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KEYNOTE SPEECH

“Philosophical Tools for Your Professional and Private Challenges”

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Dear Friends and Partners of ECOVIS,

It is my sincere honor and my genuine pleasure to talk to you today, here in Riga, at this beautiful UNESCO world heritage site.

I do not speak to you in my main professional capacity as a corporate and commercial lawyer, litigator and mediator in Zurich, but as a philosophic practitioner which is, so to speak, my side job.

*Philosophical practitioners are philosophically (and usually also psychologically) trained to **facilitate the thinking** of clients in order to enable them to **act more effectively**.*

*To facilitate the thinking of clients above all means: to focus on **significant, but problematic concepts**; concepts which are used in everyday **thinking and communication** and which are the basis for **decisions and actions**.*

Why did I decide to study, in addition to my legal studies, also philosophy?

Well, because I have always loved philosophy as an intellectual challenge; an intellectual challenge for the deeper meaning and purpose beyond the everyday meanings and purposes we attribute to things and to ourselves. Or expressed in the famous words of Shakespeare: I have always found my playful pleasure in speculating over the question of “To be or not to be”.

*Moreover, throughout my over 20 years as a lawyer, I have often made the experience that many issues, problems or disputes of my clients are, essentially, not mainly of a mere legal or economic nature, but are the consequence of **fundamental misunderstandings**; misunderstandings not only between contractual parties or partners, but especially also misunderstandings in my clients’ own mind; misunderstandings which are usually caused by inconsistent, inattentive, or even careless thinking, while careless thinking means: careless use of language in the definition of the assumptions, the means and of the purposes which determine business decisions.*

*And, based on my own life experience and on my experience as philosophic advisor, I conclude that the same – I call it the same “general philosophical diagnosis” – also applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to issues, problems disputes in our private life.*

With my – with this – short speech entitled “Philosophical Tools for Your Professional and Private Challenges” (which is actually an introduction followed by a workshop I will hold later today), I would like to give you a rough idea of what philosophy can contribute to improve your intellectual skills; to improve your intellectual skills in order to think more critically and consciously and, as a consequence thereof, to act more consistently and effectively.

I call this “the added value of philosophy” which is based on an understanding of philosophy which is much broader than what usually comes to our mind when we think of philosophy.

What probably comes to our mind when we think of philosophy can be illustrated by a fresco of the Renaissance artist Raphael which is in the Vatican. [SLIDE]

This fresco is entitled “School of Athens” and shows the most famous philosophers of ancient times. In the center, we see the Plato and Aristotle having an argument over the question of whether truth is something idealistic (which was Plato’s view) or should rather be a source of pragmatism (which was Aristotle’s approach). Pythagoras is shown left in the foreground, writing with concentration. Next to him, a pensive Heraclitus is leaning against a block of marble while Diogenes, the cynic and anarchist, is just provocatively lying on the stairs... and there are many others.

Raphael’s fresco celebrates the personalized and idealized origins of more than 2500 years of Western philosophic tradition. It depicts philosophy as an abstract and elitist academic discipline.

But what is often being forgotten:

The added value of this academic philosophical tradition is that it offers a treasure of knowledge and wisdom to better cope with our practical life challenges – here and today.

Let us not forget that at some culminating points in history, philosophy even had a dramatic impact on peoples’ lives. Try to imagine, for example, the French Revolution without its philosophic masterminds such as Montesquieu, Diderot, Voltaire, Rousseau, etc. ... impossible!

[SLIDE] *Do you know who these two cheerful guys are?*

You may probably not know the elderly gentleman on the left, who is the French philosopher Paul Ricœur (who died in 2005). But all of you do know the young fellow next to him. But do you also recognize him?

Well, he is one Paul Ricœur’s former university students and assistants: Emmanuel Macron.

And only a little more research reveals that also a surprising number of leading CEOs have studied philosophy, especially in the IT-industry, including, for example, Steve Jobs, Flickr co-founder and Slack CEO Stewart Butterfield, LinkedIn co-founder Reid Hoffman, or former HP CEO Carly Fiorina, etc.

All these and many more biographic “testimonials” leave no doubt that philosophy can definitely serve us as leaders, advisors, entrepreneurs or just as individuals in order to better cope with our life challenges, especially in the fast-living, complex and worrying times we live in, which are times of multiple fundamental crises; crises, in which the obvious is no longer obvious, in which we are forced to think the unthinkable – and in which also Emanuel Macron has not so much to laugh about anymore.

*The ongoing war in the Ukraine, for example, which could also take place right here in Latvia or in our home countries, is a painful reminder that we cannot and must not take our **freedom** for granted.*

*But in order to defend our freedom, we are called upon to **think** about freedom first. Because we must know what exactly we want to defend... and why and how we want to defend it.*

In other words: We must define... before we defend, must take one step back... before we jump.

The day before yesterday, on the way from Riga airport to my hotel, I had a chat with my taxi driver, a man born in Latvia, with a Latvian mother and his father from Azerbaijan, as he told me. When I mentioned the war in the Ukraine and inquired about whether or how this would also affect peoples’ lives in Latvia, the man gave me a surprisingly ambiguous reply: “Yes, this is a horrible war, and of course we don’t want this war to spread to the Baltic countries”, he said, “but one must understand both sides”. – “What do you mean by this?”, I asked. – “Well, you know, many people in Russia and elsewhere, for example also in Azerbaijan, want to have strong leaders and support those leaders, because they guarantee stability. Not everyone is that much interested in

what Americans and the West is calling “freedom”, because freedom often creates disorder. Only look at the chaotic Yeltsin years in Russia, before Putin came to power and restored order...”

It would have been interesting to explore my taxi driver’s scepticism – and perhaps also fear – over freedom, but our ride was too short for that. In any case, this anecdote illustrates that freedom can obviously be something controversial.

*So, what then actually **is** freedom? And what shall we **do** with that freedom?*


These are not only political or legal questions, but have also always been highly debated philosophical questions which consist of a theoretical and of a practical aspect.

*The **theoretical** question, that is the definition of what freedom actually **is**, is based on a preliminary question, namely the question of what we are able to **know** at all. Because we need knowledge in order to determine what something (such as freedom) actually is or not.*

*And only once we have acquired that knowledge – that is, in our example, a satisfactory understanding of our notion of freedom –, we can address in a next step the related **practical** question of what to **do** with that freedom. And the question of what we shall do with our freedom is, on one hand a personal question in our individual search for a happy and a meaningful life, and is, on the other hand (that is in relation to others and to our environment) also an ethical question which focuses on our “response-ability”, that is on our ability to respond to the freedom of others.*

Most generally speaking,

*the question “**What can I know?**” *

*which is usually associated with the question “**What should I do?**” ,*

are the two most fundamental questions which the philosopher Immanuel Kant– one of the prominent thinkers of the Age of Enlightenment – has identified.

In my workshop later today, I would like to further examine these two fundamental questions, and I will try to explain their relevancy with regard to our life challenges, as both professionals and as private individuals – and ultimately also as a society. For that purpose, we will look at the following pictures:

[SLIDE] You may know this popular work of the surrealist Belgian artist René Magritte. For those of you who do not speak French: The subtitle beneath the pipe says “this is not a pipe”. But apart from this explanation, I encourage you to use your own critical and creative thinking in order to find out what this painting may tell you about our human knowledge.

Also look at these pictures: [SLIDES showing a piece of cake and a cow]

*No comment as well, except my repeated encouragement to use your **own** senses and your **own** intellectual abilities, in order to ask yourself – without jumping into hasty conclusions! – what kind of knowledge these pictures may convey to you.*

*And I especially encourage you, to have the courage of admitting what you may **not** know about that pipe, that piece of cake or about that cow – and what you may also not know about anything or anyone else, including about yourself.*

In the workshop, we will finally also have a glance at this painting from the U.S. artist Edward Hopper: [SLIDE showing Edward Hopper’s painting entitled “Excursion into Philosophy”]

Apart from pointing out that this painting quite obviously seems to deal with both, the question of “What can I know?” and the question of “What should I do?”, I do not want to further analyze it – but we will do so in the workshop.

For the time being, allow me to draw an analogy with a movie scene:

In one of Woody Allen’s films, a melancholic man sits isolated and ruminating in the corner of a room – a bit like the man we see in Hopper’s bedroom scene. But in contrast thereto, the room in the film is big and packed with people exuberantly celebrating New Year’s Eve. While Woody Allen’s protagonist is staring, like a sad clown, at the celebrating crowd, he is talking to himself and says: “Socrates said, that the unexamined life is not worth living.” And after a short pause, he adds with a sighing tone of frustration: “But the examined life... is no bargain.”

Well, is this statement really true? I would say: on one hand yes, but on the other hand definitely not.

The statement is certainly true, if one expects that an examined live (that is a life in which critical reflection, especially self-reflection plays a role) should yield immediate benefits. Immediate benefits such as fast, but perhaps undeserved money; or, as shown in the movie, such as the thorough but, in any case, transient enjoyment of a rollicking party; or such as the immediate benefit of a quick – but then most probably superficial and illusive happy end of the crisis of the couple we see on Edward Hopper’s painting.

No. The benefit of philosophic thinking is certainly not immediate and quick, but indirect and above all, it needs time and patience to bear fruits.

*Philosophy invites you on a – often strenuous – **intellectual journey**, certainly not to an intoxicating party or shopping spree, and also not to an exciting business trip.*

So, my dear Colleagues and Friends, is this here maybe the wrong event to get into a philosophic mood?

Perhaps yes, unless we realize that our meeting here and today is – apart from its technical professional and networking aspects – also a precious opportunity to engage in creative thinking and interaction; creative thinking and interaction off the beaten tracks of an ordinary business conference.

*There is actually nothing to lose by seizing this opportunity, since the promise of philosophy is... that there is no promise. But philosophy gives you the tools for **meaning and purpose**.*

*The main tool for creating meaning and purpose is called **critical thinking**. And critical thinking operates by a concentrated and mindful use of **language**. Because language is not only our main tool to represent and discuss reality. Language has also the power to create reality. (Especially the lawyers among us know this very well...)*

Let me quote the 20th Century Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein whom I freely translate as follows:

“The limits of my words mean the limits of my world.”


(Original quotation in German: “Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt.”)


*So, the preeminent value of language should never be underestimated. As a consequence, in order to sharpen our thinking, we must sharpen our language. And the best tools to sharpen our language are **critical questions**, but certainly not uncritical boilerplate answers.*


*According to the U.S. linguist Noam Chomsky, a meaningful and purposeful sentence must be an answer to at least one meaningful and purposeful question. So, questions, not answers are the decisive **condition precedent** to meaning and purpose – while answers which are not based on meaning- and purposeful questions are merely idle talk.*


And what is really remarkable is that all meaningful and purposeful questions are, essentially, nothing but variations of the two basic philosophical questions of “What can I know?” or “What should I do?”. Let me give you a few simple examples of such variations:

- “Hold on a second! Hold your horses, please!


What do you / what do I / what do we actually mean by this?” 


“Is what we have just said or almost agreed – or is what we seem to disagree on –, is this really what we mean, 


and is this really what we ultimately want?” 


- “Are there perhaps fundamental misunderstandings, errors, contradictions or inconsistencies in what we are maintaining, but of which we are not aware of?” 


- “In other words: Are we perhaps jumping into hasty conclusions?” 


- “And by the way: What are the express – and actually more important: – what are the possible **implied** assumptions, prerequisites, conditions or expectations on which I base my understanding of something or someone?” 

“Am I aware of these implied assumptions, prerequisites, conditions or expectations, 

and, if yes, are they really true?” 

“And if they are true, are they also desirable?” 





- “Is my intended course of action or strategy really logic, 

and is it also sustainably purposeful?” 



- “Is the issue at hand supported by verifiable facts and generally accepted rules, 

or is it rather the expression of unverifiable opinion driven by personal interest?” 

And once we have separated facts from opinions and rules from interests:

- “In light of the goals we want to achieve, 
how do we properly weigh and balance facts and rules, opinions and interests?” 
- “In our project, plan or undertaking, what are actually the limits of our knowledge, and what are the limits of our resources?  And how should we practically deal with those limits?” 

Last but not least:

- “Is what I am maintaining here really true? 
And if yes, am I also being truthful in making my true argument?” 

And so on...

The fruits of this critical thinking through the use of critical language are that your work and life may become a bit more meaningful. As a result of this increased meaningfulness, your work and life may also become a bit more purposeful.

And the great philosophers from then and from now can inspire and support you which, however, does not require you to become a lonesome philosophy student. No. You can find philosophic concepts, methods and witty quotes in an impressive offer of secondary literature or even YouTube tutorials which are tailored to business executives and advisors like you.

*There even exist philosophic cartoons which have the very positive side-effect that they will make you **laugh**. And in this connection, my dear Friends and Colleagues, please bear in mind the following words of Arthur Schopenhauer:*

“Sense of humor is the only divine quality of man.”

