

Anecdotes of Mr Keuner

MR K AND NATURE

Asked about his attitude to Nature, Mr K said: 'Now and then I like to see a few trees on coming out of the house. Particularly because they achieve such a special degree of reality by looking so different according to the time of day and season. Also, as time goes on we city dwellers get dazed by never seeing anything but use-objects, such as houses and railways which, if unoccupied, would be empty, if unused, meaningless. Our peculiar social system allows us to regard even human beings as such use-objects; and so trees, at any rate for me, since I am not a carpenter, have something soothingly independent about them, outside myself, and as a matter of fact I hope that for carpenters, too, they have something about them which cannot be put to use.'

(Mr K also said: 'We must make use of Nature sparingly. Spending your time amidst Nature without any work, you may easily fall into a diseased condition; you are seized by something like a fever.')

ORGANISATION

Mr K once said: 'The thinking man does not use too much light, nor too much bread, nor an idea too many.'

FORM AND SUBSTANCE

Mr K contemplated a painting in which certain objects were given a very arbitrary form. He said: 'With some artists it's the same as with many philosophers when they look at the world. In striving for form, they lose the substance. I once worked for a gardener. He gave me a pair of shears and told me to clip a laurel

bush. The bush grew in a tub and was hired out for festive occasions. So it had to be in the shape of a ball. I immediately set about cutting off the untidy shoots, but however hard and long I tried to make it ball shaped I did not succeed. First I trimmed too much off one side, then too much off the other. When at last it was a ball, it was a very small one. The gardener was disappointed and said: 'Yes, that's a ball, but where's the laurel?'

GOOD TURNS

As an example of how to do friends a good turn Mr K obliged with the following story. Three young men came to an old Arab and said: 'Our father has died. He has left us seventeen camels and stipulated in his will that the eldest should have half, the second a third and the youngest a ninth of the camels. Now we can't agree amongst ourselves on the division: you decide the matter.' The Arab thought about it and said: 'As I see it, you have one camel too few to share them out properly. I've only got one camel myself, but it's at your disposal. Take it and share them out and give me back only what's left over.' They thanked him for this good turn, took the camel with them and then divided the eighteen camels in such a way that the eldest got half - that is, nine - the second a third - that is, six - and the youngest a ninth - that is, two - of the camels. To their amazement when they had each led their camels aside, there was one over. This they took back to their old friend with renewed thanks.

Mr K called this the right sort of good turn, since it demanded no special sacrifice.

RELIABILITY

Mr K, who believed in orderly human relationships, was embroiled in fights throughout his whole life. One day he was again involved in some unpleasant affair which made it necessary for him to go at night to a number of meeting-places in the town

at some distance from one another. As he was ill, he asked a friend to lend him his coat. The friend promised it, although this meant that he himself had to cancel some trifling appointment. But towards evening Mr K's affairs deteriorated so much that his calls no longer served any purpose and quite other things became necessary. Nevertheless, and despite lack of time, Mr K, anxious to fulfil his part of the arrangement, punctually collected the now useless coat.

THE HELPLESS BOY

Mr K referred to the bad habit of suffering injustice in silence and related the following story: 'A passer-by asked a boy who was crying what was the cause of his unhappiness. "I'd saved two *groschen* to go to the pictures," said the lad, "and then a boy came and snatched one out of my hand," and he pointed to a boy who was some little way off. "And didn't you shout for help?" asked the man. "Yes, I did," said the boy and sobbed a bit harder. "Didn't anyone hear you?" the man went on, stroking him affectionately. "No," sobbed the boy. "Does that mean you can't shout any louder?" asked the man. "Then hand over the other one too." He took the last *groschen* out of his hand and walked on without turning a hair.'

THE QUESTION, IS THERE A GOD?

Someone asked Mr K whether there was a God. Mr K said: 'I advise you to reflect whether, depending upon the answer to this question, your behaviour would alter. If it would not, we can drop the question. If it would, then at least I can be of some help to you by telling you that your mind is already made up: you need a God.'

CONVERSATIONS

'We can't talk to each other any more,' said Mr K to someone. 'Why not?' asked the other, dismayed. 'I never say anything that

makes sense when you're there,' complained Mr K. 'Oh, but I don't mind,' the man comforted him. 'I dare say,' said Mr K bitterly, 'but I do.'

HOSPITALITY

Whenever Mr K accepted hospitality he left his room as he found it, since he thought nothing of the idea that people should leave their mark on their surroundings. On the contrary, he went to some trouble to alter his ways to suit the place; although not at the expense of whatever he had on hand.

When Mr K offered hospitality he would change the position of at least one chair or table as a way of adapting himself to his guest. 'And it's best for me to decide what suits him,' he would say.

MR K IN A STRANGE HOUSE

On entering a strange house and before settling down, Mr K looked for the doors leading out of the house and nothing else. On being asked why, he answered with some embarrassment: 'It's a tiresome old habit. I believe in justice; so it's rather important that there should be more than one door out of the place where I'm living.'

WISDOM IS AS WISDOM DOES

A professor of philosophy came to see Mr K and talked about his wisdom. After a while Mr K said to him: 'You sit awkwardly, you talk awkwardly, you think awkwardly.' The professor of philosophy was angry and said: 'I haven't come to discuss myself but the substance of what I was saying.' 'It has no substance,' said Mr K. 'I watch you walking about clumsily and you reach no goal as I watch you walking about. You talk obscurely and you shed no light as you speak. I see your bearing and so I am not interested in your goal.'

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WHEN MR K LOVED A PERSON

'What do you do,' Mr K was asked, 'when you love a person?' 'I make a sketch,' said Mr K, 'and look to it that a good likeness results.' 'Of the person?' 'No,' said Mr K, 'to the sketch.'

MR K AND CONSISTENCY

One day Mr K put the following question to one of his friends: 'For a short time I've been quite friendly with a man who lives opposite me. Now I don't feel like seeing him any more, though I've no more reason to give him up than I have for seeing him. Now I've found out that recently, when he bought the little house which he only rented before, he immediately had a plum tree cut down in front of his window, where it took light away, although the plums were only half ripe. Shall I use this as a reason to break off relations – at any rate outwardly, or at any rate inwardly?'

A few days later Mr K told his friend: 'I've broken off relations with the fellow now. Do you know, he asked his former landlord months ago to have the tree cut down as it took light away. But the landlord wouldn't do it because he wanted to wait for the fruit. And now that my acquaintance has taken over the house, he actually has the tree cut down, still full of unripe fruit! So now owing to his inconsistent behaviour I've broken off relations.'

FATHER TO THE THOUGHT

Mr K was criticized on the grounds that too often in his case the wish was father to the thought. Mr K replied: 'There never was a thought to which a wish was not father. The only thing you can argue about is: What wish? You may suspect that it is difficult to establish paternity, but that's no reason to suspect that a child has no father at all.'

ORIGINALITY

Nowadays, Mr K complained, there are endless numbers of people who openly boast of being able to write great books on their own, and this meets with general approval. The Chinese philosopher Chuang-tsu in the prime of his life wrote a book of a hundred thousand words, nine-tenths of which consisted of quotations. We can no longer write such books because we have not enough intelligence. Consequently ideas are manufactured only in our own workshops, and anyone who does not produce enough feels that he is lazy. That is why there is no idea worth taking over, and no formulation of an idea worth quoting. How little these people need for their activities! A pen and some paper is all they can show. They build their huts without any help, with nothing but the pitiful material that a single person can carry with his own hands. They know no larger edifices than those one man can build by himself.

SUCCESS

Mr K saw an actress passing by and said: 'She's beautiful.' His companion said: 'She had a great success recently because she's beautiful.' Mr K was annoyed and said: 'She's beautiful because she's had a great success.'

ON UPSETTING THE DOCTRINE OF 'LIVING FOR THE MOMENT'

One day when he was stopping with relatively slight acquaintances, Mr K found that his hosts had already laid the breakfast things on a small table in a corner of the bedroom visible from the bed. He continued to ponder on the matter after he had begun by mentally congratulating his hosts on their eagerness to have done with him. He wondered whether he himself would lay the breakfast before going to bed at night. After some reflection he decided that in certain circumstances it would be the right thing for him to do. Similarly he thought it right that other

people, too, should occasionally ponder on the matter for a while.

MR K AND CATS

Mr K did not like cats. They did not seem to him friends of man, so he was not their friend either. 'If we had the same interests,' he said, 'their hostile attitude wouldn't worry me.' Yet Mr K was reluctant to shoo cats away from his chair. 'To lay oneself down to rest is a job of work,' he said. 'It deserves to succeed.' Also when cats miaowed outside his door he got out of bed, even when it was cold, to let them into the warmth. 'Their calculation is simple,' he said. 'If they cry, you open the door for them. If you stop opening the door for them, they stop crying. To cry is a step forward.'

MR K'S FAVOURITE ANIMAL

When Mr K was asked which animal he prized above all others, he named the elephant and justified it thus: The elephant combines cunning with strength. Not the miserable cunning which manages to avoid a trap or sneak a meal by not being noticed, but the cunning attendant upon the strength needed for important tasks. This animal leaves a broad trail. For all that, he is good-natured and has a sense of humour. He is a good friend, just as he is a good enemy. Though very large and heavy, he is also very swift. His trunk conveys even the smallest morsels to his enormous body, even nuts. His ears are adjustable: he hears only what suits him. Besides, he lives to be very old. He is sociable, too, and not only with other elephants. Everywhere he is both beloved and feared. A certain drollness enables him to be positively venerated. Knives buckle in his thick skin, but his heart is tender. He can grow sad. He can grow angry. He enjoys dancing. He dies in the heart of the jungle. He is fond of children and other small animals. He is grey and conspicuous only by his bulk. He is not edible. He works well. He enjoys drinking and grows merry. He makes a contribution to art: he provides ivory.

ANTIQUITY

Looking at a picture of water jugs by the painter Lundström, Mr K said: 'A picture out of antiquity, out of a barbarous age. At that time I suppose people couldn't tell one thing from another; what was round no longer seemed round, the angular no longer angular. The painters had to put things to rights again and show the customers definite, unambiguous, solid things; they saw so much that was obscure, fluid, equivocal; they were so starved of probity that they acclaimed anyone who refused to sell his folly. The work was shared out amongst many people, you can tell that from this picture. Those who decided on the shape were not concerned with the purpose of the objects: you cannot pour water out of this jug. There must have been many human beings at that time who were regarded exclusively as commodities. The artist had to resist that too. A barbarous age, antiquity!' It was pointed out to Mr K that the picture dated from the present time. 'Yes,' said Mr K sadly, 'from antiquity.'

ADJUDICATION

Mr K often cited, as to some extent a model, the judicial regulation in ancient China by which judges in important trials were brought from distant provinces. It meant that these judges were far more difficult to corrupt (and did not therefore have to be incorruptible), since a watch was kept on their incorruptibility by the local resident judges – that is, people who were well-versed in this particular matter and wished them ill. Nor had these imported judges any knowledge of local usage and conditions from daily experience. Injustice often gains legal sanction by dint of repetition. The newcomers had to learn everything for the first time, which enabled them to notice what was peculiar to it. And, finally, they were not compelled, in the name of objectivity, to offend against many other virtues, such as gratitude, filial love, guilelessness in dealing with close friends, nor to possess enough courage to make enemies in their own circles.

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A GOOD ANSWER

A proletarian was asked in Court whether he wished to take the secular or the religious form of oath. He answered: 'I am unemployed.' 'That was not mere irrelevance,' said Mr K. 'He made known by this answer that in his circumstances questions of that sort, and possibly even the whole Court proceedings as such, had no meaning whatsoever.'

SOCRATES

After reading a book on the history of philosophy, Mr K expressed disapproval of philosophers' attempts to represent things as unknowable in principle. 'When the Sophists claimed to know a great deal without having studied anything,' he said, 'the Sophist Socrates made the arrogant claim that he knew he knew nothing. One would have expected him to add: for I, too, have studied nothing. (To know something we have to study.) But he does not seem to have said anything further, and perhaps the immense applause which broke out after his first remark, and which lasted for two thousand years, would have drowned any further remark.'

THE AMBASSADOR

The other day I was talking to Mr K about the case of the ambassador of a foreign power, Mr X, who had carried out certain instructions from his government in our country and, on his return, as we learnt with regret, was severely disciplined, although he had gone home with important results. 'It was held against him that, in order to carry out his instructions, he had got too deeply involved with us, the enemy,' I said. 'But do you believe that he could have got results without behaving like that?'

'Certainly not,' said Mr K. 'He had to eat well in order to be able to negotiate with his enemies; he had to fawn on criminals and make fun of his own country to achieve his ends.'

‘Then he behaved correctly?’

‘Yes, of course,’ said Mr K absentmindedly, ‘he behaved correctly.’ And Mr K tried to take leave of me. But I held him back by his sleeve.

‘Then why was he heaped with such scorn on his return?’ I cried indignantly.

‘Presumably he had got used to good food, went on associating with criminals and lost his sense of judgment,’ said Mr K with indifference, ‘and so they had to discipline him.’

‘And you think they behaved correctly?’ I asked, shocked.

‘Yes, of course. How else could they have behaved?’ said Mr K. ‘He had the pluck and the merit to take on a fatal task. And so he died. Ought they to leave him now to rot above ground and put up with the stench rather than bury him?’

THE NATURAL INSTINCT FOR PROPERTY

When someone at a party called the property instinct natural, Mr K told the following story about a long-established fishing population: On the south coast of Iceland there are fishermen who have divided the sea into separate lots by means of firmly moored buoys and parcelled it out amongst themselves. They cling to these fields of water as their own property with great affection. They consider them part of themselves, would never give them up even if they yielded no more fish, and despise the inhabitants of the port towns to whom they sell their catch, for they seem to them a superficial race, alienated from nature. They call themselves water-tied. When they catch larger fish, they keep them in tubs, give them names and are greatly attached to them as their own property. For some time past they are said to have been having a bad time economically; nevertheless, they doggedly reject all attempts at reform, and they have already brought down several governments which disregarded their customs. These fishermen prove irrefutably the power of the property instinct to which man is subject by nature.

IF SHARKS WERE PEOPLE

'If sharks were people,' the landlady's little daughter asked Mr K, 'would they be nicer to the little fishes?'

'Certainly,' he said. 'If sharks were people they would have enormous boxes built in the sea for the little fishes with all sorts of things to eat in them, plants as well as animal matter. They would see to it that the boxes always had fresh water and, in general, take hygienic measures of all kinds. For instance, if a little fish injured one of its fins, it would be bandaged at once, so that the sharks should not be deprived of it by an untimely death. To prevent the little fishes from growing depressed there would be big water festivals from time to time, for happy little fishes taste better than miserable ones. Of course there would also be schools in the big boxes. In these schools the little fishes would learn how to swim into the sharks' jaws. They would need geography, for example, so that when the big sharks were lazing about somewhere they could find them. The main thing, of course, would be the moral education of the little fishes. They would be taught that the greatest and finest thing is for a little fish to sacrifice its life gladly, and that they must all believe in the sharks, particularly when they promise a splendid future. They would impress upon the little fishes that this future could only be assured if they learnt obedience. The little fishes would have to guard against all base, materialistic, egotistic and Marxist tendencies, reporting at once to the sharks if any of their number manifested such tendencies. If sharks were people they would also, naturally, wage wars amongst themselves, to conquer foreign fish boxes and little foreign fishes. They would let their own little fishes fight these wars. They would teach the little fishes that there was a vast difference between themselves and the little fishes of other sharks. Little fishes, they would proclaim, are well known to be dumb, but they are silent in quite different languages and therefore cannot possibly understand each other. Each little fish which killed a few other little fishes in war – little

enemy fishes, dumb in a different language – would have a little seaweed medal pinned on it and be awarded the title of Hero. If sharks were people they would also have art, naturally. There would be lovely pictures representing sharks' teeth in glorious colours, their jaws as positive pleasure grounds in which it would be a joy to gambol. The sea-bed theatres would show heroic little fishes swimming rapturously into sharks' jaws, and the music would be so beautiful that to its strains the little fishes, headed by the band, would pour dreamily into the sharks' jaws, lulled in the most delightful thoughts. There would also be a religion if sharks were people. It would teach that little fishes only really start to live inside the bellies of sharks. Moreover, if sharks were people, not all little fishes would be equal any more as they are now. Some of them would be given positions and be set over the others. The slightly bigger ones would even be allowed to gobble up the smaller ones. That would give nothing but pleasure to the sharks, since they would more often get larger morsels for themselves. And the bigger little fishes, those holding positions, would be responsible for keeping order among the little fishes, become teachers, officers, box-building engineers and so on. In short, the sea would only start being civilized if sharks were people.'

PRAISE

When Mr K heard that he had been praised by former pupils he said: 'Long after the pupils have forgotten the master's failings he himself remembers them.'

WAITING

Mr K waited for something for a day, then a week, and then a whole month. In the end he said: 'I could easily have waited a month, but not that day and not that week.'

A MAN OF PURPOSE

Mr K put the following questions:

'Every morning my neighbour plays music on his gramophone. Why does he play music? I hear that it is because he does exercises. Why does he do exercises? Because he needs to be strong, I hear. Why does he need to be strong? Because he has to get the better of his enemies in the town, he says. Why must he get the better of his enemies? Because he wants to eat, I hear.'

Having learnt that his neighbour played music in order to do exercises, did exercises in order to be strong, wanted to be strong in order to kill his enemies, killed his enemies in order to eat, he put the question: 'Why does he eat?'

THE ART OF NOT CORRUPTING

Mr K recommended a man to a merchant because of his incorruptibility. Two weeks later the merchant came back to Mr K and asked him: 'What did you mean by incorruptibility?' Mr K said: 'When I say the man you're employing is incorruptible, I mean: you can't corrupt him.' 'Is that so?' said the merchant glumly. 'Well, I have reason to fear that your man lets himself be corrupted even by my enemies.' 'I don't know anything about that,' said Mr K without much interest. 'But when it comes to me, he always agrees with everything I say,' cried the merchant bitterly, 'so he lets himself be corrupted by me too!' Mr K smiled conceitedly. 'He doesn't let himself be corrupted by me,' he said.

LOVE OF NATION, HATRED OF NATIONALISM

Mr K did not think it necessary to live in any particular country. 'I can go hungry anywhere,' he said. But one day he went through a town occupied by the enemy of the country in which he was living. One of the enemy's officers came towards him and forced him to step off the pavement. Mr K stepped off and became aware that he was furious with this man, and not only with this man, but even more with the country from which the man came. So that he wished it could be wiped off the face of the earth.

'Why,' asked Mr K, 'did I become a nationalist for that moment? Through encountering a nationalist. That's why stupidity has to be stamped out, for it makes stupid those who encounter it.'

STARVING

Mr K, on being asked about his country, had said: 'I can go hungry anywhere.' A literal-minded listener now asked him how it came about that he talked of going hungry whereas in fact he had enough to eat. Mr K justified himself by saying: 'What I probably meant to say was that I can live anywhere if I want to live where hunger exists. I grant you there is a great difference between whether I myself go hungry or whether I live where hunger exists. But may I plead in extenuation that, for me, to live where hunger exists, even if not quite as bad as going hungry, is nevertheless pretty bad. After all, it would be of no importance to others if I went hungry, what is important is that I am against the existence of hunger.'

PROPOSITION, IF A PROPOSITION IS NOT HEEDED

Mr K recommended that, wherever possible, any proposition should be followed up by another one for good measure, in case the first proposition was not heeded. When, for example, he had advised someone in a difficult situation to take a certain course of action which injured as few other people as possible, he also prescribed a different course of action, not so harmless, though yet not the most ruthless. 'He who cannot do all,' he said, 'should not be let off doing the lesser thing.'

THE INDISPENSABLE OFFICIAL

Mr K heard it said in praise of an official who had been in office for quite a time that he was such a good official that he was indispensable. 'How do you mean indispensable?' asked Mr K crossly. 'The department wouldn't run without him,' said his admirers. 'Then how can he be a good official if the department

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wouldn't run without him?' said Mr K. 'He's had enough time to organize his department to the point of being able to dispense with him. What is it exactly that keeps him so busy? I'll tell you: blackmail.'

CONVINCING QUESTIONS

'I've noticed,' said Mr K, 'that a lot of people are put off by our teaching because we know the answer to everything. Couldn't we, in the interests of propaganda, draw up a list of questions which appear to us quite unresolved?'

THE EXERTIONS OF THE BEST PEOPLE

'What are you working on?' Mr K was asked. 'I'm having a lot of trouble: I'm preparing my next mistake,' answered Mr K.

TOLERABLE AFFRONT

A colleague of Mr K was accused of having an unfriendly attitude to him. 'Yes, but only behind my back,' said Mr K in his defence.

TWO TOWNS

Mr K preferred town B to town A. 'In town A,' he said, 'people are fond of me; but in town B they were friendly to me. In town A people made themselves useful to me; but in town B they needed me. In town A I was asked to dinner; but in town B I was asked into the kitchen.'

ON MEETING AGAIN

A man who had not seen Mr K for a long time greeted him with the words: 'You haven't changed at all.'

'Oh!' said Mr K and turned pale.