



THE WOODPECKER
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Day one. You arrive after a long trip. Along the way, you got increasingly anxious that you may not be prepared for this. You realized you forgot to pack any soap, for instance, or even your usual chocolate supply, and began to worry about all sorts of other things you might have left behind or failed to consider. Did you take the *caffettiera*? Will there be an extension cord for your laptop? What about the power adapter – did you bring one? Once again, you waited until the last minute and didn't plan things as you should have, and now you are nervous that you might not be able to last long. You even forgot to bring an umbrella! Then you enter your apartment in Villa Walther. The morning sun is shining through the windows. The living room leads to a balcony; it directly overlooks the lake,

surrounded by woods. You wander through the other rooms and smell the clean air. Of course there is soap waiting for you in the bathroom. The kitchen has a brand new coffee maker, and there are even four espresso cups and eight coffee spoons. You open the refrigerator out of instinct. There is a bottle of wine! And there's milk, orange juice, homemade bread, salmon, cookies – and chocolate. The studios have fully equipped desks, and of course there are plenty of extension cords. You go back to the balcony and sit on a chair without unpacking. You look at the ducks and the swans, and before you know it, you are already trying to locate your first woodpecker in the trees around you. Welcome to your new home. Welcome to Wiko. Let us know if there's anything you need.

The care, professionalism, generosity, and friendly anonymity with which the Wiko staff welcomed and supported our stay in Berlin is the first thing that impressed me – and the last I will forget. I am sure many other Wiko Fellows and guests would say the same. Of course it isn't just a matter of feeling at home. This was to be a year of serious work, and just as I had high expectations, I knew my prestigious host expected me to honor the unique opportunity I was offered to finally immerse myself in my research project, to discuss it with others, and to contribute to – and benefit from – the inspiring and truly interdisciplinary intellectual life that makes the Wissenschaftskolleg the extraordinary place it is. But precisely for these reasons, the feeling of home is no secondary detail. I soon learned that it extended well beyond the walls and balcony of the apartment Friederike and I had been welcomed to. It embraces every aspect and every moment of one's stay. It is the very spirit of the Wiko experience, and that first impact was a perfect taste of what was to come.

The easiness with which a large and diverse cohort of distinguished Fellows turned into a dear group of friends is perhaps just another side of the same token, and one for which I am equally thankful. I knew that in the course of the year I would learn a lot from everyone, and I also knew Wiko expects everyone to socialize and form a community with one another. The highly organized weekly schedule, with its strict meal routine (about which I had heard from many sources), is meant to achieve precisely this purpose: collegiality. But I did not anticipate this would result in the forging of genuine friendships, some of which will certainly continue long beyond the painful goodbyes that awaited us at the end of June (if not earlier). Presumably this happens every year. It surely happened this year. And it happened despite the difficulties we all had to face when the virus outbreak hit Berlin and things changed so dramatically – small difficulties, to be sure, compared with what everyone else had to go through. We have been a lucky group indeed.

The project I brought to the Wissenschaftskolleg was ambitious, though I had no doubt this would be the ideal place to pursue it. As the title was meant to suggest – *Boundaries: From Geography to Metaphysics* – it had a clear starting point and a well-defined goal, but I needed to fill the huge gulf that lies in between, and this required a good amount of interdisciplinary steps. The starting point was this. I am interested in the philosophical significance of boundaries, and geography provides us with a concrete illustration of what they are and how they work. Above all, it tells us that boundaries (or borders, frontiers, barriers, confines, etc.) appear to come in two basic types: “natural” boundaries, such as coastlines, river banks, mountain ranges, ravines, etc., and “artificial” boundaries, which is to say boundaries that are created by human decisions and conventions (if not warfare), regardless of any physical differentiations in the underlying territory, as with the frontier between Mexico and the US, the borders of Niger, or the imaginary lines separating the German portion of Lake Constance from the Swiss and Austrian portions. It is an intuitive distinction and arguably a powerful one, not least insofar as it underlies a great deal of the history and dynamics of our political culture. (Here is one aspect of the project whose articulation benefited greatly from the generous input I received from my fellow historians, sociologists, and political scientists.) Yet this is just the starting point. For boundaries are not a prerogative of geography. They are at work in articulating *every* aspect of the world around us. Boundaries stand out in *every* map we draw, and so does the natural/artificial distinction that they elicit. The boundary marking off my body from the environment, for instance, would be a natural one, like the boundary of an island; the boundary between my top half and my bottom half, by contrast, is entirely artificial. A person’s birth and death, or the instant when a ball begins to roll, would seem like temporal boundaries of the natural sort. A person’s reaching legal adulthood, or the subdivision of baseball games into innings and of innings into frames, are instead clear examples of cutoff points that are driven entirely by human conventions and purposes. (Again, in these regards I benefited enormously from the enriching discussions I had with my Wiko Fellows, especially biologists, medical doctors, and legal theorists.) Indeed, once the opposition has been recognized, it can be drawn across the board: not merely in relation to boundaries, but also in relation to those entities that *have* boundaries. If something enjoys a natural boundary, its existence and identity conditions appear to be independent of us; it is a *bona fide*, mind-independent entity of its own. By contrast, if its boundary is of the artificial sort, then the entity itself is to some degree a *fiat* entity, a construct, a product of our worldmaking. This is the metaphysical side of the project, though getting here is precisely

what required a lot of filling in and putty work. For if you see it this way, it is not an exaggeration to say that the natural/artificial distinction betokens the general opposition between what is *found* or *discovered* and what is *made* or *created*, and this takes us straight to the metaphysical debate between realism and antirealism. And the overall goal of the project, as I envisaged it, was to investigate the antirealist stance corresponding to the limit case: What if there were *no* natural boundaries? What if all boundaries – hence all entities – were on closer look and to some extent the result of *fiat* articulations reflecting our cognitive biases and our social practices and conventions?

I knew these are difficult questions, and indeed their proper treatment turned out to be way more challenging than I had anticipated. Not only did my continued conversations with the Fellows and staff result in so many more suggestions, case studies, bibliographic sources, and food for thought than I could process in a few months. That just confirmed the many-faceted pervasiveness of boundary concerns across all fields of inquiry, and I can only be thankful for being pressed to address it in ways I had not considered. That is exactly why I brought my project to Wiko in the first place. But the tragic events that hit us all in the Spring, the cataclysm that ravaged the world around us as we were watching powerlessly, the devastating effects of that minuscule killer creature that no one knew and everyone feared – that was completely unexpected. And that, too, had a huge impact on the picture I was after. The masks, the Plexiglas guards, the social distancing, the vulnerability of our immune system... How could I stick to my “ambitious” philosophical plan when the entire boundary system out there was falling apart? How could I honestly think I could march my way from geography to metaphysics if I didn’t even know how to walk and breathe properly under a simple face shield? I was fancying the natural/artificial opposition to be unwarranted, ungrounded, unreal; I suddenly found myself staring at the most tragically real inside/outside conflict.

This is not to say that I gave up. But clearly I needed to step back and pause. In his *Romane Lectures* of 1907, the first extensive treatment of my topic from a strictly geopolitical perspective, Lord Curzon said that boundaries are “the razor’s edge on which hang suspended the modern issues of war or peace, of life or death”. He knew what he was talking about. At the time of his lecture, determining the frontiers of the British Empire was a major diplomatic preoccupation, if not a source of international danger, and Curzon himself had just returned from a continent where he had been responsible for the security of a land frontier 5,700 miles in length. It was not without authority, therefore, that he would see his lecture as an opportunity to urge British foreign ministers and

ambassadors to concentrate their efforts on frontier policy, in the conviction that many sources of political discord could be removed by adjusting rival “interests and ambitions” at points where the relevant territorial borders adjoin. If I want to extend his analysis along the lines I sketched – and question the natural/artificial opposition on which it rests – I’d better do so with some comparable semblance of authority. Wiko gave me almost everything I needed. But I cannot go any further unless I find a way of converting that painful incredulous stare into the eye of scrutiny. The razor’s edge is no longer a metaphor.

Still, I can hardly overstate how lucky I feel that all this happened while I was at Wiko. And surely enough, it was a productive year after all. For as happens with many Fellows, over and above my struggling with the official project I meant to carry out, the luxury of ten uninterrupted months in my new home allowed me to make enormous progress on several other projects that I brought along from my backlog or started anew for some reason or other. I finished a book for Oxford University Press that was long due (*Mereology*, co-authored with Aaron Cotnoir from the University of St. Andrews), dealing with a topic not altogether removed from my project on boundaries: the formal theory of the relations of part to whole and of part to part within a whole. I completed the revisions of two papers, one on the philosophical foundations of point-free geometries (“Points as Higher-order Constructs”, to appear in an edited volume for Oxford University Press titled *The History of Continua: Philosophical and Mathematical Perspectives*), and one on the metaphysics of modal logic (“Counterpart Theories for Everyone”, forthcoming in the journal *Synthese*). And I wrote five brand new papers, two of which deal with the recalcitrant ontology of absences (“Ballot Ontology”, to appear in volume for Oxford University Press entitled *Non-Being: New Essay on the Metaphysics of Non-Existence*, and “A Slow Impossible Mirror Picture”, to appear in the journal *Perception*, both co-authored with Roberto Casati from the Jean Nicod Institute in Paris), while the others deal with various issues in philosophical logic (all currently under review). Looking back on it, this was an incredibly productive year indeed.

Friederike and I left Berlin at the beginning of July. On our last day, with everything packed and ready to go, we sat one last time on our balcony. The Herthasee was getting ready for the hot summer months, with its water all green with algae. Around us, the woods were not as dense as they were on the day we arrived, as some had been taken down over the winter or stripped from their thick ivy undergrowth. But the trees looked just as happy and proud as always, as did the many birds that had visited us throughout

the year. We spent a good hour contemplating the scene that welcomed us every morning. Then the time came. We gave one last look at the ducks and the swans. And as we got up to leave, before we knew it, we heard it. The woodpecker!