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Thinking and the Sense of Life

A Comparative Study of Young People
in Germany and Japan

Educational Consequences

意味



PETER LANG
EDITION

1. Preface

This book reports and reflects about a research project carried out in the years 2009–2011 on 15/16 year old students in Germany and Japan – two industrialized countries of the modern world. In these parts of the world the general question about the “sense of life” (or meaning/purpose of life) as compared with the sense of technology, of economical welfare, of money seems to become more and more significant from year to year.

In these countries which are on a high level of cognition in education, science and economy, and which have a long and deep philosophical background in history, questions about how much thinking, cognition, even “meta-cognition” play a role in finding sense in life is becoming a matter of high priority, especially among the young generation, and it is a good example of “cultural co-evolution” to see how Japan and Germany interact in the field of educational research, each country becoming aware of itself by looking, reciprocally, into the mirror of the other.

The question which role *thinking* plays in the search for sense in life should have been answered already by C.v.Linné (1735) who named the human species “homo sapiens”. In fact, most people translate the Latin “sapiens” with “thinking”, “clever”, or “wise”. However – if this translation is correct, then all humans should be able, at least willing to find their sense in life by striving after the ideal of *thinking*. (Linné’s systematics tries to give any species a scientific name that applies to *all* individuals, without exception).

However, obviously this ideal is not pursued by all human beings; many are striving after thousands of other things occupying their fantasy so that, searching for a permanent habit characterizing *all* people on earth, Linné perhaps should have better named this species “homo imaginans” (a species full of imagination, fantasy creating artificial worlds such as novels, mangas, horror trips on television, etc. which do not exist in reality).

An additional, and for many people surprising, perspective upon *homo sapiens* is that the original meaning of Latin “sapere” (participle: *sapiens*) is not only “knowing”, “understanding”, “thinking”, but also “smelling”, “tasting”.

This throws different light upon how this species can find to itself: not only by knowledge and rational thinking, but apparently also by perception through the *senses*, i.e. through much more elementary neuronal activities than just knowing and thinking. According to Linné’s “*sapiens*” the philosophical, ethical “sense of life” and the biological + psychological “senses” can be regarded as closely interlinked; this not only etymologically through the same word “sense”, but also deeply psychologically.

Taking the wider translation of “sapere”: knowing/understanding/thinking + smelling/tasting, i.e. cognitive *and* sensory perception, we find right at the beginning of this book a first preliminary answer to the question implied in the title: The human being, *homo sapiens*, may be able to find to his “Self” (according to psychoanalyst C.G. Jung 1933 *not* the EGO, but the deeper core of the personality, see fig.19 on p.118 of this book), and thus to his “sense of life”, by thinking *and* sensory perception, by rationality *and* sensibility.

The empirical project reported here was initiated by the authors of this book who also carried out four previous projects (cf. Schaefer & Yoshioka 2000, Langlet & Schaefer 2008). Ryoei Yoshioka (Japan; NIER = National Institute of Educational Policy Research, Tokyo; astronomy, education) was project leader in Japan, Prof. Dr. Gerhard Schaefer (Germany; emerited professor at the Univ. of Hamburg; mathematics, physics, biology, psychology, science education) was co-leader in Germany. The project team, beyond the two initiators, consisted of three permanent co-workers in Japan: Prof. Dr. Takeshi Fujita (biology), Prof. Dr. Stefan Kaiser (linguistics), and Prof. Dr. Mitsuhiro Terada (biology & chemistry).

The book has been written in the English language in order to present its ideas and results to a broader international readership. German readers may also look into a planned book to follow written in the German language which is supposed to deeper reflect about theoretical questions and practical exercises concerning “Sinn” (sense). The German book will be some kind of “guide to one’s Self” (*Self* according to C.G.Jung, see above). This book here provides

an important empirical basis for the book to follow, but contains already sufficient theoretical reflections to “make sense” of the empirical data found.

The two highly industrialized countries Japan and Germany involved in the study may serve as societies exemplary for “East” and “West”, also for the Eastern and Western ways of thinking. They stand for a study of general questions around *thinking* on one side, and *sense* on the other.