

Cherish your ethos: it will guide you in precarious situations

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Welcome, nice to be here! I address you as Denker des Vaderlands -Thinker Laureate, an honorary title that has been granted to me for two years, and with which I have taken on the mission to show the beauty, importance and value of philosophy to a wide audience.

I tell those people, as I am telling you now, that for me, philosophy begins and ends with an almost naïve question: what is it for a human being to live one's life in a good way?

The strange thing about us humans is that we are aware of our existence. You are born – you are thrown into the world, as the existentialists would say – and you realize that you are alive. Sooner or later you wonder: how do I do that well, living my life? As soon as you ask that question, you are philosophizing. And the typical thing is that such a philosophical question immediately makes you bend back to your own words and concepts: what is 'good'? What do I actually mean by a good life?

To a philosophical question, there is no right answer. There is only a personal response to it. That response can certainly have more or less quality, but it is never conclusive. There is only your provisional answer, your guideline for your actions. Your ethos. The funny thing is: though it might be provisional, that ethos nonetheless forms your entire inner world - your Weltinnenraum, in Rilke's beautiful formulation. Your ethos stands for everything you find valuable and important. It permeates the way you are in the world.

This is a snapshot of my partner and daughter, which I took during one of our holidays on Terschelling. I love Terschelling very much. I love its skies, the Brandaris that evokes the island feeling in me from afar, the seagulls, the Wadden Sea with those beautiful patterns in the mud, the crabs, the sea lavender, the wide empty beaches where I can walk endlessly, the dome of air, the space around me, and the feeling that comes over me: Yes, this is right, this is how it should be. For me, the Wadden Sea Region represents a place where the world is bigger than me, and that gives me a sense of liberation. Here I touch upon what, to me, a good life entails. So, in a rather diffuse manner, the Wadden Sea Region has to do with being in the world in a good way. That is: it has to do with my ethos.

You are specialists on this region. I understand that you are mapping out the ways in which this region is being threatened, and that you are also indicating the action perspectives for achieving a

desirable future. So you work on what can be called good for this region. Another word for working in the light of ideas of what you find 'good', is: working from an ethos.

As a simple lover of Terschelling, I find it very reassuring that you are doing do that. But I realize that in practice there are at least two phenomena that push that ethos into the background, and I want to briefly mention those problems here.

The first problem: from an intuition of what you find good, you have to descend to a workable approach. Issues are complex, phenomena interact with each other, no one can oversee in detail all that is happening in the Wadden Sea Region. So the research field will be organized, and distributed over scientific disciplines. Moreover, you need research money. Money that has to be applied for, and accounted for afterwards. All of this is very understandable, and even necessary. But in practice, the effect is that research into a good future for the Wadden Sea Region becomes divided into sub-projects. And the people who work within those projects make choices that come out as the best for their particular projects.

Working in a worldly setting therefore causes a shift from the inspiration that you personally feel as a researcher in the service of a good future for the Wadden Sea Region, to the accountability you have for your sub-project. Approaches that come out as the overall best for sub-projects often have small adverse effects. For a certain bird species, for a local industry, for a cultural-historical monument, for the morphology of tidal basins in the mudflats – you know the specific examples better than I do. Probably you neatly name that unwanted side effect somewhere in your reports. But understandably, you highlight the benefits of the approach you propagate for the subcause you signed up for, and for which you are held accountable.

Unfortunately, all those small disadvantages can add up to a big effect, for which no one is responsible. An effect that no one has been aiming for, but which has the potential to change the whole situation in which everyone works.

Climate change is perhaps the most striking example: billions of small daily actions add up to an effect that no one intended and that changes everyone's situation. And no particular party can be held accountable for the cumulative effect of all those small disadvantages together.

In the 1980s, the German sociologist Ulrich Beck coined the notion of 'organized irresponsibility' to describe this phenomenon. That term struck a chord. It has become a kind of meme for a tragic phenomenon: To achieve goals, you operationalize an issue into subtasks, and for achieving those

subtasks, you declare subgroups accountable. As a result, you organize away the overarching responsibility.

That daily focus on accountability (a managerial word) instead of on responsibility (an ethical word, a word from the *Weltinnenraum* of ethos) is the first problem with ethos.

The second problem has to do with the aforementioned fact that there is no inescapable answer to the question of what can be called good.

There will always and inevitably be difference of opinion about what actually counts as good. We know that, and we are used to it. In fact, politics is the domain in which competing visions of the good confront each other, and where it is decided which vision – at least for now – will dominate.

The Wadden Academy wants a 'good' future for the Wadden Sea, and explicitly wants to be a link between research and policy. I think this implies that you, as researchers, have to gain clarity about the role you want to play as a scientist.

Four such roles have been named by the American climate scientist Roger Pielke Jr.

The first one he mentions is that of the pure scientist: such a person does research and does not worry about application or usefulness. This is a respectable role, but that role does not fit the mission of the Wadden Academy.

Pielke's second role is that of science arbiter: here the scientist provides the facts and information on policy questions when requested – period.

The issue advocate is more of an activist. He or she conducts research to serve an explicit social purpose; scientists associated with a particular company or an NGO fulfil their role in this way.

And then there is a fourth role, that of the honest broker of policy alternatives. For each of the policy alternatives, the 'honest broker' makes explicit which values are normative in that policy. For example, policy A will be especially beneficial to a stable ecology, policy B is advisable when your focus is on a particular animal species, policy C puts the sustainability of a vibrant local community to the fore, et cetera.

Pielke's classification is not sacred to me; I only quote him because he makes you think about your role as a scientist who provides knowledge to policy. I think that awareness of the role you are actually playing, and you reflecting on it, is part of your professionalism as a scientist. Especially if you work within a field of research in which the visions of what may count as a good future differ.

To conclude:

You are working on the future of the Wadden Sea Region.

I have argued that this can only be done from an ethos, that is: a vision of what would count as a good future for the Wadden Sea Region. Such an ethos drives and inspires you from within, from your Weltinnenraum. An ethos responds to, and makes you want to be responsible for, what is dear to you.

As soon as you decide to make a job out of what is dear to you, you have to go out into the world at large. You will have to participate in organisations. You then inevitably end up in the logic of accountability – with organized irresponsibility as a possible undesirable outcome.

Moreover, you come up against people or parties who come, from their Weltinnenraum, to a different ethos, to a different conception of what is good. That too is inevitable. This requires you to consciously take upon you a specific role in the interplay between knowledge and policy. You have to fulfill your role according to your ethos.

I can't say what the best role conception is. All I can say is: take care of your ethos. Try to articulate it to yourself from time to time, keep the thought of it alive. So that your ethos can serve as a compass in pressing situations; those worldly situations where the logic of accountability often dominates so easily.

A living ethos will ensure that you continue to work from commitment, and for what gives you joy.

I wish that for you.

Thank you.