Chapter 3
Hermeneutical Considerations

3.1 Taylor's Critique of Naturalism

In the Introduction I explained that, according to its wider sense, the phenomenal domain not only consists of colors, sounds, things, and spatial orientations, but also of aspects of our lives not restricted to the external world: freedom and responsibility, institutions like universities and states, praxes like sports and work, and so forth. From a phenomenological perspective it is self-evident that the experience of values also belongs to this scope. But not everyone accepts the phenomenological point of view, so this assumption needs to be supported with arguments. Charles Taylor shortly discusses two views which reduce the experience of values to a series of events in nature.[1] He makes plausible that this kind of experience cannot be understood from the naturalistic standpoint. The context of this discussion is Taylor's view of moral life and of moral philosophy,[2] so let me first sketch this view.

A first thing to note is that Taylor uses the word "moral" in a very wide sense. It not only pertains to moments in our lives when we face difficult ethical dilemmas. Morality includes our everyday attempt to make the best of our lives, to fulfill our obligations, to be good to other people, to enjoy ourselves, and to lead a life which is in some way meaningful. According to Taylor, moral philosophy should reflect this broad sense of moral life, but he observes that much moral philosophy has a very narrow and formal approach to questions of morality. Instead of exploring the good life in its broadest sense, it restricts itself to the question of what is the best action under a number of given circumstances.

1 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, Section 3.1 (53-62).

2 Ibid., Part I.

In Taylor's view, moral responses are not actions on the basis of some explicit univocal rule. They have two aspects: (a) "they are almost like instincts",[3] (b) they are based on conceptions of human life and the world. The word "instincts" has a naturalistic connotation, but Taylor does not put moral action on the same level as animal behavior. Precisely because moral responses are at the same time based on *conceptions*, these instincts are actually "moral and spiritual *intuitions*".[4] According to Taylor, our moral lives are based on intuitions which are often implicit, but which develop more fully if they are, at least to some extent, articulated. Articulation brings the second aspect of moral responses to the fore: they are based on our *views* of the human being and the world, i.e., on our moral "frameworks".[5] We have ideas about what is honorable or dishonorable, fair or unfair, authentic or inauthentic. Thus frameworks are sets of "qualitative distinctions"[6]: pairs of opposite concepts about what a good life is. Only some of these distinctions are explicitly reflected upon; others function as an implicit background which gives us orientation in moral space. There is also a historical dimension to such frameworks: they are views of the world that we have inherited from our ancestors. At the same time we tend to develop and modify them in the course of our lives.

Taylor presents a number of examples of moral frameworks: religious views like Islam, Buddhism and Christianity (or, more specifically, Catholicism, Protestantism, and so forth). Other frameworks are less religiously oriented, or not at all: Romanticism centers on individual self-expression as the essence of a fulfilling life. A further example is the ideal of leading a life according to principles of "disengaged reason".[7] This is the ambition to gain scientific knowledge of the world and also to apply the scientific way of thinking to moral issues. The idea of disengaged reason represents the most problematic framework, in Taylor's view. Science teaches us to analyze everything in terms of cause-and-effect-relationships which are relatively univocal and straightforward compared to the individuality of the situations we encounter in everyday life. There is a lot to say about Taylor's view of disengaged reason, self-expression, religion, and morality, but as announced I want to restrict myself to one, quite specific, issue: Taylor's criticism of the naturalistic approach to values.

3 Ibid., 5.

4 Ibid., 8. Italics mine. Cf. ibid., 4-5.

5 Ibid., 3 and Part I passim.

6 Ibid., 19 and Chapters 1 through 4 passim.

7 Ibid., 143 and passim (notably in Chapters 8 and 9).

According to Taylor, disengaged reason has acquired a dominant place within modern society. In our reflection on our lives, we are increasingly inclined to regard the world as a neutral universe, in accordance with the way science teaches us to see the world. Taylor observes that this has a deep impact on our thinking about values. If the world is a neutral, purely objective universe, then it seems that values cannot be part of the world: they must spring from the subject.[8] Values would be merely projections originating from us, human beings. This conception of values Taylor calls "projectivism".[9]

Taylor criticizes two philosophical formulations of this view. According to the first variant, values are projections *of our own will*. The only way to get to know the contents of values would be by dealing with this content on a purely *descriptive* level, thus separating the content of the value from its "prescriptive force".[10] According to the second variant of projectivism, the experience of values is comparable to that of secondary properties.[11] We have no choice between perceiving or not perceiving colors; seeing and colors are inextricably intertwined.[12] But physics teaches us that colors *as such* are not part of physical reality: only the underlying electromagnetic waves and photons are "real" in the physical sense. Likewise, according to this variant of projectivism, we involuntarily experience values as part of the world, but they are no more real than colors—or sounds or smells, for that matter. Both colors and values are projections and insofar as they are considered to be objective, they are actually illusions. *Reality* consists of the underlying biotic and neural conditions for the projection. Taylor observes that, in both variants, prescriptive terms are reduced to descriptive terms, so that we no longer understand values as precisely that: values.

Let me illustrate what I think Taylor means by this criticism. If I happen to witness some injustice happening in the street, like a woman being robbed of her

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8 The presupposition of the forms of naturalism here discussed, and especially of the first, voluntaristic variant, is that there *is* still room for a subject in this physical universe: it is the world *over against* her that loses its phenomenal character and is regarded merely as a physical totality.

9 To be precise, Taylor refers to "the projectivist" (Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 60).

10 Ibid., 53. Taylor regards Richard Mervyn Hare's *Freedom and Reason* as representative of this variant.

11 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 53-54. Here Taylor targets E. O. Wilson's *On Human Nature*.

12 Black, white and shades of grey here also count as colors. Ordinary language sometimes opposes colors to black-and-white, especially in the context of photography and film, but this should not distract us.

purse, I presuppose—I even have a *very* strong sense—that the perceived injustice is really there in the world itself: what is happening there is not *supposed* to happen. If I would in this moment reflect on my indignation and conclude that the value at stake (say: the dignity of the woman and her right to her property) must be a purely subjective idea, then the value can no longer motivate me to act, or even to have an opinion about the robbery taking place. If we regard values as mere projections of the will, as in the first variant of projectivism discussed by Taylor, then we can only describe the *inner* conditions for a subjective state of mind we call "valuing" or "assessing". We cannot describe any condition which would exist in the reality outside the subject as a motivating factor. In the second variant, "values" is the name we give to a set of purely objective states of the nervous system. Here, the motivational character as such of a value is obscured: it is replaced by purely *causal* conditions. In neither case can we account for the value's essence: that it is something in the world which incites us to judge and to act.

Taylor addresses several problems connected to the projection-theory of values. One is that we normally understand values like kindness or respect against a background of understanding of our social world. Values are the referents of frameworks, which consist of qualitative distinctions that define our identity; they are meaningful to us and they give us moral orientation. From the perspective of subjective projectivism, these evaluations are *morally* arbitrary. In the involuntaristic variant our values are even considered the products of a natural process, so that, from a *moral* perspective, these values become completely relative. Or better put, the moral perspective does not come into the picture here; it is side-lined from the very start, since according to the descriptive account of our behavior everything is simply the way it is. What is essential about a value, that it is morally motivating, is thus obscured. The involuntaristic variant of projectivism necessarily understands motivation as *causation*. But something which is simply caused is just as good or bad as anything else which is caused. Consequently, the moral as such vanishes from our reflection on life.

I think that Taylor's critique of projectivism, especially of the involuntaristic variant, also applies to Dennett. Dennett analyzes all moral aspects of our lives (values, norms, preferences, experiences of meaningfulness, things we care about, and so forth) in purely descriptive terms, more precisely: in the functionality terms that describe the objective physical system. A similar problem concerns the distinction between value and fact: how can we appreciate anything, judge anything to be good or bad, if this judgment is nothing else than the *factual* outcome of a functional system?

The comparison between Taylor and Dennett is furthermore interesting in regard to the question of *realism*. As we saw, Dennett's realism is restricted to the material world of physical and neural events. Taylor's discussion of projectivism also addresses the question of what can be legitimately called "reality". If values were mere projections, then they would not spring from the world; in that case they would have no reality outside the subject, says Taylor. But what does Taylor mean by "reality"? Is he referring to the reality that we can call the "human world" or to "reality" as defined and studied by science? Taylor states that "good and right are not properties of the universe considered without any relation to human beings and their lives. And to the extent that our natural science since the seventeenth century has been developing on the basis of a conception of the world which is maximally freed from anthropocentric conceptions, what Williams has called the 'absolute' conception, we can say that good and right are not part of the world as studied by natural science."[13]

So in Taylor's view, values are not part of physical reality. What Taylor refuses to conclude from this, however, is that values are *less real* than physical reality. Taylor rejects the idea that only science could decide what is real and what is not. It is not at all self-evident that a scientific account, based strictly on empirical evidence and logical proof, provides the most adequate understanding of our lives as we live it. Science simply leaves out too much of what is essential to us, for instance values as intrinsically part of the world, of situations, people, things, events, for it to be the only judge of what is real. Instead of uncritically accepting this science-based perspective, Taylor says, we should ask how we can make the best sense of our lives. Descriptions of moral life must at least be formulated in a language which connects with people's moral intuitions and makes these explicit.[14] This is Taylor's "best account" or "BA principle".[15] According to our intuitions, actions are in themselves good or bad, situations are just or unjust, and lives are miserable or flourishing. When theorizing about our lives we might be inclined to ignore the way we experience values, but in our practical lives we cannot deny that values are out there in the world.[16] This is what defines Taylor's realism: "What is real is what you have to deal with, what won't go away just because it doesn't fit your prejudices. By this token, what you can't

13 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 56.

14 Some might object to the view that philosophy should connect with our prescientific intuitions of everyday life. I will address this objection in Section 3.3.

15 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 58.

16 Cf. Anthony O'Hear, *Education, Value and the Sense of Awe*, 71-74.

help having recourse to in life is real, or as near to reality as you can get a grasp of at present."[17]

It might be objected that it is naive to think that values are out there in the world, but Taylor's realism is not naive realism: as we saw he acknowledges that values are dependent on the existence of human beings. As Ruth Abbey notes, "[Taylor] does not suggest that in trying to explain morality we imagine a moral world devoid of humans and attempt to separate its subject-dependent properties from its objective or real properties. Instead, his defense of moral realism begins with humans and their experience of morality. It would make no sense to him to try to explain moral life in abstraction from one of its central forces; that is, humans."[18]

Values do not only depend on the existence of us, human beings, they are also dependent on our moral attitude. In the context of the "crisis of affirmation",[19] Taylor argues that "the world's being good may now be seen as not entirely independent of our seeing it and showing it as good, at least as far as the world of humans is concerned. The key to a recovery from the crisis may thus consist in our own being able to 'see that it is good'".[20] We have to be willing to see the good (or lack of the good) in order to help constitute its reality. This makes the situation ambiguous: the good is transcendent but it shows itself in *moments* in our lives and it requires our openness and a preparedness to affirm the good. In moral matters, such ambiguity is unavoidable. If values had some *absolute* existence out there, we would not have the responsibility we do in recognizing, affirming, and thereby helping realize the good.[21] This moment of mediation is also a moment of relativity in our moral judgments, but it does not lead to moral relativism. Only subjectivism and projectivism lead to relativism and Taylor actually finds a balance between absolutism (objectivism of values) and relativism (subjectivism of values). I will return to the question of absolutism and relativism in Sections 3.4 and 3.5, but then in relation to the truth claim of philosophy. The conditions for truth presented there can by analogy also be applied to moral judgments.

17 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 59. Cf. Michael L. Morgan, *Religion, history and moral discourse*, 53.

18 Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 29.

19 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 448.

20 Ibid.

21 Cf. Abbey's objections to a "neo-Platonist" interpretation of Taylor's view on values: Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 30-31.

We can conclude that Taylor is a phenomenal realist,[22] and in this respect I fully agree with him. The point is that science *and* science-based philosophy, like Dennett's view, miss out on all aspects of life which resist reduction to objective nature, that is, to the descriptive domain of functional systems. Science furnishes us with technology and it teaches us many useful facts about the world—facts which we can also partly integrate into our frameworks. But the language we speak in our everyday moral lives cannot be replaced by the language of science, because only our phenomenal language does justice to the specificity and the diversity of the phenomenal world, including the reality of values.

Nonetheless, some fundamental questions about physical reality and the phenomenal world still remain open. Let us assume that Taylor has shown in a convincing manner that values are not subjective projections. We then still have to acknowledge that, if there were no human beings, there would be no values either. Taylor indeed affirms this: "Our value terms purport to give us insight into what it is to live in the universe as a human being, and this is quite a different matter from that which physical science claims to reveal and explain. This reality is, of course, dependent on us, in the sense that a condition for its existence is our existence. But once granted that we exist, it is no more a subjective projection than what physics deals with."[23] Again, I agree with Taylor, but there should be much more to say about this. For a materialist like Dennett, Taylor's position is probably begging the question: how can you say that values are dependent on our existence as subjects and at the same time maintain that values are *not* projections?

As noted, in Dennett's view, the word "values" can only be an intentional term we use to describe what *in fact* is a neural state, i.e., a state of the objective body. This excludes the possibility that the value is really in the world over against us. Dennett would acknowledge that we *experience* the value as being out there in the world, but he would at the same time regard this as a part of our autophenomenological report. This report, in his view, needs to be neutralized within a heterophenomenology which interprets our subjective beliefs as a fiction the theorist can work with. The reality of values is here merely an idea we have about the world which only pertains to our experience. In the end we have to accept that they are illusions, or indeed: projections. How can Taylor—how

22 Cf., for more explicit proof, see Taylor's critique of "antirealism": *Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture*, 39-40. See also Laitinen, *Strong Evaluation without Moral Sources*, 163-188.

23 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 59.

can *we*—explain to Dennett that, yes, the world of colors, motivational structures, values and so forth, depends on our existence, but no, it is not our projection? I agree with Taylor that both the physical and the phenomenal are real, but how are both realities interconnected? How do we reconcile physical realism with phenomenal realism? This is the first question I want to take to the next part.

We can ask a similar question in regard to the *perspectives* we adopt in relation to reality. The first-person point of view is, I agree with Taylor, indispensible for understanding ourselves, our experience, our lives, our stories. But the third-person point of view of science is also indispensible, albeit in a different sense: modern life is unthinkable without the objectifying perspective of science. We only need to think of the technology surrounding us or of the merits of medical science in order to get the point. Taylor would certainly acknowledge that science and technology are an essential part of the modern way of life, but he does not say much about the *systematic* relationship between the first-person and the third-person perspective. If the third-person perspective of science is indeed essential to modern life, then how precisely does it *complement* the first-person stance? How can we describe this complementarity in the most general terms? And if the first-person perspective indeed has some sort of primacy over the objectifying point of view, then what are the basic motives for a shift from the first-person to the third-person perspective?

In the next Part, in the discussion of Merleau-Ponty, I will present an answer to this question that is quite simple and might even seem trivial: we turn to the third-person perspective in order to restore, heal or enhance the functionality of our being in the world. A clear example of the turn from a first- to a third-person perspective is the situation that we are feeling ill. This feeling is a first-person experience, but when the doctor diagnoses our condition and prescribes a medicine for our illness, he does so on the basis of his third-person knowledge of our body's functioning. Of course, when I visit my GP and he greets me and talks with me, he addresses me as a first person, but when he takes a blood sample to determine whether I have an infection, he turns to the third-person perspective from which "I" appear to him as an objective-organic body. It is this kind of shifts of perspective that we need to examine. Taylor does not discuss this basic domain of physical healing. But he does address *mental* illness and the role of therapy in healing such conditions.[24] Taylor's discussion of mental illness has a very specific aim: it is meant to show that, in modern society, moral life is subject to a process in which bad behavior is increasingly medicalized, which

24 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 618-625.

threatens the dignity and responsibility of the moral agent. Let us now turn to this, in search of a better understanding of the arrangement of perspectives.

3.2 THE QUESTION OF THE ARRANGEMENT OF PERSPECTIVES

According to Taylor, the purpose of therapy in the case of mental disorder is to restore one's dignity, but at the same time the therapeutic situation is ambiguous: as long as we look at ourselves from a therapeutic point of view, Taylor says, the term "dignity" does not really apply. The naturalistic-therapeutic perspective bereaves us of our dignity because, from this point of view, bad or low behavior is no longer explained in terms of sin, i.e., in terms of something we do wrong.[25] Instead, Taylor continues, our behavior is pathologized, which implies a denial of our own moral responsibilities. Only from a first-person perspective, from which we take our motives seriously and develop them from within, can we really grow as moral beings. In other words, if we are drawn towards something bad instead of good, we are in a sense closer to the good than after the pathologization of evil. "So the difference is this: evil has the dignity of an option for an apparent good; sickness has not."[26]

Taylor nuances his view when he mentions the possibility of therapy which actually addresses the subject as a first person. He acknowledges that the therapeutic perspective can also take the form of a hermeneutical, emancipatory approach. So we need to keep in the back of our mind the distinction between *emancipatory* therapy and *manipulative* therapy, e.g. through medication.[27] In *A Secular Age*, Taylor only refers to emancipatory therapy in the margin and he predominantly speaks of "therapy" in terms of an objectifying perspective, i.e., a third-person point of view on the human body and human behavior.

I agree with Taylor that our societies, and especially the United States, are moving in the direction of a manipulative-therapeutic view of existential and moral problems. Hard science imposes its criteria on a domain which is actually not so easily describable in univocal terms, because we are dealing with matters

25 Taylor's presupposition is indeed that bad behavior has the religious meaning of a sin. I will not address the questions this might raise: it will soon be clear that this issue is not really relevant to Taylor's point.

26 Ibid., 619.

27 Cf. De Boer, *Grondslagen van een kritische psychologie*, translated as *Foundations of a Critical Psychology*.

on the boundary of the physical and the mental. In my view, the very term "mental illness" is problematic because if one succeeds in overcoming the "illness" without recourse to medication or other physiological interventions, one demonstrates that the problem was *ultimately* not an illness but rather a deeply rooted *personal* problem. I am not arguing it was then not an illness at all: the situation is ambiguous and can therefore be realized in two ways. If one does not succeed in overcoming the condition on the personal level and one needs to take recourse to medicine, the ambiguous situation is realized according to its alternative aspect: now the conclusion seems to be that the condition was physical all the time. But the point is of course that the condition possesses two aspects, and that therefore it can be demonstrated to be either mental or physical. So long as the problem exists, it has both aspects and either one can come to the fore at the cost of the other.

This structure applies to some—perhaps even many—forms of depression. What are generally called "psychological or "mental problems" are characterized by a deep ambiguity: on the one hand they have a mental or personal component; on the other hand they have roots or extensions in the organic body. Even if a problem starts like a purely existential problem, this personal misery may in due course attain an autonomous reality within the body: although it *was* initially not rooted in the body it now starts to *take* root in the body. One can, for instance, become depressed by one's circumstances but increasingly perceive this condition, not as a consequence of one's history, but as a purely physical state of being—indeed, as an illness. The crux of the type of problems under discussion is that the two aspects, the mental and the physical, are always present in some ambiguous constellation. Therefore I agree with Taylor that it is a mistake to regard such problems purely as diseases. But the conclusion should not be the exact opposite: we cannot treat such issues as purely *existential* or *moral* problems either. We should not deny how personal or existential problems can take possession of our bodies, and can attain a certain autonomy as an alien element within our bodily being in the world.

Taylor does not seem to agree with the latter point. Astonishingly, Taylor does not even consider the possibility that someone with, for instance, major depression, could actually be helped by temporarily resorting to medicine. Only at the end of the section concerned, he mentions in passing that there may be some "compulsive elements which can respond to therapy",[28] but precisely in this passage it is unclear whether Taylor refers to manipulative or emancipatory therapy. Taylor seems to overlook that personal problems like a trauma or a depression

28 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 623.

often have a strong physical component, so that at least in some cases medication can help the person overcome his condition—if only as a last resort.

In the previous section I discussed Taylor's objections to the projection-theory of values. The conclusion was that a view of morality which does justice to the fact that we experience values as part of the world outside ourselves is a better account than a view which calls values a subjective projection, or even reduces the experience of a value to a series of events in the objective body. Taylor's critique of the pathologization of bad behavior also argues in favor of the first-person perspective, and against the hegemony of the third-person perspective, but precisely in this domain we are confronted with *two* realities: the existential or moral reality of a personal problem, and its objective-organic reality.

This observation leads to similar questions as the ones I asked at the end of the previous section. In general terms: what is the relationship between the objective body and the subject of experience? And: how can both physical-organic reality (including our bodies) and the phenomenal world (including the ego of experience) be real? What is the systematic place of the third-person perspective within our being in the world? The question can now also be specified as follows: what is the positive role of manipulative therapy in overcoming mental disorder? How can manipulative and emancipatory approaches complement one another?

Apart from a critique of the over-estimation of the therapeutic register, we need a philosophical account of how both perspectives, the first-person perspective and the objectifying—here: manipulative-therapeutic—perspective, are interconnected. Taylor says that the "therapeutic revolution" should not be turned into "a total metaphysic",[29] which implies that he allows it a more modest place within our subjectivity as a whole. I agree, but what is this place? Some people with major depression (to stick to this example) overcome their problem with the help of medicine: they are again able to live their lives from an emancipated first-person stance. We need to make sense of the ambiguous fact that a manipulative medicine-based approach of human behavior can, at least in a part of all cases, in the end contribute to the un-reduced dignity of the subject. This implies that the "pathologization" of behavior does not always contradict personal dignity. An account which makes sense of this fact would complement the critique of naturalism delivered by Taylor.[30]

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29 Ibid., 623.

30 The word "manipulative" sometimes carries a negative connotation, but I hope that it is clear from my argument that I have been using the word in a neutral way. Physical illness can only be approached manipulatively. Mental disorders can be treated ma-

Taylor, in the passage quoted above, mentions that psychoanalysis is also in a sense hermeneutical: it takes first-person experience seriously and interprets this to make sense of it. So the question is: what is the coherence of this hermeneutical perspective and the "hard science" aspects of therapy, for instance the manipulation of feeling through drugs? In *Peaceful Coexistence in Psychology* Taylor comes closer to such an arrangement of perspectives. The context is a different one: a critique of behaviorism, but since we are looking for a *general* description of the relationship between the first-person and the third-person perspective, the article is certainly relevant for our aims.

Here, Taylor argues that the behavioristic "correlators"[31] of stimuli and responses have a proper domain of research: the level of behavior consisting of reflexes unmediated by reflection. The fallacy of behaviorism is therefore not that it works with a mechanistic paradigm of stimulus-response relationships, but that it crosses the boundaries of its proper domain, thinking that it can explain *all* behavior on the basis of this one paradigm. Taylor insists that the correlators should not interfere with the highest level of human behavior, which he calls "performance"[32]: the performance level of behavior requires a hermeneutical approach. I will not go into the details of this discussion, because I am only interested in the attempt to establish a sensible arrangement of perspectives on a general level. Taylor here makes a move which I think helps: reductive perspectives always have a domain within which they can be successful and valuable. This is the reason they exist in the first place; without this domain the truth of scientific results would have no locus. The task of philosophy is not only to criticize the totalization of these perspectives but also to show the relative place and function they have within subjectivity, and within intersubjective practices.

We are thus concerned with the relationship between scientific truth and the truths of prescientific everyday life. Science produces knowledge about the human being and the world—even about the human being's moral life—, and these scientific truths cannot be discarded as actually untrue or irrelevant. For example, a mother's care for her child has been correlated with a high level of

nipulatively (i.e. mostly through medicine), with "emancipatory" therapy (whereby the therapy addresses the patient as a first person), or with a combination of these two kinds of therapy.

31 Taylor, *Peaceful Coexistence in Psychology*, 124 and passim.

32 Ibid., 130.

the hormone called oxytocin in her blood.[33] If enough research supports this finding, then we are concerned with a truth which might some day become therapeutically relevant. Even if you say that "care for a child" is to us, first persons of experience, something completely different than a set of neural and hormonal processes, we should take into account these facts which science has proven to be true. The claim that you have a better account does not help here, because it does not address the issue. Even if it is true that the phenomenological-hermeneutical account of being in the world is better than an objectivist science-based one, then we still have to explain that there are apparently two truths about human existence. In other words, the *better* account does not make the *worse* account *untrue*, so that the problem how both truths are reconcilable persists.

Although I agree with Taylor's critique of naturalism, his argument leaves open some fundamental questions about human beings, the world, experience, science, and philosophy. I think Taylor is right that the first person understands his moral life better than the scientist: our own self-articulations express in a more adequate way what is at stake in our factual existence. But there is also something unsatisfactory about saying that one type of account is better than another—not that it is false, but there is more to say about this. If there is truth in the many scientific accounts of human life, then we need to ask ourselves what the place of this truth is. Apparently we have different ways of relating to the world, which are not just different opinions, but approaches which are somehow *structurally* complementary, in that it is typically human to be both a first person of experience *and* a potential scientific observer. So another way of asking the same question is this: what is the *locus* of the scientific perspective within our own subjectivity as a whole?

These questions point to the mind-body problem. Taylor is very convincing when it comes to showing the limitations of naturalism. But if we apply that criticism to Dennett, we also have to present an alternative answer to the question how the mind and the body go together. Dennett might accuse Taylor of dualism: Taylor presupposes that we have bodies which can be studied by natural science and that what we experience from our first-person perspective is something *different* than the objective body. So it may seem that we end up with a dualism of a physical body and a first-person mind. What would Taylor's response to this suggestion be? In my view, Taylor does not really deliver an account of the relationship between body and mind, but in regard to questions concerning

33 Feldman et al., "Evidence for a Neuroendocrinological Foundation of Human Affiliation: Plasma Oxytocin Levels across Pregnancy and the Postpartum Period Predict Mother-Infant Bonding".

representationalism vs. our immediate, bodily being in the world, as well as in other contexts, he defends Merleau-Ponty.[34]

This is an interesting reference, because not only does Merleau-Ponty explicitly address the problem of body and mind: his account is at the same time a critique of materialism. Part of Merleau-Ponty's contribution to our understanding of the mind-body problem is that he modifies it from the very outset. Merleau-Ponty does not start from the question of dualism: he does not ask how a relationship between something purely material (the res extensa) and something purely immaterial (the res cogitans) is possible. The "mind", in Merleau-Ponty, is the *embodied subject*: not a soul inhabiting the extension of the body, but the body *itself* according to its highest structure. Some time before Merleau-Ponty, Plessner developed a view of being in the world which in this respect is very similar to Merleau-Ponty's. He called his approach "philosophical anthropology" (*philosophische Anthropologie*).[35] Against this backdrop, it is a logical step to address the mind-body problem (sticking to this formulation for a while) by comparing Plessner and Merleau-Ponty. This I will do in the next part.

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34 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 161-163; "Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture"; and "From Philosophical Anthropology to the Politics of Recognition: An Interview with Philippe De Lara". Cf. Laitinen, *Strong Evaluation without Moral Sources*, 72-84. In the late-fifties Taylor was in fact still critical of (at least some important aspects of) Merleau-Ponty's philosophy: cf. Taylor, with Michael Kullman, "The Pre-Objective World". For a critical response to this article, cf. Hubert Dreyfus and Samuel Todes: "Merleau-Ponty's Three Worlds".

35 Besides Plessner, Arnold Gehlen and Max Scheler are generally regarded as the founders of philosophical anthropology. Readers not familiar with these authors may wonder whether not all (or most) philosophical views include a conception of human beings, i.e., include a philosophical anthropology. In this regard, it is worth taking notice of the distinction between two meanings of "philosophical anthropology" (Fischer, *Philosophische Anthropologie*, 9, 595). On the one hand philosophical anthropology is a *sub*discipline of all (broadly oriented) philosophical currents, which allows us to speak of, e.g., "Hegel's philosophical anthropology". On the other hand "Philosophical Anthropology" (capitalized by Fischer) is an approach, dating from the beginning of the 20th century, which is not restricted to a subdiscipline but rather deals with all major philosophical problems. In the latter sense, philosophical anthropology starts from the conviction that human beings, specifically as *living* beings, are (or should be) at the center of any fundamental philosophy (ibid., 519-520). Although I do not follow Fischer's capitalization of the term, it is this sense that I am referring to.

The final question I want to include in the discussion concerns Dennett's physical realism. I reject Dennett's reductionism but I agree with his physical realism as such, I mean with the presupposition that physical reality is indeed a reality and an ontic precondition of our being in the world. One of the reasons I believe physical realism belongs to the best account of human life is that the truth claim of science makes no sense without it. Scientific knowledge is one-sided, and like any human enterprise it contains flaws and misunderstandings, but this does not detract from the principle that it aims for truth, and that it is generally speaking successful in this aspiration to produce true knowledge. There is a very pragmatic argument in favor of this success: the technology, including medical applications, based on scientific knowledge simply would not work if this knowledge were not true to nature. Nobody would be cured by a medicine if it were not based on true knowledge of the human body and the diseases that threaten its integrity. In addition, every engineer can testify that we cannot mess around with physical forces or organic processes: designs of bridges, ships, skyscrapers must be based on knowledge which is true to the laws of nature or they will collapse.

To some, physical realism may already seem a self-evident position but as we will see it does not convince everyone. Merleau-Ponty is at best equivocal about physical reality: sometimes he accepts it as the ontic basis of life and human existence; at other times he claims that the physical is a perceptual gestalt, i.e., something which belongs to the structure of perception. Or he treats it as an intellectual construction on the basis of the lived world. In the discussion of Merleau-Ponty the question presents itself whether there are any further arguments in favor of physical realism, besides the argument that the truth-claim of science makes no sense without it.

Summing up, the questions of Part II are the following:

(A) How can we defend the primacy of the first-person perspective and at the same give the third-person perspective a place within our conception of subjectivity as a whole? What motivates us to turn from the prescientific point of view we have in our ordinary lives, to the outsider's viewpoint of science? How are these two types of perspective complementary?

(B) What is the relationship between the human body and the human mind? Is this formulation of the problem the right starting point, or should we first restate the question? What are the similarities and differences between Plessner's and Merleau-Ponty's answer to these questions?

(C) Why do we need physical realism? Is physical reality indeed a reality or is it actually something human, viz. a perceptual gestalt or a theoretical con-

struct created through a series of abstractions on the basis of the phenomenal world?

(D) Provided that the physical is a reality in itself, what is the relationship between physical reality and the phenomenal world, and how can both be real? How can the phenomenal world depend on human existence and yet have some sort of "objective" existence which makes it more than a subjective projection?

Chapters 4 and 5 address questions (A) and (B). Chapters 6 and 7 discuss questions (C) and (D), but this means that (B) is then also further elaborated.

3.3 INTUITION AND THE HERMENEUTICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS OF PHENOMENOLOGY

Before I turn to these questions in the next part, I want to address an objection one could be inclined to put forward against Taylor. I mentioned that, according to Taylor, moral philosophy should connect with our moral frameworks, which also means: with our intuitions about life and the world we live in. From the point of view of a scientistic[36] philosophy like Dennett's, this is bound to raise suspicion, because in this view science constitutes the victory of reason over our prescientific ideas about the world. I will discuss this objection and at the same time seize the opportunity to reflect on the presuppositions and truth claim of philosophy. Whereas in Sections 1.2 and 2.1 I talked about philosophy in terms of its *phenomenological* approach, I now complement that discussion with some remarks on philosophy's hermeneutical foundations.[37] Rather than presenting a historical exposition or a thorough reading of relevant passages in Plessner or Taylor, reference to the texts will serve mainly as a means to present my own understanding of hermeneutics, in order to (a) analyze the difference between Dennett's and Taylor's view of philosophy, (b) explore how phenomenology and hermeneutics are interconnected, and (c) address the nature of the truth claim of philosophy, and thereby also of this book. The third problem is the topic of Sections 3.4 and 3.5.

First we should ask what Taylor means by "intuition". As noted, according to Taylor, philosophy reflects on our moral frameworks, and this means it finds its content and its starting point in instincts which are at the same time concep-

36 "Scientistic" as referring to scientism.

37 This discussion treats hermeneutics and phenomenology as two aspects of the same philosophical approach, in accordance with the views of philosophy we find in, e.g., Plessner, Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Taylor.

tions of life, i.e., in moral *intuitions*. The word "intuition" here designates our immediate contact with the world, which is structured by presuppositions or attitudes that are largely implicit. Taylor connects with the German hermeneutical tradition which uses the verb *vorverstehen* ("to preunderstand")[38] to designate our tacit assumptions with regard to a text, a work of art, a situation, or human existence as such. Some of these intuitions are quite specific and highly dependent on the situation, e.g.: "I thought that the book was about crime but it turns out to be a love story". Other intuitions are more permanent and less dependent on the situation, for instance: "Literature opens new worlds to the reader and thereby allows her to explore her own existential possibilities". These more permanent intuitions—which, of course, are not only about literature but about any aspect of life—constitute the moral frameworks discussed above. The fact that hermeneutical phenomenology connects with these frameworks and makes our intuitions explicit does not mean that it simply embraces all inherited presuppositions we intuitively have about the world that we live in, as Dennett assumes. There are a three reasons why this criticism does not apply.

Firstly, as argued in Section 1.2, philosophy contemplates the *general structure* of our intuitive contact with the world, not specific concepts, ideas, values, norms, or preferences. I argued this in regard to phenomenology, but this principle holds for philosophy as such. For example, we can say in general (as I have, following Taylor) that one of the possibility conditions for our experience of a value is that the value is not a subjective projection but rather a feature of the situation itself that we face. By making such philosophical claims we do not decide on the question of which particular value is more important than another. We also refrain from judging which specific action should follow a certain experience of a value in combination with a set of further conditions. Instead, we are interested in the role of values *as such* in our existence.

Secondly, phenomenology focuses especially on questions we regard as "fundamental", not only in a neutral, ontological-epistemological sense, but also in the sense of important to us personally in our factual lives. Why do we discuss the nature of the experience of values? We do so, for instance, because we want to give a foundation to our experiences of justice and injustice, i.e., because we find the total relativization of such experience unacceptable—not only logically, but at the same time morally. Taylor and Plessner are both aware that the sources

38 Cf. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, § 32, 151: "die Vor-Struktur des verstehens" ("the prestructure of understanding"); § 60, 297: "ein Vorverstehen der Bedeutsamkeit" ("a preunderstanding of significance").

of phenomenological reflection are extra-phenomenological. Plessner argued this in his essay on Husserl's phenomenology.[39]

Thirdly, Dennett overlooks the fact that the phenomenological process of making intuitions explicit includes a moment of philosophical criticism, and consequently he wrongly assumes that phenomenology embraces all prescientific beliefs we may have about the world. But emphatic philosophical reflection on our presuppositions in everyday life reveals certain shortcomings and this causes us to make *changes* to our view in the process of making it explicit. Many Christians have for a long time believed (and many might still believe) that Noah's flood is an event that really happened at some point in time. Dennett refers to this belief as an example of having a "phenomenological" conception of the world which cannot bear the test of science.[40] It is one of the examples he uses in order to convince us to follow his turn from (auto-)phenomenology to heterophenomenology. But connecting with our intuitive preunderstanding is not the same as uncritically accepting premodern myths about the world as actual fact. Dennett is mistaken when he puts phenomenology on the same level as these very specific premodern cosmological beliefs. The idea that Noah's flood is a historical event is simply not an example of phenomenology—nor is the belief in the god Feenoman, for that matter.[41]

Insofar as our ordinary preunderstanding of the world includes presuppositions about issues which belong to the domain of science (Noah's flood has taken place, global warming is real/not real, homeopathy is more than a placebo/no more than a placebo, and so forth), we should of course be open to correction by science. But these specific corrections do not touch the *structure* of first-person experience: that we live in a world of qualities, imbued with moral, esthetic and vital meanings, that our lives have a narrative structure, and that we are to some extent free and responsible beings. Dennett thinks that philosophy competes with science unless it affirms the postulates of the scientific perspective. In contrast, Taylor and others in the hermeneutical-phenomenological tradition think that philosophy, while learning facts about the world from science, deals with a different kind of problems. Philosophy addresses questions concerning the relationship between science and our prescientific perspective of everyday life. It is a matter of compelling logic that this type of questions must transcend the scien-

39 Plessner, *Phänomenologie. Das Werk Edmund Husserls*, especially 144-147. Cf. Krüger, *Ausdrucksphänomen und Diskurs*, 200-203.

40 Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 94.

41 Ibid., 82-85.

tific perspective.[42] Therefore, science and hermeneutical phenomenology are not in a relationship of competition: they complement one another.

The key to a productive relationship between science and philosophy, beyond competition, is the habit of asking ourselves time and again what kind of question we are dealing with: is it a scientific, a philosophical, or yet some other type of question, for instance a political or ethical question, or a personal dilemma. The correlation of colors and (combinations of) wave lengths discussed earlier illustrates this division of labor between philosophy and science. After learning about such correlations from physics, philosophy tries to interpret the theory on a more fundamental level, namely by addressing the question concerning the *nature* of the correlation, i.e., of the relationship between physical-neural reality and the phenomenal world. It does not concern itself with the question which combinations of wave lengths correlate with what colors. Like all academic disciplines, philosophy should know its place and it should not speculate on matters belonging to a field, in this case optics, which is not its own.

Making explicit what we already know implicitly is indeed typical of the hermeneutical approach. Hermeneutics is based on a hermeneutical circle which runs between two poles: part and whole, whereby the whole can for instance be a text, a work of art, a historical development, a situation, an organism, or human existence as such. There are many ways to elaborate this, but one way is by describing a circle between our explicit reflection, which is always partial, and our immediate intuitive contact with things, people, situations, which constitutes our world as a whole.[43] We always already have an intuitive preunderstanding of things, and this is both the source of our reflection and that which we reflect upon. We are in a circle of understanding, but our thought is not circular in the sense that we are repeating the same pattern of reflection over and over again: the circle is not static but dynamic. Since our reflection contains a moment of criticism, it can shape our intuitions. Our intuitions *need* to be shaped because we do not live our lives predominantly on a reflective level: in many situations we attune ourselves to situations intuitively, without much explicit reasoning. More often than not we have to respond spontaneously to the situations we encounter, without thinking all aspects of the situation through in advance. Even

42 This is a good argument for the thesis that philosophy is not a science: philosophy is an academic discipline which occupies a meta-position with regard to science. Only from this meta-position the relationship between science and other domains of human existence can be examined.

43 I am here roughly following Ricoeur's interpretation of Heidegger in *Phénoménologie et Herméneutique*, 40-43.

when we do take a long time to think about our situation or about a decision we have to make, we remain dependent on a prereflective level of feelings, premonitions, assessments, in short: on a level of intuitive moral orientation which is *fed* by our explicit thoughts.

We should not limit our account of hermeneutics to the discussion of science vs. philosophy, because hermeneutics was first of all the method Dilthey proposed for the *Geisteswissenschaften*.[44] I will not go back to Dilthey here, but instead say something about Plessner's interpretation—and transformation—of Dilthey's ideas.[45] In his discussion of the *geisteswissenschaftliche* object, Plessner compares this object with the object of science. (Note that the English word "object" is here the translation of *Gegenstand*, i.e., the subject-matter of a discipline.) Summarizing Plessner's thought, we can say that the object of science (a) is only indirectly accessible to us, through mathematical language and experiment; (b) does not engage us: our knowledge of it does not transform our own identity; and (c) offers the guarantee of an adequate answer to our scientific questions, i.e., *if* our questions are formulated correctly. By contrast, the object of the *Geisteswissenschaften* (a) is directly available: a historical event or work of art already resonates with us, already has a *meaning*, before we approach it scientifically (in the sense of *geisteswissenschaftlich*); (b) engages us in an interaction which not only results in knowledge, but also in a changed attitude or identity, because we are part of the same prescientific, phenomenal world as the object; and (c) does not offer the guarantee of a complete and adequate answer to our questions, because it has an "unfathomable" (*unergründbare*)[46] dimension.

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44 The word *Geisteswissenschaften*, literally "sciences of spirit", does not have a fixed meaning and it is hard to translate. We are here dealing with the word's original meaning: the term refers to the opposite of *Naturwissenschaften* (science), i.e., to those academic disciplines which concern themselves empirically and interpretatively (understandingly) with the human world, including behavior, history, culture, language, and art. One could translate *Geisteswissenschaften* by "humanities and social sciences", which seems to come closest to what is meant, but the problem is that some disciplines within these fields, e.g. econometrics, model themselves after natural science, which is exactly what is *not* meant by *Geisteswissenschaft*. Incidentally, by "science" I mean "natural science", in accordance with the ordinary, narrow sense of this word in the English language.

45 Plessner, *Macht und menschliche Natur*, 165-185.

46 Ibid., 181.

By "unfathomable", Plessner does not mean that it is no use asking questions about the object because it would be totally unknowable. As regards questions of fact, these even have very straightforward answers. When did Germany invade Poland? Everyone agrees this was on 1 September 1939. The more fundamental questions, those which aim at the best interpretation of a historical event, a form of human behavior, or a work of art, can also be answered but the point is: these answers have to remain open-ended. There will, for instance, never be a definite work about World War II. The reason for this is not only that historians will find new facts, but also that they will find new perspectives which shed a different light on the meaning of this huge historical event. The question of where the aggression that drove the war came from needs to be addressed, but we know that, at the same time, we will always keep wondering how the aggressors and their collaborators were capable of what they did. (Of course, it is also an open question whether aggression was indeed the basic drive behind what happened.) In the case of something as monstrous as World War II it is even an insult to the victims to suggest that one has a complete and adequate explanation for the event.

The principle of the unfathomable does not only apply to the horrors of history or to the possible tragedy of people's personal lives. It applies to any object of the *Geisteswissenschaften*: we can only do justice to it if we respect the unfathomable character of its proper reality. For example, if we have attempted to give an exhaustive explanation of the meaning of a specific work of art, i.e., of all the conditions that define its beauty or its quality, then we can be sure that we missed its point. The description of a work of art is not meant to appropriate it in our understanding, but rather to entertain and develop our prereflective, perceptual openness to it, and to explore how it affects us and may transform our gaze. The principle of the "the unfathomable" (*das Unergründliche*)[47] of the object of the *Geisteswissenschaften* determines that we have to find a balance between appropriation through understanding and respect for the object's otherness.

Philosophy, although not one of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, shares with these disciplines the principle, due to the unfathomable character of its object, that its questions are open-ended. Let me give an example of this. As we will see in the chapters to come, Plessner describes the human body as on the one hand a subject open to the world, and on the other hand an object among other objects. The crux is that, although both aspects (subjectivity and objectivity) are essential to our being in the world, we can never bring these two aspects to a synthesis. Although I will, following Plessner (and Merleau-Ponty), attempt to find the

47 Ibid., 175.

most adequate descriptions of this ambiguity, it remains an ambiguity we are dealing with, i.e., a relationship that can never be fully understood. Intuitively we are always already in touch with this ambiguity: we are as subjects open to a world and at the same time, objectively, positioned in that world. Our task is to analyze this structure without lifting the ambiguity by absolutizing either the world-constituting power of the subject, or the objectivity of the external world.

In Sections 1.2 and 2.1 I discussed some aspects of the phenomenological approach in philosophy. I said that according to phenomenology the philosopher *intuits* the essence of phenomena: we "see" these essential structures. This intuiting is not a matter of clairvoyance or pretending to be psychic: we all do it constantly. Just imagine a lively conversation about a topic which is not as palpable as a chair or a tree, e.g. the question which is better: big government or small government? We *mean* something by "big government" because we have in view *what* we mean by it, even before we bring it into words. This "having in view" is intuiting. When we try to bring it into words we make explicit that which is already implicitly there in our intuition. So there is nothing esoteric about the suggestion that intuition is a crucial part of both ordinary self-understanding and philosophy.

I have not yet addressed how this phenomenological use of the word "intuition" connects with the hermeneutical use of the same word in the discussion of Taylor. What is the nature of this connection? This question will help us, firstly, to understand the relationship between hermeneutics and phenomenology (current section), and secondly, to explore the nature of the truth claim of philosophy (Sections 3.4 and 3.5).

I agree with Ricoeur that hermeneutics is not a different method than phenomenology, but rather a modification of the *presuppositions* of phenomenology.[48] Ricoeur describes this modification when he compares Husserl with Heidegger and Gadamer. The central concept in Ricoeur is "appartenence": we "belong to" or "participate in" the text, the situation, or the world which we interpret. This defines the finitude of all understanding, including philosophical understanding. It means that we abandon the assumption that phenomenology connects with a realm of ideas separated from the world we live in: "What hermeneutics has destroyed is not phenomenology, but only one of its interpretations, namely Husserl's own *idealist* interpretation".[49]

Ricoeur only refers to Gadamer and Heidegger to substantiate his point, but Plessner expressed a similar view as his contemporary Heidegger. In addition,

48 Ricoeur, *Phénoménologie et herméneutique*.

49 Ibid., 31. As noted in Chapter 2, Zahavi offers a different interpretation of Husserl.

Plessner's account of the finitude of knowledge, including philosophical knowledge, has one huge advantage over Heidegger's: it is based on the insight that a true philosophy of being in the world, and of the finitude of understanding, must take the shape of a philosophy of *the human body*. Because Ricoeur picked up the phenomenological tradition from Heidegger, his philosophy of "appartenance" focuses on our belonging to the spiritual world of texts, culture and narratives, while ignoring our belonging to the natural, external world. We have here a philosophical one-sidedness exactly opposite to the one we find in Dennett. It is then clear that any fundamental philosophy needs to address the relationship between these two domains: the natural and the cultural world. For this reason Plessner in the *Stufen* embeds his anthropology in a philosophy of nature.[50] This is what distinguishes Plessner's philosophy from the bulk of the hermeneutical tradition and what defines it as "philosophical anthropology".

Loosely drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur, Plessner, and Taylor, we can reconstruct the way hermeneutics modifies the phenomenological concept of intuition by taking the following three steps. Firstly, hermeneutical phenomenology emphasizes more than classic phenomenology that our knowledge of phenomena does not start when we emphatically try to see (in the sense of "intuit") the structure of a phenomenon. By attending to the phenomenon in this way, we only continue in a more emphatic manner what we already do in everyday life: recognizing phenomena and seeing the differences between them.[51] Both in everyday life and in philosophy we recognize the essence of something by its "essence indicating characteristics" (*indikatorischen Wesensmerkmalen*).[52] Philosophy thus springs from an understanding of the world which we already have before we engage in philosophical reflection.

Secondly, the categories involved in our ordinary lives (i.e., the correlations between our attitudes and the world) are not purely descriptive, they are part of *moral* life, characterized by vital interests or needs (Plessner, Merleau-Ponty), by a narrative context (Ricoeur, Taylor), and by metaphysical desire, i.e., the desire to lead a good or meaningful life (most explicitly: Taylor). Thirdly, this life in which intuited categories are embedded is a historical dynamic, and it has a particularity which is relative to one's sociocultural situation. This means that our frameworks do not have the status of eternal and universal truths, which in turn means that the philosophical questions springing from these frameworks cannot lead to eternal and universal truths either. These three steps together im-

50 The details of Plessner's view will be discussed in Chapter 5.

51 Plessner, *Lebensphilosophie und Phänomenologie*, 247 (quoted in Section 2.1).

52 Ibid., *Stufen*, 115/168. I return to this kind of characteristics in Section 5.2.

ply that the essential structures which are intuitively present to us cannot belong to a realm which is separated from the appearing world: they belong to the reality which appears to us in everyday life itself—the same reality of which we (our bodies) are part.

The point about truth raises an important issue: if philosophy indeed springs from history and never cuts itself entirely loose from it, then the possibility of philosophy's truth claim becomes a question. Phenomenology defines itself as a procedure in which the conditions for the possibility of experience are analyzed. This is what defines it as "a priori" and what distinguishes it from any empirical, a posteriori, procedure. Can we still legitimately speak of a priori philosophy and, if so, in what sense? In the next section of this chapter I want to examine this problem by starting from Plessner's *Macht und menschliche Natur*.

3.4 THE TRUTH CLAIM OF PHILOSOPHY BETWEEN ABSOLUTISM AND RELATIVISM

Macht und menschliche Natur is a difficult text with some inner tensions. One issue which can easily confuse us is Plessner's use of the notion "a priori". According to Plessner, European philosophy has traditionally aimed at producing universal knowledge about the essence of the human being. The presupposition that this is possible is not only vulnerable to epistemological objections but also to the criticism that it instrumentalizes philosophy in order to exert power over other peoples. The question Plessner asks is: how is a philosophy of the essence of the human being possible which does not claim to arrive at ahistorical and universal knowledge?

At first it seems that Plessner's answer entails the rejection of any concept of a priori philosophy: "Obviously, such a theory of the essence of the human being is not an empirical discipline . . . But the theory of the essence of the human being cannot be a priori either. Then it would not be capable of explaining the emergence of atemporal, a priori truths and commitments from the horizon of history and its experience".[53] The words "atemporal, a priori truths" is to be taken ironically: "a priori philosophy" would not be capable of understanding how it *itself* could spring from history, because this "springing from" contradicts its claim to atemporal, universal truth. In order to render possible pluralism and to avoid the exclusion of other cultures, Plessner aspires to a philosophy which keeps the question "what is a human being?" open. This excludes *a priori* phi-

53 Ibid., *Macht und menschliche Natur*, 153.

losophy, because "a-priorism . . . inevitably leads to a universalist-rationalist ontologization of the human being".[54]

However, further on in *Macht und menschliche Natur*, Plessner relativizes his earlier rejection of a priori philosophy. Now he speaks of the "new possibility of a connection between an a priori and an empirical view".[55] He says that the point is that theory "at least should not surrender to any of the two principles of method",[56] whereby the "principles" are empirical science and a priori theory. Finally, in the discussion of Dilthey that follows, Plessner credits the latter for "having created this new position with regard to the a priori in its relationship to the a posteriori".[57]

So what is this new position with regard to the relationship between a priori and a posteriori? According to Plessner, Dilthey examined the conditions for the possibility of historical knowledge, but he had to allow that the historian is not an outsider but a participant in history: "In Dilthey, the critical going back to possibility conditions does not lead to an apparatus of reason or to an atemporal order of being or essences; instead it only arrives at an opposite pole which is relative to historical reality, from which it can again push forward towards the variety of this reality."[58] Plessner wants to generalize for all philosophy what Dilthey had shown in regard to the philosophy of history, namely that transcendental theory transcends history without cutting itself loose from it. Philosophical theory constitutes a pole within a hermeneutical circle which runs back to the empirical, i.e., to the facticity of lived experience. So it turns out that, according to Plessner, we do not have to give up the notions "a priori" and "transcendental" altogether: a priori philosophy incorporates a distance with regard to history but the distance is not a definite break with the historical dynamic it reflects upon. Philosophical categories are rather like Taylor's "frameworks": they "frame", render possible, our experiences, but we cannot claim that these forms of experience are atemporal or that they are "universal" in an absolute sense of this word.

Plessner also wants to abandon the idealistic presupposition of the transparency of philosophy's subject-matter, especially where this concerns the human being. As noted in the previous section, human existence has an unfathomable character which philosophy needs to respect. This dimension of the unfath-

54 Ibid., 154.

55 Ibid., 160 (caption).

56 Ibid., 161.

57 Ibid., 165.

58 Ibid., 174.

omable renders all knowledge of the human being *finite*, and gives rise to an endless variation of life forms and theoretical conceptions of life. This is of *political* significance, in Plessner's view. Plessner explores the relationship between life itself and philosophy, arguing that philosophy is not simply a non-committal reflection on life, but also a way of taking position *in* life, a position with political implications. Life itself is deeply historical, and philosophy springs from historically developing life forms. So Plessner's question is: how can philosophy say something about life while being respectful to the diversity of cultures, now and in the past? How can it avoid *imposing* its view of the human being on the world? This is why *Macht und menschliche Natur* is about *power* (*Macht*): philosophy is not totally independent of politics and so it exerts power. Because of the historical dominance of Western culture, Western philosophy has a special responsibility in regard to non-Western peoples. It needs to unlearn forcing, under the banner of universalism, its own ethnocentric view of the human being on other cultures.

According to Plessner, avoiding this injustice is only possible on condition that philosophy respects the unfathomable character of human existence. The question regarding the human being must remain an open question. Plessner further explores the issue by distinguishing between two kinds of conceptions of the human being: those which constitute a *material* a priori and those which are a *formal* a priori. In Plessner's view, the mistake of material a priori's is that they are over-specific in content. They determine in detail and without self-relativization what human life is, which due to the political dimension of philosophy implies: what life *should* be.[59] A philosophy which is too specific (too "material") does not *keep open* the question regarding the human being, i.e., it does not respect the unfathomable character of human existence. Interpreting Plessner, Gesa Lindemann calls this type of philosophy "positive anthropology".[60] I will discuss the alternative presented by Lindemann, "reflexive anthropology", below. Plessner does not use this term, nor does he use "negative anthropology", which first springs to mind as the opposite of positive anthropology. But "negative anthropology" adequately describes the fact that Plessner wants to keep open the question regarding the human being, and that, consequently, he aspires to a minimal definition of the essence of the human being.

Plessner criticizes a material a priori and then seems to leave room for the possibility of a "formal a priori". He presents Heidegger's and Scheler's views

59 Ibid., 154.

60 Lindemann, *Soziologie – Anthropologie*, 58.

as examples of such an approach.[61] But here too, the reader is easily led astray. Plessner continues by *criticizing* Heidegger, because he would have defined the human being in terms of a specific "way of being".[62] According to Plessner, Heidegger attempts to circumvent true historicity by establishing the essence of the human being as something *prior to* history. "The 'fundamental existentials' (essential moments of Dasein) render possible history in the first place."[63] So although Plessner first seems to appreciate Heidegger (and Scheler) for not aspiring to a "material a priori"; Plessner then comes to the conclusion that Heidegger, in some sense, did present a material, in other words, an overspecific view of the human being.

I think Plessner's view at this point is problematic. Where do we draw the boundary between a philosophy which says just enough about the human being to make us understand that human existence is unfathomable and a philosophy which says "too much" to be able to leave room for otherness? Where do we draw the boundary between positive and negative anthropology? Plessner does not explicitly address this question. I think that the task of philosophy is not to try to avoid saying something positive about what human beings are. In my view, that attempt is bound to fail, because any negative anthropology presupposes a positive anthropology.

This can be illustrated by turning to Plessner's own anthropology. As we will see in Chapter 5, according to Plessner, the human being is an organism, and more specifically: an organism with a closed form of organization of the centralistic type; he is a being for whom laughing and crying are fundamental emotions; he is a being that creates art and makes music; he is a person who plays social roles in a shared world; and so forth. These are all positive, material determinations of what the human being is. Some of these stand in direct relationship to the unfathomable character of human existence, which shows that positive and negative anthropology are interdependent. Plessner's discussion of laughing and crying is a good example of this. In both laughing and crying, albeit in different ways, we experience and express that there is no appropriate answer to the situation we find ourselves in. These emotions point to "the unfathomable [*die Unergründlichkeit*] within the relationship of the human being to his

61 Plessner, *Macht und menschliche Natur*, 155. I limit myself to some remarks on Plessner's interpretation of Heidegger.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

body".[64] Here, positive descriptions of human emotions guide us towards the limitations of what can be said positively about the human being.

Since all negative anthropology presupposes positive anthropology, we face the problem of where we draw the boundary. In *Macht und menschliche Natur*, Plessner seems to aspire to some kind of minimalism, but the question is: how minimal should our anthropology be? No matter how minimal our account of the human being is, it is always possible that we encounter someone from another culture who feels excluded by it or simply disagrees with it. A man from a very masculine culture, for example, might deny that crying is a fundamental human emotion. He might regard this emotion as essential only to women and children. This is why the solution to the problem of pluralism is not minimalism, but rather *the transformation of our claim to truth*. As I show below, we find support for this alternative strategy in the very text we have been discussing: *Macht und menschliche Natur*.

I do not agree with Plessner that Heidegger was indirectly imposing a Western way of thinking on other peoples, thereby excluding them. Heidegger could have rightly responded: let anyone who disagrees with me put forward her arguments in favor of her position and let us talk about it.[65] We may agree or disagree with Heidegger's view that "the understanding of being is itself an ontic determination of Dasein",[66] but at least this view implies that ontology, as a philosophical discipline, springs from our factual, historical existence. Heidegger therefore rejects idealism, including the idea of "eternal truths", while at the same time affirming that we can speak of "a priori" philosophy starting from the "facticity of Dasein".[67] He affirms the hermeneutical conditions of phenomenology whereby hermeneutics, in accordance with Dilthey, is understood as interpretation (*Auslegung*)[68] and *Auslegung* is considered to be grounded in the understanding we already have before we explicitly reflect on our being in the world.[69] Plessner emphasizes that philosophy springs from, and remains

64 Plessner, *Lachen und Weinen*, 235/32 (translation modified).

65 The fact that, later, Heidegger would by his political support for the Nazi-regime help exclude other people, including philosophers, from such an open debate is a terrible thing, but it is at the same time an issue we should separate from his truth claim.

66 Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, § 4, 12 (italics removed by me).

67 Ibid., § 44 c, 229.

68 Ibid., § 7 C., 37.

69 Ibid., § 32, 148-151.

rooted in, our factual lives and that this determines philosophy's finitude. I think that Heidegger and Plessner actually agree on this issue.[70]

If Heidegger's philosophy is over-specific, thereby displaying a one-sidedly Western prejudice, then we should be able to prove him wrong by arguing against him as an equal interlocutor, i.e., not by accusing him of a sense of superiority, but by showing that his view of the human being cannot accommodate certain experiences which we deem important. Or we can object to Heidegger that he is looking for meaning in a dimension of human existence, Being (*das Sein)*, where there is little or no meaning to be found. This is Levinas's criticism of Heidegger: Being is a "neutral term" which deprives *a* being (*Seiende)* of her otherness and appropriates her to "the Same".[71] "Metaphysics precedes ontology",[72] which means that our relationship to the Other, a "meaning without context",[73] is more fundamental than our relationship to Being. Although Levinas's view is probably not immune to criticism either, he did touch on a weak spot in Heidegger, or at least evoke a question: why invest our hope in Being when it comes to finding meaning in life? Plessner's own criticism that Heidegger neglected the human body and thus struggles to make sense of "Sein zum Tode", "Angst", and so forth, is also a powerful argument which constitutes an attack on Heidegger's thinking while at the same time taking it seriously.

In my view the solution to the problem of pluralism is not minimalism, as some passages from *Macht und menschliche Natur* suggest. I want to look for the answer to this problem in other passages from the same text, which offer an insight in the nature of the truth claim of post-idealistic philosophy.

The bankruptcy of idealistic philosophy indeed leads to the problem of the truth claim. Whereas in Husserl this truth claim was of an absolutist kind, we are now confronted with the threat of historical relativism. Our very thoughts about historicity do not escape the historical dynamic which they address. But this does not mean that we should embrace the conclusion that all positions must be relative. That conclusion is the consequence of historism which Plessner re-

70 Cf. Plessner, *Phänomenologie*, 146, where Plessner argues that Heidegger would falsely presuppose there is "a natural order of original orientations of consciousness or Dasein". Cf. also Krüger, *Ausdrucksphänomen und Diskurs*, who agrees with Plessner's criticism of Heidegger.

71 Lévinas, *Totalité et infini*, 32.

72 Ibid. (caption).

73 Ibid. (italics removed by me), 8.

jects.[74] Relativism is itself a philosophical position whose truth claim, due to the pervasiveness of historical consciousness, becomes as problematic as any other position. These considerations seem to lead to a paralysis of all thought, but this is not Plessner's conclusion.

Plessner rather gives the present, the period or moment we are living in now, extra weight compared to past periods. He refers to his principle of the unfathomable character of the world to argue that the present cannot be regarded as the mere result of the past: "The free recognition of the obligatory character [of the unfathomable] opens the possibility of catching sight of something like a spiritual world and history, as a reality of life which is inexhaustible and yet comprehensible, i.e., as a reality which can be seen in a new way every time, because it always renews itself in a different sense."[75] It is in the present that the unfathomable character of the world makes itself felt: nobody can pretend to know in advance the possibilities that the present, extending into the future, offers us. The present is thus "open-ended" (*unabgeschlossen*).[76] The unfathomable character of the world *commits* us: we are called upon to be open to the possibilities of the present.

Our historical situation then becomes ambiguous (= my formulation): on the one hand it remains true that the past prepares the present; but on the other hand, the present constitutes a new perspective from which we explore the past in relation to a fundamentally open future. This happens both theoretically, in the *Geisteswissenschaften* and philosophy, and practically: in politics.[77] But it also implies that theory and praxis are not entirely divorced: the implication is that the truth claim of philosophy is inextricably intertwined with a practical, political dimension. Thinking about the world is at the same time *acting* in that world. So although philosophy is an autonomous domain, separate from politics, we have to take into account that our positions still also have political implications.

I agree with Plessner on most points, and I think he demonstrates in an excellent manner that we need to find a way in between the extremes of absolutism and relativism. Before I expand on this, I want to remark on one issue I have trouble with: the idea that every appropriation of the present, every decision or action through which we realize our freedom is political, as Plessner here suggests. The thought that our lives are fundamentally political is typical of *Macht*

74 Plessner, *Macht und menschliche Natur*, 183.

75 Ibid., 181-182.

76 Ibid., 182.

77 Ibid., 183-184.

und menschliche Natur,[78] but not of some other texts by Plessner, like *Lachen und Weinen*. These emotions, laughing and crying, stand in direct relationship to the unfathomable character of human life, but they are not intrinsically political phenomena. Two other texts are also worth mentioning. In *Phänomenologie*, Plessner describes the extra-phenomenological sources of philosophy and he refers to "faith", "metaphysics", and "politics" as these sources.[79] In *Elemente der Metaphysik* the question of metaphysics is summarized as "the question concerning the meaning of . . . Being".[80] Although the problem is then specified in religious terms, the question initially has a more open character: it is posed within the context of the human being as "a *wanting*, *feeling, wishing and hoping being*".[81] The most fundamental questions of philosophy are thus located beyond the domain of neutral, purely epistemological-ontological problems. My point is that Plessner does not always formulate the non-neutral character of fundamental philosophy only in political terms. But he is inclined to seek the alternative formulation in religious discourse, which implies a restriction of its own kind.[82]

If we are looking for general terms to describe the practical dimension from which philosophy springs and which philosophy takes up in its search for foundations, I think we find these in Taylor's account of the human desire to lead a good, i.e., a meaningful and fulfilling life. As Taylor shows, there are many forms of this aspiration: one can dedicate one's life to artistic expression, to one's family, God, science, a better society, and other things.[83] Philosophy borrows existential questions from all these different domains of life. Drawing on

78 Cf. especially ibid., 201.

79 Plessner, *Phänomenologie*, 146.

80 Ibid., *Elemente der Metaphysik*, 33.

81 Ibid., 32.

82 This is a restriction even if Plessner, at the end of the *Stufen*, calls on us not to make the "leap into faith" (342/420), for his position here remains greatly indebted to such faith.

83 It is worth noting that this interpretation finds support in Taylor's *Sources of the Self* but not in his *A Secular Age*. In *Sources of the Self* Taylor still takes seriously all these orientations for finding a fulfilling life. More precisely, all orientations which refer to some form of transcendence, including, e.g., the transcendence of nature or the social world, are presented as equal options. In *A Secular Age*, Taylor explicitly defends a theistic view, so that all conceptions of the good life ultimately point to variants of a *religious* life. Moral sources like nature are here subordinated to one ultimate transcendence, the transcendence of God. Cf. van Buuren, "From Sources of the Self to A Secular Age: The Development in Taylor's Concept of Transcendence".

Taylor and on texts by Plessner like *Lachen und Weinen*, we can say that the need to do justice to the unfathomable can refer to many contexts besides the political. We have to relate, for instance, to the unfathomable character of the person we love in order for the relationship to work. We can only experience fulfillment in nature if we are open to its transcendence. And we can only do justice to a work of art if our interpretation is part of an exploration of the senses which is not closed off by our understanding but kept open by it. Maybe Plessner would have agreed with these examples. The reduction of every existential domain to the realm of politics is itself a historical figure that played an important role during a long period of Plessner's life. Perhaps this explains why in *Macht und menschliche Natur* he is inclined to equate the practical dimension of life and of philosophy with politics.[84]

This objection against *Macht und menschliche Natur* should not distract us from the main point. Plessner adequately describes an important trait of hermeneutical philosophy in general, and thereby of every hermeneutical-*phenomenological* philosophy. Taylor, Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Gadamer all share with Plessner the idea that the historical determinateness of our position does not make philosophical truth completely relative. The starting point of hermeneutics is rather that only a being who is historically and socially situated, a being who already has all kinds of implicit and explicit ideas about the world, can say something philosophically meaningful about that world. As Hans-Peter Krüger puts it, "Plessner is not against but in favor of a renewed posing of the transcendental question concerning the structural conditions for the possibility of experience."[85] Since this exploration of possibility conditions is no longer deemed dependent on an absolute, transcendental consciousness, as it used to be

84 Schürmann's *Die Unergründlichkeit des Lebens* does not call into question Plessner's assumption in *Macht und menschliche Natur* that the practical dimension of fundamental philosophy is to be understood solely as a *political* dimension. On page 24 Schürmann introduces "the topos of the unfathomable", which means: "that 'life' is richer than all knowledge of it—that knowledge follows life and that it is false to believe that life be the mere transformation of knowledge into action. In this sense, the topos of the unfathomable is a child of political modernity." From hereon, Schürmann concentrates on the political meaning of the unfathomable without accounting for this restriction. Meanwhile the reader wonders: is all knowledge and action political? Is there no practical, moral, personal life outside of politics, to which the unfathomable is also essential?

85 Krüger, *Ausdruckssphänomen und Diskurs*, 204.

in Kant and Husserl, Krüger speaks of Plessner's "quasi-transcendental"[86] approach. Although I do not follow this usage,[87] I totally agree with Krüger's point: the end of "absolute subjectivity",[88] which in the context of the current discussion implies the end of the absolutist truth claim, is not the end of transcendental philosophy. Philosophical anthropology is not a priori in any sense which affirms an absolutist claim to truth, but it is a priori in the sense of examining the non-empirical conditions for the possibility of experience. We should not throw this examination of possibility conditions, on which the distinction between empirical science and philosophy depends, out with the bath water of idealism.[89]

Hermeneutical philosophy regards the historicity of one's perspective, the fact that it is bound to a unique now, as the productive condition for having an *original* and *refreshing* view on matters. In order to make this point clearer, we can add to the concept of historicity the kindred concepts of particularity and contingency. "Particularity" refers to the opposite of universality and it pertains to the individual, ethnic, gender- (and so forth) determinateness of our views.[90] Contingency is logically connected to both historicity and particularity. We can say that a view of the world which is not atemporal or universal, is neither necessary in the sense of excluding all contingency. If I would have been accepted by the *other* university, I would probably have written a (slightly?) different book. Since by writing this book I do not only make my ideas explicit but also *shape* my view, I might at the other university have developed a somewhat different view than I have now.

Since taking position in philosophy is also a practical matter, as we have just seen, it is worthwhile to contemplate under what practical conditions philosophical debate is not undermined but rendered possible by the historical, particular, and contingent determinateness of our views. How does our consciousness and assessment of the *content* of a philosophical view go together with our con-

86 Ibid., 205.

87 I prefer to regard Husserl's idealistic approach as the "quasi" form of transcendental philosophy and Plessner's variant as the real deal.

88 Ibid., 205.

89 Bitbol et al. in *Constituting Objectivity* present a similar program in regard to the a priori of *physics*.

90 Cf. Plessner, *Macht und menschliche Natur*, 231-232: Plessner here limits his concept of particularity to the ethnic determinateness of our ways of life, but I think this can be extended to gender, sexual orientation, and so forth, and even to individual character and situation.

sciousness that it originates from a historical, particular and contingent perspective? To my knowledge Plessner does not directly address this question, so let me try to sketch a possible answer on the basis of his view. I argue that philosophy can only thrive if the reflection on the sociohistorical conditions of a certain view remains *marginal* in regard to its content and the arguments supporting it.

Consider the example of meeting a philosopher from a country that you have very little knowledge of. You do not know a lot about its culture nor about its philosophy, which makes one curious: how do *they* see things? What can we learn from them? A true philosophical discussion, then, does not focus on *how* that culture produces certain ideas. That kind of reflection is rather a sociological or historical reconstruction of the development of ideas than a philosophical debate. (I return to sociologism in the next section.) Instead, we exchange ideas with the other person and explore similarities and differences on the basis of the content of what the other person says, asking ourselves whether that content could be true. Although we know that the historicity and particularity of a certain perspective is a condition for truth, our reflection on these conditions must remain in the margin of the exchange of ideas and arguments. We welcome a different, refreshing perspective, but taking another person seriously means that we do not reduce everything she says to something merely conditioned by her unique sociohistorical and individual background.

Only on condition of historicity and particularity can there be a plurality of views, whether in philosophy or within any other domain which connects with first-person experience. This does not mean that arbitrariness replaces necessity, that fleetingness replaces eternity and that ethnocentrism, localism, or subjectivism replace universality. Our task is to make our views plausible by searching for shared points of view within our respective frameworks. If there is very little overlap between our frameworks it becomes more important to show, using concrete examples, how our ideas are rooted in real life experience. For a philosophy that understands itself as hermeneutical, necessity does not contradict contingency but it does contradict arbitrariness. In other words, from this perspective, contingency and arbitrariness (or coincidence) are not the same thing. One can be convinced by an argument and at the same time know that the author might have chosen a slightly different path to make plausible a similar but different point under deviating circumstances. The fact that there is not one single procedure to write a philosophical text proves that philosophy cannot avoid contingency, but we do not conclude from this that philosophical texts lack inner necessity; we do not suppose that they have an arbitrary structure. Some texts do lack inner necessity, but this is generally regarded as a shortcoming.

Eternity is not replaced by a truth which needs to be revoked the next day, but rather by the aspiration to make a sustainable contribution, to offer an insight that could last for a longer period of time, but not eternally. Universality is only possible in the sense that a specific conception can be shared by a certain group of people over a period of time. The view itself, that philosophy does not start from scratch but rather connects with, and draws on, our attitudes and intuitions in our pre-philosophical lives is for instance widely shared among present-day phenomenologists, hermeneutical philosophers, pragmatists, and philosophical anthropologists. To the extent that it is a shared view, it has become universal. But universality as an *absolutum* contradicts the conditions of philosophical debate.

To sum up, some conditions constitutive of philosophical debate concern the background of the philosopher and although they can be analyzed and described, we do not contribute to philosophical debate by addressing how this background rendered possible the view of our interlocutor. Let me add one more example. Women are increasingly taking part in the world of academic philosophy. Without doubt this is a desirable development, not only for the sake of women's emancipation, but also because it is refreshing to hear more women's voices in philosophical debate. At the same time it is hard to define what is specifically feminine about a woman's philosophy, and often it is not even clear whether the philosophy in question is specifically feminine in the first place. On top of that, it is probably not a good idea to try to define "the feminine" in any more definite terms than a vague circumscription and it is also not a good idea to constantly emphasize that a certain philosopher is a woman (or a man)—unless by exception and with a good feeling for the circumstances. So the situation is quite delicate: we want to appreciate someone's sex, but at the same time this part of her background should remain a tacit precondition of the possible truth of her views.

The social sphere of philosophical debate is full of such ambiguities (related to ethnic background, race, sexual orientation, age, authority derived from position, and so forth) and we need some *esprit de finesse* to deal with them. Our views are rendered possible by who we are, i.e., both by group identities, the social roles ensuing from them, and by our individual qualities, both good qualities and shortcomings. We should not try to overcome the particularity of our perspective, but rather recognize situations where this particularity no longer functions as a precondition for revealing something, instead preventing us from getting a clear view of a phenomenon. As long as we do (more or less) succeed in seeing things and finding some appropriate description, then we can appreciate the particularity of our perspective as something fruitful and productive. At the

same time we should not attend to our own background too emphatically: this attention needs to remain marginal in order to avoid sociological reduction and historical relativism. We have to focus not on ourselves but on the issues we explore. It is also on that level that the discussion needs to take place. It is then still possible, and even necessary, to glance from the side once in a while, so that we can appreciate the particularity of someone's background as the precondition for an original way of thinking, or to notice that one's own background is starting to become an obstacle rather than a possibility condition for finding truth.

3.5 PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGISM

Against the backdrop of the present discussion Gesa Lindemann's interpretation of Plessner is particularly interesting, because her position ultimately leads to the kind of sociological reduction I alluded to. Philosophical debate on what nature is, or what animals or human beings are, or on what personhood is, can only take place on condition that we are finite, historically embedded beings—which we are. As noted, this does not mean that we should reduce claims about the essence of nature, the human being, society, or personhood to a phenomenon which is interesting only insofar as it belongs to a certain cultural identity or historical era. In fact, we should avoid such reduction. But this is exactly what Lindemann fails to do.

Let me explain. I have to anticipate some of the issues discussed in Chapter 5, viz. Plessner's concept of "eccentric positionality", but since we are here dealing not with the content of, but rather with the approach to these issues, I can limit myself to a very succinct description of that concept. In the *Stufen*, Plessner grounds his philosophical anthropology in a philosophy of *life*. Unlike non-living things, Plessner says, organisms not only happen to have a place in the environment: they *occupy* their position. They do so by realizing their own boundary to that environment. This property of living entities Plessner calls "positionality". Contrary to plants, animals take their position by perceiving and acting as sensorimotor subjects: they are *centrically* positioned. Human beings are sensorimotor subjects as well, but they also live at a remove from the center of their sensorimotor relationship to the environment: they are *eccentrically* positioned. This distance from the external world turns that world into a stage of *social interaction*. In virtue of his eccentricity, the human being is a *person* in a *shared world* (*Mitwelt*). I will return to these issues elaborately in Chapter 5, but for now this will have to suffice.

Lindemann presents a sociological interpretation of Plessner. Drawing on Plessner's concept of eccentric positionality, she argues that beings who are eccentrically positioned, i.e., persons (or "social agents"[91]) recognize other persons by means of a moment of interpretation (*Deutung*).[92] Although we may be inclined to think that persons are per definition human beings, Lindemann continues, there is nothing in the physical characteristics of human beings which would guarantee that only they could count as persons. It is not the physical characteristics which determine personhood: it is rather the social interaction between entities which points to their being persons.

Lindemann shows that the boundary between persons and non-persons has not always been drawn in the way in which this is done in modern society. The drawing of this boundary is rather *contingent*: it is subject to a praxis of "personal socialization", which can be observed not by looking at "mere bodies", but rather by focusing on "the way bodies relate to one another".[93] So it would be wrong, in Lindemann's view, to interpret Plessner's anthropology as a *positive* anthropology, i.e., as a theory which defines, exclusively, *human beings* as eccentrically positioned beings, and thereby as persons. Instead we should conceive of anthropology as "reflexive anthropology".[94] This discipline examines the "function anthropological assumptions have within the framework of the execution of drawing the boundary between persons and other entities".[95]

I think Lindemann's interpretation of Plessner is problematic in more than one respect. I now want to limit myself to a problem which is related to the truth claim of philosophy discussed above. Lindemann wants to study the way societies draw the boundary between persons and non-persons. When Lindemann concentrates on modern societies she shows that they have drawn the boundary of the social world in such a way that only human beings belonged to the social world, i.e., the world of social agents or persons. It is the self-evident nature of this presupposition that she wants to call into question. Lindemann demonstrates that there have been times in Western history when animals were also regarded as social agents, e.g., when they were prosecuted. After describing how this functioned in different historical periods and in different areas (in 13th through early 18th century Europe), Lindemann concludes: "If . . . one focuses on the an-

91 Lindemann, *Soziologie – Anthropologie*, 55.

92 Ibid., 54.

93 Ibid., 55.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.

imal trials described above, then it turns out that the animals involved have to be categorized as social agents."[96]

As far as I have been able to check, Lindemann does not say that *human beings* drew the line in a different way in these cultures. That description would not be sufficient, because if animals were (according to the culture concerned) really persons, then these animals would not only need to be *treated* as persons, they would also themselves draw a certain boundary between persons and non-persons. This implies that, according to Lindemann's view, animals could also have excluded human beings from the domain of personhood. Lindemann does not refer to any culture where this variant was realized.

Let us take a look at an example which we do find in her book: "On 9 Mai 1595, the dog Provetie, when trying to snatch away a piece of ham from a child, bit the child to death. The father of the child filed a complaint against the perpetrator, who was thereupon arrested, but not tortured, because it confessed. Provetie was sentenced to death by hanging."[97] I find it quite hard to believe that the sentencing of a dog who bit a child to death, turns this dog into a social actor. The fact that the dog was treated as a person cannot suffice as a criterion for personhood. Lindemann might agree that the dog, from its part, also has to *act* as a person and treat human beings as fellow-persons. And indeed, in regard to the dog mentioned, Lindemann says "the [perpetrator] was arrested but not tortured *because it confessed*" (italics mine). What is striking about this passage is that Lindemann does not add the phrase "according to the people involved" or "according to the report conceived at that time". Likewise, it is astonishing that she describes the dog as a "perpetrator" (*Täter*) instead of, e.g.: "what people at the time regarded as the perpetrator".

Before I extend on this, it should be noted that there is a *theoretical* argument for the claim that an animal species (other than the human being) could be eccentrically positioned and therefore be a person. I will return to this issue after the introduction of Plessner's view of life: in Section 5.2. I will argue that the relationship between the human being as an organism (her physical characteristics) and the eccentric position—or comparable definitions of personhood—is not entirely contingent, as Lindemann presupposes. I will also argue that this discussion is extremely hypothetical, since there are no reasons to believe that there has ever been, or is presently, any animal species which possesses eccentric positionality, like we, human beings, do.

96 Lindemann, *Das Soziale von seinen Grenzen denken*, 126.

97 Ibid., 119.

For now I concentrate on Lindemann's *approach* to these issues in relation to the problem of the truth claim of philosophy. Lindemann focuses on the question of how societies have *in fact*, in the course of history, drawn the boundary between persons and non-persons. But this is the problem: observations of how this happens *in fact* can never lead to arguments in favor of one theory of personhood or another, because such observations are not made from the perspective of the participant in any culture but from a neutral, third-person perspective *on* cultures.

Lindemann does not bring forth her evidence concerning the flexibility of the demarcation of personhood in order to argue that we, in our time, should also regard animals as persons. Reading Lindemann one keeps wondering: what is her *own* position on the relationship between persons and human beings? Does she subscribe to the view that the social world includes, without discontinuity, animals or gods[98]? Lindemann never gives a direct answer to such questions, because she wants to demonstrate that the answer depends on the culture and historical era that we happen to be looking at. Joachim Fischer has criticized this aspect of Lindemann's interpretation of Plessner, pointing out that Plessner regarded his philosophical anthropology precisely as an attempt to overcome the kind of historicism and sociologism we find in Lindemann: "Philosophical Anthropology cannot leave the ultimate foundation of the sphere of the human being to any branch of science or social science (not to biology, not to psychology, history, or sociology) and so, in virtue of its approach, it cannot be dissolved in a 'reflexive anthropology oriented towards sociology'."[99]

Why is the sociological transformation of philosophical anthropology impossible? Against the backdrop of the discussion above it is clear that the reduction of philosophy to sociology is the end of philosophical debate: if one interlocutor is only willing to describe positions which were adopted in fact, then she is no longer a participant, no longer someone who *takes* position *within* the very field she describes. This would not be a great problem if Lindemann would leave room for a non-sociological, i.e., truly philosophical interpretation of Plessner's philosophical anthropology. But she presents her view as the necessary and only possible consequence of Plessner's own view. It is this dissolving of philosophical anthropology into sociological anthropology which Fischer rightly criticizes.

98 As regards gods as social agents: ibid., 13; and Lindemann, "The Lived Human Body from the Perspective of the Shared World (Mitwelt)", 287.

99 Fischer, "Gesa Lindemann, Die Grenzen des Sozialen. Zur sozio-technischen Kostruktion von Leben und Tod in der intensivmedizin", 231.

Lindemann aspires to an intimate relationship between sociological theory and lived praxis. She objects to the way theory has always imposed its form on its subject-matter, which made theory blind to phenomena not fitting the theory.[100] This seems to be a real and interesting problem, but as I argue, empirical observations with regard to the ways in which human beings (or, according to Lindemann, other entities) have drawn the boundary between the social world and what falls beyond that world can only lead us to call into question our own presuppositions *if* we are prepared to see these human beings from other times and cultures *as our conversation partners*. This means that we first need to abandon the sociological perspective and see these persons as interlocutors with whom we can share experiences and exchange arguments. The preconditions of such conversation I have described above: they are hermeneutical-phenomenological, not sociohistorical. We need to avoid absolutism by making the right kind of claim to truth. But in order to avoid relativism *we need to take position on what the human being is*. The latter is what Lindemann refuses to do. Although she wants to keep sociohistorical relativism at bay,[101] she does not make clear how her sociological outsider's perspective allows her to avoid relativism.

If we agree with Lindemann, then we have to accept that the only way praxis can influence theory is by broadening the domain of possibilities of what can count as a person, because if, in any period of time, human beings seemed to interact with other entities as persons, these entities need to be theoretically integrated in the theory of personal socialization. We all have to accept that a dog called Provetie was a person like us. Again, this may work as a sociohistorical approach, but it is worth noting that this approach remains dependent on the way particular human beings in particular times and places *had a view* on what a person is and who a person is. It was part of their *Vorverstehen*, i.e., of their implicit framework. Contrary to the sociologist, the philosopher is reluctant to restrict herself to a neutral description of such frameworks: she wants to make explicit her own framework, develop it through criticism, express her own phenomenological view of personhood and enter into debate with people from all kinds of background. This is what it means to take other people seriously.

In Section 5.2 I turn to one of Lindemann's ontological presuppositions: in order to make the extension of "person" as broad as possible, she needs to assume that the relationship between human being and personhood is totally con-

100 Lindemann, *Das Soziale von seinen Grenzen her denken*, 28-29.

101 Ibid., 33: "In this way, the universal claim to knowledge is relativized, but not canceled."

tingent. Any being which is treated as a person essentially *is* a person, in this view. It is important to note that Lindemann is right to a certain extent: it is thinkable in principle that an organism other than the human being possesses personhood. However, as I argue in Section 5.2, it is not a mere coincidence that one *specific* organism, the one with the biggest cortex in relation to body size, with an upright position, with a relatively hairless body, free hands, and opposable thumbs, is also the being with advanced technology, an institutionalized social world, and language, in short: with all those characteristics which define personhood. Of course, the argument depends on our acceptance of a philosophy of the human being which does not balk at claiming what a human being, or what a person, *is*.