



The Sandglass as Allegory for Ethical Evolution: A Dialogue

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Abstract

As a child we all admired the sparkling desert crystal sand grains of the sandglass, and while they slowly, silently rolled down, occasionally, we started dreaming, after having turned it very carefully, watching the grains taking different directions, as the sand was suddenly starting to dance!

While the sunlight reflected on the even flow of crystal grains, imagination soared far, into the actual deserts, desert ships, camels, into the fantasy worlds... It was good to dream, freely, realistically, or with a free imagination. As in the sandglass, time moments are overlapping, never simply a passing of time as bidirectional succession of points. The duration of the present suggests a radical experience of the *hic et Nunc*. The sandglass gives us also about five minutes to figure out the right order of our experience. It is both short as an aphorism, both long enough to capture some real perfection and harmony in the world. In our dialogue we tried to crystallize a few central ethical notions, such as the ethical evolution in time, captured by the allegory of the sandglass, which opens not only the imagination but also challenges the decision-maker: “Now quick, take the right decision, I give you five minutes!”

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1. Sandglass of my life, what do you tell?

Changes in the realm of clocks! Rarely do I enter one of the Budapest malls; the glittering world of modern watch empires almost invades me. All kinds of world brands, prices reaching the sky. Just as I open my mobile, a digital clock and other ads flood. Before calling my family, inquiring about the health and mood of my children and grandchildren, an unprecedented, unwanted, tremendous flood of Christmas business offerings pushes itself into the field of vision. As if the sacred holiday wants to captivate with the shopping and buying “outdoing” the previous one, with the psychosis of spending more this year on holiday trivialities than ever before. This is an advertising dictatorship. A dictatorship of consuming everything for the eyes, hardly anything for the soul. A dictatorship of everyday banality. Meanwhile, I can be annoyed because my internet is not connecting to the provider; the service breaks several times a day. I can contemplate whether hackers are playing with me or if I am a victim of some paid global web plot? I really don’t want to dwell on this because allegedly everything, absolutely everything, serves the convenience and satisfaction (but not happiness!) of the big consumer, the digital global citizen. And anyway, this is not the world of my intellect. So, we live in the dictatorship of clocks, times, and modern techno-wonders. In the everyday dictatorship of very ordinary everyday life. In a mechanical, almost robotic existence. Far from the wonders of true existence. And light-years away from a world where time still has a human face. The world of wise sandglasses.

I need time, and the wisdom of the sandglass that measures time. Something missing from ultramodern structures, shapes. I’m still amazed at the dilemma of the philosopher at the end of the last century, who noted the dramatic question of being or not being, Hamlet’s true dramatic question: “To Be or not to Be?” In a free interpretation, being or lingering, in Design, in shapes, in rolling time out of our hands and lives. And ourselves we need time for ourselves, replacing self-destructive superficiality.

I received a small sandglass from my Swiss grandfather when I was a child, which he received from his grandfather. Gold-plated metal frame, hard glass, upper and lower cone shapes, and shining Sahara sand crystals. It measured

five minutes. My childhood sandglass was a miracle clock. I carried it in the pocket of my coat and pants, guarding it carefully. I took care of it as if it were a living bird, afraid it might fly out of my pocket in an unguarded moment. Even as a child, I admired the sparkling desert crystal sand grains, and while they slowly, silently rolled down, occasionally, I turned it carefully, and the grains suddenly took a different direction, starting to dance. It was a strange game. While the sunlight reflected on the even flow of crystal grains, my imagination soared far. Into the actual deserts, desert ships, camels, into the fantasy world of One Thousand and One Nights that never existed. But it was good to dream, freely, realistically, or with a free imagination. With the audacity of Harry Potter. While under the influence of the short-lived sandglass, I pondered its wisdom and teachings. How it depicts the basic law of our earthly existence: everything is finite in this world. What has a beginning also has an end. And that time, not only the objective time outside us but also the subjective time measuring us, will end someday. And that our lives, like the crystal grains of the sandglass, have their own physical laws of motion and timing. And that the crystal shower, the light stream, always flows from above. A great message that human existence, personal destiny, comes from the great upper being, God, whether we accept this law of being or not, whether we care about it or not. Not counting on the fact that our life starts high. In real life, there is no place for translation, only once, when God’s hand or Spirit turns our lives in another direction. We call this the miracle of conversion, the discovery of God-experience, the unrepeatably gift of life direction reprogramming. The clock of faith.

Now I still have special messages from the sandglass that I would like to share with you.

Wisdom of my Soundless Sandglass

From the poetry collection “Sandglasses” by Rose Ausländer (1901-1988), a Bukovinian Jewish writer, I take one. I am convinced that the Spirit of God, the Rúaḥ Adonai, brought this poem to me today, precisely in today’s world situation.

“ They start a war, and no one asks us.
They throw sand in our eyes.

And we can only ask:

Why do people have to shiver and hunger?

Why do our brothers bleed?

Why do we have to kill those whom others designate
as enemies?

Why can't we live in peace and brotherly love with
each other?

As it is written in the memory of every human being?

In the Old and New Testaments

And again, no one asks us.

Ethics of Diplomacy

Another short free verse from my sandglass comes from the Swiss social ethicist Christoph Stückelberger, founder of Globethics. In the title *Way-Markers*, the reader discovers a compilation of 365 short wisdoms, a work realized by applying meticulously the practical flip of the sandglass on a daily basis during a whole year (we suppose Christoph's tool was large enough to keep 10 minutes of sand). For ten minutes, with artistic regularity, each evening, a particular focus was reserved by the theologian on one ethical burning issue, which was captured and handwritten in the form of an aphorism. Thus, in “the Ethics of Diplomacy” we discover:

“ Defending one's own interests
Recognising others' interests

Not fighting each other

Taking a step towards each other

Making careful diplomatic concessions,
expecting that the other party
also makes concessions.

Putting yourself in the place of others
offers surprising possibilities
of achieving an ethical compromise.

The ethics of negotiation

The ethics of diplomacy.

(Stückelberger, *Way-Markers*, 46, 2019)

In the following section we try to assess the fundamental philosophical assumption behind the writing of ethical aphorisms, apart its short and poetic dynamical engaging with the reader, the freedom of the form of expression, and the great possibilities open to playfully making of the words sound like music to the mental ears of any likeminded reader, who would only need about two minutes to learn a deep ethical lesson.

2. The sandglass as measure for qualitative ethical leap

The sandglass should not be simply considered as a metaphor of the right temporal balance between extremes, between the “Scylla of the too little” and the “Charybdis of the too much” (E. von Hartmann, *Phänomenologie des sittlichen Bewusstseins*, Das Moralprincip der Harmonie, 1879, 123-4), as on this slightly narrow view, it cannot be considered other than simply a negative principle of the just means, a softening of the determinations by the extremes. The disadvantage of a general template for levelling any peculiar individual initiative, should not be underestimated, but as just balance it stands as a general principle, which we find in the ethics of taste as well as fundamental esthetical principle.

The balance between extremes experiences how we try to escape disharmony, and it is quickly recognized, as hostile to any form of non-proportionality of a relation. On the contrary we praise the symmetry of a comparison. Disharmony of course could take another name: the practical foundation of a descriptive pessimism of the human situation in the world, where there is an overall negative balance between pleasure and pain (Hartmann, *Pessimismus*, 1891, 77).

By contrast, the principle of the means as right balance can be regarded as having a true value or an ideal ethical value, entering in the predicate of perfection, harmony and beauty. It has historically been developed not only

by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* but also in Plato's work, first in the *Philebus* and then in the *Republic*.

Von Hartmann compares to the polyphony of an orchestra the way we get affected by our emotions where disharmony produced in repetitive manners exposes us to the creation of enduring social and ethical anomalies. By contrast, the harmony of the faculties of the mind is the "precious treasure" inherited by Mother Nature, it is for humans, comparable to leaves and fruits for trees, in the general economy of Nature. The aim of a possible ethical disposition for action [*ethische Streben*] is precisely in the possibility of harmony or perfection, or the coming closer to this central aim (Das Moralprincip der Harmonie, 134, *ibid.*).

This way of placing in a future orientation, what initially is presently experienced as negative includes consequently a wise option of a metaphysical significance, as spiritualisation of present disharmony, a method of compensation and liberation through hope and the collective holistic self-cancellation of the dispositions related to unreachable aims.

Following earlier reflections by Christian Wolf (1679-1754) there is a perfectionist ethical principle which transforms quantity, as the quantity of sand in the sandglass we may argue in our allegory, into quality, it is reminded to our attention by the need to turn the sandglass and count a qualitative momentum. Following an inspiring reflection by Hartmann, there could be a transformation from the growing quantitative elements falling in our conscious self-reflecting capacity to a qualitative one.

The richer the relation between the qualitative moments will be. Temporal facet to this process appears very logically as: "The more perfect a human being will be through these actions, through which one brings harmony into one's past, present and future state, through which he/she will become more consistent therefore with him/herself, and unperfect through the opposite." (Wolf, in E. von Hartmann, 136, *op. cit.*).

Before Wolf, G. W. Leibniz might have been one of the first German thinkers to introduce the idea of progress, as a "joy achievable in the future of the

worldly process” (quoted from Hartmann, *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, III, 13, 454; translation ours).

In his master work, his *Phenomenology*, Hartmann will develop an immense system of not one but over fifty different ethical principles which all are placed on a precise hierarchical and horizontal chain link (sometimes described as an axiology). The aim of this giant project of ethical system, an evolutionary system which normatively is based on the hope of an ascending progress from the simplest (often called proto-ethical principles) to large collective ethical principles (with both Buddhist and Christian connotations).

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4. Short biographies

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