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**Sympathy and  
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**Jörg Zeller**

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## **Sympathy and eudaimonia as resources of good social work**

“... Aristotelian practical wisdom is, up to a point, both general and (both through early moral education and through reflective material like the *Nicomachean Ethics*) teachable.” (Nussbaum<sup>23</sup>2009, 310)

### **Practical wisdom and social work**

My claim in this paper is that present-day social work can learn from Aristotelian Ethics, i.e. from the practical logic of concepts like eudaimonia and phrónesis, how to solve problems of social need. Taking ‘eudaimonia’ as expression of the spirit in which social work has to be done in order to be able to solve social problems, I will say: the spirit or mentality of social work has to be eudaimonic. In the first part of my paper I will give a short account of the logic of eudaimonian thinking.

In the second part I will try to combine Aristotelian practical logic with Wittgenstein’s idea of a language game. A great part of social work happens as an interlocution between client and social worker. Communicating by language is according to Wittgenstein 1963 “part of an activity or way of life” (PI § 23, *ibid.*, 300). Human activities try to reach desirable ends. In the case of the social-worker-client interlocution the desirable end is to help the client to realize a better life. Good life is what the Greeks called ‘eudaimonia’; or rather eudaimonia is the mentality of being able to create a good life. The aim of social work is then to bring the client into a eudaimonic mood.

Language game is Wittgenstein’s fiction of how it is possible to learn a language without a previous language. By language games we can test how we can become able to act and communicate meaningfully in forming our lives. ‘Language game’ can thus be understood as a technique or an art of learning to act and communicate meaningfully<sup>1</sup>. Applying the idea of language games to social work, the problem is then how it can be made possible to learn to realize a good life without having lived a good life before. The Aristotelian ethics of eudaimonia tries to unfold the appropriate logic of realizing a good life.

But what did Aristotle mean by a ‘good life’ and why did he call it ‘eudaimonia’? I think the meaning of the Greek adjective ‘eudaimonic’ is best explained by the

German word 'wohlgesinnt'. An English translation for 'wohlgesinnt' could be 'kind' or 'well-meaning' or 'being sympathetic with'. The German substantive 'Gesinnung' corresponds accordingly to the English 'attitude', 'disposition', 'mentality', and also 'ethos'. The Greek word 'ethos', on its part, unfolds a semantic network or conceptual field<sup>ii</sup> that *inter alia* contains concepts like: 'usual dwelling' or for animals 'pasture ground'. Another meaning-region of 'ethos' comprises concepts like 'habit', 'practice', 'custom', 'convention' and many other concepts of human practice. Ethics is thus originally more about what we have learned and became accustomed to do than what we believe to be obliged or allowed to do. The source of ethics is experience, not reasoning. As a consequence, ethical reasoning – what shall I do in order to reach this end? – is only reasonable when related to ethical, i.e. practical, experience. Knowledge based on practical experience is what Aristotle called 'phrónesis'. Translated as 'practical wisdom' (Nussbaum<sup>23</sup>2009) it is understood as the ability to perceive and conceive, to understand and evaluate an actual situation in an appropriate way, i.e. in a way that accounts for the particularities or the contingent features of the situation (cf. Nussbaum<sup>23</sup>2009<sup>iii</sup>).

Another aspect of the importance of eudaimonian thinking for social work is that a social worker only can help people in social need when acting in a eudaimonic spirit or state of mind. And this means in accordance with the outlined semantics of 'eudaimonia' something like 'to be sympathetic with' the person or persons needing help. If social work shall succeed then the sympathy of the social worker with the client is, however, just a necessary not a sufficient condition. The sympathy has to be mutual if it shall make it possible to evoke the eudaimonic mood required to bring the client on his/her way to a better life. If the client doesn't experience the well-meaning spirit of the social worker as a foreshadowing of the possibility of his/her own good life it will be difficult or impossible to reach the desired end of social work.

But not only are the client's possibilities of a good life at stake in social work. The social worker is a person who has chosen to make social work a means to realize his or her own idea of a good life. To help the client to find a way to a better life is thus a precondition for the social worker to realize a good life for him-/herself. To make this point completely clear: by choosing social work as profession, the social worker binds his/her destiny to the destiny of people in social need. The social worker is setting him/herself into a sympathetic relationship to all those people in need he meets on his/her job. He becomes thus a mirror of the misery of the society he/she is a member of and working for. He/she is, we could say, the walking bad conscience of the society.

'Eudaimonia' is usually translated to English by 'happiness'. According to the English, i.e. Western way of thinking, a person can be happy for many different

reasons. For instance, you can be happy because you have won a fortune in the lottery. Your happiness in this case is not eudaimonic in the Greek sense of the word. Eudaimonia, according to Greek ethical thinking, is the result of having deliberated the proper ends for your life, chosen the proper means for realizing them, performed the adequate actions, and at last (perhaps only after many trials) achieved the desired ends. But also when you do not happen to achieve these ends, you can anyway, because of your eager trials to achieve them, be in a eudaimonic spirit. To be in a eudaimonic spirit is therefore not the same as to experience pleasure. It is to act in accordance with *phrónesis*, i.e. with practical wisdom how to realize a good life, which makes a person eudaimonic and his/her life a good one.

To be in a sympathetic spirit as a precondition for being able to help other people in social need, one has then to address the day-to-day problem of the professional social worker: how to help the client to become able to help him-/herself? The probability of finding the appropriate things to do should increase with the social worker's ability to empathize with the client – i.e. to feel how it (probably) is for the client to be in the situation he/she is. Sympathy, thus, presupposes practical wisdom or *phrónesis*.

A practically wise person is namely not only excellent<sup>iv</sup> in understanding what it means to be in a particular situation; i.e. to understand what *follows* from being in such a situation – regarding the client's economy, social relations and state of mind. Being excellent or, in other words, being good in doing something in order to reach a certain end, is what the Greeks meant by the concept of 'virtue'. To be a good social worker means against this background: to own the virtue of *charity* or to excel in sympathizing and empathizing with people in need.

However, sympathy and empathy should not be misunderstood as a sheer emotion, but as the experiential aspect of *phrónesis*. Aristotle understands the faculty of thinking, feeling, and acting well in order to reach a desirable end, as a kind of *perception* (cf. Nussbaum<sup>23</sup>2009). Here perception has to be understood as the intellectual, emotional, and practical capturing of the peculiarities of actual situations. It thus resembles what Bourdieu 1980 has called 'practical sense'. Bourdieu had here in mind a good football-player, for instance, as a person intuitively being able to presage the best way to place the ball for a teammate. A good football-player owns practical wisdom of the space and motion potentials of a football pitch and of his teammates. A good social worker should then own practical wisdom or practical sense of the potentialities of the social space of his country, i.e. its body of laws, its economy, the ideology of its government on one hand, and on the other hand of the social mobility and acting potentials of his client and of him-/herself.

A basic challenge for the social worker is the question *why* he or she should help the client. It's not easy to sympathize with a person being under acute social

pressure and therefore in an unfriendly or aggressive mood. There exists a fundamental disproportion between them – both on the personal and the civil-servant level. As a civil servant, the social worker represents the same society under whose conditions of life the client has got into trouble. But why should a municipality or a state help a citizen in need out of his/her troubles? The condition of the free-willing man is to be able to choose between alternative possibilities to act. It is therefore fundamental for the constitution of a social community that respects the freedom of will of its members, that these are reckoned to be responsible for their own fortune – be it a success or a disaster. Why then help them in case of disaster?

The simplest answer is probably that a community of human beings is a community only as far as its members participate in each other's destiny. This has to do with the condition of man as a conscious being, i.e. as a being that is aware of what it means to exist in a changing world and coexist with other conscious and living beings. To exist as a conscious being in a changing world means to be forced to find and realize a meaning in one's life. To coexist with other conscious and living beings means to interact, communicate, and sympathize with them *as* conscious and living beings. To ignore their condition as living and conscious beings, to treat other people and living beings only as *objects* of our own appetite or distaste eventually destroys society as a community of free-willing people who are able to strive after a good life.

A changing world is a world with changing conditions for humans and other living beings to prosper or to fail in the effort to prosper. It requires not very much imagination to realize that the bad luck of my fellow man could be my own destiny. Learning to become excellent (virtuous) in doing things that can achieve desirable ends is, however, a necessary but not sufficient condition for actually reaching these ends.

One of the cardinal virtues of Aristotelian ethics, the ethics of eudaimonia, of well-thinking, well-feeling and well-doing, is *moderation*. Moderation, however, should not be misconceived as humility or meekness. According to Aristotle, a moderate person is excellent in finding the balance between too much and too little of something. For instance, Aristotle would not say 'poor is beautiful' or 'poor is ethically correct'. A good, i.e. balanced, economy is a relevant part of a good life - balanced in proportion to all the other resources that make a good life possible. If it makes sense, as I believe it does, to "transduce"<sup>v</sup> or "transfer" the concept of virtue from the personal to the social level, we could say: a society has a good economy if its wealth and poverty is moderately and not one-sidedly distributed. As an immediate consequence of this theory of ethical moderation, a society is well advised to counterbalance the disproportion between its poorest and richest citizens. Even if it were a fact that rich people are at average happier than poor

people, this doesn't imply that a society with a minority of rich people and a majority of more or less poor people is a happy one. A good life for few is certainly no guarantee for a good life for all citizens and thus for a good society as a whole. This follows from the fact that we as conscious beings, if we like it or not, are sympathetic beings. Admittedly, we are able to suppress our sympathy with other people. We are moreover able to deter other people from learning to empathize or sympathize with their fellow human and living beings. Our feelings aren't immune to our thinking. To please our suppressors we can learn to suppress sympathetic feelings for people that don't please our suppressors. Parents, teachers, or chefs are able to bring up, educate or train their children, pupils, or subordinates to suppress their sympathies for unpleasant people, for foreigners, or for people not befitting ones rank.

However, a community accustoming its members to sympathize only with those fellow men they like, but not with those they dislike or are insensible to, is well on the way to become a selfish and xenophobic community. In such a community, helping other people in social need is no longer a matter of course but has to be institutionalized by law. Because the members of the community no longer understand that helping other people in need in the last end is helping oneself, helping other people has to become professionalized. Sympathizing with one's fellow men is then no longer a virtue aspiring to a good life for everyone and a good society for all people together, but is committed to social *work*. The unsocial society keeps a minimum of sociality alive by delegating sympathizing with one's fellow men to especially trained sociality-professionals. Social work then amounts to transferring the solution of problems of the society as a whole to individual experts. This is not only a difficult, but an impossible task. It is as if we would delegate the solution of global environmental problems to an individual country.

### Outline of a social work language game

I will now consider the personal challenges of professional social work - how to help people in need without personally being motivated to sympathize with them - in connection with the construction of a social worker-client language game. The challenge is on one hand: how do we learn to sympathize with a perhaps disagreeable person? On the other hand: how do we establish a eudaimonic atmosphere between client and social worker that inspires the client to voluntarily learn how to realize a good life? This means, according to Aristotelian ethics, to learn how to become a practically wise person, a person acting by virtue of *phronesis*.

A social work meeting between client and social worker shall here be portrayed as an interaction situation with two agents, client (C) and social worker (S), acting on

the basis of different personal conditions. They share, however, some of the same *objective* action conditions – for instance the same legal basis of the society they both are members of. They share also the same physical environment - typically the office of the social worker in a municipal administration building. This kind of buildings and office rooms is seldom constructed and furnished in a way that advances aesthetical and social well-being.

Let's consider the following case. C, say, is a 40 years old man living together with his 35 years old spouse and two children being 6 and 2 years of age. C has a career as drug addict since his teenage days, starting at 13 years with cannabis and continuing at 15 years with heroin. He has been more or less addicted to heroin for nearly 20 years - including several attempts of withdrawal and therapy. In connection with one of these attempts, he met his spouse in a flat-sharing therapeutic community. She has also temporarily been a heroin addict. During C's addiction career he several times has stolen things and money from his parents and sister and later from family friends and other people, in order to be able to buy drugs. C is also inclined to become violent if he doesn't get what he wants. For violently attacking people he has been sentenced twice by a law court – at first to a suspended sentence, then to a 9-month prison sentence. Since the birth of his children, C has been more or less clean from heroin. Instead he has begun to drink. He has replaced heroin by alcohol, mostly beer. In times when he has – seldom enough - a job, he drinks in order to reward himself; When unemployed, he drinks in order to console himself. Because of his drug addiction, he has no higher education, and because of his later drinking, he doesn't have a regular job. C is a regular client of the social assistance office. C's spouse also has only casual employments. Sometimes C, his spouse and the children have to live on social welfare only. At the social assistance office, C is notorious for having violently attacked several social workers, when they didn't grant him what he wanted.

C's major problem is that he lacks a sense of responsibility for his own destiny and actions. Instead, he holds other people - his parents, his sister, his spouse, the judges of his trials, the social workers he has dealings with, and on principle everyone he meets and who dislikes him - responsible for the negative consequences of his drug and alcohol addiction. These people, the politicians, the whole social system of the country he lives in, and last not least foreigners, refugees, and immigrants flooding in his opinion the country and taking the jobs he could have got, are in his eyes guilty of his being forced to live a lousy life.

C's addiction and unhealthy life style has eventually also affected his physical condition. He has got serious problems with his liver, and recently also his blood pressure is much too high. He disavows, however, that he is an alcoholic. He is neither sober today, when he arrives at the social service meeting. As usual, when

he has drunk, he is in a euphoric mood that easily changes to aggressiveness when someone or something displeases him.

S, say, is a 48-year female social worker with a 25 years long work experience. She knows C's client history and his inclination to violence when confronted with disagreement. She realizes at once that C isn't sober.

C's plan is to persuade S. to concede him an extra amount of money in order to be able to go on holidays with his family. S suspects him, however, of willing to spend the extra money for more drinking. Her plan is therefore to persuade C. to agree to an alcohol-withdrawal treatment and subsequent therapy. She is convinced that C's only chance of becoming able to create a better life for himself and his family is to become clean of all kinds of drugs and to learn by therapy to what extent he himself is responsible for his fortune. She considers how she can use the euphoric phase of C's alcoholization to motivate him to the withdrawal treatment and therapy. She knows that forcing him to the treatment – for instance by refusing him the disbursement of the standard amount of social assistance and giving it instead directly to his spouse – wouldn't work. In this case he would undergo the treatment and the therapy without really being convinced that this the appropriate way to a better life.

So what can S. do to make C. perceive the situation as a real chance to seek for himself a way out of his misery?

The general answer is: sympathize with C. S. could try to do this – utilizing C's temporarily euphoric mood – by telling him that her own mother has been an alcoholic, and how she at last succeeded - aided by the whole family and friends of the family and as an active participant in alcoholics anonymous work - to become clean and create a better life for herself and her family. By setting her own family history in a relation to C's history, she tries to establish a spirit of solidarity. If she succeeds in convincing C of the genuineness of her solidarity she enhances the chances of making him ready to cooperate.

Collective experimenting with social work language games:

Let's form a circle and perform a **brainstorming** about what else S. can do in order to bring C. on his way to learn how to realize a good life! Reflection about moderation as formal rule to realize a good life: how to bring

- Freedom (Ego)
- Responsibility (We)
- Chance (It)

into balance?

Some further proposals:

**Role reversal game:** S. asks C. to set himself in her position and to propose how he means he best could help to realize a better life. **Aim:** C learns to assume responsibility of his own destiny.

**Extended role reversal game:** C. sets himself in the position of his

Spouse

Child 1

Child 2

Mother

Sister

Neighbor

Employer

as they experience him when he is drunken, aggressive, and violent.

**Value /fantasy game:** S. asks C. to imagine the best possible he could desire to achieve in his life – irrespective of it being really possible to achieve it or not. She asks then how much he would be prepared to do in order to reach his aim – how many troubles he would be willing to stand. – In this connection: collective reflection on the difference between WILLING, WANTING, DESIRING.

**Sympathy game:** 2 participants of the course volunteer to sympathize/empathize with C and S and to set themselves in their part. They try subsequently to design an action plan to help C to learn how to realize a better life.

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<sup>i</sup> 'Meaning' stands here not only for the semantic content of linguistic expressions but for everything that makes existence meaningful for a conscious being. Besides making something recognizable or understandable, things, states, events, and actions can, in my opinion, have aesthetical, instrumental, or ethical meanings or values.

<sup>ii</sup> By a 'conceptual field' I mean a dynamic structure of more or less related concepts. Wittgenstein 1963 called the increasing and decreasing meaning-relatedness between concepts 'family resemblance'. The dynamic of such meaning fields lies in the fact that concepts not only are representatives for certain entities but origins of a manifold of more or less similar or different concepts. Every concept is in this way a marker to other concepts and an allusion to alternative possibilities of understanding something. It's like the tonic in music that evokes a series of overtones. Lennart Nørreklit 2008 has taken this field feature of concept-interwovenness as starting point to a philosophical method of reality-construction called *complementary conceptualization*. The method helps to detect possible alternatives to established ways of understanding the world and of constructing personal and social reality.

<sup>iii</sup> Nussbaum <sup>23</sup>2009 explains 'phronesis' directly as a kind of *perception*.

<sup>iv</sup> The Greek word for 'excellence' is 'areté', which is usually translated by 'virtue'. A virtuous person is thus originally a person who is good or excellent to perform a certain kind of action. A morally virtuous person in the sense of eudaimonian ethics is a person who is able to realize a good life.

<sup>v</sup> 'Transduction' is a concept from the physiology of perception. The different forms of physical energy that stimulate our different sense organs have to be transduced or translated to nerve-energy in order to be amenable to perceptual processing.

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