Content

Preface

"Nothing stays for us."
Blaise Pascal

"Nothing compels us to say that there is something behind the fluid realities of everyday life, behind the actions or operations, that is constant and that one would have to recognize in order to comprehend."
Niklas Luhmann

Can we, with philosophy, face the rapid changes of our world that so severely confuse our orientation? Can philosophy understand how to keep up with the times? Philosophy has indeed been slowly preparing for this – but, at the same time, it has grown more confusing and uncertain than ever before. It has split into various fields: in part, philosophy now strives to establish specific standards of precision or justice; in part, it is engaged in addressing specific theoretical or practical issues; in part, it deals with its history and its specific authors or topics; on the whole, it is clustered in opposing camps that you may join alternately – beyond its name, you can hardly detect its coherence any more. Not only does our orientation about the world we live in today seem lost, but so does our orientation about philosophy, which might at least provide an initial overview and some certainty. But what is orientation? This is precisely what philosophy – as research into the fundamentals of existence, thinking, and action – should first of all be able to answer while, at the same time, drawing conclusions for how we, in everyday life as well as in the sciences and the humanities, can adequately deal with our relentlessly changing world. Such an answer has not yet been given. We will try to do so.

By now, hardly anyone, not even in philosophy, expects unshakeable and timeless orders; rather, quite to the contrary, we assume today that change in all areas of life, including its most basic conditions, will continue to accelerate, making our world ever more unsurveyable and uncertain as time goes on. But orientation is needed precisely when situations, both large and small, change to such an extent that they become confusing – when you no longer know your way around. Orientation is, in common understanding, the achievement of finding one's way in an unsurveyable and uncertain situation so that one can successfully master the situation. Orientation is not purely intellectual – animals, too, orient themselves, in some ways they even surpass human beings – but it challenges the whole person. Orientation involves finding paths both in the terrain and through all the circumstances of human life: not only our daily life but even our survival depends on the success of our orientation. We will only sur-

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vive in our rapidly changing world if we succeed in reflecting on our current orientation skills and acquiring new ones.

If every orientation is the achievement of dealing with a specific situation, be it private, social, or global, then orientation as a whole is the ability to keep up with the times: the strength to make decisions in ever-new situations on how things may continue to run successfully – decisions that promise to hold for at least some time until new orientations become necessary. Orientation includes the capacity of renewing oneself. This has always been critical; but in a more stable world it was less noticed. Today, this is of crucial interest, for every individual and every society on this earth, but particularly in a country that feels responsible for the entire world.

As capacity for an achievement, each orientation is a process; over time, from the experience of countless such processes, a kind of knowledge consolidates that provides security, even if this knowledge – in changing with the times – cannot and must not ever be fully certain of itself. Structured in this temporal way, orientation can hardly be grasped with traditional terms, and it cannot be exhaustively defined in advance. For in order to give definitions, you must already be sufficiently oriented; any meaningful way of thinking, speaking, or acting must always be preceded by a variety of orientation processes, which may themselves also change. However, orientation processes may fail: from cases of momentary confusion or (to push it to the extreme) dementia, on the one hand, to those of social riots or global catastrophes, on the other, what is lost before anything else are the usual routines of orientation and the hold they provide. Orientation must constantly reckon with such disorientations.

Orientation processes always take place in individuals, even if some activities are now being performed by machines; for these machines to work purposefully, they must be controlled and employed by individuals. Individuals' orientations are bound to their standpoints, perspectives, and horizons; to the clues they hold on to and the signs that are available; to their routines, beliefs, and identities – all orientation decisions are inevitably made under these conditions. Always being singular, orientation processes may vary to a great extent. We must therefore – especially in democratic societies – proceed from individual orientations in order to understand how we generally behave and might alternatively behave in our world, or rather our worlds, which include our various social and global orientation worlds, as well as how we organize or could organize them. And only under these conditions can we clarify how individuals are able to cooperate in their orientations and thus arrive at common orientations and designs of their world (or worlds). Anything beyond individual orientations is an abstraction – springing from individual orientations.

In order to approach the question of human orientation in this way, we must re-sort and reexamine the insights that philosophy has hitherto gained and developed in collaboration with the sciences from the ground up: while philosophy has so far been oriented toward universality, timelessness, and finality, the question of human orientation instead centers on singularity, temporality, and decidability. Proceeding from the different orientations of individuals, this philosophical inquiry into orientation investigates how the structures of human orientation manifest themselves in social life, i. e. in the interactions and communications of individuals and in their functional communication systems, such as economics, media, politics, law, science, art, and religion. We will further explore where these structures gain moral and ethical significance, how they are affected by current processes of globalization and digitization, and how and why they remain disregarded by metaphysics. We do not presuppose any universals, be they alleged givens or norms; we refrain from universal reasons, justifications, or evaluations; we rely, instead, on observations. Our investigation first of all *describes* the conditions under which universalizations become possible and often necessary – for such universalizations are specific orientation strategies, too. The same applies to this book: while performing itself what it addresses, it tries to *orient* you about the conditions of human orientation. It thereby establishes the philosophical *pre*conditions for those informed orientation decisions that are required to successfully manage the accelerating changes of our world. By doing so, the philosophical investigation into the conditions of orientation itself becomes a philosophy of orientation.

Of course, no philosophy is entirely new; neither is this philosophy of orientation. Any orientation, in everyday life as well as in philosophy, is preceded by other orientations; orientations are always reorientations. This philosophy is new, however, in so far as it begins with orientation itself. Once this beginning has been made, you find many paths leading to it in the history of philosophy, starting with the very beginnings of philosophy. Particularly close to the philosophy of orientation is – besides the thinking of (the Frenchman) Blaise Pascal, who most strikingly expressed the need for orientation, and the thinking of (the German) Immanuel Kant, who situated this need in the midst of his critical philosophy of pure reason, thereby giving prominence to the philosophical term of orientation – the thinking of American pragmatism, which stands in the tradition of nominalism, empiricism, and utilitarianism. American pragmatism already proceeds in a rather sober and moderate manner. William James, who most succinctly formulated the basic attitude of pragmatism (while keeping in mind the German philosophy of his time), describes it as follows:

> He [the pragmatist] turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power.[1]

Theories and their respective innovations are not beyond experience but permeate and develop it further; they are never ultimate solutions adequately representing reality, but instruments for expanding human experience: "Pragmatism unstiffens all our theories, limbers them up and sets each one at work."[2] Terms, natural or artificial, are only "short-cuts";[3] they help with "linking things satisfactorily, working securely, simplifying, saving labor."[4] Pragmatism conceives of the world (and of orientation about and in it) as a network of networks that are expanded via "conductors" and limited by "non-conductors."[5] Common sense, as it develops over a long period of time, provides (in terms of the philosophy of orientation) plausibilities (*Plausibilitäten*) that are still unclarified and unorganized, but on which new knowledge must be based in order to be comprehensible. Such plausibilities, however, are in turn transformed by new knowledge; both plausibilities and knowledge have a "steering function"[6] concerning the other. Pragmatism (like the philosophy of orientation) offers "no dogmas, and no doctrines," but it allows one to explore the meanings of terms, theories, and doctrines used in one's dealings with the world.[7] In this "radical empiricism," as James later calls it, "truths" (plural) have the "function of *a leading that is worth while*."[8] Truths are promising leads, nothing more, nothing less. As such, pragmatism also indicates "the ways in which existing realities may be *changed*." James calls pragmatism "an attitude of orientation."[9]

Corresponding in many respects to American pragmatism, even in its later, 20th century forms, this philosophy of orientation could find particularly open ears in the English-speaking world. Nevertheless, it goes beyond American pragmatism by – following an irreconcilable dispute about the meaning of the concept of truth – no longer focusing on the problem of truth itself but instead, as mentioned above, on how individuals, with their different orientations and responsibilities, make use of the concept of truth. American pragmatism, which itself differentiated into various standpoints, influencing many areas of life, science, and the humanities, was and remains – as far as one can still conceive of it as a unity or at least as a movement based on shared conditions and goals – primarily an epistemology standing in critical relation to earlier, particularly rationalistic, epistemologies. The philosophy of orientation, on the other hand, takes seriously questions concerning the "practical cash-value" of clues, footholds, signs, terms, concepts, and truths, all of which may show up differently at different times in each orientation and may be assessed in different ways; in-

vestigating the conditions and structures of human orientation, this philosophy clarifies how individuals, despite their different orientations, are nevertheless able to find hold within their orientations, successfully communicate with each other, and, at the same time, continually renew their orientations. By emphasizing the individuality and temporality of human orientation, the philosophy of orientation deepens the basis and expands the horizons of the philosophical investigation of our thinking and acting in the world.

Nobody else characterized the force and momentum of this kind of philosophical investigation as clearly as Friedrich Nietzsche (who, for his part, hardly used the term of orientation). In the first aphorism of his most important work critiquing metaphysics, *Beyond Good and Evil*, he no longer presupposes even the "will to truth," but asks instead for its "cause" and its "value" for life. He confronts us with a question: "Granted, we will truth: *why not untruth instead?* And uncertainty? Even ignorance?" Untruth, uncertainty, and ignorance may be just as necessary for life as truth, certainty, and knowledge. If this is the case, then you are constantly forced to decide between the two, and the mere knowledge of being able to decide between them frees our orientations to new horizons of thinking, acting, and living. It may thus lead to innovations even in philosophical thinking that can help us keep up with the times. Before this, Nietzsche wrote down in a notebook: "The happiness of the great discoverers in their quest for certainty could now transform into the happiness of finding everywhere uncertainty and venture."[10]

In fact, human orientation can never be fully certain of itself, not even in cases when it is successful according to the standards of pragmatism; it always continues to be (more or less) at risk. Truth is something (Nietzsche adds later in the 5th book of his *Gay Science*, No. 355) that reassures us, calms us down; James speaks of "sublime tricks of human thought, our ways of escaping bewilderment in the midst of sensation's irremediable flow."[11] Given the alternative to truth(s) that Nietzsche establishes ("*why not untruth instead?*"), there remains a perpetual concern that dealing with truth(s) could only be a matter of tricks and that there could always be alternative (useful, if not even vital) truths or untruths, whether one likes them or not. Nietzsche especially calls upon philosophers to likewise scrutinize in the direction of untruths, uncertainties, and ignorance in order to discover what our orientations might offer us or conceal from us for the sake of current usefulness.

Here, the term of orientation gets us further than the term of truth, even in respect to Nietzsche. With the term of orientation, it also becomes clear that, despite all untruths, uncertainties, and ignorance, the widespread fear of nihilism and relativism is unjustified: human orientation does not require a final hold outside itself, which could never be verified (there is none); human orientation

creates its hold(s) within itself in various ways, which we are able to investigate and clarify. These holds of orientations within themselves may fail at times because orientations are never safe from falling into disorientations. But the structure of human orientation typically allows one to gain a sufficient orientation once more. Our orientation thus creates confidence that its own hold(s) will continue to hold.

It may be an irony of history that Germany, although – or perhaps because – it failed miserably in its political orientations, has developed a particularly refined language of orientation, especially in the word field surrounding hold (*Halt*) and foothold (*Anhaltspunkt*), which provides a particularly fitting base for investigating the conditions and structures of human orientation. In Anglo-American philosophy, the philosophical term of orientation is still not common – in spite of James' reference to it. We are confident that through this book it will also find its home in Anglophone philosophies and beyond.

The *Philosophie der Orientierung* was first published – in German – in 2008. It includes many results of the investigations I have pursued ever since I discovered the topic in my inaugural address at the University of Bonn in 1990, "'What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?' – On the Possibility of Philosophical World Orientation according to Kant." The German original thus includes numerous excursus into the history of philosophy and contemporary sciences, which contribute to our understanding of human orientation. In the last decade, a lot of new evidence on the issue has emerged, which I have addressed in various publications. The year 2016 witnessed the publication of a volume compiling many inspiring contributions to the philosophy of orientation, to which I have tried to respond.[12]

Then, in 2017, the financial entrepreneur Mike Hodges from Nashville, Tennessee, suggested a translation of the *Philosophie der Orientierung* into English. Together, we decided not to translate the original text in its entirety, but rather an abridged version that is easily and quickly readable. Therefore, I minimized discussions on German orientation language, the history of philosophy, and the contemporary sciences (which have made considerable progress since then), and have removed most of the footnotes, where I discussed scholarly work, as well as the extended bibliography and index. The philosophy of orientation has thus attained a more essayistic form, which might be particularly appropriate for it (the scientific evidence can still be found in the original German version). To make the text particularly plausible for an English-speaking audience, I nonetheless made many textual changes and added some points on the subject matter, especially concerning identity politics and the digitization of global communication. The oftentimes challenging work of translation was accomplished by Reinhard Mueller, in close cooperation with me. Just as to Mike Hodges, for

his initiative and support, I am thankful to Reinhard Mueller for his tireless efforts and patience, as well as to Sydney Sepùlveda and especially John Murray, whose thorough proofreading assisted our endeavors.

A philosophical investigation focusing on how we deal with the unsurveyabilities and uncertainties of our orientation in the current world must itself be as clear as possible in order to establish, if not certainties, then at least plausibilities. This was my task not only in this book, but also in a '25 footholds' summary that I composed as an overview for 'readers in a hurry'; our conversations with Mike Hodges (and the title of a former paper of mine) led to its title, *Fearless Findings*. For readers interested in how the philosophy of orientation was prepared for in the history of philosophy, I compiled a somewhat more detailed overview entitled *Courageous Beginnings: 25 Situations of New Orientations in the History of Philosophy*. Eventually, there will also be a very short list of *15 Conclusions from the Philosophy of Orientation for Your Everyday Life*, under the title *Successful Modes of Orientation* for those specifically asking for the 'cash value' of this philosophical approach.

The historical overview gratefully acknowledges the various philosophical inspirations I have received for this book from the 'great philosophers.' I want to highlight, besides Blaise Pascal, Immanuel Kant, and Friedrich Nietzsche, a diverse set of philosophers including, on the one hand, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Willard Van Orman Quine, Hilary Putnam, Nelson Goodman, and Donald Davidson, and, on the other, Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, but also the sociologists Erving Goffman and Niklas Luhmann, as well as my outstanding teachers Karl Ulmer, author of a philosophy of the modern lifeworld, and Josef Simon, author of a philosophy of signs.

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Werner Stegmaier