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A Philosophical Pharmacy

First aid for essential questions

(Philosophische Notapotheke)

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Sample Translation by Emily Berns Heyser

Introduction

Thinking offers comfort and healing for everything.
Chamfort

The philosophical emergency pharmacy contains pregnant ideas that can assist us at the first sign of emptiness and hopelessness, saving us from soul-deadening boredom and energy-sapping dissatisfaction with ourselves. As the adjective "pregnant" implies, the quotations included in this book give birth to perceptions in each person who reads them – thoughts that are born in his or her head.

When speaking of "philosophy" as something that can provide first aid for essential questions, as the subtitle puts it, we are referring back to Plato's literal definition of the word: "love of wisdom", meaning a longing for the same.

Yet what exactly is this wisdom? It is made up of three different things: a profound knowledge of human life, extensive psychological intelligence and, last but not least, good humour. An irritable wise man is an oxymoron.

When we philosophize or read something of a philosophical nature, we wish not only to become cleverer but, with the help of a cheerful attitude, to be raised up and carried over the shoals of everyday life.

Yet why do we actually need this help in our daily lives? We need it because life is very rarely idyllic. One possible definition of "human life" might be "to require help" – help to be gained from ourselves, from others, from art, athletics or a philosophical word. The first aid offered by the philosophical emergency pharmacy is direct, swift, provisional. With one sentence or several, it helps individuals to free themselves from an uncomfortable mood.

Philosophy is the first and most important assistance, because it supports people and encourages them not to lose their good humour – or, in fact, to gain it in the first place. Whether we are sick or suffer from a fatal illness early in life, whether we lose people close to us or are lonely, a confident mood of cheerfulness remains essential. It is the seal of our consummate individual freedom, the thing that protects us from being limited from the outside or forced to do things.

To philosophize means to recognize contexts; wisdom means to be cheerful by virtue of life experience. And we can probably only remain cheerful if we recognize and accept that in the final analysis, there is no consolation in life.

The maxims in this book can help to free us from gloom. They allow us to enjoy even the grim spectacle of growth and decay, of life and death – fully aware that we are ourselves part of this astonishing evolutionary process. At the same time, we sense that this simple insight into our birth and death remains, at bottom, incomprehensible.

Immanuel Kant, the most cheerful of all German philosophers, is the author of a maxim about good humour as a mark of wisdom. His words get to the heart of the matter in a serene and admonitory manner:

"In this way there can and ought to be piety in cheerfulness; in this way we can and ought to perform our difficult but necessary jobs – even die cheerfully. For everything loses its worth through peevishness and moroseness."

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