



SIDEWAYS
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One of the few downsides of spending the year at the Wissenschaftskolleg is that when you get back to what no longer entirely feels like home, people – well-meaning people – ask how your year went; you tell them about all the ways it was ideal, which inevitably elicits a question along these lines: “So were you able to make progress on your project?” Or, “What sort of headway did you make?” Or sometimes, “How far did you move forward?”

This is when your sentences become syntactically complicated. You start dissecting words whose meaning you had taken to be straightforward, but which you now realize

are filled with ambiguities and pitfalls, words like “progress” and “make”. You hem and you haw.

I admit that I did my share of hemming and hawing, that I started even while still in Berlin whenever colleagues, friends, or family – all well-meaning – asked The Question. I also admit that it took me far longer than it should have to realize that apologies and deflections were completely unnecessary, in fact wrongheaded, and that my stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg had already taught me the correct answer: *of course* I did not simply progress with my project. It would have been missing the point of being at a place like the Wissenschaftskolleg to soldier on, grimly checking items off the bibliography and hammering out sentence after sentence, as though the conversations, the lunches, the talks and readings, the workshops, the ping-pong, and the many other serendipities had failed to make the slightest dent in the trajectory of my thinking. No, not only had I not moved forward, I now became convinced that moving forward would have signaled a case of lamentable obtuseness.

Not moving *forward* did not mean that there was no movement. I knew I had moved, and it certainly did not feel like *backwards* movement, nor did I have the impression that I had moved *down* into greater depths or *up* towards a more encompassing view. What I did, without fully realizing it at the time, was to move *sideways*, which has turned out to be a more interesting direction for thought than I would have guessed. In fact, I have come to think of sideways as the essential dimension of thinking. The great, unsung accomplishment of the Wissenschaftskolleg lies in gently opening up that dimension for those willing to enter it.

What does it mean to move sideways? When I move sideways, I am not simply following a line perpendicular to my original path; sideways is thus not a direction in a Cartesian grid. Instead, its meaning is relational, deriving entirely from the manner and direction of my movement rather than from any absolute system of coordinates. When heading sideways, I have not thereby abandoned my goal and gone elsewhere. I continue to move in its general direction, the goal in mind if not always in sight, but I do so not directly or by the shortest path. This is not a deliberate choice. I never make a decision to go sideways, since while I am on the sideways path, I remain unsure of whether it will take me where I need to go, in part because the very idea of where I need to go shifts with the sideways motion. Under the best of circumstances, my meandering provides a new and oblique view of a goal that has itself changed in the process.

As deleterious as sideways motion may be for action, its advantages for thinking ought to be self-evident. Having moved sideways – or, more accurately, having been tempted or urged there by an interlocutor – for as already mentioned one rarely *sets out* to go sideways – I begin to see that the range of possibilities I had considered when making an argument was not just too narrow, leaving out options on either end of the spectrum, but that the spectrum itself had left out other modes of engaging with the same set of ideas. These other modes do not behave like additional pieces of information or new data points, but rather like an additional dimension popping up in a geometric space. They open up not just new thoughts, but new *kinds* of thoughts. This is perhaps too Pollyannaish a way of putting things, as though going sideways invariably entailed some sort of personal enrichment. The truth is that new kinds of thoughts can – and usually are – deeply unsettling, and there is no way to tell ahead of time what kind of thought one is going to encounter on a sideways trajectory. It does not have the guarantee of the *Umleitung* that accompanied us on our M19 bus travels for our whole Wiko year and, despite the small detour, always managed to deliver us to our destination.

Sidewaysness – this mix of the exhilaration of obliquely stumbling upon a never-before-seen view of a familiar situation and the disorientation we feel when our thoughts simply go awry – describes much of my intellectual life at the Wissenschaftskolleg. I have never before been in a place and among people where in the midst of a perfectly ordinary conversation about everyday matters, without warning and with uncanny frequency, a new vista suddenly opened. How or why it happened as often as it did remains a mystery to me. I am, however, no less grateful for it.