

Three Guides to the Philosophy of Orientation

B.

Fearless Findings

**25 Footholds for the
Philosophy of Orientation**

**By Werner Stegmaier
and
Reinhard G. Mueller**



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**The Hodges
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I

A Realistic Philosophy for Our Current Time

1. The Aim

Contrary to the usual, the philosophy of orientation does not uncover any abysses, raise any moral claims, design any utopias, pursue any politics, give any advice, or offer any self-help philosophy nor does it constrain philosophy to merely making terms more precise. It responds to the problems of the ever-increasing complexity, confusion, unsurveyability, and uncertainty of our current world: it soberly and calmly describes how we successfully orient ourselves in this world under these conditions. Like never before, it philosophically focuses on orientation itself, which is now spoken of everywhere.

The philosophy of orientation is a realistic philosophy for our current time. It helps us navigate through our bewildering world.

2. Orientation as the Origin and Unity of Cognition and Action

Human orientation precedes cognition and action, i.e. the issues of theoretical and practical philosophy. To be capable of recognizing and acting, one must already be oriented. In one's orientation, cognition and action cannot be separated. Both emerge from it.

The philosophy of orientation proceeds from a new beginning and a new unity of philosophy.

3. The Temporary Unity of a Process

Our orientation is a comprehensive unity, which includes a multitude of processes running in flexible structures. Our orientation processes are bound to standpoints within horizons. Our standpoints and horizons leave room for perspectives to change. Thus our orientation can keep up with the times. It neither presupposes nor arrives at anything firm in itself. Its processes are processes of decision-making on ever-new alternatives in ever-new situations.

The philosophy of orientation investigates the structures of human orientation processes.

4. A Revaluation of Nihilism and Relativism

The assumption that there is ultimately nothing firm in our orientation is often, in philosophy, considered as “nihilism;” that all cognition and action is bound to standpoints, horizons, and perspectives, as “relativism.” Most contemporary philosophers are afraid of both. The philosophy of orientation takes away the fear by reevaluating them. This is supported by the mere concept of orientation, which, in our times, is used positively everywhere. Our orientation succeeds under the conditions of so-called nihilism and relativism.

The philosophy of orientation is the positive response to the dreaded nihilism and relativism.

5. A New Unity of Philosophies

Today’s philosophies, for their part, resolutely take standpoints or positions (such as realism or anti-realism, utilitarianism or deontology), or they are ascribed to them. Philosophies argue within each their framework, simultaneously respecting and denying each other’s positions. The philosophy of orientation, however, clarifies how such philosophical positions are possible at all and how they can coexist.

The philosophy of orientation goes behind the diversity of philosophies. It thereby enables a new unity of philosophy.

II

The General Structure of Orientation

6. The Situation of Orientation

One orients oneself about situations in situations. One's own situation of action is, in principle, a situation of orientation in the midst of the world as a whole. Everything that happens in the world may matter; the circumstances of a situation can never be fully explored. Moreover, they are relentlessly changing. Therefore, they always remain to a certain extent unsurveyable and uncertain. However, their relentless change requires cognition and action; it generates time pressure. Orientation is the achievement of finding one's way in a situation under uncertainty and time pressure in order to make out opportunities for action to master the situation.

The philosophy of orientation is about opening up the world under the pressure to act. In this respect, it is pragmatic.

7. The Temporality of Orientation Structures

The structures of an orientation or of orientations can change over time. In today's time, they are becoming more and more complex in many respects. Philosophy must respond to the increasing complexity of the conditions of orientation and to their accelerating transformations.

The philosophy of orientation uses dynamic concepts; it subjects its own concepts to time as well. In this respect, it is temporal.

8. Orientation as an Art of World Abbreviation

In situations of orientation, isolated and permanent objects are not already given, as traditional theories of truth and cognition presuppose. One of our orientation strategies is to mark off and isolate surveyable objects from unsurveyable contexts: we reduce the confusing complexity of situations of orientation to surveyable formats. Human orientation abbreviates the world. We orient ourselves by means of shortcuts.

The philosophy of orientation understands human orientation as an art of abbreviating the world. In doing so, it always keeps in sight the world as a whole that is abbreviated. In this respect, it is holistic.

9. The Hold of Orientations to Footholds

At first, the situations of orientation are abbreviated to clues relevant for an orientation. Clues leave room for more clues. Our human orientation adheres to them only provisionally; it does not commit itself to them immediately. This means: it orients itself “to” them. We look around for additional clues or leads that fit to the former ones until some appear together as sufficiently sustainable footholds. They then form patterns that make sense for the respective orientation – we say: an orientation can “make something of them.” In this way, each orientation establishes its own hold. We can hardly observe this initial orientation process; we usually see only the results. All so-called facts, even in court or in the sciences, are initially based on such clues and patterns of evidence. However, with each additional clue, lead, or foothold, the patterns can take on a new meaning.

The philosophy of orientation conceives of all reality as a result of connecting clues, leads, and footholds. This is confirmed by recent brain research.

10. Orientation Decisions under the Condition of Uncertainty

Which footholds an orientation relies on depends on the needs and interests, according to which it explores the situation. Other perspectives are possible which we do not, given a certain time pressure, take into account. Thus, an orientation always selects its footholds under the condition of uncertainty; it continually makes orientation decisions at its own risk. It is therefore all the more anxious to reduce the risks and reassure itself in every way about whether its footholds are sustainable.

The philosophy of orientation faces the risks of uncertainty management in all cognition and action.

11. Calmness and Unsettlement (Beruhigung und Beunruhigung) as Primary Distinction

The uncertainty management is therefore not primarily about truth and falsity, the basic distinction of cognition theories, but rather about the unsettling you feel when you think there may be relevant footholds you have overlooked. Once your orientation decisions lead to successful actions, a reassuring calmness sets in. Here truth is something calming or appeasing, falsity something worrying or unsettling.

The philosophy of orientation places before the distinction of truth and falsity the distinction of calmness or reassurance and concern or unsettling.

12. Things, Signs, Concepts, and Terms as Fluctuances

Signs connect to footholds and patterns of footholds; their meanings can be defined by concepts or terms. Signs and terms are additional means of an orientation's art of abbreviation. Signs can again be abbreviated by means of signs and likewise terms by means of terms. In this way, signs and terms can increasingly detach an orientation from its respective situations and expand its horizons. Nevertheless, the use of signs and terms as well as their meanings in a situation are still bound to standpoints. To be applicable in different situations, signs and terms must also leave room for different uses. As a result, their meanings can shift over a shorter or longer period of time. We call things, signs and terms that shift their meaning over time fluctuances. The meaning of signs may be withdrawn from shifts by scientifically defining their use, but, as the history of science shows, this is again only for a certain period of time.

The philosophy of orientation includes a philosophy of signs and of their meanings' fluctuances.

13. The Confidence in Routines

Human orientation, which keeps up with the times and does not rely on anything stable either in or beyond itself, stabilizes itself above all by means of routines. Routines develop through the repetition of processes. When processes change significantly, new routines emerge, and when new routines emerge repeatedly, routines in changing routines arise. Closely intertwined routines form special orientation worlds (such as family, work, or politics), among which one can routinely switch again. When the routines break down in one orientation world (e.g. your family falls apart, you lose your job, or the style of politics changes abruptly), then the routines of other orientation worlds usually save you from disorientations, such as anxiety, despair, or depression. Routines give you confidence that your orientation will work in the future as well.

The philosophy of orientation provides trust in orientation itself. The routines that develop in it on their own give an orientation its strongest support and its greatest hold.

14. The Recursive Self-Referentiality of Orientation

Just as there are no isolated objects given to our orientation, there is no isolated subject either. Our orientation always operates as a whole: the subject of orientation is orientation itself. It is self-referential like the so-called subject, but its self-referentiality is not circular, but recursive: experiences from orientations in previous situations, good and bad, enter the subsequent orientation processes and continuously change their starting point. Orientation thus remains flexible; it is never the same. It can also concentrate on different aspects: by focusing its attention on a center, it marginalizes everything else to the periphery without losing sight of it; but as soon as conspicuous clues appear in the periphery, it can immediately focus on them. But it does not necessarily have to focus on something, it is not, in the phenomenological sense, intentional per se.

The philosophy of orientation does not begin with the distinction of subject and object, but with the recursive self-referentiality of orientation itself, which, over time, is able to integrate what is new and then shift its attention. Orientation is capable of much more than what cognition has been imagined to be.

15. The Observable in Thinking

Traditionally, philosophy has primarily relied on thinking: it has conceived the subject as a thinking subject. But we do not know what thinking is; it is not observable as such. However, there are observable clues and leads for what is called thinking, for example the way we look, talk, and write. Thinking particularly manifests itself in the fact that human orientation is able to detach itself by means of signs and terms from its immediate situations, that it projects possibilities for future orientations and actions beyond these situations, that it evaluates and selects them according to its own criteria, without instantly putting them into effect, and that it thereby skips multiple concrete orientation experiments. As a result it altogether becomes much more complex and effective. Logical thinking is only one part of this. There are rambling, fantasizing, and creative kinds of thinking as well. Human orientation can also handle paradoxes, against which logical thinking resists: it uses them as means to create equal alternatives in thinking in order to start anew from both alternatives.

The philosophy of orientation offers a more realistic and more comprehensive picture of thinking than the traditional one – as an enhancement of orientation.

III

Consequences for Mutual Orientation

16. The Orientation about and to Other Orientations under the Condition of Double Contingency

Other people may think differently, but we are unable to observe what they think or want. We can only interpret the clues, leads, and signs we perceive from others when communicating with them. This means: all we can do is orient ourselves about and to each other. However, others are the most relevant in situations of orientation; they can become both threatening and helpful. There is no common and equal reason we can rely on; instead, we have to find out in each new situation whether we can follow others or should better keep distance from them or with whom we can cooperate for a shorter or longer time and with whom not. Arguments, too, are not plausible for all in the same way, but convince some more, others less; they are not based on final reasons that apply equally to everyone, but on plausibilities that depend on standpoints. Thus, orientation to other orientations has to cope with double contingency, as systems theory calls it: one's interlocutor can always behave differently than one expects. Double contingency is the basic problem that mutual orientation continually has to solve. It solves the problem primarily through routines again, some of which can be pinned down as rules. Languages in which we communicate are likewise orientation

routines or standards of plausibility; they routinely suggest certain forms of expression, but in turn allow for an unsurveyably great number of possible expressions. Thus, situations of communication are once again situations of orientation.

The philosophy of orientation understands human interaction and communication as an orientation about and to other orientations under the condition of double contingency.

17. Identity as an Identification with Identifications

The identity of a person is not just given, either. The function of attributing an identity is an initial simplification of the double contingency of mutual orientation. We want to rely on identities. But identities are complex and dynamic as well. One “has” no identity, not even in one’s sexual orientation; but one identifies oneself with identifications, and one can do this in different communications in different ways. Thus, identities change as well. They are fluctuances, too.

The philosophy of orientation is not based on identities, but considers them a problem.

18. The Function of the Social Communication Systems for Orientation

To further cope with the double contingency of mutual orientation, orientation systems with specific functions have developed in the communication of modern societies, such as economics, mass media, politics, the law, science, education, art, or religion. Sociological systems theory understands them as autonomous and autopoietic. But at the same time, they professionalize our everyday orientation in different ways: the economic system professionalizes its economic abbreviation of everything inexpedient; mass media the desire for new information; politics the planned handling of uncertain possibilities for action; the legal system professionalizes making decisions under uncertainty (judges only have clues, leads, and footholds, too, even in laws) and complying with obligations to which people committed; the system of science professionalizes the exploration of facts and their clear and conclusive presentation; the art system the creative expansion of the leeways of orientation; the system of religion the orientation to the incomprehensible, and the education system the orientations of others.

The philosophy of orientation allows us to understand the functional systems of societal communication in their functions for orientation.

19. Moral Orientation as a Closing of the Leeways of Orientation

Morals and morality are matters of orientation, too. They put the human orientation in a new disposition: the leeways of orientation immediately shut down when one feels compelled to help others in an emergency situation that they are unable to overcome on their own. Then, you must help them without reservation; you are the next available and most responsible for them. That means: the necessity of morals is the necessity of trusting in the reliability of others in situations of emergency. The double contingency of mutual orientation is thereby reduced in the strongest way; this is why morality is so relevant. For the moral compulsion caused by the emergencies of others, there are distinct clues and signs, from concern to indignation; however, as clues and signs they can also be passed over. In moral action, too, routines and different orientation worlds develop. Here, rules are established for a variety of reasons. They may be justified as norms that everyone is expected or forced to follow; and this generates societal, moral pressure. This pressure demands a constant submission to values. Values are considered good. However, one can choose between them as between footholds; this likewise makes possible a change of values and a dynamism of morals. Over time, other necessities of life assert themselves against moral compulsion; the leeways of orientation open up again.

The philosophy of orientation anchors morals in the compulsion to help others in need. In this coercion, the leeways of orientation shut down without reservation, but again only for a certain time.

20. Ethical Orientation as One's Opening for a Morality in Coping with Different Morals

If the leeways of mutual orientation also open up to values of different morals, then the structure of orientation attains its distinct ethical rank. Since our orientation does not presuppose an equality of orientations, reciprocity is likewise not to be expected. Instead, if one is impartial enough in one's situation, one questions the values of one's own morals through the values of others. Thus a reflected morality develops in coping with different morals, for which one's own morality is no longer the standard for everyone else. In this way open-mindedness, tactfulness, friendliness and benevolence, but also nobility, goodness, and love become possible, as it has been taught by great founders of religion and moral philosophers and demonstrated by exceptional people. The ethical orientation, as we call it, is becoming increasingly necessary in the growing mixture of peoples and cultures. It can no longer be understood in terms of values, norms, and principles that are equally valid for everyone. Instead, it sets distinct signs for others to follow them under their own conditions.

The philosophy of orientation opens up the morals of values and norms equally asserted for all to an ethics of a self-critical morality in coping with different morals.

IV

Consequences for Metaphysics and Politics

21. Metaphysics as a Disregard of the Conditions of Orientation in Orientation

Metaphysics responds to the need for a firm hold in firm beings, in both cognition and action: with its concept of an atemporal being to the orientation problem of temporality; with its concept of the world to the orientation problem of the unsurveyability of situations; with its concept of the soul to the problem of the uncontrollability of orientations; and with its concept of God to the orientation problem as such: uncertainty. Metaphysics transcends the conditions of orientation: it is an orientation that disregards the conditions of orientation. However, it lingers still in many current concepts such as thing, consciousness, reason, truth, or will. Skepticism in the English-speaking world, in empiricism, utilitarianism, and pragmatism, helps us remain critical of these concepts.

The philosophy of orientation leaves behind metaphysics. Nevertheless, it keeps a place for it – as far as we continue to use it as a kind of abbreviation.

22. Reasonableness as a Virtue of Orientation

Speculative metaphysics had been founded on the attribution of a common and equal reason to all people. Against that reason, common sense was asserted not only in the English-speaking world: from the ongoing quarrel between speculative reason and common sense, the Jewish Enlightenment philosopher Moses Mendelssohn developed the initial idea of philosophical orientation. According to him, common sense orients speculative reason, which in turn corrects, based on its criteria, the common sense. As a result, reason becomes a kind of manifold and dynamic reasonableness. As such, it combines virtues of orientation, like overview, circumspection, foresight, understanding, caution, consideration, forbearance, and confidence, which can be differently developed in each individual orientation.

The philosophy of orientation evaluates the concept of reason as a dynamic reasonableness, i.e. as a unity of manifold virtues of orientation.

23. Politics Based on Orientation Virtues in Times of Growing Globalization

Globalization as the establishment of a world society creates new orientation problems. On the one hand, standardized means for orientation and communication, such as immediately understandable icons, English as the world language, GPS systems, the internet, and social media, simplify and accelerate our orientation. On the other hand, these means increase the complexity of communication due to the unsurveyably great number of possible contacts and of easily exchangeable virtual identities. When you are online, you can easily orient yourself without having any intentions for action; but you can also quickly get lost on the internet. At the same time, moral responsibility now extends to emergency situations throughout the world that we learn about immediately; but there is no common world government that can effectively assume this responsibility. This requires a kind of politics that is, in a globalized mutual orientation, based on ethical virtues of orientation that allow it to master more easily unpredictable global situations of orientation. Such politics relies less on power in the traditional sense but on influence through superior orientation, judgment, and decision-making skills.

The philosophy of orientation suggests, in times of growing globalization, a politics based on orientation virtues.

V

Initiation and Continuation of the Philosophy of Orientation

24. The Initiation of the Philosophy of Orientation in the Modern Era

The philosophy of orientation was gradually initiated in the course of the modern era. Distinct forerunners were Michel de Montaigne, René Descartes, Baruch de Spinoza, and Blaise Pascal. From Moses Mendelssohn, Immanuel Kant adopted the term of orientation; he was the first to philosophically elaborate it. Since then, the term rapidly spread beyond its philosophical contexts. However, it has so far not been a subject of its own in a foundational philosophical investigation. But the most innovative philosophers since the end of the 19th century have contributed to it: Friedrich Nietzsche, Charles Sanders Peirce, the American pragmatists, Alfred North Whitehead, Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and, moreover, Niklas Luhmann with his systems theory.

The philosophy of orientation connects to the most innovative achievements in philosophy.

25. The Continuation of the Philosophy of Orientation beyond Itself

At the same time, the philosophy of orientation strongly converges with current research in the related sciences. However, as a philosophy, it does not bind itself to them, but rather observes them and other philosophies to the extent that they encourage new philosophical orientation decisions.

The philosophy of orientation also pioneers new philosophical orientation decisions beyond itself.

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Dr. Reinhard G. Mueller, translator of *What is Orientation?*, received his PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Texas at Austin with a dissertation about the philosophical reorientations in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and James Joyce. He will be the executive director of the Hodges Foundation for Philosophical Orientation.



NOTES

This is one of the three guides to
Werner Stegmaier's
What is Orientation? A Philosophical Investigation
translated by Reinhard G. Mueller (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2019)

A. Successful Modes of Orientation: 15 Conclusions from the Philosophy of Orientation for Your Everyday Life (Hodges Foundation for Philosophical Orientation, Nashville, Tennessee, 2019).

B. Fearless Findings: 25 Footholds for the Philosophy of Orientation (Hodges Foundation for Philosophical Orientation, Nashville, Tennessee, 2019).

C. Courageous Beginnings: 25 Situations of New Orientations in the History of Philosophy (Hodges Foundation for Philosophical Orientation, Nashville, Tennessee, 2019).

The very first thing one does in all situations of life is orient oneself. Decisions of orientation, which are mostly made under uncertainty and the pressure of time, largely determine subsequent decisions. But what is orientation? The problems of orientation are as old as humankind, the word is used everywhere, but the concept has never been thoroughly investigated. The philosopher Werner Stegmaier comprehensively clarifies for the first time the conditions and structures of orientation, including those of our sexual, economic, media, political, legal, scientific, artistic, religious, moral, and ethical orientations. He thereby establishes a new philosophical language and offers a philosophy for our time.

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