurture and education, it relates to mind and soul. In the dimension of teaching and learning, care ranges from the training of (bodily) practices and customs (*habitus*) and the formation of character (abilities, characteristics, virtues) all the way to imparting social skills and orientation (rules and norms) with the objective of forming personal identity (individuation) and social lifestyles (socialisation).

In all of its aspects, life care is bound to creatureliness and aliveness, to material nature, while at the same time pointing beyond them. One of its characteristics is that the various dimensions are interwoven; a separation of the levels, a gradation leading upwards from the realm of the bodily 'below' via the spirit to the soul 'above' is misleading and wrong. Nor is it any more possible to separate the dark aspects of life from the bright ones. Care is about coping with the necessities of life in its paucity and need, and – insofar as this succeeds (*gelingt*) – life can produce an effervescent fullness, abundance and profusion – yet without thereby being enabled to move definitively beyond life's limits. Care relates to the joy and suffering of human existence; it comprises a broad spectrum of more or less arduous work designed to secure the 'upkeep' or sustenance of life; but it can be 'upbeat' or entertaining too – in the broadest sense of the word, the sense of pure, non-directional, carefree communication. Care relates to the entire lifecycle. Accordingly, the active tasks of caring have circular, repetitive traits. This kind of work is never 'finished', the conversation has no ultimate goal, knows no conclusion; life is a 'talking shop' in which there is no end to either cares or caring.

Care is pitifully and woefully chained (passive) to the wheel of life, but it also 'takes care' (active) to ensure that the wheel keeps turning. Care governs every kind of activity concerned with verbal communication and/or non-verbal interaction between people. In care, signs and bodies, form and matter, laughter and tears are linked – care is what “holds life and limb / body and soul together”.

5

Whereas self-care and life care were traditionally based at home (modern: in the privacy of the home) and bashfully concealed or hidden from view ("discretio"), these same topics have become more and more publicly visible in the course of the 20th century: They attract the attention of state (social and ecological) policies as well as the business interests of the private sector. Under both regimes, whether directed by the state or, increasing so, under the governance of the market, life care is subjected to professionalization. CARE has long since come to constitute a broader and broad-

er spectrum of social work / services in social professions. Social work comprises all activities of people, for people and with people, all relations between people as well as all reflections arising out of life's growth and decay. Social work is life care / care, regardless of whether this work is done privately, professionally, or voluntarily.

6

Whereas the first waves of major technological revolutions in the Industrial Age were concerned with the production and distribution of material goods, the innovations in information and communication technologies and in medicine and reproduction technology have an immediate impact on life itself (*life sciences, care industries*). These developments fundamentally revolutionise life and life care; they are the real causes of the "care revolution", which is so much the subject of contemporary debate. They give fresh impetus to the old dream of escaping from contingency, of overcoming weakness and finitude. They reinforce the use and importance of technology and social technology.

Changes and shifts to life's limits / contingency will continue to take place as they have always done. Overcoming these limits or stepping beyond them, on the other hand, is something that has never yet happened, and is hardly ever to be expected.

"Modernity has accomplished many far-reaching transformations, but it has not fundamentally changed the finitude."²⁹

7

Life in this mortal vale of tears is not good and there is no "salvation" beyond it. None of us are self-made men/women and/or engineers of our own fortunes. Life has limits, and within these limits, people are dependent on each other in spite of all otherness, and of the limits/barriers within us and between us.

In closing, let us return once again to the question of life and life-care work's "Gelingen" [success, enhancement, turning out well]. Social work can and should *satisfy* (zufriedenstellen) – so, instead of "good", "very good" and better and better still; excellent, outstanding / exceptional and increasingly higher, faster, further enhancement without limit, the disappointing old German school grade 3: only "befriedigend" (satisfactory)?

²⁹ Berger, Peter / Brigitte Berger/ Hansfried Kellner: *The Homeless Mind. Modernization and Consciousness*. New York: Random House 1973. S. 185.

The word element "Frieden" (*peace*) is present in the two German terms *zufriedenstellen* and *befriedigen*. The equivalent terms in English – *satisfy / satisfactory / satisfaction* – are derived from the Latin and signify the redressing of harm / damage, or of a debt / obligation: reparation. Whether we think in terms of repairing fundamentally damaged lives, or of making peace between life's limits – that is certainly no mean feat. It can be achieved and can succeed (*gelingen*), if and when we comprehend that these limits of ours do not imply failure: They are far more the limiters / limitations of our potential, which we can only realise together and in solidarity.