Christoph Quarch Great Vessel Christoph Quarch

How to Unleash the Meaning of Life

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CHRISTOPH QUARCH

The Great Yes

How to Unleash the Meaning of Live

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True future can only be the joint result of the destroying and of the conserving power. For this very reason, it is not the weak spirits, seized by each new gospel of a new time, but only the strong spirits, adhering at the same time to the past, which are able to create the true future.

Joseph Schelling

"Die wahre Zukunft kann nur das gemeinschaftliche Ergebnis der zerstörenden und der erhaltenden Macht sein. Eben darum sind es nicht die schwachen, von jedem neuen Evangelium einer neuen Zeit ergriffenen, sondern nur die starken, zugleich an der Vergangenheit festhaltenden Geister, welche die wahre Zukunft zu schaffen vermögen."

All real life is conversation.

Martin Buber

Alles wirkliche Leben ist Begegnung.

Prologue in heaven

The highest GOD blew a gasket on a winter morning in eternity. He had watched it long enough. It could not go on like this. His dear human children had gone completely out of control. They rushed like possessed, they calculated and acted; they ran after what they called "happiness," yet became increasingly unhappy; they slaved away, but their souls became more and more desolate; they feared for their health, but dragged themselves tormented through life; they travelled in search of recovery, but inwardly they froze over. At least that's how GOD saw it. It seemed to him not that people had lost their minds, but that their hearts were frozen in their breasts; and that therefore they could no longer think clearly. They had lost their sense of meaning. Remedy was needed. And so he called the *Council of Thinkers*.

So there they sat, in long rows in a place without place, in the hope that they could explain to the highest GOD what could be done to master the crises on earth. The philosophers of all times were sitting there, their chins in their hands, thinking. Perhaps it should be pointed out that GOD, in his infinite wisdom, had only asked the thinkers of the West to the council. They, he said, were the ones who had screwed up the whole thing, and so it seemed only right and proper to him that these gravely brooding gentlemen should be the ones who now pulled the cart out of the mud. Besides, the wise men of the East preferred in any case to go in the thoughtless weightlessness of their meditations... After thinking for a brief eternity, GOD thought the time had come to raise his voice and to ask the lofty troupe for an answer to the question of questions: "What must we give people so that they may discover the meaning of their lives?"

As soon as the last word of GOD had faded away in space, a man at the very front - one whom the others mockingly called the "primus" and whom they did not really like to suffer – raised his hand.

"Speak, Augustine," sounded the ETERNAL.

And Augustine said: "My heart is restless, if I may speak before you, my..."

"No long confessions, Augustine," admonished the mighty voice, "Come to the point."

"Well then," stammered the irritated saint, "well, if I have understood all this correctly, then we should bring the people from there to here, so that they can regale your great glory forever."

A certain Dante, sitting in the back rows, broke out laughing at this suggestion and shouted, "What a divine comedy!" But when he saw that the HIGHEST had turned away bored, pointing the holy teacher of the Church to his place with a resigned, waving gesture, he fell silent, as did all the other clever minds. Dark silence lay on the group. No one dared venture forward after this thoroughly messed up prelude. Only one rose. He stood upright, bold, straight - a magnificent appearance, full of decency, discipline, spiritual rigor. Everyone respected him, even if nobody loved him: Kant. Immanuel Kant. Cool and concentrated, he raised his voice: "It is my duty to answer you, dear Lord," he said. "My answer is: let us give them a maxim by which they can likewise want it to become a general law."

"Huh?"

All eyes turned to the throne. Had the HIGHEST and BEST really said "Huh?" He had, and he sat there scratching his wise head.

"Say it again, my friend," his word went out, "I didn't understand you!"

"Very simple, sire," replied the lean thinker. "Make sure that they act as if the maxim of their actions, through their will, should become the general law of nature."

"Ah, um," the ETERNAL shifted back and forth on his throne. "But, hmm, haven't we tried that already? I mean, the Ten Commandments, morals, moral law, Sermon on the Mount my God, the whole program. None of it helped."

"Yes, indeed," jumped up a fixed little fellow whom no one really knew, but who introduced himself in an agile turn as "John Stuart Mill, advocate of utilitarianism and liberalism." That was quite presumptuous, but the others bent to hear what the lively little man had to say. "It didn't help because you didn't promise them any reward. You should realize the following, my Lord," he looked up at the throne, "all people want to be happy."

"That's right," old Aristotle grumbled in the front row, which apparently gave Mill wings, so that he continued boldly: "You must make them happy if they hold to the commandments. They need a reward for their morality, not in heaven, but on earth."

Aristotle smiled triumphantly and did not see Kant puke. A terrible seizure had apparently struck the Königsberger, to everyone's embarrassment, and it took a little eternity for him to recover.

"With all due respect," Kant interjected, "but it won't work. Happiness as a reward! What a cheap trade." He turned to Mill with inner chastisement, "You, dear sir, are a merchant soul who knows how to do arithmetic, but not how to think."

A storm broke out as soon as Kant had spoken: "Kant is right," called Nietzsche, Heidegger, Schelling, and a strange group of German thinkers.

"Mill is right," Adam Smith retorted with an army of Englishspeaking gentlemen in tailor-made suits. A great confusion arose, and it took a thunderous "Stop!" from the heavenly throne to put an end to the looming battle in the hall.

"No, no, no," GOD said with a severe look. "Not like that! We have already tried letting you do it, gentlemen. We have

allowed your morals! We have allowed your educational models! Yes, we have even allowed your economy! Pah, 'invisible hand,' ridiculous!" The Eternal looked disgusted at the gentlemen in the suits (although he himself had a fancy bespoke suit hanging in the closet!). "Nothing helped. It all just got worse and worse. Even my son couldn't do much because you fucked everything up with your stupid philosophies!" Silence entered. "I don't want to know anything more about it! If I don't immediately hear a reasonable suggestion, then, then..." - Fear spread throughout the universe - "... then it bursts!"

"What, a new big bang?" Mr. Einstein, who had been dreaming so far, had suddenly woken up.

"Nonsense," shouted the LORD OF THE HEARSHARDS. "Much worse: I will send a battalion of prophets!"

The philosophers cringed. Their archrivals, of all people, were to be the ones to beat them! And yet no one produced a word. Well, not no one. One stood up, plucked his mustache, scratched his mad hair, and said: "If the truth is a woman, could it be that none of the gentlemen gathered here truly understood women?" Nietzsche looked around with a fiery eye. "Could it be that the gruesome seriousness and awkward intrusiveness with which they used to approach the truth were clumsy and unseemly means to win themselves a woman?" He looked up and saw with satisfaction that the ALMIGHTY encouraged him with the right to continue. "It is certain that she did not allow herself to be taken." Everyone looked spellbound at the odd codger with the walrus mustache. "The time has now come for the last people," he continued. "They no longer know how to give birth to a dancing star. They probably long for the night and long for the day. They honor health and claim to have invented happiness." Here he took a contemptuous look at Mill, Smith, and the suit wearers, "But they have become small - small like flea beetles. For," he raised his head, and a shining aureole surrounded him, "they have no more chaos in them!"

"Well spoken," thundered GOD. "And what is to be done?"

"Maestro," Nietzsche said, "I may have declared you dead, but that only applied to what this miserable mob did to you. That's why I dared to invent my own prophet: Zarathustra. Send him - the prophet of the God who knows how to dance. Send him, that he may give people what they need; that he may rekindle their sense of meaning! For one thing is necessary, Maestro: let us teach them...dance!"

A murmur went through the assembly. What an outrageous speech! And there was none who had not looked banished to the throne.

GOD looked thoughtfully for a moment, and then he raised his hands to clap. And the glory of the heavens shone around him. He clapped and clapped. The place without place trembled, the philosophers threw their caps up in the air - and Nietzsche laughed.

And it would probably have remained that way if two aged old men had not used the general turmoil to sneak unnoticed before the divine throne. There they stood - with their long, white beards and robes of antiquity. But the strangest thing of all was that they stood there holding hands.

As the gentlemen thinkers gradually became aware of the curious pair, they paused and withdrew to their places, eager to see what sensation would happen now. The divine clapping also died away. The ETERNAL leaned forward, measured the worthy ancients with an attentive look, frowned, and was heard as follows: "Socrates, Plato - what do you have to say? Didn't you like what the young man said about chaos and dance...?"

"Quite, quite," Socrates said to him. "That was entirely in my spirit! Oh, how I love to dance! Come, my dear Plato, let us dare a little dance!" And he put his left hand on his friend's shoulder, snapped his fingers, swayed his hip and began: "Bada, bada, badadada..."

And now he really would have started dancing Sirtaki if Plato hadn't pushed him in the ribs: "Master, you wanted to ask something!"

"Right," Socrates remembered. "My dear ZEUS, there was a tiny question that I can't suppress. May I ask it? Please!"

GOD, who had not heard this address for a long time, smiled inwardly and waved his agreement to Socrates.

"Speak, my friend," Socrates said, "don't you think there's something missing here?"

"Something is missing?" The ETERNAL looked helplessly into the round. General shrug. Socrates was considered a nuisance. "What should be missing?" he finally asked.

"Didn't you once create the world?" Socrates replied.

"But of course."

"And not only the world as such, but also everything that creeps and flies in it?"

"Indeed!"

"Also people, right?"

"Socrates, come to the point! We don't want to punish you again for blasphemy." The ETERNAL seemed annoyed.

Socrates did not allow himself to be put off by this: "And, tell me, my friend: in what image did you create man?"

"In my own image I created him."

"Of course, but there was something else: you created him as a man and..., well?"

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"...as a woman!"
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"Right!" Socrates jumped up and turned once in a circle. "And so what is missing here then?"

"A woman?" GOD scratched his beard.

"Exactly," said Plato, remembering. "And that is why I now call my dear friend Diotima into our midst. So much is certain, my dear gentlemen, who - if you will pardon my saying so - are nothing else but, um, footnotes to my works anyway" (Plato was considered a bit arrogant); "you will hear from her mouth alone what it is that we have to give to humanity. My friend Nietzsche is correct - oh, if only he would have recognized that he is my friend and not my rival. But that's another story..." He now seemed to really get going: "As correct as my young friend has spoken here, he failed to say what is necessary for man's dance to succeed. And this is what Diotima will announce to you."

As soon as he had spoken, a venerable lady stood by his side, her mild beauty and lovely aura warming the hearts of the bony thinkers.

GOD leaned back satisfied, smiled encouragingly at her, and said: "Well, Diotima, it is said that you have the wisdom to tell us what people lack, so that they regain their sense of meaning. It is said that your wisdom goes beyond that of our young Nietzsche, who recommended that we teach people to dance. It is said that you have better, and more beautiful, things to say than new commandments and imperatives. It is said that you know the antidote against the lower meaning of trade and commerce? – Now then, speak!"

What happened next had not been seen in heaven for a long time, something that will be told for all eternity: Diotima smiled. Her smile penetrated the universe to its last crack. And then she said only one word, but it sounded simultaneously in all languages: "Eros, Amor, Love, Amore, Love..."

And GOD? GOD rose, GOD bowed, GOD walked down the steps from his throne to her, GOD kissed her and shook hands with the two old men. "So be it!" he said. And Socrates danced.

The rest is quickly told. GOD returned to his seat on his throne and announced his decree. At first he turned to the worthy wise men of Greece: "Well, my friends, because it was you who bring the eternal truth, we will take your old gods into service, so that they may bring our gifts to people. First I call Hermes. He knows his way around the human world. After all, trade is his business. But he should only be the guide, opening the doors down there. Above all for my dear Apollo. His task as God of healing and harmony will be to let people know what the meaning of life is. Then my old friend Dionysus is needed. For he alone knows how to dance. And so he shall teach people how to nurture chaos within themselves and how to let their intoxicated souls dance. Finally, the beloved, the golden Aphrodite, should follow them. So that love and beauty melt the ice in people's hearts. For only what man sees with the heart makes life meaningful." After speaking in this way, GOD paused. He looked happy. "The session is over. I thank you, thinkers." He let himself be heard before he withdrew into the silent company of the Eastern wise men.

And the old gods came to us and walked on earth. What they were to bring to men was a change of our heart and ... *senses*. For their mission was to teach us what to do so that our life *makes sense* again. On the current eclipse of meaning, the light in a Bavarian homestead and the Socratic concern for the soul

Not thinking is no solution either

You always think philosophy is a fruitless art, a pastime for the over-educated without relevance to daily life, practiced by anemic academics who pursue their glass bead games in their ivory towers in lalaland with almost manic perseverance. One thinks of them as whimsical men (women are seldom thought of here) who, like their ancient ancestor Thales of Miletus, are so lost in their worlds of thought that they lose sight of the ground. It was said in ancient times that Thales had once been so lost in contemplation of the starry sky above that he did not notice the well shaft in front of his feet and promptly fell into it. The legend further tells that a "funny and charming Thracian maid" witnessed the incident and broke out in hearty laughter as she found the wise man soaking wet. She is said to have mocked him with the words that he was "eager to get to know things in heaven, yet had no idea what was behind him and at his feet."

Be that as it may: since the laughter of the Thracian maid resounded, the philosopher has turned away from the world and has become a fixed character-type of Western cultural history. And justly so. From Diogenes in the barrel to Heidegger in the Black Forest Hut, there has been no lack of slightly bizarre figures in which oddness and dazzling intelligence combined to form peculiar constellations. To be fair, however, this did not apply to Thales. On the contrary. He was extremely enterprising, as an anecdote tells: When reproached for his poverty, as if philosophy was of no service to him, he is said to have used the little money available to him to rent, at low winter rates, all the oil presses in Miletus and Chios after his astronomical studies suggested the olive harvest would be abundant. When harvest time came, and the olive growers all demanded the presses at once, he rented out his presses as expensively as he chose, and thus earned money in spades.

Now, measured by the standards of a given time - our time which is able to appreciate the meaning and use of a thing solely according to its monetary value, Thales' abstract studies were apparently by no means fruitless. And I dare say: not only those. Seriously, I dare to say - funny oddballs or not - that philosophy is an extremely useful business; more than that, it is a valuable and meaningful endeavor, today more than ever. What you hold in your hands is written to prove that passionate and courageous philosophizing is absolutely necessary for a successful life on earth.

A bold thesis, you think? But of course. And I'm well aware that I expect a lot from you, and from myself, if I am to propose it. But believe me, it is not just for your sake, but for all of ours. We need thinking people. We need people who have the courage to do what Heidegger and Socrates believed is the core business of philosophizing: to question the self-evident; to crack our thought patterns; to shake our view of the world; to dispose of our often empty conceptual husks; to take out the spiritual garbage that has accumulated in our heads over the years and centuries.

We need a spiritual detoxification, because it could be that the manifold crises of our present have something to do with the fact that our thinking is intoxicated - that we adhere to concepts, structures, and ideas that cloud and shadow our view of ourselves, life, the world, and (gladly) God; and that we therefore have to rethink our thinking. Not thinking is also not a solution - even if it sometimes seems tempting to follow the thoughtless silence of the Eastern teachings of wisdom.

While nothing should be said against Eastern teachings, there is much to say for the thinking required for philosophy. Seriously: we are well advised to think through our thinking. We are well advised to give philosophy a place in our lives because it can actually heal us – heal us from the madness that rages on earth. And here I am less concerned with phenomena such as the excessively turbulent economy, the manifold ecological catastrophes, or the unjustifiable hunger in the world. I am concerned with the emptiness and despair that our lifestyle leaves in more and more people. You don't follow me? Then let me be clearer.

Eclipse of meaning

I'd like to start with a quote. It is the announcement of an evening's topic on ARTE, a Franco-German television network that promotes cultural programming:

"Depression has become the single most widespread disease in industrialized countries. More than five per cent of the population is acutely affected. And one in five people become depressed at some point in their lives. Nevertheless, the disease is still taboo and underestimated. The World Health Organization (WHO) predicts that depression will be one of the second most common diseases in the world after cardiovascular diseases by 2020. Another dramatic finding is that about two to three times as many women as men suffer from depression."

Dramatic, indeed. Or how do you feel when you read that four million Germans suffer from depression? "For many of those affected, life seems pointless, nothing gives them pleasure." And if we believe the opinion polls and health scientists, that is only the tip of the iceberg. Thus the impression we are left with is that loss of meaning is the epidemic of our time. People have lost their sense of meaning. They no longer know what the meaning of their lives is. They often have everything they need for a comfortable life, and very few of them (in this country, mind you) suffer from material need, yet feelings of inadequacy have settled in their souls. Like a hamster in its wheel, they run inexorably through their lives without ever making progress. They consume and buy, seek diversion and entertainment, and yet complain about stress, lack of time, inner exhaustion. Above all, work seems to be an inexhaustible source of discomfort and depression. You don't have to search long for evidence of this. Since the beginning of the 2000s, Germany's major health insurers have pointed

to the linear rise of the rate of mental illness at work and the associated rise of absenteeism. Children, adolescents, and students are also increasingly being treated for psychological problems. If that is not alarming, I do not know what is.

People have become insecure. They wonder what the whole thing is about. But there is no one to give them answers. They turn on the television, but they hear about violence and crime, about corruption and intrigue. Or they see politicians who think they are powerful, but in reality are slaves to an economic system that drives them on powerlessly. Some people seek refuge in churches, where they are all too often fobbed off with moral speeches and theological theories that no one understands anymore. Others travel, populate wellness hotels, book events, but when they return home, their lives feel just as gray and boring as before. They save without knowing why. They spend without knowing why. They pay millions for health care and nonetheless get sicker and sicker. And why is that? Namely, because an eclipse of meaning has occurred. Because, as the English philosopher Terry Eagleton has aptly written, an "eclipse of meaning" lies over the land.

This diagnosis, of course, is not new, which does not make it less shocking. Already in the 1950s, alert analysts of the zeitgeist sensed that the last hour had passed. Paul Tillich, the great theologian, was one of them. In a memorable essay from 1958 (!), he wrote what might be addressed to us today: "The decisive element in the present situation of Western man is the loss of the dimension of depth." He