

Topic 1

„What do I care about my chitchat from yesterday?“ (“Was interessiert mich mein Geschwätz von gestern?“) This phrase has originally been used by Konrad Adenauer, the first Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany. Today people often refer to this sentence in order to justify their indifference about things they said in the past, particularly when their previous statement contradicts their present opinion. However, Adenauer once didn't want to provoke a disbelief in his authenticity and reliability, but rather understanding for human nature, which makes us learn something every day we live. We cannot and do not know everything right from the beginning on, but we can become more and more wise by acquiring knowledge throughout life. With his famous statement Adenauer indirectly wanted to call on us to be able to admit the falsity of our past belief, based on the new knowledge we gain since then. This awareness is also directly connected to the observation Michel de Montaigne describes in his *Essais*: at different points in our lives we might support contradicting positions and might believe in opposites as the real truth due to our differing complexity of knowledge at each time. Given that we follow only one single and final goal with all our passion and activity, defined as “Eudaimonia” by Aristoteles (= blessedness), different people might use different ways as well as means to approach that goal. For instance to one cultural group the most alleviating way to help old and sick people would be to kill them, to another cultural group the most logical way would be to try to keep them alive as long as possible by caring for the suffering ones. Hence, the two groups would choose contradicting ways in order to reach the same goal: the good of other people. Patzig defines this difference as the principal relativism. Taking this relativism as basis, I assume that the same difference could even appear when we have to declare our personal opinion about something at two different points in our life with differing surrounding conditions. If those surrounding conditions, which in my eyes basically are the complexity of knowledge, strongly differ at two moments in our my life, the probability that my beliefs about the truth differ at those moment is quite high. Since, the complexity of our knowledge grows with every second we live and learn, the dilemma Montaigne describes in his second *Essai*, also has to happen to us quite frequently and with the same intensity as Montaigne states.

Each one of us probably already witnessed the situation that either oneself or a close friend/relative changed the personal opinion by 180 degree; either because of plausible reasons or without. Then we try to explain ourselves with the popular phrase: “Old times....” And hope not to have to give any further explanations. At that point Michel de Montaigne asks us as well as himself whether it is possible to support two different opinions with the same intensity and passion at different times in life, as stated in his second Essay or will one side always be supported with the greater passion and intensity? Montaigne describes his observation as the development with the same intention as Adenauer once used his famous sentence: not as a description of a inconstant and weak character who is not willing to stick by their past statements, even

in unpleasant situations, but rather as the very natural development of changing minds as a consequence of new knowledge; basically as the indication of maturation.

The problem which Montaigne indirectly indicates in his *Essai*, is the fact that there is no such absolute truth or objectivity. The decision about right and wrong seems to be very individual and personal and often comes to varying results. Therefore, since absolute objectivity or absolute truth seem to be concepts that can generally not be acclaimed and fulfilled by any human being due to our restricted perception of the world, everyone can acquire an absolute individual point of view about any issue. We, as human beings, are all equal concerning our limited capacity to perceive, process, and understand as much as possible of all the things going on every second around us, but our brain filters the information around us very individually, unlike the brain of anyone else. If you look at some people sitting in the same almost quiet room with open windows, closing their eyes, each one of them will answer the question “Which sounds did you hear and identify?” differently. Our social background and the education we undergo in the very first years determine to a large extent in what way and with which priorities our brain is going to filter afterwards. At first our parents make most decisions for us, which in later years we are going to do for ourselves. Those decisions are based on previous experiences, parental influence, physical abilities, or even handicaps or talents. All those factors determine which information our brain processes and saves.

Due to the restriction of the human way to perceive the complex world we live in, different points of view in every issue are possible and allowed. The lack of absolute truth and objectivity allows for discussions about “right and wrong”. As Montaigne once says: “Human understanding is marvelously enlightened by daily conversation with men, for we are, otherwise, compressed and heaped up in ourselves, and have our sight limited to the length of our nose” (*Essai I, 18*). We have to try to understand other people, because they are right the same way we are. We have to understand that “the only thing certain is nothing is certain” (Montaigne). Even if the majority of people agrees about a certain aspect, it doesn’t mean that they are right. Because of the awareness of human ignorance about truth, Montaigne asks the question “What do I know?” (“Que sais-je?”, *Essais II*).

No matter how much we know, we are often forced to believe what the majority thinks is right, and then at some point we are one of some few people who understand that our previous assumption was wrong. Today, everyone is allowed to choose and talk freely about his/her opinion concerning a certain issue. Jean-Paul Sartre declares this free will to be the basis for his ethic. He says that people are born as a nothing, just “being thrown into life”, without any knowledge or understanding of anything. Nevertheless, with every second we live we seem to gain life experience and knowledge. This knowledge, then, can as well as should be used to decide as well as act freely, given that we take total responsibility for all our decisions and actions. Under these conditions, Sartre allows everyone of us to decide with a completely free will, causing a dilemma for us every time we have to choose. However, the point is that we have the possibility to choose at all without any rules and laws. The only law we have to follow is the awareness or the consequences of the decisions we make. Therefore, following Sartre, we are even allowed to support two different theories with the same input and passion, as long as we take responsibility for each of them at their time.

Since everyone of us starts at the point zero when we are “thrown into life” (Sartre), it seems to be a normal consequence, that the amount an complexity of knowledge is growing with every second from birth on. As we always say: “No one ever stops learning!” This concept that one always pursues saving new information in our brain, also explains, at least to a certain extent, why it is possible, that we stand for nearly contradicting opinions about the same issue at different points in our life. We are forced to declare a very individual and personal position of ourselves in society as early as possible in order to be able to find a place in society at all, but we don’t have all the knowledge we need to make a totally plausible decision right from the beginning on. Therefore, many of us start to believe in spiritual signs, which apparently help those people to come to a decision which they can then support with all their passion. Sartre, on the other hand, states, that there are no such signs at all. To him those things that other people call signs, are just a chain of event which make them believe to be something like desire due to their intensity. Sartre plausibly lowers their reasonability by the assumption that not the sign itself is the factor that makes us decide in a certain way, but the interpretation of the sign. And this interpretation totally depends on various other surrounding factors, which at different times can be totally different from each other, even with one single person. Given that the interpretation of “signs” can definitely change with its surrounding conditions due to its absolute individuality, also the social position we explain to stand for can definitely change similarly as a consequence of new information, which slightly change the basis to form our opinions on. Therefore, the change of opinions that we even stand for with all our understanding, reasonability and passion, has to be identified as a necessary consequence of proceeding maturation, a consequence of gaining life experience. In some cases the change to the opposite might even be the best possible development. For instance, if I totally believe in a certain decision and it turns out to be wrong, the ability to admit the falsity of my choice will be the best change for myself as well as for everyone else, who was affected by that decision either directly or indirectly. Schopenhauer described this development as the ability to flee from all the impressions and the stress of our youth to the wisdom we acquire as elder, contemplative people, looking at all their life experience from retro perspective. The easiest examples for this sort of development are all those situations when someone, in the process of maturation, starts to understand decisions of his/her parents, which s/he couldn’t understand at all some years ago. As children we resolve not to be like our parents when we will be in their position, but once getting to that point, we will decide and act exactly the way our parents once did, and not contrarily.

Someone, who wants to disprove Michel de Montaigne, would probably say that there is no possibility to support contradicting theses at different points in life, given that the person one is talking about has a strong character and is not one of those people, who just follow the mainstream as a consequence of the lack of a personal opinion. For them changing minds and opinions simply is the definite sign of weakness and insecurity about oneself. Consequently, since Montaigne’s observation could be proclaimed as the consequence of some specific character traits, there have to be some people with the opposite character on the other hand, which then would disprove the general reliability of Montaigne’s observation. These opposing characters then would always stick to one single statement, no matter how far they have already gotten concerning their life experience and the knowledge that is closely bonded to the sagacity we gain throughout life. Montaigne’s opposition would argue that there might

be some slight variations in our belief of what real truth is, but those light variations would never extend to a contrary belief and are totally unimportant looking at the whole picture. Following this thesis, to believe in something with absolute passion and reasonability would mean, is only possible for one side throughout our whole life.

Although, Montaigne's opposition at first might seem to be very plausible, we mustn't forget that Montaigne is not talking about weak characters when he is talking about the problem everyone of us already witnessed to some extent, that at first we truly believe in something as the absolute truth, and then later on we find ourselves believing in the opposite as the absolute truth. With this observation Montaigne doesn't want to accuse people of their unreliability; on the contrary he just wants to make us aware of the fact that each one of us is born without any knowledge, so to some extent changing minds is only part of the very natural and incredibly important process of maturation, throughout which we improve our opinions and positions by using the complex of knowledge which grows with every seconds we live. Therefore, finally, changing minds, or as Adenauer said "What do I care about my chitchat from yesterday?", and having a strong personality doesn't exclude each other, but the right mixture of both is even the best way to form an admirable character.

Sources:

Michel de Montaigne: Essais I, 18 & II, 12. Apology for Raymond Sebond. Frankfurt am Main 1998.

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