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A Long, Fulfilling Journey: Travelling the Silk Road of Ethics with Hans Martin Sass

As academics, we acquire various elements of knowledge and information from books and scholarly journals. These ingredients are the building blocks for our own intellectual horizon and our system of thought. However, the specific functions and roles of these building blocks are not mainly determined by the literature we consume. Rather, what is crucial is the role of the tutor or teacher walking alongside the budding scholar. This pedagogical role has hardly changed even in the era of the internet and in the face of the breathtaking speed of knowledge production. Its importance is particularly prominent in the humanities, encompassing methodological, substantive, and scientific aspects. These three levels of influence can be traced back to the work of Hans Martin Sass and its impact in the following manner:

His teaching method and his attitude towards students show particular characteristics. His way of accompanying his students is reminiscent of Socrates' art of maieutics. However much his student's arguments and thoughts may appear unprofessional, absurd, flawed, or outright false, he never criticizes them head-on. With unlimited patience, like an experienced midwife, he uses judicious and sometimes provocative questions and provides open-ended commentaries in his effort to point the student in the right direction. When advising master's or doctoral dissertations, Sass – unlike many thesis advisors – has no desire to reflect himself in the work he has been advising. This approach offers doctoral students an enormous

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amount of freedom to experiment with a wide variety of thoughts and perspectives, a freedom I myself have benefited from in important ways. I also wish to point out his way of keeping a low hierarchy in his relation with students. What is important for him is the student's wonder and curiosity. I still recall vividly how for a long time he remained in correspondence with a student from Iran, indefatigably answering her questions without even knowing the person individually.

In addition to Sass' didactic style, I would like to draw attention to the inspiring substantive character of his approach to scholarly work and his attitude towards ethical problems. As a philosopher and ethicist, he will never tire to emphasize and remind us that ethics is inextricably linked with practice. Though this insight is sometimes considered trivial and undervalued in academic circles, it inspired me on the path I subsequently took. Sass sees the philosopher's and ethicist's task in analyzing problems encountered in his society and recommending plausible solutions. These recommendations, however, must never be devoid of theoretical reflection. Each ethical formulation needs to be measured with regard to its operationalizability. Therefore, Sass prioritizes simple, but functional methods and approaches over abstract methods that are hard to apply in practice – which is of course not to say that such a theory, in virtue of being applicable, will be accepted at the expense of overlooking theoretical inconsistencies.

Looking at his scholarly work in more detail, what is striking is the breadth of his area of academic interest. Among the topics Sass has been studying, we find keywords such as the beginning of human life, termination of pregnancy, public health ethics, advance directives/living will, health literacy, transcultural medical ethics, the definition of brain death, and several more. As this short essay is not intended to review his numerous important publications, I will instead rather focus on one particular issue, transcultural medical ethics.

The way Sass addresses this topic reflects his attitudes in dealing with people from other cultural environments. While many studies in the area of transcultural or intercultural medical ethics are of a mainly descriptive nature, focusing particularly on the differences between medical ethical positions, Sass approaches this issue from a different perspective, emphasizing commonalities between various moral systems found in different cultures that are used to assess specific medical interventions morally. His aim is to uncover a common basis for dialogue and mutual understanding, which is why in his way of thinking there is no room for notions like the populist slogan of a "clash of cultures"; on the contrary, Sass argues in favor of a dialogue of cultures in the search for solutions of problems including those originating in medical and bioethics, considering that these problems nowadays are no longer limited to the local environment but have assumed a global character.

For Sass, transculturality is not merely an academic topic but rather a lived experience. His numerous seminars and talks beyond the confines of Germany and the US, for example in China, Croatia, Iran, Turkey, and many other places, and the friendships resulting from these encounters, cultivated over many years, are not simply an expression of an industrious philosopher's expected attitudes. His approach in these seminars and talks given overseas is free from any kind of ethical proselytism. In these events, Sass is at the same time provider and receiver of knowledge, bold enough to apply foreign normative terms in the course of constructing his own arguments in order to open up new horizons. Thus, in his publications it is not unusual to find Confucian and Islamic normative terms, which shows that we should not have any reservations when encountering unfamiliar moral systems in the process of studying intercultural ethics. This openness towards other cultures may be a fruit of his biographical development, having lived in two countries, Germany and the US, from early on in his life.

As a young doctor, after I graduated in medicine from Istanbul University, I entered the field of the humanities as a novice. Since when I had the great fortune to meet Hans Martin Sass, more than a quarter century ago, he has tutored me, in phases of varied intensity, giving advice and support. Especially while I was writing my doctoral thesis, his role as advisor was characterized by a great deal of patience and respect. I value the period of writing my dissertation under his advice most highly, and I regard our subsequent collaboration in numerous projects as a great treasure, having shaped my own outlook. I am proud to be able to say that I am a disciple of such a great master.

Thank you very much, Herr Sass!

