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Obituary and Commendation Professor Dr. phil. habil. Fritz Wenisch*

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On January 30, 2020, a wonderful man, dear friend, and important philosopher, still to be discovered and recognized more widely, Professor Fritz Wenisch, left us, and entered the true, immortal and eternal life he was always convinced of as a philosopher, and believed in and hoped for as a Catholic Christian.

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I wish to express here my deeply felt condolences to his widow Resia (Theresia) Wenisch, his children Dr. Michael Wenisch and wife Michelle, Dr. Magdalena Andres and husband Frank, and Dr. Thomas Wenisch and wife Shannon, and to his grand children; to his brothers, Dr. Berhard Wenisch and wife Waltraud, and Johannes Wenisch; and sisters Lilli Wenisch, Pia Crosby and husband Dr. John Crosby with their children, and Gertrud Wenisch, now Sr. Freude Maria.

1 Biography in brief

Born in Austria (Neunkirchen/Lower Austria), Dr. Wenisch grew up in Hallein and Salzburg. He attended part of his Elementary School (*Übungsschule*) and his first four High School years at the Academic Highschool (Prep school) Borromäum, both in Salzburg, Austria. After this, he attended the Teacher Training College (*Bundeslehrerbildungsanstalt*); likewise in Salzburg. From 1964-1968, he studied philosophy at the University of Salzburg. In 1968, he received his Doctorate in Philosophy.

From 1966-68, he served in a position corresponding to Graduate Assistant (linked to the Chair of Professor Balduin Schwarz) and from 1968-1971 as Assistant Professor in the Philosophy Department of the newly founded University of Salzburg.¹

He started his teaching career at the University of Rhode Island in 1971, first as Assistant Professor, then as Associate Professor, and finally as Full Professor of Philosophy. In 1975 he received his “Habilitation” from the University

of Salzburg and earned the rank of a *Privatdozent*.²

Spanning almost half a century, from 1971 to 2019, Fritz Wenisch has been teaching taught at the University of Rhode Island. From 1974-1991, he served as Philosophy Department Chair.

2 Fritz Wenisch as Personality

Before discussing his merits as a philosopher, I wish to say a few words about the remarkable personality of Fritz, who was one of my best and most faithful friends from 1953 on, when we attended the same elementary school.

Everything about him was original: his appearance and facial expression, his voice, his extraordinary sense of humor, his wit and quick-wittedness, his many poems written in his unique style, his way of acting as the teacher Wampl in Johann Nestroy's comedy *Die schlimmen Buben in der Schule* (the bad boys in school), his mode of philosophizing and publishing philosophical writings. In all of these activities he was, more than any other person I knew, with the exception of Dietrich von Hildebrand - who was also quite unique and original -, unmistakably "Fritz".

Fritz was a very loving, tender husband, who, until a few days from his death, woke up his wife Resia every morning with a loving poem he had composed for her the previous evening.

Fritz was also a very faithful and loving friend, who, though we had been separated in space from our 25th birthday on, for over half a century (we saw each other only now and then), always sent me birthday messages, in the form

of poems and rhymes, the last one just three weeks before his death (my birthday is January 6th and I am just two months younger than Fritz). I will put his poem here in the original German and, though it is hardly translatable, in English, because this poem and the fact that he wrote it just three weeks before his death, captures his warm and kind personality beautifully:

Lieber Josef!
Die Jahre eilen – eins, zwei, drei –
An uns schon sehr geschwind vorbei.
Schon wieder ist es jetzt so weit:
Es ist für mich die höchste Zeit,
Herzlichst zu gratulieren Dir,
Da nun Dein Alter gleichet mir:
Ja, fünfundsiebzig – eine Frist,
Die ehrwürdig als Alter ist.
So wünsche ich Dir jetzt das Beste
Zu diesem schönen, großen Feste.
Mög' Gott Dir Seinen Segen schenken,
Und Dich auf Deinen Wegen lenken.

Vielen, vielen herzlichen Dank für das ausgezeichnete und hochinteressante Buch Christian Philosophy and Free Will.

Da ich jetzt komme an das Ende,
Noch einen Gruß ich schnell Dir sende.
Dein steinalter Freund

Dear Josef!
The years hurry on - one, two, three-

they pass us very rapidly.
Again, it is already due:
High time for me, to send to you
Congratulations,
Now that your age is like mine:
Yes, seventy-five-,
Which is a venerable age.
So now I wish you the best
To this big, beautiful Feast.
May God give you His blessing,
And guide you in your ways.

Many, many thanks for the excellent and highly interesting book Christian Philosophy and Free Will.

Now that I am coming to the end,
Quickly one more greeting I send.
Your stone age friend

Without recording here the many pranks he played on his high school teachers and friends, I just want to mention two examples of his occasionally slightly sharp but also charming sense of humor.

For example, he advised an American student who was in Salzburg to learn German and lived in his apartment, that when she was invited for dinner in an elegant home, and had eaten enough, she should simply say what a polite guest ought to say, namely: "Danke, mir graust bereits" (Thank you, I am disgusted already).

In a similar vein, he asked our, at that moment heavily smoking, high school teacher on an excursion whether he

knew the difference between a hay wagon and a cigarette. When the teacher hesitated how to answer this question and confessed his lack of finding the right answer, Fritz said: The ox draws the hay wagon from up front, in the case of the cigarette, in contrast, the ox draws from the back.

Fritz was a noble person, always ready to help, very humble and modest, almost effacing himself in an unobtrusive way. He was a man without any streak of arrogance or pomposness but always very polite, patient and kind in discussions. In philosophical discussions we had regularly from high school on in my parents' home, or during joint vacations in the castle Goldegg near Salzburg, he made always intelligent observations, asked excellent question, immersed himself deeply in reading and understanding the *Ethics* and other books by Dietrich von Hildebrand and other authors. Together with his elder brother Bernhard and his younger brother Johannes and three sisters, the early deceased Maria (Mirli), Lilli, Pia (now Mrs. Crosby) and Gerti, now religious sister in a convent in France, we passed during several years wonderful vacation times together, read with Fritz's father Ernst comedies of Johann Nestroy which made his father laugh so much that often he could not continue reading. Later, Fritz was a very good actor of the *Salzburger Zimmertheater*.

Fritz was also a deeply religious person who prayed the Breviary every day in his later years, and received the last sacraments before his death.

His death occurred rather unexpectedly, after a brief illness. He died peacefully in the presence of his family and accompanied by their prayers.

I am confident that his soul entered without delay into paradise.

3 Fritz Wenisch as a Member of the School of Phenomenological Realism

The school of which Wenisch was an important representative and that numbered such philosophers as Max Scheler, Adolf Reinach, Dietrich von Hildebrand, Edith Stein, Hedwig Conrad-Martius, Roman Ingarden, and many others among its members, has been called “phenomenological realism”.

The name seems complicated, but the matter is simple: As a form of realism, the movement acknowledges that there is a mind-independent reality (a “Thing-in-Itself”) which the human mind can, to a certain extent at least, recognize the way it really is (pace Immanuel Kant).

“Phenomenological” is derived from the Greek word “phainomenon,” meaning in this context “What shows itself”, or: as Heidegger put it in one of his few fortunate expressions, “that which shows itself from itself”. In other words, this school follows the call of the early Husserl, the founder of the phenomenological movement: “Back to Things Themselves.” This maxim invites the philosopher to look at all things and their essences open to what they are themselves and abstaining from all varieties of intellectual constructions and “reductionisms” that falsify things themselves.³

Reductionists – under many names and hyperactive in

many psychological and philosophical movements – interpret the nature of things, at least in part, contrary to what they themselves really are. They call love nothing other than just a form of “sublimated sexual libido”, the moral virtue of justice just a resentment of the weak against the strong (a reductionism found in Callicles of Plato’s *Gorgias* or in Friedrich Nietzsche). They reduce a person just to a bundle of perceptions (David Hume), or to an epiphenomenon of brain-processes, promises just to declarations of the will that produce expectations of their fulfillment or to language games; they call free will an illusion, whereas in reality our decisions would be determined by material forces, by history, early childhood experiences, or by God who would predetermine us.

None of these and countless other reductionist philosophies do justice to “things themselves.” Thus, they are bad philosophies. For the purpose of all true philosophy ought to be, and is quite explicitly recognized as such in phenomenological realism, a “return to things themselves.”

Thus, the philosophical movement to which Wenisch belonged places an investigation on what is immediately given, on what presents itself in its own identity to the human mind, at the starting point and at the center of philosophical investigations.

Dr. Wenisch belonged to this very important phenomenological movement and school of philosophy that goes back to Edmund Husserl’s publication *Logical Investigations* (1900 / 1901), who, with this work, became the father of the phenomenological movement, separating clearly the eternal laws of logic, whose truth and validity is the condition of any truth and science, from mere subjective necessities of

human thinking, and thereby laid the foundations for any refutation of relativism and skepticism.

But phenomenological realism, after 1905/1913, separated radically from its father Husserl's later transcendental turn, a version of phenomenology that became highly constructive, left the given *urphenomena* far behind, and was more akin to Kant than to Husserl's own *Logical Investigations* with their marked objectivism and refutation of relativism of any sort including the Kantian one.

After their break with his new turn to subjectivity, Husserl called the Göttingen and Munich schools of realist phenomenology.

In reality, the phenomenological realists have been the true followers and developers of Husserl's thought and among them are his most prominent students and colleagues: Adolf Reinach, Max Scheler, Roman Ingarden, Dietrich von Hildebrand, Alexandre Koyré, Edith Stein, Hedwig Conrad-Martius and others. They carried out in a very superior form the call to return to things themselves. They returned to the objective values and to the absolute, non-relative logical principles and truths, whose intrinsic necessity is wholly independent of the human mind and equally valid for angels and for God Himself, as Husserl had so forcefully stressed in *Logical Investigations*. Husserl has shown that these eternal and necessary laws, as those found in logic, cannot be accounted for by a Kantian or psychologistic "subjective necessity of human thinking" and are in no way constituted by human subjectivity, a position Husserl later abandoned, at least partly.

The phenomenological realists continued and perfected this original Husserlian objectivism, while Husserl's later

philosophy is more akin to German idealism based on the Copernican turn to the subject that considers itself the source of all intentional objects and as world-constituting. In this respect, phenomenological realism and philosophy of necessary and timeless essences of many things is incomparably more akin to Plato than to Husserl.⁴

The call to return to “things themselves” was masterfully put in action by Adolf Reinach’s philosophy of the *A priori in Civil Law*,⁵ by Hildebrand’s epistemology and ethics,⁶ and by other phenomenological realists, who rejected Husserl’s and many others’ relapse into Kant-inspired German Idealism and transcendental relativism.⁷

Other phenomenological realists, in a deep encounter with Aristotle and Aquinas, as well as after exchanges and debates with “existentialist Thomists”, rediscovered also the fundamental role of *esse (being and existing)* as distinct from essence for reality and as object of philosophical knowledge, and thus overcame, while fully maintaining the philosophy of necessary essences and of an objective a priori characteristic of phenomenological realism, a certain “essentialism” found in early realist phenomenologists.⁸

Realist phenomenologists are thus the true heirs of the maxim “back to things themselves” that has been largely obscured by the later complicated constructions of transcendental (Husserl) and the unintelligible thoughts and word-creations of existential phenomenology (Heidegger).

The most significant contributions of Wenisch as member of this school that he absorbed as one of the 3 or four most brilliant students of Balduin Schwarz, in his turn a student of Dietrich von Hildebrand and first chairman and full Professor of the philosophy department of the Univer-

sity of Salzburg, are his doctoral thesis, in which Wenisch explores and argues intelligently for the objectivity of values, and his habilitation thesis on the method of philosophy,⁹ in which he develops further the insights of the Magna Charta of realist phenomenology: Hildebrand's *What Is Philosophy*, which Wenisch translated back into German and whose German edition was revised and augmented by Hildebrand himself.¹⁰

Wenisch contributed also later important explanations of the core of phenomenological realism and its method.¹¹ Still regarding his work as a significant member of phenomenological realism, he contributed to a volume dedicated to Balduin Schwarz as *Festschrift*.¹²

Notes

¹The University of Salzburg originally had been founded 1622 as a Catholic Benedictine University under Prince-archbishop Paris Graf Lodron. It was some 200 years later closed down in 1810. A Pontifical Institute of Philosophy survived until the Paris Lodron University reopened in 1962 as a state University (courses began in 1964). Fritz Wenisch was University Assistant in the new Faculty and Department of Philosophy (1964-). The Pontifical Philosophical Institute was reintegrated in the Catholic Theological Faculty of the new University.

²This degree presupposes a second book to be written and published after the doctoral dissertation (the Habilitationsschrift) and, after this book is judged favorably by the faculty, a lecture has to be delivered before the faculty, upon which a colloquium with the faculty follows. The final step is a public lecture. If all parts of the habilitation process and the quality of a candidate's Habilitationsschrift as well as of some published articles are judged favorably by the faculty, the University confirms the facultas docendi (the ability to offer high-level academic courses) and confers the *venia legendi*, that is, the grace (and right) to teach courses in a given discipline at the University. The University also bestows the title of "Privatdozent" on a habilitated person. This degree also opens the way to a Privatdozent to become a University Professor and to obtain a chair in philosophy in a European University.

The special character of this title consists in that it goes along with a kind of "absolute right" to teach at a University level that is not dependent on whether paid positions are avail-

able at the University from which one obtains this title. It obligates the universities to provide facilities for offering courses, but it does not obligate them to pay a salary, except for a modest stipend determined by enrollment (even this small stipend has been recently eliminated entirely in German Universities).

The value of the institution of “Habilitation” lies in a University considering the right to academic teaching in a certain discipline (and the right to share one’s research with University students) as being independent of job-opportunities. This implies a purely intellectual recognition; receiving his *venia legendi* is thus regarded as a high distinction in itself that is not dependent on salaries or paid positions, but is bestowed by the University on any scholar deemed worthy of such a distinction. Habilitation and the title of Privatdozent are thus regarded, above and beyond their eventual usefulness to obtain an academic position, as a high academic recognition and honor a University bestows on a person.

This pure, non-utilitarian appreciation of scholars and authorities in their field and bestowing on them the right to offer University courses, is virtually absent in most countries outside of Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Liechtenstein, Switzerland, Hungary, and a number of other states in Eastern Europe.

Another remarkable aspect of the institution of habilitated Privatdozenten is that the University gives the Privatdozent a similar fundamental human right as that of the independence of the judge, whose “job” must not be up to being terminated by an employer or depend on politics, ideologies or parties. From this status of a Privatdozent, as long as one practices this right, and as long as one’s behavior is becoming to an

academic, one cannot be “fired”. It is a kind of “tenure from the first moment on”. Of course, this loss of control of the University over an independent “Privatdozent,” just as over a tenured Professor, also entails a risk for the University, just as a judge’s independence entails a great risk for society, if he or she turns out to be unjust and use his or her “far-reaching independence” badly.

³For more information on the realist phenomenological method, see Fritz Wenisch, *Die Philosophie und ihre Methode*. (Salzburg 1976); Josef Seifert, *Back to Things in Themselves. A Phenomenological Foundation for Classical Realism* (London: Routledge, 1987); *Discours des Méthodes. The Methods of Philosophy and Realist Phenomenology*, (Frankfurt / Paris / Ebikon / Lancaster / New Brunswick: Ontos-Verlag, 2009).

⁴See Josef Seifert, Cheikh Mbacké Gueye (Ed.), *Anthologie der Realistischen Phänomenologie, Realistische Phänomenologie. Studies of the International Academy of Philosophy in the Principality of Liechtenstein and at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Bd. I* (Frankfurt / Paris / Ebikon / Lancaster / New Brunswick: Ontos-Verlag, 2009). *Predislovie k Antologii realisticheskoy fenomenologii* “(Introduction to Anthology of Realist Phenomenology). in: *Antologija realisticheskoy fenomenologii*” (Anthology of the Realist Phenomenology), (Moscow, St Thomas Institute of Philosophy, Theology and History, 2006), pp. 9-57. See also Josef Seifert, *Ritornare a Platone. Im Anhang eine unveröffentlichte Schrift Adolf Reinachs*, hrsg., Preface and transl. by Giuseppe Girgenti. Collana Temi metafisici e problemi del pensiero antico. Studi e testi, vol. 81, (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2000).

⁵Adolf Reinach, *Die apriorischen Grundlagen des bürger-*

lichen Rechtes“, in: Reinach, Adolf, Sämtliche Werke. Texkritische Ausgabe in zwei Bänden, Bd. I: Die Werke, Teil I: Kritische Neuausgabe (1905-1914), Teil II: Nachgelassene Texte (1906-1917); hrsg.v. Karl Schuhmann Barry Smith (München und Wien: Philosophia Verlag, 1989), 141-278; The Apriori Foundations of the Civil Law,” transl. by J. F. Crosby, Aletheia III (1983), pp. xxxiii-xxxv; 1-142.

⁶See Dietrich von Hildebrand, *What is Philosophy?*, 3rd edn, with a New Introductory Essay by Josef Seifert (London: Routledge, 1991); *Ethics*, 2nd edn (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1978).

⁷See Walter Hoeres, *Kritik der transzendentalphilosophischen Erkenntnistheorie* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1969); ‘Critique of the Transcendental Metaphysics of Knowing, Phenomenology and Neo-Scholastic Transcendental Philosophy.’ *Aletheia* (1978) I,1, 353-69.

⁸See Edith Stein, *Endliches und ewiges Sein. Versuch eines Aufstiegs zum Sinn des Seins. Anhang: Martin Heideggers Existenzphilosophie. Die Seelenburg. Edith Stein Gesamtausgabe Band 11/12. 2nd ed. (Freiburg I. Br.: Herder, 2013)*.

See also Josef Seifert, “Esse, Essence, and Infinity: a Dialogue with Existentialist Thomism”, in: *The New Scholasticism*, (Winter 1984), 8498; *Essence and Existence. A New Foundation of Classical Metaphysics on the Basis of ‘Phenomenological Realism,’ and a Critical Investigation of ‘Existentialist Thomism’*,” *Aletheia* I (1977), pp. 17-157; I,2 (1977), pp. 371-459 *Sein und Wesen. Philosophie und Realistische Phänomenologie/ Philosophy and Realist Phenomenology. Studien der Internationalen Akademie für Philosophie im Fürstentum Liechtenstein*

enstein/Studies of the International Academy of Philosophy in the Principality Liechtenstein, (Hrsg./Ed.), Rocco Buttiglione and Josef Seifert, Band/Vol. 3 (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1996)

⁹*Die Objektivität der Werte.* (Regensburg 1972). *Die Philosophie und ihre Methode.* (Salzburg 1976).

¹⁰Was ist Philosophie?, aus dem Engl. übers. v. Fritz Wenisch, in: Hildebrand, Gesammelte Werke, Bd. I (Regensburg / Stuttgart: Habbel / Kohlhammer, 1976). Dietrich von Hildebrand, What is Philosophy?, 3rd edn, with an Introductory Essay by Josef Seifert (London: Routledge, 1991); Che cos'è la filosofia?/What Is Philosophy?, English-Italian, (Milano: Bompiani Testi a fronte, 2001). This work originated in Dietrich von Hildebrand, Der Sinn philosophischen Fragens und Erkennens, (Bonn: Peter Hanstein,. 1950).

¹¹See Fritz Wenisch, Insight and Objective Necessity - A Demonstration of the Existence of Propositions Which Are Simultaneously Informative and Necessarily True?", Aletheia 4 (1988), pp. 107-197.