

Experiences of powerlessness and possibilities for empowering people

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introduction to the workshop

Some considerations in advance

I am neither a social worker nor a social scientist but a philosopher. The discipline I work for at my Danish university is called *Applied Philosophy*. Establishing such a discipline presupposes that philosophy can be applied and that it makes sense to do it. The next question is then *WHICH* sense it makes to apply philosophy to *WHAT*. The answer to both questions depends of course on which kind of knowledge and skill a philosopher has; and how he/she can apply it to perform tasks or solve problems in a philosophical way.

In contrast to all other forms of knowledge and skill philosophy is about – to say it in a simple way – *the whole of human existence*. Philosophy is thus not just a special theoretical discipline in addition to other disciplines. As a ‘passion for wisdom’ it is – in the last end – a *quest for happiness*. A philosopher – understanding him- or herself in this sense as a *lover of wisdom* – is trying to find out how it is possible to live a good, i.e. meaningful and valuable, life. The simple answer is: life *is* meaningful and valuable insofar as we *make* it so.

Power to the people

Perhaps the best example of how the philosophical quest for happiness should be understood is Albert Camus' interpretation of the Sisyphus myth. Punished by the gods to suffer from a completely meaningless activity in all eternity he becomes according to Camus a happy person by taking his punishment as a voluntary purpose of his existence. Insofar Camus' Sisyphus can be understood as a philosophical answer to the question how to empower powerless people.

In the following I will first say a little about what I understand by 'philosophical method'. Thereafter I will do some conceptual work in order to pave the way to the workshop on experiences of powerlessness and possibilities of empowering people. I will look at just the two concepts:

- namely what I call 'social disease'
- and what I understand – inspired by Hannah Arendt and Pierre Bourdieu – by 'power' .

I will conclude my introduction of the workshop with some suggestions how to experiment in a philosophical way with powerlessness and empowering.

Philosophy as therapy

In the same way as for instance physiology is not necessary for being able to perform body-movements philosophy is not necessary to gain scientific or practical knowledge.

But in the same way as physiology can be used as basis for therapies of bodily diseases philosophy can be used as basis for therapies of mental or social diseases.

A similar idea about the practical use of philosophy can be found in the late Wittgenstein. It's true, the diseases Wittgenstein had in mind were epistemological, i.e. theoretical, and not mental or social in kind.

What I call social diseases – and I think powerlessness is a symptom of them – are *consequences of constructing a social reality on the basis of sickening theories of society*.

Experimental Philosophy: language game

An experimental approach to philosophical problems is not content with just to *think* about problems of human existence but tries to *create concrete situations* in which participants on the one hand *experience* physical, mental and social facts determining the situation but also can *change* the conditions of these facts to make more meaningful and desirable facts possible.

Inspiration for what I mean by 'experimental philosophy' comes from late Wittgenstein's idea of 'language game'. A language game – shortly explained – is a human interaction situation where two or several human actors cooperate to achieve a (ideally for all participants) wanted end.

Such interactions succeed if the participating actors by their actions *construct* – i.e. realize or bring about the meaning and value of – what they intend to do. 'Construct' means thus 'making real by human action'.

This way Wittgenstein explained how humans in interaction with other humans could create and understand a language without having a language in advance.

By enlarging the idea I will assume that we are able to create and learn the meaning and value of all dimensions of our existence by cooperating and communicating with our fellow men. The meaning of our actions and the value of their results is socially determined. Meaning and value are *social* concepts.

Philosophy as reality construction

Enlarging 'language game' to an experimental method how to construct a meaningful and valuable reality I lean on Lennart Nørreklit's philosophy of *reality construction*.

'Reality' is according to Nørreklit 2004/2012 a 4-dimensional entity or "space-time" constituted by

- facts
- possibilities
- meanings
- values

Facts are space-time located physical or mental entities with properties and relations. Facts span a "space" of *possibilities*: what is possible because of what there is and happens. Especially interesting are here what I will call *practical possibilities*; i.e. what an actor *can* do on basis of given facts.

What we *want* to do depends, however, on what it *means* for us to act in a certain way in order to achieve a (for us and/or other people) *valuable* end.

Let's call the totality of an actor's meaningful acting and its valuable results a *good life*.

The method of philosophical experimenting: philosophical theatre

Language game is a 'recursive' or feedback method for creating meaning by making what we do in a meaningful way. It is a kind of bootstrapping method – by doing something in a certain way we create the very fundament for our doing. Which way there is meaningful in relation to a certain end we can't be sure of in advance. We have to try.

By trying to realize a good life we establish a reference frame for what we are willing to understand and accept as a good life. This bootstrapping character of the practical possibilities of our quest for happiness is intrinsically linked with one of the constituent parts of what we call *action* – free will.

Let's say it is part of the human constitution as a conscious-being that we only can find meaning and value in our existence if we *voluntarily* want to find it and practically try to establish it.

I call the enlargement of the language game method to an experimental scenario of inventing and testing meaningful and valuable forms of acting (forms of life) *philosophical theatre*.

Staging

‘Theatre’ shouldn’t, however, be understood here as a “show” of readymade dramas for a just consuming audience. Thus the purpose of philosophical theatre is not to entertain but to perform practical experiments about existential problems. Here the actors of the experiment are at the same time guinea pig, experimenter and reflecting audience.

To investigate an existential problem by philosophical theatre means to *stage* the problem; i.e. to *translate (transduce)* it into a space-time localized situation of actors on a adequately furnished scene. I suggest that the actors by playing their roles in the problem-scenario should follow Bertolt Brecht’s instructions for his *epic theatre*, i.e. the method of “Verfremdungseffekt” (alienation effect).

By the alienation effect Brecht wanted to make both actor and audience *reflect* on the causal and conceptual function of the role the actor plays in the set-up of the drama. Especially the actor should, while playing his/her role, consider if his/her acting is the only possibility to perform the task or to solve the problem connected with the role. Acting on stage becomes this way an experimental investigation of *action alternatives* in trying to perform a certain task or solve a certain problem.

On this background philosophical experimenting or philosophical theatre can become a laboratory for the invention and proving of alternative reality constructions.

Disrespect as social disease

An essential ingredient in an actor's endeavor to establish a good social life is if he or she gains the recognition of his or her fellow men. To recognize a person means to show her or him *respect*. Originating from Latin, 'respect' is a telling word. Literally it means 'looking back'.

You will respect a person if you in passing look back to find out whom he or she is. This way you have become attentive to him or her. It is a symptom of your disrespect of a person if you don't notice his or her presence. The disrespected is an "overlooked" person, someone whose presence is not reckoned to play a role in what's going on – from the point of view of the overlooking person.

An actor whose activities to establish a meaningful and valuable humane life not gain the respect of his or her fellow men risks to experience life more and more meaningless and "inhumane". As a consequence a socially not respected person will in the long run be in danger not to feel him- or herself a fully-fledged human being. To make a person powerless means to make him or her doubt if he or she is any longer able to act as a *full-fledged* human being. As such the experience of powerlessness is like the experience of a social disease or disorder. The powerless feels the lack or deficiency of power – i.e. the ability to act.

Disease, disorder

According to Wikipedia a “disease is an abnormal condition that affects the body of an organism. (...) The term *disease* broadly refers to any condition that impairs normal function, and is therefore associated with dysfunction of normal homeostasis.”

And “a disorder is a functional abnormality or disturbance. Medical disorders can be categorized into mental disorders, physical disorders, genetic disorders, emotional and behavioral disorders, and functional disorders. (...) In mental health, the term mental disorder is used as a way of acknowledging the complex interaction of biological, social, and psychological factors in psychiatric conditions.” (cf. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disease>)

Using it in a more general way, disease can be understood as a weakening of a person’s ability to act – a diminishment of an actor’s action-power or actorship. I don’t want to go here into the different kinds of physical illness that impede a person more or less to act in full vigor. I want neither to dig into the different kinds of mental illness that make it more or less difficult or impossible to live a satisfying professional and/or private life.

I will instead focus on what I understand by ‘social disease’ and immediately note that there are smooth transitions between mental and social illnesses. Social diseases have often mental effects, and mental diseases usually have social consequences.

Social disease

The basic thesis of my considerations in this lecture is that powerlessness is the experience of a social disease.

But what makes a disease a social disease? Diseases have causes. Something – a pathogenic agent – elicits the damage of a person's power to act.

In case of physical illness the pathogenic agent can be expected to be a physical agent, a bodily injury, a virus or something like that.

Mental illnesses can have both physical, mental or social causes – for instance a defect in a person's genetic equipment or another actor hurting the construction and development of a person's personality (let's call it a damage of the person's Ego) or the fatal precarisation of a person's possibilities to establish a good social life.

Consensus

Please note that this kind of “reality experiment” treats the problem of *power* relations between human actors in a basically *democratic* way.

Like the solution of meaning problems through language games the solution of existential problems through philosophical staging is based on *consensus* between the actors. ‘Consensus’ means literally ‘*sensing in common*’ or – to make it still more clear – ‘to act in respect to one’s co-actors’.

What a real human being is like get we nowadays to know by the mass media construction of “best” reality. If we don’t feel able to be like the people that are very important (VIP) or at least important enough persons to be shown or to have one’s say on TV or radio – regardless if they are football players, politicians, business- or show businessmen, scientists, murderers or terrorists – then we are in danger to experience ourselves as unimportant, superfluous creatures. Instead of being respected for what we are and do we feel disregarded for what we are not or do not.

Power 1

From Wikipedia: In politics and social_science, **power** is the ability to influence the behavior of people. The term authority is often used for power perceived as legitimate by the social structure. Power can be seen as evil or unjust, but the exercise of power is accepted as endemic to humans as social beings.

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Power \(social and political\)\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Power_(social_and_political)))

Power 2

In contrast to most theoreticians that mistake power for violence Hannah Arendt 2009 understands power as based on social consensus.

She says: "It is the support of the people that gives power to the institutions and laws of a country; and this is the continuation of the original consensus that has constituted institutions and laws" (ibidem: 42).

In other words:

power = personal ability + social support.

Understood this way power is based on what Bourdieu 1996 calls *social capital* and a powerful person is an social actor having the *habitus* (subjektive ability) and *capital* (social potential) to reach socially wanted ends. Action-habitus and –capital are, however, according to Bourdieu only effective within an adequate practice-*field* consisting in the dynamic interaction of competing actors and resources.

Power is the motor of social actorship – the ability successfully to act within a social community.

Powerlessness

I use 'power' as the ability to act (actionship) and thus as the ability to make a good life (and good society) real.

A person experiencing powerlessness is then a person whose actionship has been sickened. The actionship of the powerless is not successfully adapted to the practice fields he/she is trying to succeed. By this such a person experiences his/herself disabled to make a good life real.

The normal case of the powerless in democratic societies with market economy is not "principally" prohibited to live one or other kind of life. But most powerless people that social workers have to do with are in one or other way disabled to realize a good life real.

Workshop

The general idea of the workshop has two dimensions – disempowering and empowering:

1. Disempowering: imagine actions and attitudes that disable people to do what they are tasked to do or voluntarily would do if they had the power to do it
2. Empowering: turn the situation upside down and find possibilities to help an actor to cope with a task he/she couldn't perform without other actors' (social) support.

I will furthermore differentiate between three modes of dis/empowering:

- Physical
- Mental
- Social.

This leads me to suggest the following recommendations how to perform philosophical dis/empowering experiments. Please note that this kind of “reality experiment” treats the problem of *power* relations between human actors in a basically *democratic*, i.e. respectful, way.

Experiments with physical dis/empowering

Physical dis/empowering: form groups of two actors

1. Ask your co-actor to do something (task him/her with something) but at the same time try physically to impair him/her to perform the different actions that are necessary to fulfill the intention. Try in turn one tasking the other with something and hindering him/her to perform the task.
2. After a while working with this the two actors should then try to do the opposite: devise tasks/problems for the partner that he/she isn't able (hasn't the power) to perform without help. And then try to perform the task/solve the problem in common.

Experiments with mental dis/empowering

Mental dis/empowering: 2 partners again inventing for each other tasks/problems and disable/empower the tasked part with mental hindrances/mental help to perform the task.

1. Disempowering: for instance describe a task insufficiently: the tasked person doesn't know what or how exactly to do what he/she has been asked to do. (Cognitive disempowerment). Emotional disempowerment: for instance by mobbing the tasked person as considering him/her as too stupid or awkward to perform the task.
2. The opposite empowering experiment: by inventing tasks to the partner he/she isn't able to perform without giving exact instructions how to do it; or without encouraging the tasked person and promising to help and protect him/her under the performance.

Experiments with social dis/empowering

Social dis/empowering (experiments with at least 3 persons in the experiment group): every member in the experiment group should invent a task/problem that only can be performed in a cooperative way.

1. A disempowering hindrance could for instance be to design the task as a competition where one of the group members necessarily has to lose the competition. A variant could be that the participants in the experiment get promised a reward for performing the task together but the value of the distributed rewards is very different (different wage for same work) – disempowering by disrespect.
2. The opposite experiment: empowering by cooperation and mutually helping and protecting each other physically, mentally, and socially.