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Still today he develops concepts for newspapers and magazines, for companies amongst other things, and writes first and foremost essays about topics as economy and society, or publishes books like the one about »Die sieben Todsünden« (the seven deadly sins).

Illustrations by Ines Haver

ÜBERLEBEN TODAY

A PHILOSOPHICAL OUTLOOK WITH JÜRGEN WERNER



MR. WERNER, HOW CAN MAN SURVIVE?

Let's have a look at the historical evolution of the human being. Considering natural conditions, one might find it astonishing that the human race has survived at all.

Animals have eye teeth, thick fat layers underneath their skin, and they have a wonderful array of well working instincts. They are well adapted to react to stimuli.

The human being has none of these. So you might ask yourself, how it is possible under biological selection conditions, that this creature, after all the struggles that have emerged over millions of years, still exists today. And not just exists, but lives as it does, namely that it builds this world in a manifoldly dominant kind of way.

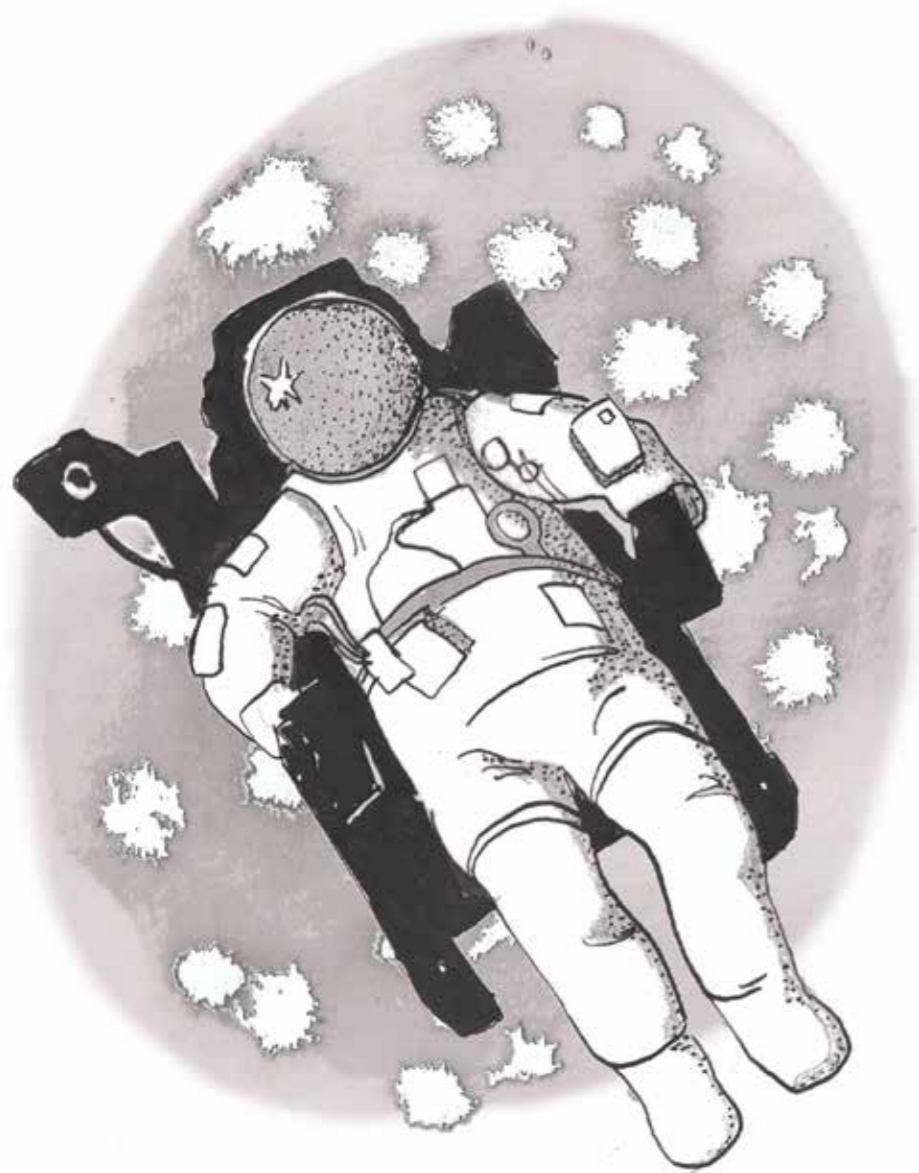
Perhaps in the absence of such conditions of existence lies a chance. The fact, that we are not directly integrated in an environment, has led to the matter, that it was possible for us to walk upright. We are bipeds, not quadrupeds.

WHAT DOES THAT MEAN? Being upright means that we are able to see more. Man also discovered that this ability of seeing more comes along with an embarrassment, namely being seen earlier.

This new field of view is surrounded by a horizon. It is a border, that has quite an odd characteristic: being definite and indefinite at the same time. Indefinite because it is not possible to reach this horizon. It eludes. While dealing with this border, the human being learned everything he needed to survive.

Therefore it was important to define precisely and as early as possible, what appeared indefinite at the horizon, in order to identify if attack or escape is necessary.

Man is not good at dominating close situations. In close combat with a lot of animals, he definitely would have been inferior. But because we are able to recognise danger earlier than others, because we can deal well with distance to the environment that we live in, the



distance to ourselves, and the distance to others, we have survived. We don't have to react to stimuli immediately; we can ask ourselves at any time how we feel in or with certain situations. Being upright also means that your hands are free. Thereby we discovered and invented tools that improved and extended the abilities of our hands. Till today this kind of instrumental selection is the fact that lets the human race be superior to other creatures.

WHAT DOES »ÜBERLEBEN« MEAN FOR US TODAY IN THE WESTERN SOCIETY? In certain biographies it means nothing for now. It is about shaping one's life, about joy of life, about lifestyle. It is not about survival. We are not only beings that live their lives, we are beings that have to lead their lives. To give an every day example: I need to ask myself »Do I want to choose this profession?« I need to ask

myself »Do I want to let this person into my life?« I need to ask myself »Do I want to go public with this perspective, with this attitude, with this opinion?«

All that is not given automatically. As nice as it is sometimes, that makes it difficult as well. Leading a life means to try to picture a future that I don't know of yet. Do I feel calmness or even lust? Does it scare me? Do I want to engage in that? This talent, to imagine something that is not yet there is what we have learned in the struggle for survival. This skill might help us in overcoming daily struggles.

WE HAVE SPOKEN ABOUT THESE MANY QUESTIONS THAT MAN HAS TO FACE AND ANSWER FOR HIMSELF DURING HIS LIFETIME. NOWADAYS, A LOT OF PEOPLE DON'T HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT PHYSIOLOGICAL NEEDS AND SHELTER ANYMORE. WHY DO A LOT OF PEOPLE STILL FEEL INCAPABLE OF SURVIVING? There are questions that we are neither able to answer nor get rid of. What is it with life? Does it have purpose? How do I cope with the awareness of finitude? I know that everything ends: my power, this beautiful moment, the feeling of being secure, the luxury that I got to know, my bravery. All of that ends. And ultimately life ends as a whole.

Then what is the use of starting anything? But one might as well reason that one enjoys this moment especially, precisely because one is aware of that finitude. Animate beings are only confronted with questions that don't appear as questions but as urge to react, when immediate matters of survival are taken care of.

HOW CAN PHILOSOPHY ADVISE MAN WITH REGARD TO HIS SURVIVAL? Can it at all? For your generation, that's how I experience it, it might be more exhausting to give one's self a perspective in comparison to older generations. Not be-



The human being is able to adapt to any environment

cause this generation is less talented to do so, but because possibilities have grown very much. Is there a greater future? And that in the light of the almost unmanageable range of choices. The philosopher can help there, perhaps he has to.

WHAT KIND OF PROBLEMS HAS MANKIND TO DEAL WITH IN FIFTY YEARS, WITH REGARD TO SURVIVAL? I would appreciate it very much if we concern ourselves formatively with the present, instead of rigidly staring into the future and trying to guess how it will turn out. Looking into the future is often a diversionary tactic. Where does the future become concrete, comprehensible, tangible, perceptible? In children. If one looks at little children, then one sees the future and associates this with wishes. The most abstract wish would be: »They should be better off than us.«

A vision of the future would be for example – in a technical sense – that it would be great, if cars would be built by computer companies in the future. A huge portion of any car already comprises of computer technology. Apple could possibly build the perfect emission free car. The problem is that rechargeable

batteries cannot save enough energy. This problem would be solved with a certain nano-car-paint. This nano-car-paint would derive electric energy from daylight. That's how I imagine cars in 50 years' time. In the light of such thoughts we easily miss that the essential questions are in an odd kind of way always similar in the past as in the future. And I am certain that people who will live in fifty years, will still ask themselves: »Does life have a purpose?«

HOW DO YOU ASSESS THE ROLE OF RELIGION FOR HUMANS WITH REGARD TO THEIR SURVIVAL? Let's try first to identify what religion could be. Religion means, that people don't want to consider themselves as the greatest. In every religion lies a kind of will for modesty and the appreciation that I can delegate burdens and wishes and postpone needs. Religion means that I am able to transfer the necessity of leading my life to someone else whom I think of as greater than me. We call him God. I don't abandon my life to an abstract situation like fate or coincidence, but believe, that there is someone, who will let it succeed without me having to interfere.

In living together, if you reduce it to its elementary forms, there are two preconditions that reappear in all societies of this world and are obviously necessary. One is the ability to make promises – we have developed it to organise our living together with contracts – and the other ability is to forgive, because we keep breaking promises over and over again.

The promise claims to be able to handle the future as if it is as definite as something past. If I say to a child »We go and get ice cream tomorrow«, then the child knows that they should rely on that. I, who promised this, can't truly define the future like that. When one forgives, the opposite happens: What has happened is treated like something as indefinite as the future. With these two conditions of our living together we overstrain ourselves. Here language has reached its limit. The Old Testament is about a meaningful promise. It tells about a God who makes an eternal union with man. The Old Testament demonstrates what a promise means.

The New Testament ultimately culminates in forgiveness, where it tells about this God that doesn't denounce the promise even though we humans constantly break this union. Under social aspects this is the most redemptive story that has ever been told about humans. It is a story about living together and the redemption from the constant struggle between promises and forgiveness. It cannot be any more beautiful.

English translation of the German original by Simone Hinrichsen

