

Jasper van Buuren

# BODY AND REALITY

An Examination of the Relationships  
between the Body Proper, Physical Reality,  
and the Phenomenal World Starting  
from Plessner and Merleau-Ponty

[transcript] Philosophy

Jasper van Buuren  
Body and Reality

**Philosophy**

**Jasper van Buuren**, born in 1974, is an independent philosopher based in Berlin with publications in the fields of phenomenology, philosophical anthropology, and the philosophy of the good life. He obtained his master's degree in philosophy in Amsterdam and Leuven. After several visiting studentships in the United States he received his PhD in Potsdam.

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## Preface

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This book is a thoroughly revised version of the philosophy dissertation I wrote at the University of Potsdam between 2008 and 2013. Modest parts of this book have been published in two book chapters: *Plessner and the Mathematical-Physical Perspective: The Prescientific Objectivity of the Human Body* (2014) and *Exzentrizität, Dingstruktur und der Leib als Subjekt und Objekt* (2017), as well as in an article in Continental Philosophy Review: “The Philosophical-Anthropological Foundations of Bennett and Hacker’s Critique of Neuroscience” (2016).

I thank the selection committee of the postgraduate program “*Lebensformen und Lebenswissen*” for accepting me into the program in 2008, thus enabling me to pursue my PhD. I am also grateful to my fellow PhD students and the postdocs in the program for their useful responses to the dissertation prospectus and chapter drafts.

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# Introduction

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## 1.

When we reflect on ourselves we often borrow concepts and thoughts from the natural sciences. The rise of modern science and its commitment to truth motivate us to integrate scientific views in our reflection on our personal lives, society, and generally all the things we care about. We are, for instance, increasingly inclined to explain our character, our behavior, and our experiences in terms of neural processes or genetic blueprint. There is no doubt that it is worthwhile to learn from science about certain aspects of our lives, but this does not relieve us of the task to reflect on the fundamental relationship between the scientific view of human beings and the view we have of ourselves before we adopt a scientific perspective. What are the similarities and differences between the presuppositions of science and those of the prescientific point of view we normally have on our own lives?

Let me give an example to make this problem more concrete. When Hillary Clinton was running for president against Obama in 2008, CBS reported: “During a campaign stop in the hometown of the woman who started the celebration of Mother’s Day 100 years ago, Hillary Clinton said that being a mother and a woman have uniquely prepared her for taking on the presidency. ‘I’ve come to believe that hard work, determination and resilience are encoded in our DNA’, she said. ‘We know we have the “worrying gene”, we know we have the “put your coat on because it’s cold outside gene”, but we also have the “stand up and fight for what you believe in gene”.’”<sup>1</sup>

Clinton’s speech illustrates the way that scientific conceptions become part of the way we see ourselves. This evokes several questions. It is a myth to think that for every human talent or other kind of property there is a gene which corre-

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1 Fernando Suarez, “Clinton Says She Has the Right Genes To Be President”, CBS, 11 Mai 2008, [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-502443\\_162-4086447-502443.html](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-502443_162-4086447-502443.html).

lates one-to-one with that property, but this is not my main interest—geneticists can dispel that myth much better than I can. Another question is: do we have a genetic makeup and does it (besides other factors) determine our physiological constitution and our talents? We can be very short about this: of course we do, and of course it does: there is absolutely no reason to call these scientific insights into question. But the truly philosophical question is: what *other* conceptions of the self does the genetic perspective compete with? The molecular structures called genes do not occur in our ordinary experience and they are virtually absent from our life stories. We can take any biography and we will see that reference to genes is almost always non-existent or futile. Assuming that there is truth in the stories we tell about ourselves, we have to ask how this truth about human existence is reconcilable with the scientific truth that genes are an important factor in determining what and who we are.

Consider another example of the influence of science on our self-reflection: Derek Thompson's article in The Atlantic about consumer behavior.<sup>2</sup> Thompson states that we, consumers, are not very good at making rational decisions. Part of the problem, he says, is that very often we simply do not calculate what a price reduction or an offer of a free extra quantity of a certain product amounts to. He presents eleven ways in which “we are not good at math”.<sup>3</sup> Although Thompson's insights are certainly worth paying attention to, I am here more interested in something else: the author in passing refers to the *brain* as responsible for our lack of a critical attitude. Thompson tells us that most people prefer a free extra portion of a certain product over a reduction on an unchanged quantity of the same product, even if the reduction makes the purchase relatively cheaper: “Consumers don't know what the heck anything should cost, so we rely on parts of our brains that aren't strictly quantitative.”<sup>4</sup> In addition, we would rather buy something which costs \$99.99 than something priced \$100.00, although the difference between the two prices is negligible. Thompson explains: “In the number 9, the bargain-hunter/discount-gatherer corner of our brain spots a pluckable deal.”<sup>5</sup> Thompson apparently thinks that *we* do not spot a beneficial deal: our *brain* spots it. Or do the brain and the person whose brain it is *both* spot the deal?

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2 Derek Thompson, “The 11 Ways That Consumers Are Hopeless at Math”, The Atlantic, 6 July 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/07/the-11-ways-that-consumers-are-hopeless-at-math/259479/>.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

Thompson's story is not emphatically about brain functioning, and he also refers to us, consumers, as *persons* who make choices on the basis of certain narratives: "If you can't sell a product, try putting something nearly identical, but twice as expensive, next to it. It'll make the first product look like a gotta-have-it bargain. One explanation for why this tactic works is that people like stories or justifications. Since it's terribly hard to know the true value of things, we need narratives to explain our decisions to ourselves."<sup>6</sup> We see that Thompson sometimes refers to the brain as the decision maker, at other times to the person as the one who decides. But it is not clear what criteria Thompson uses to refer either to the "consumer-brain" or to the "consumer-person". Could he also have said, in the latter quotation, that "the *brain* needs narratives to explain its decisions to *itself*"? In other words, are "brain" and "person" interchangeable in such sentences? Or do we tacitly shift from a first-person perspective to a scientific, third-person point of view in these cases?

I think we do, and this raises a number of further questions. What motivates such shifts of perspective? When are we justified—not morally, but logically—to choose our usual "I did this"-perspective, and when should we instead turn to the "the brain decided"-point of view? Can we say at all that the brain decides something? It is undeniable that good brain functioning is a precondition for perception, action, and decisions, including consumer choices. It is also undeniable that we can (at least under lab circumstances) correlate decision making with specific brain processes. But do these observations imply that it is actually the brain that makes the decision?

Both the genes example and the "consumer-brain" example raise the question of which perspective we should adopt in our everyday self-reflection, and this question refers us to the mind-body problem. Let us suppose for now that human beings have bodies which are potentially scientific objects, and that they also have minds. What, then, is the relationship between this objective human body, including our genes and the brain, and the mind that is in some sense (and to some extent) the master of that body? When Thompson refers to the stories we tell ourselves, he intuitively ascribes these stories, not to the brain, but to us, persons. Perhaps Thompson felt it was a step too far to say that the brain would explain its decisions to *itself* by telling *itself* stories. As regards the first example, Clinton does not always talk about her genes: the campaign speech quoted above was in this respect exceptional. Both examples illustrate that, although we are inclined to integrate a scientific way of thinking into our self-reflection, we are for some reason not inclined to adopt the scientific perspective as our default

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6 Ibid.

point of view. Even if it is true that we increasingly have recourse to scientific explanations in order to understand our behavior, there is always a point at which we return to our first-person perspective and say, for instance: “The offer looked good to me, so I bought it.” Or: “Women are in some respects more talented than men.”

What is a person and her narratives in relation to her body and her brain? The question pertains to what we consider to be the scope of human *reality*. What is our ultimate reality: is it the body as an objective part of nature or is it the person who refers to herself as an ego, an I? Is it the physical and organic body or is it the first person of experience, and the world as she experiences it in her own life—what in philosophy we call the *phenomenal* world? The question is: what do we regard as real, this phenomenal world including ourselves as inhabitants of that world or objective reality, including our bodies as part of that reality—or somehow both?

If we feel the need to choose at this point we might be tempted to endorse a materialist position. According to materialism, the way we experience the various worlds that make up our lives (our working environment, family, the activities we enjoy, the world of art, politics, entertainment, and so forth) are nothing but an illusion caused by natural processes within the external world and our own bodies. The materialist argues that his position draws on scientific knowledge, the truth of which is based on its relationship to an objective reality. This objective reality might include living and non-living things, but from the scientific perspective the non-living is more fundamental than the living: the existence of the organic (including human life) depends on a preexisting inanimate world, not vice versa. There is certainly truth in this way of thinking, but as I will show, this truth needs to be complemented by an account which treats the phenomenal world as more fundamental than physical reality. Materialism does not accept this complementary view: it thinks only physical reality can have a fundamental ontological status.

It is important to note that not all physical realism is reductionistic and materialistic: if you believe that physical reality is indeed *real*, this does not automatically mean that you reject the reality of the phenomenal world. You might still also want to embrace some form of *phenomenal* realism. The phenomenal realist says that the world as we experience it from our first-person perspective is real. He says that the consumer’s decision to buy this or that product cannot be reduced to the objective processes within his own body. In this view, the phenomenal world cannot be reduced to physical reality because it is of a fundamentally different kind: the phenomenal world does not have the same *structure* as physical reality. The latter view is my own position: I argue that in order to un-

derstand our being in the world we need to endorse both physical and phenomenal realism. One of the main aims of this book is to show how we can reconcile both views.<sup>7</sup>

But what does it mean to say that the phenomenal world has a different “structure” than physical reality? I address this question by distinguishing between two concepts of “transcendence”. Let me introduce this distinction, for now in a sketchy manner, by restricting myself to the way the external, *natural* world is present to us.

Phenomenal nature is characterized by an inexhaustible richness of colors, shapes, sounds, smells, landscapes, weather conditions, minerals, organisms, and so forth. It is organized by spatial orientations: every landscape has a higher zone (e.g. above the horizon) and a lower zone, a left and a right, a zone close to us and a zone far away from us—regardless of where exactly we would draw the boundaries. Accordingly, every object appears with one side up, the other side down, with a left side and a right side, and with a front and a back. The phenomenal world is furthermore constituted on the one hand by primary properties like mass and volume, and on the other hand by secondary properties like sound and color. However, our ordinary perception does not distinguish between these two types of properties. Insofar as primary properties like mass are perceived, physical reality is *integrated* in the phenomenal world. The coldness of the snow really tells me something about a physical property of the snow that science, in a different way, also has access to. One stone feels heavier than the other: if we are not tricked by a perceptual illusion, a scale will affirm that the stones have different masses within physical reality. In our prescientific perception of the phenomenal world, primary and secondary properties are all the same to us.

This phenomenal world is characterized by an ambiguity of immanence and transcendence. On the one hand the appearing world correlates with what we actually perceive on the basis of our familiarity with the environment; this is the world’s immanence to experience. On the other hand, since the phenomenal world is always only partially given in perception, we can say that it has a depth of qualities which goes beyond, which *transcends* its actual appearance to us. Because the world transcends us it always invites further exploration and can keep surprising us. This is the first concept of the transcendence of nature I distinguish.

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7 By “reconcile” I do not mean that I bring the two realisms to a synthesis, but rather that I present a view which *accommodates* both physical and phenomenal realism while at the same time respecting the fundamental discontinuity between these two perspectives.

In contrast with the phenomenal world, physical reality does not possess secondary but only primary properties. Among these primary properties are the properties which render possible that, on a phenomenal level, *secondary* properties (also) appear as part of the phenomenal world of human beings. As just noted, we experience the phenomenal world as organized by spatial orientations, but if we adopt a more theoretical point of view we know that spatial orientations cannot be ascribed to physical reality. Since the outer world is nonetheless present to us according to these structures (unity of primary and secondary qualities and spatial orientation<sup>8</sup>), physical reality is not only integrated in the world as it appears: it also has an aspect which is, as it were, turned away from the phenomenal world. The obscure side of physical reality is not the same as the phenomenal depth of qualities referred to above, since the latter qualities are all *potential* phenomenal appearances. This is the second way in which we can speak of the “transcendence” of nature: physical reality transcends the way in which the external world is present to us in perception. From this perspective, the phenomenal world *as such* is immanent to perception. In other words, when we concentrate on the relationship between physical reality and the phenomenal world, we necessarily lose sight of the depth of qualities, i.e., of the dimension of transcendence *intrinsic* to the phenomenal world. We can only be oriented towards one of these two kinds of transcendence at a time, because the one always makes the other invisible. This also means that it makes no sense to say that one of these realities is “more transcendent” than the other.

Let me illustrate the two meanings of “transcendence” by giving an example. Take a single natural object: a boulder in a shallow stream. We know that it has many aspects, a texture which is smooth at one place, rough and gritty at another. As an aesthetic object the rock can be studied indefinitely. The rock shines through all its appearances, and it continues to invite new points of view. We attribute transcendence to the rock insofar as it possesses a richness of properties which can in principle be perceived but which goes beyond its actual appearance here and now (first concept of transcendence). The boulder in the stream appears with a top and a bottom, a front, a back, a left and a right. If we say that it does not really have these spatial orientations, because the rock up side down looks quite the same, then we still have to admit that after the turn we *see* the top in the side which used to be the bottom. This is necessarily so, because the phenomenal world, the landscape of which the rock is a part, is always organized by spatial orientations. But when we reflect on these matters on a more theoretical level

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8 For the sake of simplicity I am, for now, leaving out the motivational structure of the phenomenal world, which I turn to later.

and we abstract from the structure of perception, we realize that, in some sense, neither the rock nor the surface of the earth possess a top or a bottom, a left or a right. We are then contemplating physical reality as it is in itself, and we find that the physical is not characterized by these orientations, or that they are merely relative. Insofar as physical reality in itself does not possess spatial orientations, it can be said to *transcend* the phenomenal world, because the phenomenal is characterized by these very orientations (second concept of transcendence).<sup>9</sup>

I have distinguished between two concepts of transcendence: the transcendence of the phenomenal (intrinsic to the phenomenal world) and the transcendence of physical reality (extrinsic to the phenomenal world). The main emphasis in this book is on the concept of the transcendence of physical reality, i.e., on the relationship *between* physical reality and the phenomenal world. Let me return for a moment to the question of why this is an important topic. As noted, the attempt to get some grip on the relationship between natural science and our prescientific experience leads to the question regarding the truth of scientific knowledge—its possibility and its limitations. In my view, acknowledging the possibility of scientific truth depends on physical realism: physical reality is the *ontic* condition for the possibility of scientific truth. However, if the world of first-person experience has a different structure than physical reality but is no less real, then there are at the same time *limitations* to the scientific domain. Scientific truth competes with, for instance, the truth conveyed by the stories we tell about ourselves. When I speak of the “truth” of stories I do not mean the details of our narratives, but rather the basic presuppositions of storytelling with regard to what we, human beings, are. Taking someone seriously by listening to her story means that we approach her as a person, who makes choices and gains some understanding of herself through self-reflection and conversation. It means that we approach the other person as a being who is situated in a natural and a social world, which means that she is *free*—not in an absolute but in a relative sense.

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9 We can attribute a third meaning to the expression “transcendence of nature”. This meaning is located on the phenomenal level, but it cannot be defined merely in terms of the world’s qualitative depth. It refers to the otherness and to the intrinsic value of nature, which makes itself felt *in* and *through* the specificity of its qualities. Charles Taylor discusses the Romantic background of this concept of transcendence and he also seems to endorse that tradition when, referring to nature and other moral sources, he calls on us to engage in “the search for moral sources *outside* the subject” (Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 510). I leave this conception of nature’s transcendence aside. I mention it in order to avoid the misunderstanding that my current use of the word “transcendence” would have this moral or existential significance.

We do this all the time in the practice of our daily lives. Even in extreme cases, if a person's life is full of adversity so that the person's freedom is constantly restricted, the tragedy of this life consists precisely in this person's *real* freedom being minimized. We can only make sense of such tragedy if we accept a non-reductive concept of freedom. The crux is that by speaking of freedom as a reality we do not judge on the question of *how* free we are.<sup>10</sup>

Since my introduction of the concept of a phenomenal world above was restricted to nature, it did not yet include a notion of freedom. Even if it is only my secondary aim to contribute to the classic freedom-determinism debate, I still need a broader concept of the phenomenal world, so that it includes our inner world and the social world. I will return to the different senses of "phenomenal world" in Section 3 of this introduction. In addition, in the chapters to come I will try to show that the attempt to reconcile physical realism and phenomenal realism not only serves the aim of understanding our relationship to the outer world, but also of doing justice to the person, her freedom, and the social character of her life.

On the one hand we should take seriously the truth claim of science; on the other hand science cannot tell the whole truth about human existence. The attempt to reconcile physical realism and phenomenal realism is an attempt to argue that very point. Finally, this attempt also entails the necessity of dealing with the problem of how a human being can be both a mind and a body (or have a mind and a body). But, as I argue, the mind-body problem can only be addressed properly if at the same time we change its traditional Cartesian formulation in these very terms: mind (*res cogitans*) and body (*res extensa*). This formulation implies that the mind is something immaterial and accessible to a first person, that the body is something purely material and mechanical, and best described by science, and that mind and body are thus *divorced* from one another.

This book will put forward several objections to the Cartesian view. Firstly, the body is not only an object of science but also a thing that is part of our everyday world. My body is an object of everyday perception (whether I am the subject of perception or not) and, as we saw above, a phenomenal object is not

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10 For this reason I am critical of Dick Swaab's way of reasoning about freedom (Swaab, *Wij zijn ons brein*, 379-382/ *We Are Our Brains*, 326-329). Step by step Swaab tries to show that we are not as free as we are inclined to think. This attempt to "dispel the myth" of freedom is logically flawed, because Swaab confounds two questions. The primary philosophical question is: are we in any respect, and to any extent, free beings? The degree of freedom and our possible overestimation of it is secondary to that question.

the same as a physical object. Secondly, the mind is not purely immaterial: it is itself *embodied*. The mind is primarily an engaged, sensorimotor openness to the world. It is the subject of bodily perceptions and actions in the external world, or of immediate bodily self-expressions within the social world. It is the same body that performs the act of thinking, even though thinking seems at a distance from the body. We need to replace the “mind-body problem” by the question of how these various aspects of our existence, i.e., embodied subjectivity and the various senses in which the body is “objective”, are interconnected. This question follows from the question of how the scientific and the first-person perspective are interrelated. A philosophy of the body is the key to understanding the relationship between physical reality and the phenomenal world, as my body is both part of and relates to this reality and this world.

Because of this focus on the body, a large part of this book is devoted to Merleau-Ponty, who is widely regarded as the philosopher of the body par excellence. But I will draw even more strongly on the less well-known Helmuth Plessner. Both Merleau-Ponty and Plessner have developed a philosophy of embodied subjectivity (although, in relation to Plessner, we should actually speak of “embodied personhood”<sup>11</sup>), and both defend the primacy of first-person experience and self-understanding over scientific perspectives. Finally, they have in common a thorough knowledge of natural science. Plessner was not only a philosopher but also a biologist. Both Plessner and Merleau-Ponty base their views on detailed interpretations of research in the fields of biology, behavioral sciences, neuroscience, physiology, and psychology.

As regards the historical background of these two philosophers, Plessner’s main work, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*,<sup>12</sup> was published 14

11 According to Plessner, human beings are not only subjects but also persons, and “person” is the more encompassing concept. I agree with Plessner’s distinction, but in phenomenology the word “subject” predominates and, in addition, it is often interchangeable with “person”. We speak, for instance, of the subject as a first person. Therefore, until the discussion of Plessner in Chapter 5, I will follow this flexible usage.

12 Hereafter: *Stufen*. A translation of this work into English is forthcoming. References to the *Stufen* will first mention the page number from the De Gruyter edition, then the one from the Suhrkamp edition (separated by a forward slash). Translations of passages from the *Stufen* are mine. As regards other translated passages, all translations in this book are my own, unless I add the page number from an existing translation, which is then mentioned in the bibliography. Page numbers from translations are given after the page numbers from the original work, separated by a forward slash.

years before Merleau-Ponty's first important work, *La structure du comportement*.<sup>13</sup> It seems that Merleau-Ponty had not read Plessner's *Stufen*.<sup>14</sup> Merleau-Ponty only refers to some texts which Plessner wrote together with F.J.J. Buylendijk, but he never enters into a discussion with Plessner about the essential parts of his philosophy. Interesting though this history is, I will focus on the systematic comparison between the two views. I think that, on the one hand, Plessner offers a more encompassing framework for understanding the relationship between physical reality and phenomenal world. On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty's concept of motivation and his distinction between syncretic, amovable, and symbolic behavior, are unequaled and indispensable for our purposes. In my view, both philosophers complement one another.

I have given this book the title *Body and Reality* because it explores in what ways we are, as bodies, both *part* of reality and *open* to that same reality. The word "reality" not only refers to physical reality but also to the phenomenal world. Only our phenomenally present environment can be called a "world", but this term does not imply that it is merely subjective and not real. As noted above, the aspiration of this book is to accommodate both physical and phenomenal realism. It is to show how both the physical and the phenomenal can be real.

Without doubt, this agenda raises the question whether this is still a phenomenological project. This question will be touched upon a number of times, but I will not present any definite answer or make strong claims about the issue. I will assume that phenomenology can be expanded to include physical realism. One reason in favor of this assumption is that, as I will show in Chapters 6 and 7, we have first-person experience of physical reality as that which transcends the phenomenal world. Phenomenology is the philosophy of first-person experience. Another reason is that we can apply eidetic variation and reduction to physical reality as it is in itself (more about this in Section 3 of this Introduction). But to be honest, I am not entirely sure yet whether my agenda should be to *expand* phenomenology or to *complement* it with a philosophy of physical reality and physical realism. In that sense the phenomenological pretence of this book is somewhat hypothetical. I hope that my phenomenological readers acknowledge that this is not the most important question we face. We should think freely about these matters and not turn phenomenology into a dogmatic program. So, in principle, we should be prepared to expand phenomenology beyond its current boundaries *or* accept that there is more to philosophy than phe-

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13 Hereafter: *The Structure of Behavior*, except in footnotes.

14 Cf. Stryker-Boudier, *Merleau-Ponty and Buylendijk: Report of a Relationship*, and van Buuren, *Buylendijk und die Philosophische Anthropologie*.

nomenology if the *things themselves* urge us to do so. The question whether you agree with my view is more important than the question whether you want to call it phenomenology (which is not to say that the latter question is unimportant).

The next section is an announcement of the content of all 7 chapters of this book. This enables the reader to get a quick overview and to find points of his or her interest. However, being a summary it is unavoidably a bit dense and raises many questions – which, I hope, will all be answered in the course of this book. Section 3 of this Introduction explains the reasons behind some of the main terms used. Readers who want to dive right into the matter may want to skip Section 2 and 3 and move on to Chapter 1.

## 2.

Part I of this book discusses the two dominant strands of materialism today, reductionism and eliminativism, and some criticisms of these strands of thought. In Chapter 1 I discuss Daniel Dennett's reductive materialism. Dennett is not only one of the most important representatives of materialism of our time; his "heterophenomenology" also invites a comparison with phenomenology. In the discussion of Dennett, the question regarding science and ordinary, non-scientific self-understanding turns out to be inextricably intertwined with the so-called mind-body problem. (I say "so-called" because, as I will explain, the term "mind-body problem" is a bad phrasing of the actual issue at hand.) Dennett thinks there are two possible answers to this problem: materialistic monism and Cartesian dualism. Dualism is the idea that the mind is something immaterial and thus divorced from the material human body. Since Dennett wants to steer clear of this radical separation of body and mind, he embraces materialistic monism instead. This is also the background of his rejection of phenomenology.

I argue that Dennett misconstrues phenomenology and that, consequently, his objections to this tradition miss their target. In addition, I show that while Dennett tries to abandon phenomenological concepts on the personal level, he tacitly reintroduces such concepts on the subpersonal level of neuronal functioning. In this way he involuntarily demonstrates the indispensability of phenomenological understanding.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> My criticism of Dennett is, of course, not a novelty but stands in a long tradition of phenomenological critiques of materialism or naturalism. As noted, I draw on Plessner's and Merleau-Ponty's, but also on Charles Taylor's work. As regards the criti-

Part of my critique of Dennett is inspired by Maxwell Bennett and Peter Hacker, whose *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience* is discussed in Section 2.1. Bennett and Hacker rightly criticize what they call the “mereological fallacy”: Dennett ascribes properties which belong to the person as a whole (such as thinking or perception) to only a “part” of the person: the brain. Although I agree with the tenor of this critique, I argue that Bennett and Hacker’s ordinary language approach needs to be complemented by phenomenology. I then turn to the other dominant strand of materialism today: eliminative materialism. Whereas Dennett sometimes allows that intentional states are real, but can only be explained on a subpersonal level, Paul and Patricia Churchland, inspired by Quine, claim that such states are not real in the first place. They think that only physical reality is real. I argue that the Churchlands implicitly presuppose that there is something like first-person knowledge, which means that their view is incoherent. I also criticize their concept of “folk psychology”: this notion is too restricted in scope to define the domain of first-person experience.

In Section 2.3, the final section of Chapter 2, I turn to the question to what extent phenomenology is the prisoner of a mechanism of polarization between phenomenology and materialism. Has phenomenology, in its fierce defense of the phenomenal world against reductionism, failed to do justice to physical reality and its relationship to the phenomenal world? In Chapters 6 and 7 I show that this can indeed be argued in regard to Merleau-Ponty. In Section 2.3 I prepare that discussion by pointing the question at Husserl and Heidegger, arguing that neither of the two provides a convenient starting point for understanding physical reality in relation to the phenomenal world.

Chapter 3 discusses the phenomenological-hermeneutical view of Charles Taylor. Taylor does not extensively criticize Dennett or the Churchlands, but his critique of naturalism also applies to materialism (as one form of naturalism). I agree with Taylor that the question regarding a true understanding of our being in the world is a matter of finding the “best account” of it.<sup>16</sup> If it turns out that scientific concepts are too poor to accommodate our own experiences and our basic forms of self-understanding, then we need a different kind of concepts. I

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cism of the reduction of human experience to, specifically, neural processes, we find an early example in Émil Du Bois-Reymond’s 1872 Paper *Über die Grenzen des Naturerkennens* (*The Limits of Our Knowledge of Nature*), which I will refer to a couple of times. I hope the beginning of my introduction makes clear that, despite this rich tradition, it remains important to explore the relationship between the scientific world picture and our ordinary self-understanding.

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

argue that Taylor is right that hermeneutical phenomenology offers a better account of our being in the world than materialism. Phenomenology connects directly with the way we experience the world as first persons and also with the narrative structure of our self-understanding. The reality of freedom, of subjectivity, of what we express in our narratives, we can summarize as “phenomenal reality”. We can thus say that Taylor supports phenomenal realism.

The discussions in Part I lead to four further questions, which I take up in Part II. I will first sketch these questions, and then present the layout of the remaining chapters.

(A) Taylor touches on the problem of how the first-person point of view and the scientific perspective are interconnected, but he does not give a place to the scientific perspective within subjectivity as a whole. Another open question is: what motivates the shift from one perspective to the other? I call this problem the question of the arrangement of perspectives.

(B) We may reject materialism by pointing out that we are subjects or persons who experience the world in a way which is indescribable from a third-person point of view, but then we still need to develop an alternative response to the mind-body problem. The question is: what is the best account of the nexus of human body and mind? We have to start by asking ourselves whether the formulation “mind-body problem”, or its variant “mind-brain problem”, is a good point of departure in the first place.

(C) The power of materialism lies in its physical realism and in the thesis that the human body is an integral part of the physical universe. Taylor in passing endorses physical realism (i.e., besides phenomenal realism), but this is not a main issue for him so he does not present an extensive argument to support his position. Are there any further arguments in favor of physical realism, besides the need to do justice to the truth claim of science?

(D) How can we overcome the one-sidedness of materialism and at the same time retain its inherent physical realism? In other words, how can we understand that both physical reality and the human, phenomenal world are real?

The key to addressing these issues is a philosophy of the human body. Although Taylor does not develop such a philosophy he often refers to (and defends) Merleau-Ponty. As noted, I will draw on both Merleau-Ponty and Plessner. The discussion of Merleau-Ponty will focus on *The Structure of Behavior*, because this work expounds the relationship between physical reality and human existence. In addition, I discuss a number of key-passages from Merleau-Ponty’s

*Phénoménologie de la perception.*<sup>17</sup> Merleau-Ponty's later work will also be touched on.

The layout of Part II is as follows. In Chapters 4 and 5 I address the problem of the arrangement of perspectives and the mind-body problem. The question we inherit from Dennett is: what do we do with dualism? When we say that there is not only a human body but also a real subject or person who lives in a real world of phenomenal qualities, are we not embracing a mind as divorced from the body? Both Plessner and Merleau-Ponty show that there are more fruitful ways of formulating the mind-body problem: the "mind" is not an immaterial substance; it is our subjective *bodily* openness to the world. We should thus speak of a body-subject, so that the question is no longer: what is the relationship between the mind and the body?, but rather: what is the relationship between the subjective aspect of the body and the objective aspect of the body?<sup>18</sup>

Interpreting Merleau-Ponty, I argue that the subject's first-person experience has primacy over the objectification of the body by science. (The same can also be argued on the basis of Plessner's view.) This concerns the problem of the "arrangement of perspectives". I show that the turn to the perspective of natural science is fundamentally motivated by the need or desire to heal, restore, or enhance our being in the world as subjects. I then explore in what way we are an objective body not to science but to ourselves as first persons. I begin with a discussion of the *perception* of the body proper according to Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*. Merleau-Ponty on the one hand allows that *parts* of the body proper can be an object to me; on the other hand he expresses the view that our body cannot be an object *at all* to us, since the body is first and foremost a subject who is open to the phenomenal world. We find a broader outlook in Merleau-Ponty's earlier *The Structure of Behavior*: an *awareness* of the objective body is here more fundamental than specific perceptions of it. The subject not only perceives *parts* of his body as objects: his whole body is to himself both

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17 Hereafter: *Phenomenology of Perception* or simply *Phenomenology*, except in footnotes.

18 I do not agree with Taylor Carman that phenomenology should not address the mind-body problem because it would be a "metaphysical" not a "phenomenological" question (Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 227). Both Carman and I see that the problem is badly formulated, but, in my view, this is precisely why it needs phenomenological re-description. Admittedly, I have a fairly broad view of phenomenology—more about this below.

a sensorimotor subject and “an object among objects”.<sup>19</sup> I find *The Structure of Behavior* in this respect more persuasive than the *Phenomenology of Perception*.

The question concerning the body as an object of the phenomenal world can be solved by comparing Merleau-Ponty’s own texts, but one fundamental question then still remains unanswered. When Merleau-Ponty states that we are to ourselves not only subjects but also objects among other objects, it is not clear *from what position* we can actually experience our bodies as both subject and object, or *in what position* we are, insofar as we are conscious of these two aspects. In addition, it is unclear in what *form of embodiment* this distance from the objective and subjective body is realized. Merleau-Ponty’s anthropology remains a philosophy of embodied *subjectivity*, which human beings share with higher animals.

In Chapter 5 I argue that Plessner’s view is very similar to Merleau-Ponty’s, except that Plessner complements Merleau-Ponty’s view in regard to this very issue. With Plessner we can understand what it is about our embodied being in the world that renders possible that we relate to both the subjectivity and the objectivity of our bodies. In Plessner’s view, only a being that is “eccentrically positioned” lives at a distance to these two aspects of his existence. This way of being positioned in the world, this “form of positionality”, defines the human being as a person. Plessner’s philosophy of “embodied personhood”, as we can call it, thus surpasses and encompasses Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of “embodied subjectivity”.

Chapters 4 and 5 still deal with the body proper as, on the one hand, a scientific object and on the other hand an object of the first person’s phenomenal world. Science approaches the body as an organic or a physical object, but the fact that our body is part of physical reality can also be experienced from a pre-scientific perspective. So far, when we speak of the first-person experience of the objective body, this refers to the body as an object of *the phenomenal world*. As noted, the phenomenal world has a structure which differs from that of physical reality: it is organized by perceptual qualities and spatial orientations. In Chapters 6 and 7 I explain that in exceptional situations we are specifically confronted with the body as an object of *physical reality*, or better: the *tension* between the phenomenal world and physical reality makes itself felt. I argue that this happens in two types of experience: (a) experiences of the threat of a natural disaster, and (b) perceptual illusions. The physical body in this sense, although experienced from a first-person point of view, is not the same as the body as an object of the phenomenal world. Only by addressing the body proper as part of

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19 Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 128/118.

physical reality can we complete our answer to the mind-body problem and (at least within the logical space of this book) definitely overcome materialism.

In Chapter 6 I argue that Merleau-Ponty's view of the relationship between physical reality and the phenomenal world is not entirely consistent. On the one hand Merleau-Ponty presupposes that physical reality is the ontic precondition of the higher dialectics of animal and human existence. On the other hand there is, in his view, no physical reality in itself: physical reality would be a human construction on the basis of the lived world, and physical gestalts are, according to him, *perceptual* gestalts. The problem arises that, if physical reality is a human construction, it cannot at the same time be an ontic precondition for human existence. This problem is of an ontological-epistemological kind. It amounts to a question of foundation: is physical reality a perceptual structure and conceptual construct, based on our first-person experience, or is it the other way around: is the phenomenal world based on physical reality? I argue that we are concerned with two *directions* of foundation which are complementary. Materialism clearly founds the phenomenal world on physical reality. Merleau-Ponty in some passages does the exact opposite: by stating that physical reality is a human construct or a perceptual gestalt, he one-sidedly founds physical reality on the structure of the human world.

I show that Plessner tacitly respects both directions of foundation. On the one hand he attributes to the phenomenal world its proper structure (perceptual qualities, spatial orientation) and on the other hand he examines physical reality insofar as it is not part of the phenomenal world, because it is its ontic foundation. A Plessnerian approach includes an ontology which goes beyond phenomenology in the narrow sense of a description of the structure of the appearing world,<sup>20</sup> and affirms the existence of physical reality beyond the phenomenal world. This approach allows us to reconcile physical realism with phenomenal realism. In the comparison with Merleau-Ponty, the physical realism part is the trickiest. Therefore I will underpin my argument by discussing the possibility of natural disasters and perceptual illusions: these two kinds of events can only be understood if we accept that physical reality precedes, supports, and transcends human existence and perception. Whereas in Chapter 6 natural disasters are discussed, Chapter 7 focuses on perceptual illusions.

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20 In the next section I explain what senses of phenomenology I distinguish.

### 3.

Before I cut to the chase I will make five remarks on the terminology used in this book.

#### (1) “Paradox” and “ambiguity”

Both Plessner and Merleau-Ponty use the words “paradox”<sup>21</sup> and “ambiguity”<sup>22</sup> in a positive sense, and I will follow this usage. Some philosophers find the use of these words very fashionable, and they do not mean that as a compliment. In my view, they are indispensable tools if we want to describe the topics introduced above, and especially if we want to describe the *relationships* between *unlike domains* of phenomena or entities. To recur to the example of spatial orientation, it appears to be undeniable that the world taken as a phenomenal world incorporates spatial orientations like up and down. But it also seems true that the world taken as physical reality does not possess such orientations. What word should we use to describe the relationship between the phenomenal world, with its spatial orientations, and physical reality, without such orientations?

If we call the relationship a “contradiction”, then we have to decide that one of these “truths” is in fact not a truth at all: only physical reality or the phenomenal world would be real. This is why the word “paradox” springs to mind.

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21 Plessner, *Stufen*, 305/379: “then the original paradox of the human being’s life situation becomes clear: that, as a subject, he stands against himself and the world, and that, at the same time, he is at a distance from this opposition.” Cf. also *ibid.*, 342-343/420-421 and 346/424, in regard to the utopian standpoint as “paradox” (*Paradoxon* (343/421, 346/424)) and even “contradiction” (*Widerspruch* (342/420)/ *Widersinn* (342-343/420-421)).

Merleau-Ponty very often uses the word paradox (*paradoxe*) and paradoxical (*paradoxal*) in a positive sense. One example is *Phénoménologie de la perception*, viii/XV, where Merleau-Ponty says that phenomenology should reveal the world “as strange and paradoxical”.

22 Plessner, *Lachen und Weinen*, 235/32 (translation modified): “It was overlooked that the human being has, not a univocal, but an equivocal relation to his body, that his existence imposes on him the ambiguity of an ‘embodied’ creature and a creature ‘in the body’, an ambiguity that means an actual break in his way of existing.”

Merleau-Ponty uses the words “ambiguous” (*ambigu*) and “ambiguity” (*ambiguïté*) so often that de Waelhens calls his thinking “a philosophy of ambiguity” (the title of de Waelhens’s foreword to *La structure du comportement*).

A paradox is a *seeming* contradiction. With this term we can try to make sense of the fact that both the physical universe and the phenomenal world are real. The word “ambiguity” is a kindred term: it describes the relationship between these two aspects of reality in a more positive way than “paradox”; it underscores that the logical hiatus between the physical and the phenomenal is *constitutive* of their relationship. Incidentally, I will use “paradox” and “ambiguity” on other occasions, too, but always in a similar sense: to describe the relationship between two unlike aspects of our being in the world. When I use the word “paradox” I emphasize that the relationship is a logical problem and a challenge for our thinking. When I say “ambiguity” I endorse that the relationship at issue constitutes a positive structure. For the sake of clarity I will use the word “equivocity” to refer to unproductive “ambiguities”, like inconsistencies.

## **(2) Three senses of “phenomena” and “phenomenology”**

I use “phenomena” and “phenomenology” both in narrower and in wider senses. In the narrowest sense, the phenomenal world is the world as it appears in perception. This means that we are here primarily concerned with the *outer* world, not with the mind’s inner world or with the social world.<sup>23</sup> It also means that we are emphatically concerned with the way the outer world *appears* to us. Elements of this “way of appearing” are both primary and secondary properties (like color, mass, sound, smell, volume), spatial orientations like up, down, left, and right, the thing’s appearance in adumbrations, and the figure-background structure of the perceived world.

In Chapters 6 and 7 I use “phenomenal world” in this narrow sense. There, the central issue is the relationship between the phenomenal world and physical reality. On the one hand the physical is *integrated* in the phenomenal world: gravitation is a physical force and I have perceptual experience of it. On the other hand, physical reality is *hidden* from such prescientific perception, and in tension with it: we perceive colors, sounds, and spatial orientations but these structures do not belong to physical reality. We know that physical reality does not, in itself, have these properties. This places physical reality as it were beyond our perception and beyond the phenomenal world as the correlate of perception.

In the wider (but not the widest) sense, a “phenomenon” is an integral part of the world as it is experienced by the subject as a first person. The subject or person herself is included in this field of experience. The boundary of the notion

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<sup>23</sup> The distinction between inner world, outer world, and social world is from Plessner. It will be explained in Section 5.1.

is here defined by first-person experience, whereby “experience” is much broader than perception. The phenomenal concerns anything carried out by the first person or “lived through” by her as her reality. Phenomena do not only include external things like the coffee cup on my table and the blueness of the sky, but in addition everything that belongs to the self and the social world, including dreams, memories, imaginations and thoughts, but also social interaction, situations, feelings, emotions, moods, suffering, pleasure, freedom, character, language, story, mood, politics, war, trauma, institutions like states, businesses, schools, universities, the media, and praxes like outdoor sports, science, family life, love, sex, creating art, and philosophy itself.

When we address the freedom-determinism problem, we are not only concerned with a tension between physical reality and the appearance of the *external* world (the narrow definition of the phenomenal), but, more broadly, with the tension between physical reality and our sense of being a free self. Here, the phenomenal includes freedom, responsibility, motivation, reasons. The wider sense of the phenomenal includes the narrow sense, and the distinction between the two senses is not very sharp. Merleau-Ponty has demonstrated that an appearing object possesses a motivational structure: it invites us to do something with it, to respond to it in particular ways. This means that the perceived object is always already integrated in the life of a subject who has practical interests. The subject is solicited to respond *within a certain play of freedom*.<sup>24</sup>

According to a still wider sense that we can attribute to the “phenomenal”, even physical reality falls within the scope of this concept. I am not referring to physical reality insofar as it consists of the specific laws of nature which are discovered empirically. This is the field of scientific research. But physical reality is not the exclusive domain of science. The questions I raise about the relationship between physical reality and the phenomenal world are *philosophical* questions. If they are sensible questions, which I think they are, then physical reality is also a topic of philosophy. To go a step further, only philosophy can address the relationship between the physical *as such* and the phenomenal. Physics is not equipped to analyze the inner structure of the phenomenal world, and it is not able to think through the ambiguous relationship between the phenomenal world and physical reality.

But in what sense is physical reality a phenomenon, and thus a subject-matter of phenomenology? One of the reasons I want to use this “widest” definition of phenomenology (besides the “narrow” and the “wider” one), so that it in-

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24 As we will see, syncretic motivations are an exception to this, in that they escape direct intervention by the subject.

cludes the physical, is that we can apply Husserl's method of free imaginative variation to physical reality.<sup>25</sup> I think that any answer to the question which kinds of properties are primary qualities and which are secondary qualities is essentially based on such eidetic variation. We vary the properties (mass, color, volume, sound, temperature, movement, etc.) and decide on the basis of an intuiting of the object which of these properties belong to the physical object as it is in itself, and which properties are rather produced in our subjective relationship to the object. The process of narrowing down what belongs to the object itself is the so-called eidetic reduction.<sup>26</sup> This procedure is not empirical. I cannot decide by any experiment or observation whether the blue book in front of me, as a physical object, is in itself blue. When I see the book it appears as blue to me, and when I turn to measuring wave lengths I focus on the wave lengths. Although empirical research *correlates* wave lengths with seeing blue, it does not contemplate the nature of the correlation as such. It is no coincidence that Locke made the distinction between primary and secondary properties, determining that color must be a secondary property, long before Maxwell concluded that light is an electromagnetic wave. The relationship as such between colors and wave lengths is not a scientific problem.<sup>27</sup>

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25 For a clear description of this method, see Husserl, *Erfahrung und Urteil*, 409-442/339-364. Husserl is critical of the distinction between primary and secondary properties, but this is mainly because he wants to call into question the scientific thesis that only primary properties are real and secondary properties are not (Husserl, *Ideen I*, 82-83/84-85). However, it is important to note that my approach to physical reality goes against Husserlian phenomenology because, in Husserl's view, phenomenology cannot describe physical reality and certainly not a subject-independent physical reality. See Section 2.3.

26 When applied to primary properties, the method of eidetic variation and reduction differs somewhat from this procedure applied within the domain of the phenomenal world in a narrower sense. In the latter case subject-relativity does not imply that a property does not belong to the phenomenon.

27 Three qualifications need to be made. Firstly, I am presupposing that there is a distinction between science and (a priori, transcendental) philosophy, i.e., that philosophy is not a science. Even if we do want to call philosophy "science", then we still need to acknowledge that it is one of a kind. Secondly, I do not mean that a person who is an empirical scientist cannot engage in a deeper contemplation of the relationship between the physical and the phenomenal, or between primary and secondary properties. I simply say that if she does, she is doing philosophy. Thirdly, science has of course an extremely important role in informing philosophical reflection, and phi-

I have been arguing that first-person experience demarcates the domain of the phenomenal. Does that criterion still hold for the widest sense of “phenomenality”? In other words, can we have a first-person experience of physical reality as distinct from the phenomenal in the narrow sense? If I can feel that one stone is much heavier than another, I can, under normal circumstances, be pretty sure that it has, in itself, a greater mass. In that case the physical is not experienced as distinct from the phenomenal world but as integrated in it. It is simply the physical which appears phenomenally. Science not only quantifies such facts much more accurately, situating them in a context of physical laws, it also “perceives” much more of the external world than we can from our normal, prescientific perspective.

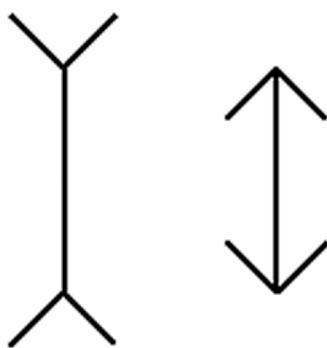


Figure 1: the Müller-Lyer illusion

But the question was: do we have first-person experiences of physical reality as somehow dissolving itself from, as in tension with, the phenomenal world? We do, as I will explain in Chapters 6 and 7. Occasionally we experience physical reality as being in tension with the phenomenal world. This happens in perceptual illusions. Consider for instance the Müller-Lyer illusion (figure 1). Phenomenally, the lines are unequal in length. To use Merleau-Ponty’s terminology, the auxiliary lines *motivate* the appearance of one main line as shorter than the other. Physically, the two main lines are equal in length (within a negligible margin of deviation). The physical truth of the matter is only established indirectly, in

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losophy interprets scientific findings. Philosophy is partly a meta-reflection on science and therefore both historically and logically dependent on it.

this case by measuring the actual lengths of the main lines. “Indirectly” means that we bypass the motivational structure of the appearing world.

In perceptual illusions, the phenomenal is not univocally the medium of the appearance of physical reality: the physical hides, so to speak, behind the motivational structure of the phenomenon. Insofar as we experience the illusion *as* an illusion, we are at the same time aware *that* something is being obscured. This awareness is part of our experience and therefore we can speak of an experience of the tension between physical reality and phenomenal world. Consequently, the physical, as distinct from the phenomenal, can indeed be experienced from a first-person perspective. This is another reason to use the widest sense of “the phenomenal”, so that the concept includes physical reality.

However, does this not cancel the distinction between the wider and the widest sense of the phenomenal? This is not necessarily the case. We can say that the second (wider) sense of the phenomenal includes all experience that is not an experience of the *boundary* of the phenomenal, i.e., the boundary which separates it from the physical insofar as it hides behind the structure of the phenomenal. Even if we would make another decision on these labels, the important thing is that we understand the differentiations involved. I will return to these issues elaborately in Chapters 6 and 7, then with a more thorough philosophical preparation, and with many more examples of perceptual illusions. At this point my main aim has been to show in which three senses I use “phenomenal” and “phenomenology”. I will not always make explicit which of these senses is meant, but I trust that this can be derived from the context.

### **(3) “Prescientific”, “everyday-life”, and “ordinary-life experience”**

The term “prescientific experience” expresses that our life experience is in some sense *prior to* the possibility of a scientific explanation of that experience. However, the disadvantage of this word is that it may sound as if, in ordinary life, we are always on the verge of turning to the scientific perspective, as if our life experience already presents itself as the potential object of scientific research. It is true that every experience can in principle be subjected to some scientific method, for instance in the form of a questionnaire to be filled out by the subject of the experience. The word “prescientific” is meant to denote that our normal experience has its proper structure which differs essentially from the structure of matter ruled by laws of nature, or of behavior as described by ethology or psychology. However, its explicit reference to science may in a subtle manner undermine that very aim.

Therefore we could choose to refer to prescientific experience as “everyday-life experience”. The latter term is in my view certainly acceptable, but not

without its own disadvantage: this expression, in turn, seems to exclude “special” experiences which go beyond the mediocrity of our daily lives, such as traumatic events or experiences of euphoria or a deep meaningfulness. That exclusion is not intended. As a third term to denote the domain of (prescientific, everyday-life) experience, I speak of “ordinary-life experience”.<sup>28</sup> This term seems to have the same downside as the previous one. The advantage of this variant is that it invites a comparison with “ordinary language philosophy”, which from my phenomenological perspective rightly stresses the ordinary (in the sense of the non-theoretical), but at the same time over-emphasizes the role of *language*. This will be argued in Section 2.1.

One could object to my use of these three terms that there is not one unified domain of “ordinary-life experience”: there are many cultural life forms in the world and so we must be concerned with a plurality of structures of ordinary life. I have two remarks in response to this objection. Firstly, any claim I make about the structure of ordinary life experience refers to a basic structure which underlies cultural variation. For example, different peoples are focused on different gestalts in the outer world, and gestalts are imbued with different meanings. For some peoples a full moon has a moral-religious significance. For many modern city dwellers the full moon might appeal to certain romantic feelings. But all peoples see *gestalhaft* unities, like the moon, which are more than the sum of their parts, and which motivate them to respond in a certain way. All peoples see the moon larger at the horizon than high up in the sky.

Secondly, it is true that individuals from different cultures produce different descriptions of this basic structure of ordinary-life experience, but this only implies that there is no such thing as absolute truth. It means that my claims about the structure of the phenomenal world constitute a finite attempt, from my particular perspective, to say something about the general structure of experience. Cultural diversity must actually be a productive factor: only from such finite perspectives can we have a go at saying something sensible and worthwhile for others and can we be interested in what people from other cultures have to say to us. I return to this issue in Section 3.4.

#### **(4) “First-person”, “second-person”, and “third-person perspective”**

Phenomenology wants to maintain a certain continuity with our ordinary (prescientific, everyday) life experience. This implies that it connects directly with

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28 Cf. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 73.

the experiences of an I, an ego, who is open to the external and the social world. Since phenomenology tries to describe the *general* structures of this experience, the first person singular is at the same time a first person plural. Nonetheless, the philosopher can only put the truth value of any phenomenological claim to the test if she relies on her own first-person (singular) experience of the world, and attempts to reduce the properties of the experience to the logically necessary possibility conditions of the type of experience at hand. After all, in philosophy, each individual has to find her own way of approximating what she regards as the truth of the matter. When it comes to taking position in philosophical debate, each person is left to her own devices.

In what sense is the turn to science a turn to a third-person perspective? According to one of its meanings in philosophy, which I will be loyal to, the third-person perspective always only refers to a scientific point of view. It denotes the fact that physics, chemistry, neuroscience, and other disciplines of natural science, approach the human being and the world as a purely objective, external reality, in other words, as part of a reality without subjects or persons.<sup>29</sup> However, the grammatical sense of “third-person perspective” (“he says”, “she does”, “it is”) does not in itself imply such objectification. The philosophical use of “third-person perspective” is justified only very minimally, namely by the fact that objects are always grammatically referred to as third persons. I cannot use the second person in regard to an object. I cannot say “you did such-and-such” or “you are so-and-so” to a coffee cup, a stone, or even a plant or lower animal. (Higher animals are an in-between case.) Only the third-person form includes the possibility of referring to entities which are not persons but non-living things or “lower” living things, like plants.<sup>30</sup>

What is the place of the second person in this context? We can only use the second-person form if the entity facing us is to herself a *first* person: she can say “I am . . .”, “I see . . .”, and so forth. The first-person perspective and the second-person perspective are thus tightly interconnected. This is illustrated by phrases

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- 29 Some scientific disciplines which study behavior take into account that the animal or human being is a sensorimotor subject, but since the goal is then still formulating laws (viz. of behavior), we are concerned with an objectification of a higher order (according to a certain dialectics of subject and object that will be described below).
- 30 We cannot conclude that we refer to single persons as “he” and “she” and to single things as “it”. In English there is the peculiar exception of the ship, which is a “she”. In other languages, like French and German, even considerable subclasses of objects are—grammatically speaking—female or male (in German: besides neutral). They are referred to as “he” (il/er) or “she” (elle/sie).

like “If I were you, I would . . .” There is here a moment of identification on a personal level, a degree of interchangeability of first persons which characterizes the social world. The same holds for the plural variants of these forms: “If we were you, we would . . .” But, of course, the third-person perspective also includes reference to other persons. I can say: “If I were him, I would . . .”, and this identification is not essentially different from the identification with a person facing me, with a “you”. This means that the third-person perspective as a *scientific* point of view is a very specific kind of third-person perspective.

The fact that the grammatical third person includes reference to things renders possible that we characterize the scientific perspective as a third-person perspective. It is then tempting to conclude that the scientific point of view is limited to a subcategory of entities grammatically referred to as “third persons”, namely non-living things and lower living things like plants, and perhaps also lower animal species. We would account for this conclusion by saying that only human beings are persons: if science is concerned with objects as distinct from persons, then its domain must be reality excluding human beings. But this conclusion is of course false, because science studies everything, including human beings. So the third-person perspective of science cannot be defined by the domain of *objects* (“things”) within reality as a whole. Its field cannot be demarcated by any empirical domain or group of entities. Instead, the thematic field of science should be defined as the *objective aspect* of reality as a whole, including human beings. Science studies everything, but it studies everything as a purely external reality, i.e., without interpretations of the subject’s or person’s proper life.

## **(5) “Subject” and “object”**

Both Merleau-Pontyans and Plessnerians are wary of using these words, or at least of emphasizing their importance. As part of the discussion of Plessner and Merleau-Ponty I will justify my vocabulary in relation to the texts,<sup>31</sup> so I will now restrict myself to a general remark. I think that “subject” and “object” are indispensable terms if we want to make sense of our being in the world. I have just referred to the first- and the second-person perspective: “we” are in the world means that there is a *we* consisting of a number of egos. Despite any criticism we might have of the concept of a “subject”, we do not have to throw the

31 For the discussion of the use of “subject”, see Section 4.1 (Merleau-Ponty) and Section 5.3 (Plessner). As regards “object”, see Chapter 4 as a whole (Merleau-Ponty) and again 5.3 (Plessner).

baby out with the bath water. We can hold on to the concept of a subject in the sense of a “center” of experience and action—even if this subject is at the same time “eccentrically positioned” (Plessner). An essential part of our being in the world consists of our openness to the *external* world, and part of this openness consists in perceiving *things* (objects) around us. So the subject-object relationship is very real. Even if the subject is not concerned with any object, but, for instance, experiences the landscape as an immediate whole and herself as physically part of this whole, then we still need to understand how this “embodied subject” (*sujet incarné*, Merleau-Ponty) is both part of the landscape and open to it.

I realize that there is much more to this relationship than only a subject and an object, such as a foreground-background structure, the sense of being immersed in a worldly medium, the embeddedness of the subject in a social world, or the ambiguity of immanence and transcendence. But I do not see how these moments of our openness to the world would make the concepts “subject” and “object” superfluous. Whether we can maintain them depends on how we shape their definition. I agree with the traditional phenomenological critique of Cartesian dualism, i.e., of the limited *opposition* between subject and object. But I do not think we can overcome that opposition by abandoning these terms altogether. Instead, we need to rethink the relationship between subject and object in such a way that we can, for instance, understand the self-forgetfulness we often experience in being “with” the things (*bei den Dingen*), i.e., in what Dreyfus calls “absorbed coping”.<sup>32</sup> We need to get a sense of the *directness* of our being in the world. Merleau-Ponty’s concept of motivation can help us achieve this, and so can Plessner’s principle of mediated immediacy. Finally, we need to think these terms in such a way that the subject reveals himself to be also an “object” in some sense: our bodies are both subjects open to the things surrounding us, and themselves such things. Considerations like these will help us overcome the opposition between the subject as a mere *res cogitans* or consciousness and the object as *res extensa* or pure externality.

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<sup>32</sup> Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger’s Being and Time*, Division I.

## **Part I**

### **The Limitations of Materialism**



# Chapter 1

## Dennett and Phenomenology

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Part I of this book is devoted to the relationship between materialism and phenomenology, with a strong focus on Daniel Dennett. Not only is Dennett one of the most prominent defenders of materialism, his “heterophenomenology” also invites a comparison with phenomenology. Dennett’s reductive materialism is one of many existing answers to what is commonly called the mind-body problem. According to Dennett, dualism is to be avoided at all cost and he concludes from this that there is no room for taking seriously the subject who inhabits a phenomenal world. Only if we turn from first-person experience to the physical-neural events underlying this experience, would we find a solid basis for systematic knowledge of human existence.

Whereas Dennett is known to be a reductionist, other materialists prefer calling themselves “eliminativists”. The most important exponents of the latter brand of materialism are Paul and Patricia Churchland. As we will see, the dividing line between reductionism and eliminativism is not a sharp one. This means that we can draw some general conclusions about materialism. I criticize materialism by pointing out that philosophy cannot do without phenomenology. The subject and her world are real and irreducible/ineliminable. Philosophy can and should analyze the inner structure of this reality, which differs essentially from the structure of the physical. This means that we have to reject the materialistic reduction of subject and phenomenal world to physical reality.<sup>1</sup> But what I find

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1 In my view, materialism is always at least reductionistic and sometimes even eliminativist. I disagree with Terence Horgan that a “nonreductive materialism” is possible. Horgan’s view is indeed nonreductive but it is not materialistic: it is, in his own words, “robustly realist about mentality itself, about mental causation, and about men-

good about materialism is its inherent physical realism. In the current part I will simply assume that physical realism is a good thing and ask: how can we overcome materialism without throwing physical realism out with the bath water? My actual argument in favor of physical realism needs more preparation; I will present it in Chapter 6.

Chapter 1, and to a lesser degree Chapters 2 and 3, focus on Dennett's reductive materialism. After introducing Dennett's thought in Section 1.1, I will in Sections 1.2 and 1.3 argue that Dennett misconstrues phenomenology and in doing so falsely discredits the first-person perspective as a basis of systematic philosophical knowledge. In Section 1.4, I show that Dennett himself remains dependent on phenomenological concepts. This illustrates that such concepts are indispensable for a philosophical understanding of the relationship between neuroscience and our non- or prescientific lives. Then, in the next chapter, I broaden the discussion by turning to Bennett and Hacker's ordinary language approach and to Paul and Patricia Churchland's eliminativism.

## 1.1 THE CARTESIAN THEATER AND THE MULTIPLE DRAFTS MODEL

In *Consciousness Explained* Dennett defends what he calls the Multiple Drafts model and heterophenomenology against the Cartesian Theater and autophenomenology. Let me explain what these terms stand for and, in doing so, present some important elements from Dennett's thought. The Cartesian Theater is the term Dennett coins as a way of interpreting Descartes' explanation of human experience. According to Descartes, the body is provided with external afferent inputs via the senses; these inputs then come together in a single functional center, the pineal gland, where they are transformed into a theater of representation of the external world. "Cartesian materialism is the view that there is a crucial finish line or boundary somewhere in the brain, marking a place where the order of arrival equals the order of 'presentation' in experience because *what happens there* is what you are conscious of."<sup>2</sup> In addition, the Cartesian view is dualistic, because both the theater and the *res cogitans* who is the observer of that theater are considered to be *immaterial*. They are opposed to the materiality of the body and the external world.

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talistic causal explanation" (Horgan, *Nonreductive Materialism and the Explanatory Autonomy of Psychology*, 295).

2 Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 107.

Dennett wants to replace this model by his Multiple Drafts model, which he says is not dualistic. His aim is to develop an account of consciousness which explains every one of its essential elements and possibilities in terms of physical and neural processes, assuming that, if he would succeed, the mind is shown *to be* the brain: “I will explain the various phenomena that compose what we call consciousness, showing how they are all physical effects of the brain’s activities, how these activities evolved, and how they give rise to illusions about their own powers and properties.”<sup>3</sup> The result is a truly materialistic account of the human being and the world, because the immaterial elements we refer to in ordinary language (consciousness, the I, thoughts) are on the one hand reinterpreted as physical effects and on the other hand discarded as illusions. Descartes’ problematic dualism is thus replaced by materialistic monism.<sup>4</sup>

An important aspect of Dennett’s criticism of the Cartesian Theater pertains to the idea of a “finish line” for information running up the nervous system. This is Descartes’ assumption that what goes on in the nervous system leads to a representation of the world in the brain, of which there is at any moment in time only one version. Dennett disagrees with this assumption: “We don’t directly experience what happens on our retinas, in our ears, on the surface of our skin. What we actually experience is a product of many processes of interpretation—editorial processes, in effect. They take in relatively raw and one-sided representations, and yield collated, revised, enhanced representations, and they take place in the streams of activity occurring in various parts of the brain.”<sup>5</sup> According to Dennett this implies that another presupposition of the Cartesian Theater must also be false: the thought that we are able to time exactly when a particular experience of the world comes to be. Although we can time individual neural processes, Dennett says, we cannot time exactly when a particular conscious experience brought about by these processes *taken together* comes into existence.

Let me present one of Dennett’s examples, the metacontrast experiment, to get this point clear. A research subject is confronted with two pictures, the one very shortly (30 msec) after the other (figure 1.). The first is a colored disc. The

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3 Ibid., 16.

4 Interestingly, Bruce Mangan argues that Dennett is tacitly more disturbed by the supposedly *mysterious* character of a Cartesian mind, i.e., its inaccessibility to science, than by its immaterial character. Mangan supports his view by pointing out that Dennett makes use of scientific research in the field of psychophysics, which is based on dualistic presuppositions. (Mangan, “Dennett, Consciousness, and the Sorrows of Functionalism”, 12-13.)

5 Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 112.

second is a colored ring that fits exactly around the disc shown just before it. The result of this set up is that the second stimulus *masks* the first: the subject will only remember the second, not the first stimulus. The fact that the first picture is presented only a very short time is not a sufficient condition for this phenomenon to occur. Without the second stimulus the colored disc *is* consciously experienced and remembered.



Figure 1.

Dennett presents two possible explanations of this phenomenon of masking stimuli. One explanation is that the prior stimulus was never consciously experienced in the first place. The alternative explanation is that it was experienced, and that the subject's memory of the stimulus was obliterated by the second stimulus. Dennett argues that there is no experiment that can show which of these explanations is right, because this question is unanswerable as a matter of principle:

The outer contour of a disc rapidly turns into the inner contour of a ring. The brain, initially informed just that something happened (something with a circular contour in a particular place), swiftly receives confirmation that there was indeed a ring, with an inner and an outer contour. Without further supporting evidence that there was a disc, the brain arrives at the conservative conclusion that there was only a ring. Should we insist that the disc was experienced because *if the ring hadn't intervened* the disc would have been reported? That would be to make the mistake of supposing we could 'freeze-frame' the film in the Cartesian Theater before the memory of it was obliterated by later events. The Multiple Drafts model agrees that information about the disc was briefly in a functional position to contribute to a later report, but this state lapsed; there is no reason to insist that this state was inside the charmed circle of consciousness until it got overwritten, or contrarily, to insist that it never quite achieved this privileged state. Drafts that were composed at particular times and places in the brain were later withdrawn from circulation, replaced by re-

vised versions, but none of them may be singled out as definitive of the content of consciousness.<sup>6</sup>

We should keep in mind that, in Dennett's view, the margin of revision of drafts is limited to very short instances. If you change the metacontrast experiment, now showing the colored disc for a couple of seconds instead of 30 msec, the order in which experiences occur will, of course, correspond with the order of their correlative neural processes. In that case consciousness cannot be tricked in the way described: one will remember both the disc and the ring.

Because of the ambiguous status of stimuli within a very short time span, Dennett is critical of the conclusions sometimes drawn from Benjamin Libet's famous experiments with conscious intentions. I will not extensively discuss these experiments here, but only use one of them as an illustration of Dennett's thought. In one of the most described experiments, the research subject had his hand on a button and his eyes focused on an oscilloscope which basically looks like a clock that has a red dot circling around its face instead of pointers. The subject was asked to push the button at any time according to his own preference and then mark the position of the oscilloscope's point at that very time. During the experiment, Libet's researchers measured, by means of an EEG, when the neural activity correlating with the conscious decision to push the button started to mount in the brain. Libet then compared the moment of brain activity with the moment of conscious decision as marked by the research subject himself.

As one would expect, the actual pushing of the button, which was also timed and registered, occurred just after the conscious decision took place, viz. around 200 msec. The astonishing result, however, was that brain activity correlated with the decision started 350 to 400 msec earlier than the conscious decision as timed by the subject himself. This appears to lead to the conclusion that the decision was not made by the subject, but rather by his brain. It even leads some to think that free will is an illusion, because processes in the brain would *cause* the decision before we (thought we) made the decision ourselves.<sup>7</sup> Libet himself thinks that we can still to some extent make free decisions, but that our freedom lies in the opportunity to veto the decision which spontaneously builds up.<sup>8</sup>

Dennett argues that the 350 to 400 msec found by Libet is too short to arrive at *any* conclusion about voluntary acts. "If someone thinks the thought

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6 Ibid., 142.

7 This is Daniel Wegner's position in Wegner, *The Illusion of Conscious Will*, 52-61.

8 Libet, *Mind Time: The Temporal Factor in Consciousness*, 137-141.

‘One, two, three, four, five’, his thinking ‘one’ occurs before his thinking ‘two’ and so forth . . . But the experiments we looked at are concerned with events that were constricted by unusually narrow time frames of a few hundred milliseconds. At this scale, the standard presumption breaks down. Every event in your brain has a definite spatiotemporal location, but asking ‘Exactly when do you become conscious of the stimulus?’ assumes that some one of these events is, or amounts to, your becoming conscious of the stimulus.<sup>9</sup> According to Dennett, we cannot single out one such event. The beginning of neural activity correlated with a conscious decision is essentially no different than the activity correlated with seeing the disc in the metacontrast experiment. This neural activity potentially contributes to the subject’s experience, decision, or action, but this depends on later activity in the nervous system: it can be canceled out or revised in the hundreds of milliseconds after these first brain events, without any vetoing by the conscious subject. The initial activity in the brain is in itself only potentially meaningful, depending on what comes after.

This shows that, although Dennett is a materialist, he is not an atomist. Atomists think that the whole of a physical system or an organism is no more than the totality of its distinctive parts. In the experiment above, the subject’s being conscious of the stimulus cannot be pinned down to a single “finish line”-event in the brain, because this consciousness is the property of a whole set of interdependent events which is hard to delineate. I think Dennett’s argument is in some important respects quite convincing. It shows that there is no one-on-one correlation between each neural event and each “element” of conscious experience—supposing we could single out such elements in the first place. There are only global correlations between areas in the brain and specific functions of consciousness, and also between sets of events and types of perception and action, like memory, seeing a color, or making calculations.<sup>10</sup> Neuroscience tries to find the minimum set of neural events necessary for functions which are as narrowly specified as possible. But the search for neural correlates of consciousness, or NCCs, moves forward only very slowly and is highly dependent on the selection

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9 Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 168-169.

10 In the first two parts of *La structure du comportement*, Merleau-Ponty demonstrates that all attempts to correlate directly, in an atomistic manner, behavior with neural processes (establishing what is now called “neural correlates of consciousness” or NCCs), is bound to fail because the nervous system does not function like a machine but rather performs global functions according to the vital and symbolic interests of the organism as a whole. Cf. also (not in relation to Merleau-Ponty) Hans-Peter Krüger, “Das Hirn im Kontext exzentrischer Positionierungen”, 284.

of functions which can be easily defined (“becoming conscious of a red light”, “remembering a word”, and so forth) and which lend themselves for testing under lab circumstances.<sup>11</sup>

Dennett is absolutely right to allow a certain discontinuity between what happens on the microscale of neural processes and what happens on the scale of human functioning as a whole. Neuroscientific correlations can be considered a “bridge” across the gap between mind and brain but they do not fill the gap; they do not make it disappear. A neural correlation is a relationship between two different domains of reality and the philosophical question is: how do we describe these domains and their relationship on a more fundamental level than the particular correlations found by empirical research? With respect to Dennett, the question is: does it suffice to regard “the various phenomena that compose what we call consciousness” as “all physical effects of the brain’s activities”.<sup>12</sup> Is consciousness really no more than a higher physical property of the nervous system itself? Is the gap we are dealing with located between levels of complexity within physical matter, as Dennett’s monism forces us to accept, or does it sit between neural processes on the one hand and the human being’s first-person experience on the other? Does it make sense to speak of “experience”, “consciousness”, or “freedom” without giving the first person and her phenomenal world their proper place within one’s theory? These are some of the big questions which will be answered in stages throughout this book, but in the current Chapter I will already make some important steps. Let us begin by examining Dennett’s relationship with phenomenology.

## 1.2 HETEROPHENOMENOLOGY

Dennett’s aversion to dualism motivates him to reject not only Descartes’s view but also the entire tradition of phenomenology. In Chapter 5 I will show that a Plessnerian phenomenology is not dualistic: it does not describe dual but rather triadic structures. We also find traces of such a triadic approach in Merleau-Ponty, as Chapter 4 will make clear.<sup>13</sup> For now, I will leave the question of dual-

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11 Maxwell Bennett, *Neuroscience and Philosophy* (Chapter in Bennett and Peter Hacker, *Neuroscience & Philosophy*).

12 Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 16.

13 We also find variants of such a triadic structure, which goes beyond dualism, in the analytic tradition to which Dennett belongs. I am thinking especially of more recent approaches to the mind-body problem in cognitive science, for instance in Hanna and

ism aside and limit myself to a tentative examination of the relationship between materialism and phenomenology.

Dennett's critical stance towards phenomenology is reflected in his concept of "heterophenomenology", which means "phenomenology of the other". Dennett opposes this to "autophenomenology": the phenomenology of a first person of experience who *identifies* with the beliefs supporting his phenomenal world rather than adopting a scientific outsider's perspective with regard to those beliefs. A common example is the perception of colors. We only know what a color looks like from the first-person perspective. From a third-person, scientific perspective color perception amounts to electromagnetic waves or photons hitting the retina, causing nerve processes in the brain.

Dennett wants to provide a philosophical foundation for the correlation of our experiences with these physical-neural processes happening in objective reality. But first-person reports of experience are according to him not reliable enough to build on. This is one of the main reasons for Dennett to reject classic phenomenology. Dennett argues that phenomenology is based on the idea that, through introspection, we have "privileged access" to our own consciousness and that this would make us "immune to error".<sup>14</sup> He discusses a number of perceptual illusions to show that the first-person perspective is not reliable at all and proposes a method which neutralizes the fallibility of the first-person point of view. He introduces a second third-person perspective, complementary to the third-person perspective which aims at the analysis of physical and neural processes. This second perspective we could call psychological or sociological: the scientist collects reports from research subjects about what they experience. From this third-person perspective we do not see physical-neural reality but rather, what Dennett calls, "autophenomenological" texts. Since we approach the-

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Thompson, "The Mind-Body-Body-Problem", and in enactive approaches such as Thompson, *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind*, Desmidt et al., "The Temporal Dynamic of Emotional Emergence", and Colombetti, *The Feeling Body: Affective Science Meets the Enactive Mind*. The enactive approach differs from earlier approaches in cognitive science in that it focuses more on forms of higher-order cognition, such as the metaphorical use of language, which presuppose a strong disengagement from the world of sense-perception (cf. Froese, "From Adaptive Behavior to Human Cognition: A Review of *Enaction*"). It explores how human behavior is structured by a distance from the world which is alien to (other) animals. It should be noted that all these views overlook Plessner's early and fruitful approach to the mind-body problem and his concept of eccentricity.

14 Ibid., 68.

se from a neutralizing, outsider's perspective, this is to us *heterophenomenology*: phenomenology of the other.

In order to turn auto- into heterophenomenological texts, according to Dennett, the scientist needs to adopt the “intentional stance”: “we must treat the noise-emitter as an agent, indeed a rational agent, who harbors beliefs and desires and other mental states that exhibit *intentionality* or ‘aboutness’, and whose actions can be explained (or predicted) on the basis of the content of these states. Thus the uttered noises are to be interpreted as things the subjects *wanted* to say, or *propositions* they meant to *assert*, for instance for various *reasons*.<sup>15</sup> However, this does not mean that the scientist would identify with the first person of experience who expresses his beliefs and desires. In Dennett's view, the first-person perspective is too “treacherous”<sup>16</sup> to build solid knowledge on. For this reason science and philosophy need to appropriate the phenomenological world of the other as “a theorist's fiction”<sup>17</sup>: something scientists can work with and explain, but which they do not accept as an account of the world which could even possibly be true. Heterophenomenology “involves extracting and purifying *texts* from (apparently) speaking *subjects*, and using those texts to generate a theorist's fiction, the subject's *heterophenomenological* world.”<sup>18</sup> So the reports these subjects take seriously themselves are regarded as illusory by heterophenomenology. Once subjective experience is neutralized in this way, neuroscience can work on revealing the ultimate truth behind these intentional relationships: the underlying neural-physical processes.

At this point it is interesting to address the question of Dennett's realism. Realism could apply to three elements in Dennett's theory: (a) physical-neural reality, (b) intentional relations as the subject's first-person experience, and its “object”, the phenomenal world, (c) intentional relations as seen from a third-person perspective, i.e., as objective facts. The reality of the physical-neural aspect of our existence is never a point of debate for Dennett because he simply assumes that there is such a reality. I agree with him, but I do think this needs to be supported by arguments. As noted, I will return to that endeavor in Chapter 6. Now I only want to focus on the question: how broad is Dennett's realism? Does it also include our intentional relationships to the world?

When Dennett calls the domain of the subject's proper experience a theorist's fiction, this is unmistakably a denial of the reality of the phenomenal

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15 Ibid., 76.

16 Ibid., 70.

17 Ibid., 98

18 Ibid.

world. This denial is underscored in the discussion of qualia in Chapter 12 of *Consciousness Explained* (“Qualia disqualified”). To cut a long story short, Dennett here claims that there are no qualia, but that it is true “that there *seem* to be qualia”.<sup>19</sup> This phrasing is characteristic of the move Dennett repeatedly makes: he does, in a sense, acknowledge the existence of intentionality (i.e., of perceptions, beliefs, and desires), but he approaches it exclusively as an objective fact which can only be properly assessed from a third-person perspective. So perceptions, beliefs, desires, and other intentional relationships do exist, according to Dennett, but only as part of objective reality. Of course, the third-person perspective is the appropriate perspective for understanding intentionality in the first place.

Dennett allows that there are intentional relationships and that there is a discontinuity between these relationships and the microscale of genetics and neural structures. In some texts he allows that some form of *explanation* on the intentionality level is possible: we use such explanations in our everyday “folk psychology”,<sup>20</sup> and this approach can also be developed into a scientific method called Intentional System Theory.<sup>21</sup> I will not discuss the details of this theory, but I do want to note two things. Firstly, this kind of folk-psychological or intentional-systems explanation remains bound to Dennett’s “intentional” stance, i.e., to an outsider’s point of view from which we try to predict the other person’s behavior on the basis of known conditions. In other words, it does not even come close to an examination of the phenomenal world as it appears to ourselves as first persons. Taylor Carman rightly wonders whether Dennett really says anything about intentionality in any sense vaguely reminiscent of its phenomenological origin. Dennett fails to ask what intentionality is “from our own point of view *within* it”.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, in Dennett’s view, “intentional” explanation is not the ultimate aim of science. As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, the program of materialism is to “explain the various phenomena that compose what we call consciousness, showing how they are all physical effects of the brain’s activities,

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19 Ibid., 372 (italics mine).

20 “Folk psychology” does not have one single meaning and its exact origin is unclear (Ian Ravenscroft, “Folk Psychology as a Theory”). In Dennett it carries more or less the same meaning as in Paul and Patricia Churchland (see Section 2.1), viz. a set of common sense views which a person holds with regard others, by which she tries to explain and predict their behavior.

21 Dennett, *The Intentional Stance*, 43-68.

22 Taylor Carman, *Heidegger’s Analytic*, 113.

how these activities evolved, and how they give rise to illusions about their own powers and properties.” What does this mean for the various forms of intentionality, such as perception, belief, and desire? If they are the mere effects of the brain’s activities, how then can they be more than some kind of abstract properties of the brain itself? Dennett indeed regards intentional relationships as abstract but “real patterns” in physical reality, comparable to centers of gravity or equators.<sup>23</sup> Just like the latter structures, intentional relationships in Dennett’s view are not themselves material, but they are properties or structures *of* matter. And how could it be otherwise? Dennett leaves no doubt that he will defend materialistic monism against dualism, so it is clear from the outset that there is no room for defining intentionality as something which transcends physical reality.

At the end of his introduction of heterophenomenology, Dennett concludes that “we have developed a *neutral* method for investigating and describing phenomenology. It involves extracting and purifying *texts* from (apparently) speaking *subjects*, and using those texts to generate a theorist’s fiction, the subject’s *heterophenomenological world*. This fictional world is populated with all the images, events, sounds, smells, hunches, presentiments, and feelings that the subject (apparently) sincerely believes to exist in his or her (or its) stream of consciousness.”<sup>24</sup> Just like the subject “seems” to see qualia, everything in her world seems real. However, according to Dennett, what ultimately counts as real is made up of only two things: intentional relationships taken as objective facts and the underlying physical and neural structures. In the quoted passage Dennett, for rhetorical reasons, pretends to adopt a constructive attitude toward phenomenology. In reality his heterophenomenology is not a form of, but rather a direct attack on, the entire phenomenological tradition.

### 1.3 DENNETT’S MISUNDERSTANDING OF PHENOMENOLOGY

I think that both Dennett’s view in itself and his criticism of phenomenology are problematic. In the next section I will address problems in Dennett’s own theory. In the current section I address his heterophenomenological critique of phenomenology. A first problem which needs to be addressed is the assumption that every report from a first person can be called phenomenological. As noted, Dennett construes phenomenology as a method which simply describes what we happen

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23 Dennett, “Real Patterns”.

24 Ibid., 85.

to find in our consciousness, as if all first-person knowledge would be phenomenology. It is true that the first person lives in a *phenomenal* world: she does not measure wave lengths but she sees colors. Or she does not measure the level of dopamine in her brain when running 10 kilometers, but she may enjoy her run. When running, she is primarily a sensorimotor subject, perceiving the irregularities in the sidewalk, and all the familiar things around her (houses, streets, cars, trees) organized as a single dynamic landscape with a higher segment, a lower segment, a left side and a right side. If this subject reports that she prefers running uphill and downhill over running in a more or less flat landscape, this is not a phenomenological proposition. Phenomenology does not include just any kind of report from a first-person perspective. Whereas the runner in the example expresses a *particular* preference within her phenomenal world, phenomenology offers descriptions of the *general structure* of this world.<sup>25</sup> On top of that, phenomenology does not arrive at descriptions by focusing on just any general structure. The importance of the questions it tries to answer through eidetic variation and ideation is itself not determined by means of this method: it stems from life itself, i.e., from the existential or moral questions in our prephilosophical and prescientific lives which we deem relevant not only to ourselves individually, but to all of us.<sup>26</sup>

Dennett would not agree. By calling every first-person report “(auto-) phenomenology”, Dennett is also saying that it makes no sense to distinguish between a general structure of first-person experience and the individual instantiations of such experience. To him, all first-person experience is unreliable and therefore cannot be the basis of a serious discipline. Dennett discusses many perceptual illusions to support this view. I will not discuss these in detail here, but let me instead say something about perceptual illusions in general.

It is true that our perception is easily tricked, either by accident or because a magician wants to trick us. However, perceptual illusions are revealed not because someone shows us that our brain is being deceived by physical and neural

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25 In his famous article “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”, 441, Thomas Nagel presents a similar argument: “The point of view in question [the subjective point of view, JvB] is not one accessible only to a single individual. Rather it is a *type*.” Nagel speaks of a type of experience not only to describe the general character of the inner structure of human experience, but also to argue that there are non-human types of experience, e.g., the type of experience of a bat.

26 Not all phenomenologists agree that the source of phenomenological questions is extra-phenomenological. I am representing Plessner’s position in *Phänomenologie. Das Werk Edmund Husserls*, 144-147.

processes, but because we see with our own eyes that the situation is different than it seemed at first. As Merleau-Ponty notes, “The difference between illusion and perception is intrinsic, and the truth of perception can be read off only from perception itself.”<sup>27</sup> I may be fooled by a magician, but if I decide to learn his trade, the illusion is for me not taken away because I learn what happens in the brain, but rather because I now get to see the performance from different angles, and executed at a slow pace. The unmasking of illusions takes place within the scope of the first-person perspective. It all happens within the very same phenomenal world.

Furthermore, that we can be deceived does not detract from the fact that we can say something general about the phenomenal world. The preference for running in hilly terrain is not a phenomenological claim, but it *is* based on the fact that the world is organized by spatial directions, such as up and down, and left and right. *Every* individual’s world is organized by these spatial orientations. Phenomenology can show that these orientations in the world correlate with the sensorimotor body schema of the subject, and that, in this sense, subjective body and phenomenal world share one single structure.<sup>28</sup> Dennett wrongly identifies “phenomenology” with all claims about the relationship between self and world from the first-person perspective. Only systematic descriptions of the general structure of our being in the world count as phenomenology.

The second misunderstanding about phenomenology to which Dennett falls prey, is the assumption that the method of phenomenology is “introspection”.<sup>29</sup> This has never been a widely accepted view in phenomenology. Dennett mentions Edmund Husserl. Husserl’s teacher Franz Brentano, whom Dennett does not mention here, can still be said to support some form of inner perception.<sup>30</sup> This was one of the reasons why Husserl, the main founder of phenomenology, followed a different avenue. Husserl explicitly distanced himself from introspec-

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27 Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 343-344/346-347.

28 I return to these issues in the discussion of Plessner and Merleau-Ponty in Part II.

29 Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 44-45, 66-68.

30 Wolfgang Huemer, *Husserl’s Critique of Psychologism and his Relation to the Brentano School*. Cf. also Cyril McDonnell, “Husserl’s Critique of Brentano’s Doctrine of Inner Perception and Its Significance for Understanding Husserl’s Method in Phenomenology”. McDonnell rightly points out that Brentano insisted upon the distinction between “inner perception” (*innere Wahrnehmung*) and “introspection” (*innere Beobachtung*).

tion (*Selbsbeobachtung*) as the method of phenomenology.<sup>31</sup> In *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft*, he complains that his *Logische Untersuchungen* were misunderstood as “a rehabilitation of the method of introspection”<sup>32</sup> and he accepts some responsibility for causing the misunderstanding: he had called his phenomenology a “descriptive psychology”,<sup>33</sup> thus creating the impression that the intuiting of essences (*Wesensschau*) was a psychological method. Introspection then seemed to be the only probable candidate for this method.

Husserl has a clear view on the difference between introspection and phenomenology: whereas phenomenology deals with “essences”, introspection is a method which explores the “individual particularities” which belong to the factual, empirically accessible “existence” of experience.<sup>34</sup> In other words, the intuiting of essences is *not* concerned with particular experiences but rather with the a priori general structure of experience. It could be argued against Husserl that introspective psychology also wants to say something general about the particular processes and events going on in the mind. But the generality psychology aspires to is of a different kind: it concerns *factual* regularities, inclinations, dispositions, not the logically necessary structures which constitute the framework within which such regularities, inclinations, or dispositions are possible in the first place. As Dan Zahavi points out: “it is important to realize that classical phenomenology is not just another name for a kind of psychological self-observation; rather it must be appreciated as a special form of transcendental philosophy that seeks to reflect on the conditions of possibility of experience and cognition.”<sup>35</sup> It is also important to note that Husserl’s famous argument against psychologism, i.e., against the reduction of logical laws to empirical-psychological laws, would not make any sense without the distinction between phenomenology and psychology.

Later phenomenologists like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, and Plessner do not regard introspection as essential to their method either.<sup>36</sup> In my view, which is strongly influenced by Plessner, phenomenology is the praxis of

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31 Cf. Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 136. See also Dan Zahavi, “Killing the Straw Man: Dennett and Phenomenology”, 28-29.

32 Husserl, *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft*, 43.

33 Ibid., footnote 1.

34 Ibid.

35 Dan Zahavi, “Killing the Straw man: Dennett and Phenomenology”, 28. Cf. ibid., 29, for additional references to Husserl on introspection.

36 Cf. ibid., 28. Zahavi shows this particularly for Merleau-Ponty: ibid., 31-33. See also Ted Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 64.

analyzing one's first-person experience of the world, and this includes both subjective moments of experience and moments which belong to the “object” (in the widest possible sense of *Gegenstand*, the reality over against the first person of experience). For example, phenomenology deals with the differences between living things and non-living things, between natural objects and artifacts, or between works of art and use-objects. Of course, this immediately involves the way we *relate* to these different kinds of objects, since phenomenology is not naive ontology: it takes into account that an object's mode of being is at the same time its way of *appearing* to us within a certain human praxis, for example, creating and looking at art. But the fact that phenomenology always takes into account the givenness of the object to the subject does not make it introspection. Apart from the problem that “introspection” is an empirical method, it also seems to refer exclusively to the *inner* world. It is only applicable to something subjective, something concerning my own personality, for instance a personal weakness I want to explore in order to overcome it.<sup>37</sup>

Against the backdrop of Dennett's misinterpretation of Husserl, it may be surprising to discover what seems to be a similarity between Husserl's and Dennett's method. Is Dennett's “theorist's fiction” not similar to Husserl's “epoché”, the bracketing of the ontological presuppositions inherent to our different modes of consciousness? Dennett also sees the apparent similarity. Describing the heterophenomenological procedure, he writes: “You reserve judgment about whether the subject's beliefs, as expressed in their communication, are true, or even well-grounded, but then you treat them as constitutive of that subject's subjectivity. As far as I can see, this is the third-person parallel to Husserl's notion of bracketing or epoché, in which the normal presuppositions and inferences of one's own subjective experience are put on hold, as best one can manage, in order to get at the core experience, as theory-neutral and unencumbered as possible.”<sup>38</sup>

Despite the apparent similarity, there are two huge differences between Husserl's epoché and Dennett's “theorist's fiction”. Firstly, as Dennett observes, phenomenology connects directly with the inner structure of first-person experience; Dennett turns away from this structure in order to explore purely objective conditions of subjective experience. The term “heterophenomenology” is there-

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37 Cf. Shaun Gallagher, *Phenomenology and Non-Reductionist Cognitive Science*, 22–23.

38 Dennett, “Who's On First? Heterophenomenology Explained”, 22. Cf. David L. Thompson, *Phenomenology and Heterophenomenology*, 206. I have removed the parentheses in the original.

fore misleading. It suggests an affinity with phenomenology which simply is not there. Secondly, the aim of the epoché is not to *deny* the truth value of first-person experience, but rather to focus on the inner structure of the experience regardless of the question whether its object is real or fictitious. This means that phenomenology can, in principle, still be complemented by an ontology which does not balk at describing the essence of the different kinds of beings we encounter in the real world around us. A philosophy which embraces this combination of phenomenology and ontology takes first-person experience, including its truth value, very seriously. This does not imply that it relapses into a naive form of metaphysics based on the belief that we simply experience things as they are. The combination of phenomenology and ontology affirms an ambiguity of being and appearance: our knowledge of being is mediated by its appearance and this is what makes our knowledge finite. You could say that this kind of ontology is “critical” in a more or less Kantian sense: the world-disclosing function of the subject is here constantly taken into account.

I think that Plessner's phenomenology is “more ontological”, in the sense described, than Husserl's. Husserl's epoché needs to be understood against the backdrop of the transcendental reduction, which Husserl thought proved the ultimate dependence of the appearing world on consciousness.<sup>39</sup> Plessner, like Merleau-Ponty, shows that consciousness is essentially embodied and that, as such, it is part of the reality that it experiences. To deny, call into question, or bracket the existence of the reality of which consciousness is *physically* a part is then no longer an option. This also determines Plessner's thinking about essences. An essence is not an *eidos* belonging to a realm separate from the outer world, as it is in Husserl; it is the mode of being of the entities we encounter in the world. For instance, the essence of vegetable life is both the plant's mode of appearance and its real way of being.<sup>40</sup>

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39 Cf. Ricoeur, *Phénoménologie et Herméneutique*. However, there are different interpretations of Husserl. According to Zahavi, for instance, Husserl merely wanted to overcome a “dogmatic *attitude*” with regard to reality: “Killing the Straw Man: Dennett and Phenomenology”, 30.

40 Cf. Thomas Ebke, *Lebendiges Wissen des Lebens*, 49-51.

Sometimes Plessner seems to argue *against* ontology (e.g.: *Stufen*, 23/60-61), but this criticism aims at *naive* ontology, which does not take into account “eccentric positionality” and historicity as the preconditions for our knowledge of being.

## 1.4 AN “ILLUSION” THAT JUST WILL NOT DISAPPEAR

There are more problems. As Thomas Nagel observes, Dennett claims to distance himself from the first-person point of view, but in fact his theory remains dependent on first-person concepts.<sup>41</sup> For example, Dennett often mentions beliefs and desires as important forms of intentional relationships. According to Dennett, beliefs and desires are intentional properties of consciousness, and this means that they are basically illusions created by the brain. They are no more than higher properties of brain-matter, patterns of neurophysiological reality. Dennett mentions beliefs and desires separately because, as everybody knows, they are not the same thing. But how do we know that a belief is something different from a desire? Is our knowledge of this difference not rooted in our experience of *having* beliefs or desires? When we define beliefs in epistemic terms and desires in terms of volition, do we not do this because we know from our prescientific everyday life perspective that a belief is primarily a matter of knowledge and desire a matter of praxis and will? The first-person perspective is at least an important source of knowledge regarding the differences and similarities between beliefs and desires and the same holds for all forms of intentionality.

But this issue becomes even more interesting when we take a look at the strange mix of phenomenological and neuroscientific language we find, for instance, in Dennett’s Multiple Drafts Model. Dennett claims that he can explain the heterophenomenological world by referring only to neural processes, but in fact he smuggles phenomenological terms into his third-person explanations. In the account of the Multiple Drafts model and the metacontrast experiment (discussed in Section 1.1), Dennett assumes that seeing means that the brain is “informed” by afferent activity in the nervous system.<sup>42</sup> In addition, the brain weighs “evidence that there was a disc”, and “arrives at the conservative conclusion that there was only a ring”. Information is said to be part of a “report”, which may later be “overwritten” by later “drafts”. Dennett believes that there are not only neurons, synapses, dendrites, axons, neurotransmitter molecules, and so forth in the nervous system, but also “drafts” which are “edited”. He denies the existence of the phenomenal domain but he cannot describe physical reality without using concepts which belong to that very domain.

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41 Nagel, *Other Minds*, 87: “In fact, the procedure [of heterophenomenology] relies implicitly on our first-person understanding of consciousness, while pretending to do without it.”

42 All quotations in this paragraph from *Consciousness Explained*, 142.

Dennett would object to this criticism that the Multiple Drafts model was never more than just a set of metaphors: “I haven’t replaced a metaphorical theory, the Cartesian Theater, with a *nonmetaphorical* (‘literal, scientific’) theory. All I have done, really, is to replace one family of metaphors and images with another, trading in the Theater, the Witness, the Central Meaner, the Figment, for Software, Virtual Machines, Multiple Drafts, a Pandemonium of Homunculi. It’s just a war of metaphors, you say—but metaphors are not ‘just’ metaphors; metaphors are the tools of thought. No one can think consciousness without them, so it is important to equip yourself with the best tools available.”<sup>43</sup> But if the brain’s “drafts”, and “editing”, its “being informed” and its “arriving at conclusions” are just metaphors, then what are they metaphors *for*? Why does Dennett not simply refer to the neural processes to which these metaphors refer? Otherwise put: why does Dennett need so many metaphors in the first place?

I will return to these questions in a moment. First we should call to memory that Dennett has criticized Descartes by saying that there is no such thing as a Cartesian Theater to be found in our nervous systems: “When you discard Cartesian dualism, you really must discard the show that would have gone on in the Cartesian Theater, and the audience as well, for neither the show nor the audience is to be found in the brain, and the brain is the only real place there is to look for them.”<sup>44</sup> So when he later says that “drafts”, “editing”, etc., are just a better set of metaphors than the Cartesian Theater, this should not prevent us from asking whether there are really “drafts”, “interpretations”, and “editing processes” to be found in “the only real place to look for them”: the brain.

Are there drafts in the brain?

A draft can either be an image or a text. There are clearly no images in the brain: there is only this grey mass, and on a microscale there are neurons, synapses, neurotransmitters, axons, dendrites, and so forth. If there were images in the brain, then we would be confronted with the same problem as we face with the Cartesian Theater: we would need an audience or at least one little man in the brain (a so-called homunculus) to look at the image, who would revise it on the basis of new “information” (the colored circle which comes after the colored disc, for instance). The homunculus would create new sketches of what happens in the external world.

Dennett actually accepts the idea of homunculi, on condition that they fulfill only *partial* functions within the whole of the brain: “As long as your *homunculi* are more stupid and ignorant than the intelligent agent they compose,

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43 Ibid., 455.

44 Ibid., 134.

the nesting of homunculi within homunculi can be finite, bottoming out, eventually, with agents so unimpressive that they can be replaced by machines”.<sup>45</sup> But for some reason, when Dennett speaks of homunculi, he does not talk about the editing brain, and vice versa. Dennett does not say that it is a homunculus who does the editing of drafts which finally leads to a unified experience. Perhaps the reason for this is precisely that homunculi can only fulfill partial functions.

We seem to find a reply to my objection in the following passage: “Are mental images real? There are real data structures in people’s brains that are rather like images—are *they* the mental images you’re asking about? If so, then yes; if no, then no.”<sup>46</sup> No, these are not the images we are asking about, because data structures are not images . . . unless at some point they appear to someone in the form of an image: an extended, colored figure against a colored background (whereby white and black count as colors). What does Dennett mean when he says that these “data structures” are “rather like images”? The claim, which mixes AI vocabulary and phenomenal terms, is not further clarified or supported.

Or Dennett means by “draft” a kind of text. But here the same argument goes: there are no texts in the brain, and if there were, somebody would need to read them. The problem is that Dennett ascribes properties which belong to the phenomenal world, in which images, texts, information, reports, and drafts indeed exist, to physical-neural reality. There are many more examples of the confusion of phenomenological and neuroscientific language. Dennett says that the eyes “provide our brains with high-resolution information”,<sup>47</sup> that the brain carries out “processes of interpretation”,<sup>48</sup> that the “content long-haired woman has already been discriminated in the brain”,<sup>49</sup> that the brain makes ““decisions”” (now between quotation marks),<sup>50</sup> and forms “assumptions”.<sup>51</sup> What do these expressions mean?<sup>52</sup>

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45 Ibid., *Sweet Dreams*, 137. Cf. *Consciousness Explained*, 262.

46 Ibid., 459.

47 Ibid., 54.

48 Ibid., 111.

49 Ibid., 119

50 Ibid., 134.

51 Ibid., 142.

52 The following criticism of Dennett is similar to Krüger’s argument, in *Gehirn, Verhalten, und Zeit*, against Gerhard Roth (ibid., 93-100) and Wolf Singer (ibid., 106-110). In addition, my criticism draws on Bennett and Hacker’s reading of Dennett which is discussed in the next chapter.

When I see that the weather is nice outside, this is not commonly called information. It is not called that, because I simply immediately attend a condition out there: e.g. that the sun is shining. I also do not make a decision on the weather. Rather the weather is just *there* for me in this condition.<sup>53</sup> Now we might say that there are *decisive processes* in the brain to make this perception possible. But this simply means that these processes fulfill a *crucial* role in supporting perception. We cannot say that the brain receives “information”, or that it “decides” or “assumes” anything. I may decide to buy a new bicycle, and then we can *correlate* certain processes within my brain with this deciding, but we cannot say that the brain decided to buy a new bike. In that case we would also have to say that the brain went out to buy a bike, and that it chatted with the neighbors on the way to the bicycle shop. But it did not.

This still leaves open the question of whether, once we accept phenomenological projections as metaphors, they have some practical role to play in neuroscience. Metaphors make it easier for us to talk about neural processes and might even be indispensable. We should take into account that neuroscientific literature relies heavily on words like “information”. Is neuroscientific theory conceivable without all such concepts in the first place?

Bennett and Hacker, to whom I return more elaborately in the next chapter, allow that neuroscience makes use of metaphors like “representations” or “maps in the brain”, but not unconditionally: “Whether there is any danger in a metaphorical use of words depends on how clear it is that it is merely metaphorical, and on whether the author remembers that that *is* all it is.”<sup>54</sup> Bennett and Hacker in fact show that many authors do *not* remember the metaphorical character of their terminology. They show how these allegedly innocuous metaphors time and again lead to misunderstandings about the nature of the nervous system. Colin Blakemore, for instance, legitimizes his use of words like “representation” and “map” (as something present in the brain) by calling them metaphors, later ignoring their metaphorical character and continuing to describe neural processes in terms of “representation”, “interpretation”, and so forth.<sup>55</sup>

In response to Bennett and Hacker, John Searle says that, “[a]s long as we keep clear the distinction between the literal observer-independent sense in which I infer or receive information and the metaphorical and observer-relative senses where we say my neurons perceive such and such phenomena, it seems to

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53 Cf. Taylor Carman critique of Dennett’s “intellectualism”: Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 55-56.

54 Bennett and Hacker, *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience*, 79.

55 *Ibid.*, 78-81 and 86-87.

me that these metaphors are, or at least can be, harmless.”<sup>56</sup> Within the German discussion about these issues, Hans-Peter Krüger criticizes the “hermeneutical projections” by respectively Gerhard Roth and Wolf Singer, but he states that such projections are allowed, and even necessary, as a research instrument: “I consider [hermeneutical projections] to be heuristically inevitable within the *research* context of discoveries, but not . . . within the context of their *presentation*.<sup>57</sup>

I want to leave open the question which terms can be used harmlessly as metaphors, and under which conditions. But we can conclude that harmful confusion arises when the two sides of neuroscientific correlations are no longer kept separate but are rather mixed up so that the neuroscientist or philosopher on the one hand seems to have no need of accounting for the phenomenal pole of the correlation, while on the other hand tacitly smuggling in phenomenal/phenomenological terms into the description of the other pole: the neural events in the nervous system.

This is precisely the mistake Dennett makes. In *Consciousness Explained*, Dennett first rejects phenomenological descriptions of first-person experience and then reintroduces phenomenological terminology on the microscale of neural processes. The only right way, then, to formulate the correlations found by neuroscience is by consistently addressing both sides of the correlation and by keeping the respective discourses separate. I am euphoric because of the wonderful time I am having with my friends. There is probably a high level of dopamine in my brain at that moment, which is correlated with my joy in the sense that it is one of the physical preconditions for what I live through as a first person. But it makes no sense to say that the brain is happy. Neuroscience will try to get as far as it can differentiating and refining correlations between the phenomenal and the neural-physical. This is what we expect from neuroscience, and it is not only interesting but also extremely useful in the case of brain damage, dementia, and so forth. What we do not expect from this discipline, or from philosophy, is that it mixes the two sides of the correlation by saying that the brain is enjoying itself with other brains.

Why is Dennett so dependent on metaphors anyway? The reason for this is that he tries to reduce one side of the correlation—the phenomenal—to the other side of the correlation: the physical-neural. But both phenomenal and phenomenological terms (thinking, deciding, joy, depression, perception, “a long-haired woman”, “a red light”) keep urging themselves upon our thought. If the phe-

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56 Searle, *Putting Consciousness Back in the Brain*, 112.

57 Krüger, *Gehirn, Verhalten und Zeit*, 109.

nomenal world as such is an illusion, it should at least be unlike any other illusion we can think of. Better put: it does not make sense to compare the phenomenal world *as such* with *particular* illusions, like a magic trick or a Fata Morgana. Contrary to these illusions, the phenomenal world in which colorful forms appear immediately, and appear *as* things, plants, animals, houses, streets, windows, desks, computers, other persons, pieces of music, natural landscapes and works of art, does not disappear after we investigate it or change our perspective. This can lead us to conclude that the phenomenal world is a “necessary illusion”.<sup>58</sup> Even if this is meant as a strategy to save the phenomenal world, I think the strategy is too generous to materialism. An “illusion” which just refuses to vanish, because it is a *structural* and *predominant* aspect of our being in the world, simply cannot be an illusion.

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58 I am referring to Arnold Burms en Herman De Dijn, *De rationaliteit en haar grenzen*, 100: “What attracts people, what appeals to them and motivates them to act, is bound to occur as ‘mere appearance’ or illusion to the objectifying gaze. But knowing this also means realizing that the illusion is necessary and that it cannot be destroyed by any objectifying perspective.”

## Chapter 2

### Materialism and Its Critics

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#### 2.1 BENNETT AND HACKER'S CRITICISM OF DENNETT

My objections to Dennett's view in Chapter 1 resemble the criticism we find in *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience*, by neuroscientist Maxwell Bennett and philosopher Peter Hacker.<sup>1</sup> I have two reasons for dedicating this section to their view. Firstly, Bennett and Hacker deserve credit for their apt critique of Dennett. Secondly, there is an important difference between their starting point and mine: whereas my approach is phenomenological, theirs is ordinary language philosophy. Consequently, the similarity between their criticism of Dennett and mine is not as great as may seem at first sight, which offers a good occasion for a brief comparison between ordinary language philosophy and phenomenology.

Bennett and Hacker's main objection to Dennett's view is that Dennett would commit what they call the "mereological fallacy". Mereology is the logical theory of parts and wholes. Dennett's fallacy would be that he attributes "psychological"<sup>2</sup> predicates (thinking, consciousness, judgment, perception),

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1 Parts of this section have previously been published in van Buuren, "The Philosophical-Anthropological Foundations of Bennett and Hacker's Critique of Neuroscience".

2 The word "psychological" in Bennett and Hacker does not refer to the psyche as separate from the body, but rather to Aristotle's "psuchē" which refers to the human being as a whole. Bennett and Hacker explicitly criticize Cartesian dualism. Consequently, Robinson is mistaken when he suggests that Bennett and Hacker embrace a "discursive dualism" after the fashion of Descartes: "Bodies do not cogitate, persons do . . . It is the person as *res cogitans* and not some extended property of that entity, such as its brain." (Robinson, "Review of *Philosophical foundations of neuroscience*", 144.)

that are normally applied to the person as a whole, only to a “part” of the person: the brain. “Given Dennett’s conception of the intentional stance, it is unclear what precisely he means by claiming that the brain gathers information, anticipates things, interprets the information it receives, arrives at conclusions, etc. Presumably *he* is ‘adopting the intentional stance’ towards the brain, and is treating it as if it were a rational agent that believes what it ought to believe and desires what it ought to desire and acts on its beliefs and desires.”<sup>3</sup>

According to Bennett and Hacker, Dennett is certainly not the only philosopher or scientist to commit the mereological fallacy. A broad variety of examples is discussed in their book. In some cases psychological properties are attributed to the brain, in others to *parts* of the brain, for instance to one of the two hemispheres after “split-brain” operations: “After such ‘split-brain’ operations, patients exhibit dramatic forms of malfunctioning. This is commonly explained (e.g. by Crick) by reference to the alleged fact that ‘one half of the brain appears to be almost totally ignorant of what the other half saw’. When the patient is asked to explain why he moved his left hand as he did, ‘he will invent explanations based on what his left (speaking) hemisphere saw, not what his right hemisphere knew’.”<sup>4</sup>

We do not need to go into the details of split-brain operations in order to understand Bennett and Hacker’s point. They do not object to the particulars of Francis Crick’s theory, but rather to its presuppositions: the left hemisphere does not see anything, nor does the right hemisphere know anything. Instead we should say that *I* see or know something, and that this is rendered possible by specific functions located in the right or left hemisphere of the brain. Neuroscience sometimes ascribes psychological attributes to even smaller parts of the brain, including, in the most extreme case, individual neurons. Bennett and Hacker quote Colin Blakemore, who says that neurons “have knowledge”, “have intelligence”, and “present arguments to the brain”.<sup>5</sup> According to Bennett and Hacker, this goes against the mereological principle of neuroscience, which in sum purports that “psychological predicates which apply only to human beings (or other animals) as wholes cannot intelligibly be applied to their parts, such as the brain”.<sup>6</sup>

I agree with the general purport of Bennett and Hacker’s criticism of Dennett and neuroscience and -philosophy in general. As regards their objection to

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3 Bennett and Hacker, *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience*, 426.

4 Ibid., 153. Bennett and Hacker are quoting Francis Crick.

5 Ibid., 69.

6 Ibid., 73.

projecting psychological predicates to parts of the brain, including the tiniest parts, it is interesting to note that, already in 1872, Du Bois-Reymond criticized this way of thinking:

What conceivable connection exists between, on the one hand, certain movements between certain atoms in my brain, and on the other hand these facts which are to me original, which I can neither further define nor deny: 'I feel pain, feel *like* something, taste something sweet, smell the scent of roses, hear the sound of the organ, see red', and the certainty ensuing from this: 'And therefore I am'? It is precisely completely and forever incomprehensible that a number of carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen etc. atoms would not be indifferent about how they are positioned and move around, how they were positioned and moved around, and how they will be positioned and will move around. In no way can it be understood how their being together could produce consciousness. If they were not indifferent to their way of being positioned and moving around, then we would need to conceive of them as individually equipped with consciousness, like monads. This would not explain consciousness as such, nor would it contribute the least to the explanation of the unified consciousness of the individual.<sup>7</sup>

The passage shows that both Bennett and Hacker's and my own criticism are part of a tradition which is much older than one might be inclined to think. In addition, the passage demonstrates that already Du Bois-Reymond recognized a logical *tendency* inherent to the reductionist approach: the materialist assumes that the brain is conscious and seeks the explanation for this capacity in *partial* processes, which easily leads to the ascription of consciousness to these parts, which in turn leads to the ascription of consciousness to even smaller parts of the nervous system. Bennett and Hacker and I are both historically and systematically speaking in the same camp, but there are also some important differences between their view and mine. From my point of view their approach raises some pressing questions.

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7 Du Bois-Reymond, *Über die Grenzen des Naturerkennens*, 458.

Cf. G. H. Lewes's *The Physical Basis of Mind* (1877), 441: "it is the man and not the brain, that thinks; it is the organism as a whole and not one organ that feels and acts". Quoted by Hacker in "Before the Mereological Fallacy: A Rejoinder to Rom Harré", 143.

One question is whether, from a philosophical perspective, human beings are animals, as Bennett and Hacker presuppose.<sup>8</sup> This may seem like a side-issue but in fact it is not: our shared criticism of Dennett also targets the primacy of the scientific perspective, and it is precisely from this perspective that the difference between human beings and animals appears to be non-existent or merely gradual. I argue that the assumption that human beings are animals goes against Bennett and Hacker's own aspiration to make explicit the habitual rules of ordinary language. From a *biological* perspective human beings are animals, but in our everyday lives we start from the assumption that human beings are different from animals. If somebody says "I like animals", she does not mean to include human beings in this assertion (although she might also like people). And if someone says that farmer John treats his animals badly, we know that she is referring to his cattle, not to his wife and children (although he might also treat them badly). It has become something of a habit in philosophy, and gradually also in everyday forms of "theoretical" self-reflection, to regard oneself from a biological perspective and to adopt, without reservations, the presupposition that there is no essential difference between animals and human beings. There are, as far as I can see, two reasons why we are inclined to do so:

(1) Over the past few centuries biology and natural science in general have been extremely successful in producing a vast amount of empirical knowledge about the human being and the world. This tempts us not only to accept these results as truths about *some* aspect of our existence, but to think that the presuppositions of biology are applicable to *all* aspects of our lives, regardless of the question whether they are in tension with our normal assumptions about what we are.<sup>9</sup> Science is accepted as the ultimate source of truth about the human being and the world, and the problem of whether a specific question is a *scientific* question in the first place is neglected. Although Bennett and Hacker criticize reductionism in neuroscience, scientism is not without influence on their view.

(2) Many of us, late-moderns, feel we should do more justice to animal well-being than we have in the past. We think that we have not taken animals se-

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8 This presupposition is apparent in the quotation above, but also e.g. in Bennett and Hacker, *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience*, 209, where Bennett and Hacker refer to animals as "*non-human* animals" (italics mine).

9 This issue is more complicated than it seems: I do not mean that there are *areas* in our lives which science does not explore. Science can in principle explore *everything*: the word "one aspect" here designates that it explores everything in a single, one-sided way, which certainly has its value but is not the only truth about human existence. This will be discussed more extensively in the chapters to come.

riously enough. This moral judgment, which is in itself legitimate, leads to a form of overcompensation: we think we should take animals just as seriously as human beings. And so we speak of the “non-human animal”, and say it has “rights” like we, “human animals”, do. Although I wholeheartedly agree with the moral agenda of treating animals better than we have been doing, I think this should not cause us to blur the distinction between human beings who are persons and have rights, and animals, which do not have rights but which nonetheless deserve a good life without unnecessary suffering. (The difference between human beings and animals will be further explored in Chapters 4 and 5.)

The second question evoked by Bennett and Hacker’s criticism of Dennett concerns the term “mereological fallacy” and what it implies. Bennett and Hacker say that “perception, thought, and feeling, *are attributes of human beings*, not of their parts—in particular, *not of their brains*.<sup>10</sup> They continue that “[a] human being is a psychophysical unity, an animal that can perceive, act intentionally, reason and feel emotions”.<sup>11</sup> Other passages suggest that the brain is “a part of the *person*”.<sup>12</sup> I agree with the general purport of this criticism, but I have some trouble with the assumptions implied in these formulations. It seems awkward to say that the brain is a part of the human being or the person. John Searle makes this very point: “The relation of the brain to the rest of the *body* is indeed part-whole. The brain is a part of my body. [Bennett and Hacker] say only a *person* can be the subject of psychological attributions, not just a brain. But the person is not related to the brain as whole to part.”<sup>12</sup> I agree with Searle: the brain is not a part of the human being or the person, but rather of his (organic) *body*. But does the body not belong to the person? I will return to this question shortly.

In their response to Searle, Bennett and Hacker give in somewhat to this objection, distinguishing between person and human being. The brain would be part of the human being, indeed not of the person:

Human beings are persons—that is, they are intelligent, language-using animals—are self-conscious, possess knowledge of good and evil, are responsible for their deeds, and are bearers of rights and duties. To be a person is, roughly speaking, to possess such abilities as qualify one for the status of a moral agent. We would probably not say that the brain is part of the person but rather that it is part of the person’s body, whereas we would not hesitate to say that Jack’s brain is part of Jack, part of *this* human being, just as his legs and

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10 Bennett and Hacker, *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience*, 3.

11 Ibid., 112 (italics mine); cf. 81-85.

12 Searle, *Putting Consciousness Back in the Brain*, 107. Cf. Rom Harré, “Behind the Mereological Fallacy”, 336-339.

arms are parts of Jack. Why? Perhaps because ‘person’ is, as Locke stressed ‘a forensic term’, but not a substance name. So, if we use the term ‘person’ in contexts such as this, we indicate thereby that we are concerned primarily with human beings *qua* possessors of those characteristics that render them persons, in relative disregard of corporeal characteristics.<sup>13</sup>

I agree with Bennett and Hacker that “person” and “human being” are somewhat different concepts. Hacker rightly states that personhood could in principle also exist as the mode of being of another organism than the human being.<sup>14</sup> This implies that the extensions of “human being” and “person” do not necessarily coincide.<sup>15</sup> But does the distinction solve the problem at hand? I argue that it does not, because although not all persons are necessarily human beings, we consider all (healthy, adult) human beings to be persons. Jack is a human being, for sure, but this implies that he is a person. I do not understand why the authors presuppose that a proper name like Jack would refer to anything less than the *person* Jack. If one would want to clarify the claim that Jack’s brain is part of Jack, one would probably add something to it: “Jack’s brain is part of Jack, *that is: of his body.*” So Searle’s point remains valid: The brain is not part of the person Jack, but of the person Jack’s body.

But the case is a little more complicated. Bennett and Hacker’s expression “the person’s body” from the quotation above implies that the person *has* his body. This is certainly part of the way we relate to the body, which is illustrated by everyday life expressions such as “I like (or dislike) *my* body” or “I hurt *my* finger.” But at the same time we *are* this body that we have. In the same manner, Jack from the example above not only *has* his body, which includes the brain, he also *is* that body. The claim that the brain is part of Jack is therefore true in one particular respect. It is true insofar as Jack *is* the body that he (also) has. Insofar as Jack simply coincides with his objective body, each part of that body is part of Jack. The reason the claim is problematic, then, is that its truth is only partial. It suggests that Jack is *nothing more* than the objective body, because that is

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13 Bennett and Hacker, *The Conceptual Presuppositions of Cognitive Neuroscience*, 134-135; cf. Hacker, “Before the mereological fallacy: A rejoinder to Rom Harré”, 142-143. I am assuming continuity between Hacker and collaborative work by Bennett and Hacker.

14 Hacker, *Human Nature: The Categorial Framework*, 313; cf. Plessner, *Stufen*, 293.

15 Since “human being” and “person” have *in fact* the same extension (as there are, as far as we know, no other organisms than the human being which are persons), I will often use these terms more or less as equivalents.

what the brain is a part of. The formulation evokes a reductive-materialistic picture of the human being, which is precisely what the authors want to avoid. So although it is tempting to accept that Jack's brain is a part of Jack, or that the brain is a part of the human being, these claims are just as problematic as "the brain is a part of the person."<sup>16</sup>

I am anticipating the discussion of Plessner in Chapter 5. According to Plessner, we should distinguish between my own body as a thing, i.e., as an object, including the brain, and my body as a *subject*, i.e., as a sensorimotor unity, open to the world. Subject and object are not parts of the body, but two *modes of being*, two *aspects*, of one and the same body. In the case of human beings, who also have a structural awareness of the subjectivity and the objectivity of the body, this unity is called a "person".

So, according to Plessner, the human body not only has different parts; there are also different *aspects* to the body. Using this vocabulary we can say that the brain is a part of the objective body and that the objective body is only one of two aspects of our bodily existence as a whole. The objective body is a *partial aspect* of our being in the world. This is a more differentiated mereology than Bennett and Hacker's, because we distinguish between two kinds of part-whole relationships: (a) the relationship between a part of the body and the body as a whole, (b) the relationship between a partial aspect of our bodily existence and this existence as a whole, whereby the whole is the person. The person is herself embodied and she is more than the sum of the partial aspects which make up her existence. Since "person" describes the whole Plessner does not call it the "third aspect" of human existence. Searle's objection to Bennett and Hacker that the brain is not a part of the person is correct, because (a) and (b) are fundamentally different kinds of part-whole relationships. They should not be conflated. Instead of saying that the brain is part of the person (or human being), we should

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16 Rom Harré also argues that the brain is not part of the person but, in my view, he mistakenly concludes from this that we are not dealing with a mereological problem at all. The real mistake would be the violation of "the radical disjunction of moral and factual judgments" (Harré, "Behind the Mereological Fallacy", 339). I think Harré overlooks the possibility of a different interpretation of the mereological relationship between brain and person, namely the interpretation presented here. In my view, the mereological fallacy goes together with the reduction, addressed by Harré, of the moral domain to mere facts. I do not understand why Harré assumes that these two kinds of fallacy exclude one another.

say: The brain is part of the objective body and the objective body is only one of two aspects of the person.<sup>17</sup>

The third and final question raised by Bennett and Hacker's critique of materialism has to do with method. I want to show that the similarity between my objections to Dennett's view and Bennett and Hacker's criticism of that view is not as great as may seem at first sight.

Bennett and Hacker argue from a Wittgensteinian background: they say that all they do is analyze the rules for the correct use of words. These rules constitute the conceptual contents of the words and their relations to other words. "To have a concept is to have mastered the use of a word (or phrase)."<sup>18</sup> And: "Conceptual problems . . . are problems that result from misinterpreting the forms of our language, using words in ways that appear to make sense, but do not."<sup>19</sup> Bennett and Hacker insist that philosophy can only decide whether sentences make sense or need to be disqualified as nonsense. In their view, philosophy does not judge about the truth or falsity of propositions. Questions of truth and falsehood would be restricted to the empirical realm: "Scientific theories must be testable in experience. They may be true (or false); but equally they may be only approximations of the truth. Philosophy, by contrast, clarifies what does and does not make sense. Determinations of sense antecede experience, and are presupposed by true and false judgments alike."<sup>20</sup> Let us explore what this means by looking at two examples.

Bennett and Hacker say that it makes no sense to speak of "the east of the North Pole".<sup>21</sup> There are rules to the use of the words "east" and "North Pole", and these rules prevent us from saying something like: "I am organizing an expedition to a location just east of the North Pole." I agree with Bennett and Hacker that this is a conceptual mistake on the basis of (at least *also*) considerations concerning the correct use of language. It is simply illogical to utter the sentence mentioned. But is this conclusion based *only* on a reflection on language?

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17 As we will see, the situation is actually still more complicated. In Chapter 6 I will distinguish between two senses of "objective body": the body as a phenomenal object and the body as a physical object. The brain is only part of the body as an "object" in the second sense, because it is not a member of our everyday prescientific phenomenal world.

18 Ibid., 340.

19 Ibid., 401.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid., 6.

I argue that the diagnosis of this nonsensical use of words presupposes that we know what the words “North Pole” and “east” *mean*. It is not clear to me why Bennett and Hacker want to reduce this meaning to a set of rules for the right use of the word. “North Pole” refers to a real location on earth. It is true that our use of the word “North Pole” is based on linguistic life forms or habits, but these forms are at least partly founded on the special character of this particular location *in reality*. We can say that the North Pole is real for us on three levels. Firstly, the rules involved in the use of the word “North Pole” are based on scientific knowledge of physical reality, notably that the North Pole is one of the two places on earth located at the pivot of the earth’s rotation. Secondly, and in direct connection to that, these rules are based on *geometrical* knowledge of the properties of a sphere. It is *a priori* (without physical knowledge) clear that the surface of a sphere which rotates around a stable virtual axis can be divided by evenly placed straight lines from one pole to the other, i.e., by what we call degrees of longitude. East and West define positions relative to these degrees. Since the degrees of longitude converge at the North Pole (and the South Pole), the North Pole is not a position *in relation to* any degree of longitude. I am, of course, not saying this because the reader would not already know this or because he would not be able to make these observations. I am illustrating that the use of language points to various aspects of reality which are not linguistic.

Thirdly, then, the North Pole is a *phenomenon* because it is a place we can experience from the first-person perspective, and it has a meaning for us which cannot be reduced to the scientific knowledge we have of it. To make an even stronger point, our physical and geometrical knowledge of the North Pole becomes meaningful only because, and insofar as, we integrate this knowledge in our phenomenal conception of the North Pole. An example of such integration is the planning of a Pole expedition. Our scientific knowledge concerning the North Pole is put to the use of an enterprise which we anticipate and live through as first persons and which can only in this way be meaningful to us. Even if the goal of the expedition would *itself* be the collection of scientific data, our *fascination* with the reality that we explore cannot be fully understood in third-person terms, because fascination is not part of the technique of science: it joins it, and motivates it, and therefore alone must transcend the mere goal-oriented production of scientific results.

This basic relationship between us and reality we call “phenomenality”: it is our relationship to anything that appears in the world or anything that we have in mind when we are focused on or anticipate something, or when we have vivid thoughts or conversations about it. The analysis of language is empty without the perspective which focuses on phenomena. Ordinary language philosophy de-

pends on phenomenology, just like phenomenology depends on language for its expression.

Let us take a look at a second example of Bennett and Hacker's ordinary-language approach. They argue that it makes no sense to speak of a "conscious chair" because the two concepts involved ("consciousness" and "chair") are not combinable in this way.<sup>22</sup> It would go against the rules of the use of language to claim or presuppose that chairs can be conscious. I agree, of course, that chairs are not conscious, but again I think the ordinary-language approach needs to be complemented by a phenomenological perspective. The main reason why we do not believe chairs are conscious is that the *appearance* of a chair gives us no perceivable indications of life, let alone of consciousness. These indications are partly generalizable, partly context-dependent. Imagine that there is an old, worn-out armchair in the room. Suddenly our attention is drawn to the chair because something is moving in the chair's stuffing. Something seems to want to get out. The light shock we experience (even before we express this shock in language) is motivated by the subtle indications that a mouse is in the stuffing of the chair, seeking its way to out. Our surprise marks the transition from one mode of experience to another, i.e., from the experience of inanimate use-objects to the experience of living things, more specifically animals, mammals, rodents, mice.

The example demonstrates that our familiarity with things like "consciousness" and "chair" is not only based on the rules for the correct use of words, but also on the ways things appear to us categorially, for instance, as living rather than non-living. Such categories constitute little frameworks of experience. I am here drawing on Plessner's view that categories of experience are not the same as concepts.<sup>23</sup> According to Plessner, categories do not in themselves have a linguistic structure. We recognize an animal by essence indicating characteristics which are perceptual and intuitive at the same time. They evoke in us an attitude which is attuned to the kind of being we are dealing with. Our attitudes do not (primarily) have a linguistic form: we *embody* them. For instance, animals evoke a readiness in us to play with them, to chase them, or to run away from them. Our attitudes thus correlate with the kind (category) of being over against us. Our linguistic concepts are based on these *preexisting* correlations between phenomena and our embodied attitudes towards them. This does not mean that we do not *shape* these correlations through language: we do, to a great extent even.

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22 Ibid., 245.

23 Plessner, *Stufen*, 116-117/169.

But there remains a prelinguistic level of experience beneath mediation through language.<sup>24</sup>

The example also illustrates that the phenomenological intuiting of an essence, as carried out by the philosopher engaging in eidetic variation and reduction, is a continuation of something we already do in our pre-philosophical lives: we recognize the essence of things by their appearing characteristics. According to Plessner, “Each original confrontation with what is given and is conceived in words happens in categorial intuition. In the table in front of me, which is perceived by the senses, I ‘see’ *a* table. In a contract with the landlord I grasp that which gives it the character of a contract. Each human being is capable of such a seeing (intuition) of the essence, especially when he rejects the wrong expression for something (which can be given perceptually or otherwise) and searches the right expression for it.”<sup>25</sup>

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24 Cf. Richard Shusterman, *Vor der Interpretation: Sprache und Erfahrung in Hermeneutik, Dekonstruktion und Pragmatismus*, 65-98.

25 Plessner, *Lebensphilosophie und Phänomenologie*, 247.

There are some important differences between my use of the term “category” and Plessner’s use of the term—differences which indicate that Plessner in some passages envisages a more restricted role for phenomenology than I do. I am using “category” as the word for both a *kind* of entity and the *way* we essentially relate to this entity. This does not contradict Plessner, but Plessner more generally equates categories with all properties which constitute the essence of a being or a relationship (Plessner, *Stufen*, 114/167). In addition, according to the *Stufen*, categories can only be partly revealed by phenomenology. Plessner sometimes even contemplates whether phenomenology can really go further than revealing essence indicating characteristics (ibid., 115/168). He speaks of an intuition of categories, but then, at least in the *Stufen*, he prefers to call the theory which makes use of this intuition “dialectics” (ibid.). I understand that Plessner wants to emphasize the dynamical character of the analysis as well as the internal relationships between different essences, and I agree with the term “dialectics”, but I do not see why philosophy cannot be phenomenological and dialectical at the same time. Plessner argues that the categories of life have to be gained through “deduction”, because a phenomenological, “static description of essences” (ibid., 115/168) would not be the appropriate means. Again, I do not see why phenomenology and dialectics are contradictory: why would a phenomenological description necessarily be “static”, i.e., not be able to let one level of life “organically” follow from the previous one? I also do not see why there should be a distinction between one part of the category (e.g. of the living) which can be phenomenologically described, and a part which can only be logically deduced. In my view, all logical rea-

Summing up this point, I agree with Bennett and Hacker that we cannot decide what consciousness is on the basis of empirical research. We already know what consciousness is on the basis of a certain familiarity with it, before we reflect on this philosophically. Bennett and Hacker explain this familiarity by referring to knowledge of the rules for the use of the word concerned. This knowledge consists of an indefinite range of concepts. I say that our knowledge of words goes together with knowledge about the *world* we refer to when we use these words. We are familiar with *consciousness* and with *chairs*, i.e., with what they are/ how they appear to us, not only with the use of the words “consciousness” and “chair”. We can also have the experience of a chair, or of another consciousness, without, at that very moment, using language. The presence of beings in the external world is primarily perceptual and categorical.

It might be objected that consciousness does not appear to us, or that it does not appear to us in the way that a chair appears to us. I would need to anticipate too much of what is to come in the rest of this book to argue that the objection does not hold. Let me restrict myself to the following remark. The example of the mouse in the chair demonstrates that we recognize in the outer world indications of life, in this case of animal life. In the specific case of mammals this already implies consciousness—albeit not the kind of consciousness of human beings. Let us assume for the moment that mammals and other higher animals indeed have consciousness, in that they are a sensorimotor center of perception and action. The surprise we experience when we recognize animal life crawling through the stuffing of the chair is occasioned by the sudden and unexpected recognition of a conscious being in the external world. In this sense consciousness *does* appear in the world, although it can only appear as embodied by a living thing.

More challenging is the example of my *own* consciousness. Since we, human beings, can distance ourselves from our own being in the world, even our own consciousness is a phenomenon that can be explored through eidetic variation and reduction. How is this possible? Although phenomenology traditionally

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soning about essences is at the same time a matter of trying to see, i.e., intuit, the ground structure of the phenomenon at hand and of testing one's insight by repeated eidetic variation and reduction. Although I agree with Plessner that phenomenology depends on questions borrowed from life itself, and is only possible under hermeneutical conditions (cf. Sections 3.3-3.4), I think the phenomenological scope is wider than Plessner suggests. Just as hermeneutics does not start where phenomenology begins, phenomenology does not stop where dialectics begins. I think these approaches are different aspects of one and the same philosophical discipline.

starts from the givenness of physical objects in perception, it is not limited to describing the structure of the appearance of external objects to (perceptual) consciousness.<sup>26</sup> Consciousness can also be a phenomenon to itself. We can explore it by eidetic variation. Is it a physical thing? No. Does it depend on some kind of embodiment? Yes. Is that embodiment necessarily organic? Yes. (Here Dennett would say: No.) I am leaving out the arguments and I am also leaving open further questions as to what kind of phenomenon consciousness is. I call it a phenomenon because *any* truly philosophical topic is at some point subjugated to eidetic variation and reduction—even though the method of eidetic variation and reduction is often not explicitly mentioned.<sup>27</sup>

Consequently, I think it is possible to be *wrong* about the essential properties of whatever is at issue in a philosophical discussion. This means that philosophy is not only about sense and nonsense, as Bennett and Hacker suggest, but also about truth and falsity.<sup>28</sup> Since philosophy has these very real subject-matters, which are “material” in the sense that they are richer than formal logic can describe, philosophy in my view not only strives for consistency and coherence, but also attempts to produce adequate descriptions of phenomena. The example of the chair makes clear that we need eidetic variation and reduction to argue that chairs are not conscious.

Bennett and Hacker’s *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience* targeted a range of scientists and philosophers, but especially Searle and Dennett. After the book came out, the American Philosophical Association in 2005 organized an “Authors and Critics” session in New York, with Bennett, Hacker, Dennett, and Searle. The debate led to a new book, *Neuroscience and Philosophy*, which I already quoted from a couple of times. In this book Bennett and Hacker restate their point, and Searle and Dennett respond to the critique aimed at them. Dennett rejects Bennett and Hacker’s criticism because their objections would be based on a false reading of his work. This response is also relevant to my criticism, because Dennett *denies* that he ascribes properties like thinking, perceiving, drawing conclusions, or deciding to the brain. As noted, Bennett and Hacker

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26 My starting point is now the wider sense of “phenomenal” and “phenomenological”, which I distinguished in Section 4 of the Introduction.

27 I am not implying that we could ever arrive at some absolute or definite understanding of consciousness. Cf. Sections 3.3-3.4.

28 I agree with Dennett about this (Dennett, *Philosophy as Naïve Anthropology: Comment on Bennett and Hacker*, 79-80).

criticize Dennett for committing the mereological fallacy. In their view, we should not say “the eye sees”, but “I see *with* my eyes”, not “the brain has experiences, knows and believes things”, but: “*I* experience, know and believe things”. Bennett and Hacker think these are *psychological* modes of being, that cannot be ascribed to processes in the brain: they can at best be *correlated* with such processes. Referring to his early work, *Content and Consciousness*, Dennett replies: “This is at least close kin to the point I made in 1969 when I distinguished the personal and subpersonal levels of explanation. *I* feel pain; my brain doesn’t. *I* see things; my eyes don’t.”<sup>29</sup> This is a surprising response. As we have seen, Dennett *does* attribute first-person concepts like “assuming” and “deciding” to the brain and other parts of the nervous system, and he *does* say that autophenomenological texts like “I see X” should be heterophenomenologically neutralized by turning them into “he *seems* to see X”. Dennett’s claim that he has long acknowledged that persons, not brains, think, perceive, have pain, etc., cannot disprove this criticism. It simply means that he is inconsistent.<sup>30</sup>

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29 Dennett, *Philosophy as Naive Anthropology: Comment on Bennett and Hacker*, 76.

30 Some time before *Neuroscience and Philosophy* came out, Jennifer Hornsby argued that there is a great difference between *Content and Consciousness* and Dennett’s later work. (Hornsby, “Personal and Sub-Personal: A Defense of Dennett’s Early Distinction”, and: *Simple Mindedness: In Defense of Naive Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mind*, 158, 175-177, 184.) In *Content and Consciousness*, Dennett would defend a distinction between a personal level of explanation, which takes seriously first-person experience, and a subpersonal level of explanation, which turns to the functionality of the objective body. In Hornsby’s view, Dennett changed his mind about his early personal/subpersonal distinction, abandoning it in *Brainstorms* and everything thereafter. Responding to this suggestion, Dennett denies that there is a difference between his early and his later work: “Among the philosophers who have taken my personal/subpersonal level to heart, at least one—Jennifer Hornsby—has surmised that I might have abandoned it in my later work. Did I in fact turn my back on this good idea? No.” (Dennett, *Philosophy as Naive Anthropology*, 77.) I do not have the space here for an extensive discussion of *Content and Consciousness*, but I do want to refer to Thomas Nagel’s review of the work (“Dennett: Content and Consciousness”, reprinted in *Other Minds*, 82-85), which argues that *Content and Consciousness*, despite some red herrings, advances a reductionist agenda.

## 2.2 THE CHURCHLANDS' ELIMINATIVISM

Dennett regards himself as a reductionist and not an eliminativist. Eliminativism denies the existence of anything other than physical reality, which means that it also denies the reality of intentional relationships such as beliefs or desires. Below I return shortly to the question whether Dennett is indeed a reductionist rather than an eliminativist. First I want to take a closer look at the latter branch of materialism by discussing the view of Paul and Patricia Churchland, who are without doubt its most important advocates.<sup>31</sup> Since there is great similarity between the Churchlands' view and Dennett's,<sup>32</sup> I will keep this discussion relatively short in order to avoid unnecessary repetition.

The Churchlands do not enter into a discussion with phenomenological views, but their critique of folk psychology targets certain ideas which are kin to phenomenology. The term “folk psychology” here refers to our everyday common sense conceptions about why people behave the way they behave. The eliminativist critique of folk psychology attempts to consistently explain our behavior on the subpersonal level of the physiological body, notably the brain, and physical reality, with a view of ultimately eliminating all folk-psychological concepts.

Folk psychology is not the only target of the Churchlands' neuroscientific critique. We can distinguish three targets. Firstly, folk psychology is part of the more encompassing folk *theory*, which also includes folk physics, biology, etc., i.e., all of our everyday presuppositions about how the world works. Secondly, there is psychology as an academic discipline, which according to the Churchlands overcomes many false hypotheses of folk psychology, but which still depends on basic “phenomenal” conceptions like belief, desire, the ego, qualia, etc. Thirdly, both folk and academic psychology try to explain the domain of subjective experience. But in this view subjective experience is itself theory-laden. The perception of a chair, for instance, would depend on my “theoretical” knowledge of what chairs are and what one can do with them.<sup>33</sup> This means that experience is not clearly distinguished from folk theory. The domain of experience is the

31 I will assume that Patricia and Paul Churchland defend one and the same philosophy, but I do not exclude that there are subtle differences between their views. John Bickle promises that he sets out to explore such differences, but he ends up addressing only differences in style (Bickle, *The Neurophilosophies of Patricia and Paul Churchland*).

32 Cf. Dennett, *Two Steps Closer on Consciousness*, 193.

33 Paul Churchland, *The Ontological Status of Observables*, 36-37.

target of neuroscientific critique in the sense that the specific, autonomous character of experience (its relative independence from the physical) is denied: all subjective phenomena *are* in the end nothing other than neurophysiological and physical mechanisms. Thus, the mind *is* nothing but the brain.<sup>34</sup> Light is not that which makes things visible, but rather a set of electromagnetic waves.<sup>35</sup> And there is no room for qualia in our understanding of experience.<sup>36</sup> So the target of elimination is not only folk theory, but also the qualities we experience first hand. The basis of this eliminativism is a physical realism that affirms the reality of entities or properties which can be observable or non-observable, as long as they are validated by scientific theory.<sup>37</sup>

Although the Churchlands have the name of being “eliminativists”, they often speak of the “reduction” of theories or phenomena, and sometimes it is hard to figure out what their agenda is. The Churchlands are more or less clear about their goal of eliminating folk psychology. However, their relationship to *academic* psychology is more ambiguous.<sup>38</sup> In *Neurophilosophy* Patricia Churchland first argues in favor of a “co-evolution” of psychology and neuroscience.<sup>39</sup> Psychology would still have a role to play in the description of behavior, but this description would then be “reduced” in the sense of explained by neuroscience. Only when she turns to folk psychology does she embrace a clear eliminativist program. The question what this means for our non-neuroscientific concepts of things like consciousness, free will, color perception, and so forth, is not explained. How can you *eliminate* such concepts when they occur as elements of a folk psychology but only *reduce* them when they are part of academic psychology? Is it not thinkable that our folk-psychological concepts would be informed and shaped by psychology and could thus be preserved?<sup>40</sup> This question remains unanswered. I will assume, for the sake of argument, that the answer the Churchlands would offer would not detract from the core of their eliminative materialism.

The fact that the Churchlands leave no room for a philosophical perspective that connects with first-person experience and its correlates, such as perceived

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34 Patricia Churchland, *Neurophilosophy*, ix.

35 Paul Churchland, *Consciousness and the Introspection of 'Qualitative Simples'*, 41.

36 Ibid., 55.

37 Paul Churchland, *Scientific Realism and the Plasticity of Mind* (Chapter 1) and *The Ontological Status of Observables*.

38 Cf. Kitcher, *From Neurophilosophy to Neurocomputation*.

39 Patricia Churchland, *Neurophilosophy*, 362-376.

40 I think that this is what Brian Keeley also has in mind (Keeley, *Paul Churchland*, 22).

qualities (qualia) leads to a number of problems. Firstly, as with Dennett, there is the problem of consistency. In *Plato's Camera*, Paul Churchland explains that the eye creates “a representation” of the “*spatiotemporal particulars* currently displayed before its lens”.<sup>41</sup> The brain, says Churchland, constructs a representation more slowly. This is a representation of “the *abstract universals*, the *temporal invariants*, and the *enduring symmetries* that structure the objective universe of its experience”.<sup>42</sup> What kind of representations are we talking about on this higher level? Churchland insists that they are non-propositional and non-sentential: this is what would distinguish them from the beliefs of folk and academic psychology. The higher-order representations, Churchland tells us, are spaces or “maps”: “Not the two-dimensional maps that grace your automobile’s glove compartment, but *high-dimensional* maps—maps with three, or a hundred, or even a million distinct dimensions, maps with extraordinary resolution and structural detail.”<sup>43</sup> As an example Churchland discusses the “map of the space of possible colors”.<sup>44</sup> There are many such maps or spaces, each defining a certain variable of our experience. In Churchland’s view, the unit of cognition is thus not a representation with a propositional content, but rather “the *activation pattern* across a *proprietary population* of neurons. It is the activation *point* within any one of the many hundreds of representational *spaces* urged above.”<sup>45</sup> This one point activates other pointlike activations, ultimately in motor spaces, leading to motor behavior.

Speaking of maps in the brain raises the question regarding their relationship to the brain itself as a collection of neurons. Churchland says that these maps are “embodied” by “one’s neuronal populations”<sup>46</sup> and he promises that his book *Plato's Camera* will explain how they are thus embodied. However, the book only explains the details of this theory; it does not go into the fundamental question of how a materialistic theory can account for something like maps in the brain in the first place. The phrase that neurons “embody” these maps is simply never elucidated. At the same time the notion of a map, for instance the “space of possible colors”, seems to fulfill an *Ersatz*-function for the eliminated phenomenal world. The rhetorical move is quite similar to Dennett’s: first Churchland claims that qualities have no place in any solid theory of perception,

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41 Paul Churchland, *Plato's Camera*, vii.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid., vii-viii.

44 Ibid., plate 1 opposite page 134.

45 Ibid., 4.

46 Ibid., ix.

but then he reintroduces those qualities in a color map which supposedly can be found in the brain. As long as the Churchlands do not explain how there can be maps in the brain, and how this does not result in a dualism of neurons and maps, their view cannot be convincing. As noted above, the alternative philosophical approach to these questions is that you retain the distinction between our experience of the phenomenal world on the one hand, and the brain and physical reality on the other hand, then to establish as many correlations as you can between brain processes and experience.<sup>47</sup>

Secondly, the reason why the Churchlands reject the importance of first-person experience is that they lack any sense of the distinction between the first- and the third-person perspective in the first place. I will show this by turning to (a) Paul Churchland's discussion of qualia, and (b) Patricia Churchland's discussion of folk psychology.

(a) In a recent debate Paul Churchland defended materialism against some classic arguments from, respectively, Thomas Nagel, Frank Jackson, and David Chalmers. I will only go into two arguments (from Nagel and Jackson), and I will ignore the fact that there are significant differences between their views and my own view. Their key point, which I agree with, is that there are qualities that we experience which cannot be reduced to neuronal processes and thus be eliminated. This, of course, is the point Churchland disagrees with.

Nagel famously argued that if you would know everything about a bat's neurophysiological state, you would still not know what it is like to be a bat. His point is that there is "something that it is like to be a bat",<sup>48</sup> or a human being for that matter, and that this "something that it is like" cannot be grasped by the objectifying perspective of natural science. According to Churchland, Nagel fails to appreciate the difference between the situation where I know the theory of something and the situation *where this theory holds true of me*. I can know everything about superconductors, but this does not turn me into a superconductor, he says. And returning to the example of the bat: "Nagel is implicitly demanding or expecting that mere possession of a certain body of *theoretical* knowledge should *constitute* (as opposed to describe or explain) a quite *distinct form* of

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47 You can then also create "maps" in the sense that you correlate certain areas in the brain with certain cognitive functions, thus "mapping" the former to the latter. But this is a completely different use of the word "maps": in this case the spatial configuration of the brain is identical to the spatial configuration of the map. The same cannot be said of, for instance, the color map introduced by Churchland. Cf. Bennett and Hacker, *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience*, 76-77.

48 Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?", 438.

knowledge: bat-style subjective cognition.”<sup>49</sup> According to Churchland, this is an “unreasonable” demand on the materialist.<sup>50</sup>

I think that Churchland misinterprets Nagel’s intentions. Nagel is not at all demanding or expecting that scientific knowledge would initiate us into the subjective experience concerned. His point is precisely that this transition from third-person knowledge to first-person experience cannot be made. So he would be the last person to demand or expect this from science or materialism. Churchland’s response is quite astonishing, as he implicitly agrees with Nagel that there is a discontinuity between scientific and subjective knowledge. By insisting that the demand is unreasonable, he is in fact affirming Nagel’s point: that there are two kinds of knowledge with a certain discontinuity between them. Churchland is only one step short of understanding that this is a valid objection to his own materialism.

Churchland repeats his argument in relation to Jackson’s example of Mary who lives and works in a totally black-and-white room. In this example, Mary is in possession of all possible neuroscientific and physical knowledge about seeing colors, but she has never in fact seen colors.<sup>51</sup> The question Jackson asks is this: when Mary leaves her room and finally sees the colorful world, does she then learn anything new about colors? Jackson concludes that she does, and that this proves that materialism is untenable. Churchland responds in the same vein as to Nagel: “But here again, Jackson is expecting, quite wrongly, that one form of knowledge should *constitute* a quite different form of knowledge. He is expecting that explicit/discursive/scientific knowledge should somehow *constitute* subjective knowledge of visual experiences.”<sup>52</sup> Again, I think that Churchland completely misses the point. Jackson is not expecting at all that scientific knowledge should have given Mary the actual experience of colors. Quite the opposite, he says that this is impossible and that this impossibility proves that there are two kinds of knowledge. Again, ironically, Churchland here seems to *concede* that there are two kinds of knowledge: in his resistance to the “unreasonable” expectations of neuroscience, he admits that objective knowledge cannot be turned into subjective knowledge.

(b) The distinction between our prescientific first-person perspective and the third-person perspective of science indeed constitutes the appropriate framework for a critical examination of the Churchlands’ materialism. Their failure to

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49 Paul Churchland, *Consciousness and the Introspection of ‘Qualitative Simples’*, 45.

50 Ibid.

51 Jackson, “Epiphenomenal Qualia”.

52 Paul Churchland, *Consciousness and the Introspection of ‘Qualitative Simples’*, 46.

appreciate that the first-person perspective possesses truth-disclosing characteristics of its own right is probably most evident in their critique of folk psychology. So I will end the discussion of the Churchlands by examining this critique. The crux of the concept of a folk psychology, I argue, is that it is based on a projection of the theoretical attitude of the scientist onto our prescientific way of being in the world. It is a form of what Merleau-Ponty calls “intellectualism”, which prevents us from understanding life as we live it before (or after) we engage in scientific endeavors.<sup>53</sup>

According to Patricia Churchland, folk psychology is “that rough-hewn set of concepts, generalizations, and rules of thumb we all standardly use in explaining and predicting human behavior”<sup>54</sup> This definition already betrays the limitations of the view under discussion. By speaking of folk psychology, and of folk physics, biology, and so forth, the Churchlands pretend to have covered the entire domain of our everyday prescientific conceptions about the self and the world. The basic characteristics of this domain are defined in terms of the human aspiration to explain and predict things that happen *within* the world we live in. This restriction should justify the claim that folk psychology is an *empirical* theory.<sup>55</sup> Even if we agree with the Churchlands that a subcategory of our everyday thoughts and assumptions concern explanations and predictions of events within the world, this does not mean that we have to accept the claim that folk psychology, complemented by other folk theory, covers the entire domain of our prescientific conceptions about ourselves and the world.

I argue that there are many forms of knowledge which belong to our everyday prescientific attitude which fall beyond the concept of folk theory. Connecting with the discussion of Jackson above, we can observe that our knowledge of what red looks like is perhaps “empirical” in the sense that it is not a priori knowledge, but it is not knowledge of a causal mechanism which allows us to predict events in the world. As noted, it is also not reducible to neuroscientific theory because there remains a discontinuity between our experience of red and our analysis of the physical and physiological processes with which this perception is correlated. Another example is listening and getting to know a piece of music. When we listen to a piece of music several times we get to know the different melodies, rhythms, and so forth, but although we anticipate what comes next, this anticipation is not a prediction on the basis of causal conditions. And

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53 Cf. Carman’s critique of Dennett in terms of Merleau-Ponty’s concept of intellectualism: Carman, *The Inescapability of Phenomenology*.

54 Patricia Churchland, *Neurophilosophy*, 299.

55 Paul Churchland, “Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes”, 68.

yet it is completely unproblematic to speak of “knowing the music” in this context. If the materialist counters that this is a very limited kind of knowledge, we can extend the example to the knowledge of various composers, their styles, the evolution of certain melodies or sequences of chord in the course of the history of music. This is all knowledge but it is not a knowledge of cause-and-effect relationships and it does not allow us to predict events. A third example is my life story, of which I tell parts to others if the situation seems suited to do so. This is a very important sort of knowledge that I have about myself; it is essential to my sense of identity, but it cannot be formulated in terms of a chain of causes and effects, although some such relationships might now and then be involved. Fourthly, my knowledge of the philosopher Hegel enables me to tell someone not familiar with Hegel about his philosophy, but this knowledge which I am then passing on is not a knowledge of mechanisms which allow me to predict an event in the world or a person’s behavior. The list of examples can be extended indefinitely.<sup>56</sup>

The Churchlands defend the possibility of a complete theoretical reduction of folk theory to natural science. But some of their examples raise pressing questions. A much discussed case is the phlogiston theory of combustion.<sup>57</sup> Why can things catch fire and burn, and why does the burning stop when we put a sealed cover over a burning object, like, for instance, a candle? According to the phlogiston theory, the richness in “phlogiston” determines that an object easily burns and when the air is saturated with phlogiston, the combustion process would stop. This theory is now obsolete. Compare this example to Paul Churchland’s example of the reduction of our theory of light: “We used to think that Light was essentially that-which-made-things-visible. But the vast majority of kinds of light—i.e., all wavelengths outside the tiny ‘optical window’—do no such thing, at least for humans. And even within that tiny window, making environmental information available to terrestrial creatures is an extremely peripheral feature of light, hardly its essence.”<sup>58</sup> Both cases are meant to show that theoretic reduction

56 Some or even all of these examples belong not only to the domain of prescientific experience but also to the domain of those academic disciplines, like history, which concern themselves with the human being as an *expressive* being. I will return to the difference between science and other academic disciplines (which in German are called the *Geisteswissenschaften*) in Section 3.3.

57 Patricia Churchland, *Neurophilosophy*, 281; Patricia and Paul Churchland, *Intertheoretic Reduction: A Neuroscientist’s Field Guide*, 22; Paul Churchland, *Matter and Consciousness*, 75.

58 Paul Churchland, *Consciousness and the Introspection of ‘Qualitative Simples’*, 41.

is a good thing. Everybody would agree with the first case, but are these really the same *type* of cases?

The phlogiston theory is indeed a theory: it is a view which tries to answer a scientific question: what are the physical principles underlying combustion? We can all agree that science has progressed and that the phlogiston theory of combustion is false. But the second example is of a different kind. The question here is not in itself scientific. It is: what *is* light? The reduction proposed here is not of one theory to another theory but of one kind of knowledge, i.e., our everyday understanding of what light is, to *scientific* knowledge. If we make room for both kinds of knowledge, then we can allow that light is still also that-which-makes-things-visible, because this is what light is in our prescientific lives.<sup>59</sup> It is also still what every scientist thinks of when she tries to give a neuroscientific explanation of the perception of objects. The claim that most kinds of light do not make things visible is not warranted. It is more accurate to say that many wavelengths fall beyond the scope of light waves, if you want to preserve the reference to what in real life we call “light”.

The notion of folk psychology narrowly defines knowledge as the theoretical cognition of cause-and-effect relationships which allow us to predict events in the physical world. It thus amounts to a projection of the scientist’s attitude onto our non-scientific ordinary lives in which we have many presuppositions, ideas, and cognitions which are not at all theoretical. The true nature of our prescientific attitudes is thus obscured. In addition, by discrediting what they call folk theory the Churchlands discard philosophical approaches which connect directly with the first-person perspective, like phenomenology. Their message is that the prescientific perspective itself is unreliable and that only a turn to neuroscience will lead to knowledge.<sup>60</sup> But as we have seen there are many phenomena which only count as real within the scope of our everyday non-scientific lives, and doing justice to these phenomena requires that we connect with the first-person perspective.<sup>61</sup>

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59 Torin Alter presents a similar argument but then in relation to warmth (Alter, *Churchland on Arguments against Physicalism*, 64).

60 David Cerbone has also criticized this aspect of eliminativism (Cerbone, *Lost Belongings*, 132-133). Cerbone’s critique is based on the phenomenological hermeneutics of Heidegger. Although I agree with this critique, I doubt that Heidegger’s philosophy is the ideal starting point for developing such a critique. See the next section.

61 A related point, which was touched on in the previous section and will be discussed in the remainder of this book, is that the (first) person (of experience) is not limited to the mental. Within the whole discussion of folk psychology in analytic philosophy,

The Churchlands speak of “folk theory” as if there is only one such theory. This makes it easy to discredit all prescientific knowledge: you only have to find a range of false beliefs and present them as representative of folk theory. But, firstly, in the course of history, different people have held different beliefs and we all know from experience that some people’s views of the world are much more to be valued than some other people’s views.<sup>62</sup> Secondly, like Dennett, the Churchlands fail to distinguish between specific beliefs about things or people *in* the world, and the basic structure of our being in the world *as such*. For example, the belief that something like “world” presupposes subjectivity is incomparable to the belief that dark clouds imply a great chance of rain. Whereas the first belief pertains to the basic structure of our being in the world, the second pertains to innerworldly facts, i.e., facts which are rendered possible by that basic structure. Thirdly, phenomenology not only restricts itself to beliefs of the world’s basic structure, its knowledge is also not simply an expression of the beliefs we already have. Phenomenology develops its insights rather by critically examining these beliefs, thus transforming or developing them, without, however, overturning their first-person character. It never simply affirms the beliefs that we already have, but it does try to do justice to our first-person experiences. For these three reasons phenomenology is not touched by the Churchlands’ criticism of folk theory: phenomenology is a critical examination of the general structures of experience, and phenomenologists are individuals some of whom we might agree with, some of whom we might disagree with.

How does the Churchlands’ view compare to Dennett’s? This question is interesting especially in regard to their respective positions on realism. Both the Churchlands and Dennett champion physical realism: physical reality and the re-

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the “psyche” in “psychology” is not derived from Aristotle’s concept of the “psuchē” which, as noted in the previous section, refers to the human being as a whole. It is based on the Cartesian dichotomy of *res cogitans* (the psyche) and *res extensa* (the physical). So, for instance, Scott Christensen and Dale Turner in their Introduction to *Folk Psychology and the Philosophy of Mind* (xvi; italics mine), say that “folk psychology is the tag given to ordinary talk *about the mind*. It does not refer to talk about the biology of the brain and central nervous system; rather it refers to talk about beliefs and desires, intentions and fears, wishes and hopes. It is essentially the vocabulary we use to talk about and explain ourselves and others. It is *the vocabulary of the mental*.” This limited ontology, in which there is objective matter and, if you are not a materialist, a bodiless mind, but nothing else, is also at the core of the Churchlands’s concept of folk psychology.

62 Cf. Keeley, *Paul Churchland*, 21-22.

ality of the brain *exist* beyond doubt and they constitute the ontic basis of scientific truth. But in his criticism of Paul Churchland, Dennett in addition presents himself as the advocate of a realism of beliefs and other forms of intentionality. The argument is in fact aimed at Paul Churchland and Stephen Stich, but it applies to eliminativism in general:

I see a shared problem in [Churchland's and Stich's] extreme eliminativism: until the rest of the world catches up with them and shares their world view, what will they tell the judge? That is, when called on to go give sworn testimony in a court of law, and asked by the judge whether they *believe* they have ever seen the defendant before, what will they say? Surely they must deny that they are saying what they believe, since they believe (uh-oh) that there is no such thing as belief. That is to say, they are *of the opinion* (will that do?) that there is no such thing as belief. What they mean is, the theory they, um, espouse or champion has no room in its ontology for beliefs.<sup>63</sup>

Dennett depicts his position as a reductionism which can save intentionality, i.e., as something totally different from the eliminativist position of Churchland and Stich. However, surprisingly, the argument does not follow a heterophenomenological pattern, as we would expect. Churchland and Stich are requested to consider what it means that *they*, pressed by a fictitious judge, would say that *they* believed something. They are asked what it means to say “I believe that....” Dennett is here not defending belief as an objectified, third-person form of intentionality. Instead he is defending the undeniable reality of belief as part of our prescientific experience of the phenomenal world: belief is here the intentional attitude not of a third but of a first person. I agree with Dennett’s critique of eliminativism in this passage, but it is at odds with his own agenda, which, as we saw in the previous chapter, is called “heterophenomenology”.

As we have seen, Dennett is highly equivocal about the ontological status of intentionality. On the one hand he says that adopting the intentional stance means that we take the other to be an agent, who has reasons. But the basic assumption of Dennett’s approach remains that all matters of consciousness, i.e., all forms of intentionality, are effects of brain processes. Perceptions, desires, and beliefs are higher properties of matter which is complex enough to produce these effects. They are mere “patterns” emerging from, but remaining within, physical-neural reality. As noted, these limitations are determined by the framework which Dennett has accepted as his starting point: the rejection of dualism and the unreserved acceptance of materialistic monism.

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63 Dennett, *The Intentional Stance*, 33-34.

For these reasons it is very hard to take Dennett's defense of the existence of beliefs as something other than physical matter or a property of physical matter seriously. Insofar as Dennett, in his objections to eliminativism, shows himself to be more than a materialistic monist, he contradicts his own framework; but if he is nothing more than that, then he should accept that his view is no less eliminativist than that of the Churchlands.<sup>64</sup> The Churchlands and Dennett might then still disagree about what kinds of entities populate the physical universe and to what extent there is discontinuity between the microscale of genetics or neurons and the scale of human behavior. Since both the Churchlands and Dennett are exclusive physical realists, they might have disagreements about what exactly belongs to this physical reality and what does not belong to it, i.e., what is fiction. But these questions are no longer relevant to the purpose which I have been pursuing, which is to call into question some of the basic presuppositions of materialism.

## 2.3 SAVING PHYSICAL REALISM

Materialism is not only popular because it denies supposedly unwarranted beliefs regarding the world we live in, but also because of what it constantly, and often implicitly, confirms: the existence of objective reality. Materialism implies physical realism and nothing seems as clear-cut as the reality of the physical. Although I endorse physical realism, I think that the question whether physical reality exists is no less ambiguous than the question whether the phenomenal world exists. This means physical realism needs to be supported by arguments. One argument in favor of physical realism centers on the truth-claim of science: without physical reality this truth-claim does not make any sense. Science would be a mere artificial construction, a cultural product without external referents and this consequence makes antirealism unacceptable and unconvincing. I certainly agree with this point, but my main argument centers on the possibility of natural disasters and perceptual illusions, both of which presuppose, in my view, the existence of a physical reality beyond our own existence. I can only develop this argument after some preparation, which means that the reader will have to wait until (or jump to) Chapter 6. I will for now tentatively assume that any comprehensive ontology must include both the phenomenal world (as real) and physical reality (as real).

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<sup>64</sup> Carman also observes the eliminativist tendencies in Dennett's thinking (Carman, *Heidegger's Analytic*, 113).

I have addressed the weakness or one-sidedness in materialism from a phenomenological perspective, but there might also be a one-sidedness in the tradition of phenomenology. I think that this indeed the case: phenomenology is so preoccupied by the task of defending the phenomenal world that it often neglects physical reality. Or if it does not neglect it, it plainly denies that there is such a thing as a physical reality in itself. Or if it does not neglect or deny it, it turns out to be unable to give the physical universe a place within its ontology due to certain systemic reasons. I argue that the first one-sidedness or weakness—neglect—applies to Charles Taylor,<sup>65</sup> the second—denial—to Merleau-Ponty, and the third—systemic limitations—to Husserl and Heidegger, although for different reasons. I will turn to Taylor in the next chapter and to Merleau-Ponty in the chapters thereafter. The discussion of Husserl and Heidegger would require some chapters or an entire book of its own, but I will instead limit myself to a few remarks. As regards Husserl, I will focus on Zahavi's interpretation (under (a)). The discussion of Heidegger will draw mainly on Taylor Carman's reading of his work (b).

(a) Within the scope of different readings of Husserl we can distinguish between two alternatives: a reading that says that Husserl's phenomenology was a form of strict transcendental idealism and a reading that says that it was rather a form of critical realism.

Ricoeur presents an idealistic reading of Husserl and argues that Heideggerian hermeneutics has transformed phenomenology into a discipline which takes the human being's finitude and his rootedness in history into account, thereby canceling Husserl's idealism.<sup>66</sup> Since this interpretation allows virtually no space for a realistic interpretation of Husserl's phenomenology, let us instead focus on the alternative reading of Husserl. Zahavi argues that Husserl was not an idealist *pur sang*: he ultimately only wanted to overcome a dogmatic attitude with regard to reality, i.e., the belief that reality is simply objectively *there*. He wanted to develop a *critical* realism according to which reality is al-

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65 Perhaps, insofar as the *neglect* of physical reality is concerned, it is unfair to speak of a weakness: few philosophers do not neglect some important topic because they are focusing on other equally important topics. I also want to note that Plessner, whose position I will explain and defend in later chapters, also does not offer an extensive examination of physical reality and its relationship to the phenomenal world. But as I will show, his thought does provide the right framework for an examination of this very relationship.

66 Ricoeur, *Phénoménologie et Herméneutique*.

ways relative to the constituting activity of a subject who brings reality to appearance.

What kind of realism are we dealing with? According to Zahavi, there is no “metaphysical realism, as if Husserl would claim that we can only speak of a mind if there is also something mind-independent toward which it can be directed.”<sup>67</sup> When Husserl speaks of an object being “real”, he means that it is “the real object of the intention”.<sup>68</sup> And, summing up, Zahavi says: “When he calls an object real, this characterization carries no metaphysical implications, nor does it imply that the object exists mind-independently. It is merely to be taken as a descriptive characterization: The object is intuitively given in its bodily presence.”<sup>69</sup>

What could mind-independence mean? Above I distinguished between phenomenal realism and physical realism, but I have not given a fully fleshed-out account of what this distinction amounts to in terms of subject-dependence or -independence. I will here restrict myself to a few remarks and fill out the details in the following chapters. In both cases we are dealing with a certain ambiguity. The phenomenal world has come to be with the evolution of the human being, and this also means that it has gained a certain autonomy with regard to individual experiences. When plant life evolves, physical reality is integrated into the biocycle of the plant, and when animal life evolves, it is transformed into the environment of the numerous species alive on this planet. Likewise, with the evolution of the human being, physical-organic reality is transformed into a phenomenal world. It would not be there if there were no human beings, but granted that human beings are there, the phenomenal world exists as a reality over-against, surrounding, and encompassing the human being. So the phenomenal world is not independent of the existence of human beings, but because of its relative autonomy from individual human beings it is independent of specific perceptions: it makes no sense to say that the moon is not there when I am not looking.

As regards physical reality, here the situation is ambiguous as well, but in a different way: on the one hand physical reality is integrated in the phenomenal world. When I feel the mass of a stone in my hand, I have the experience of a real physical property. But the notion of a physical reality in itself refers to physical reality precisely insofar as it does not occur in our perceptions or thoughts. (I have talked about this issue in the Introduction and will return to it in Chapter 6.)

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67 Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology*, 21.

68 Ibid., 39-40.

69 Ibid., 40.

Here we are concerned with a more radical—an absolute— independence from the subject. Clearly, even Zahavi's most realistic reading of Husserl does not allow for this form of realism. What Zahavi explains is that Husserl embraced a phenomenal, or as Zahavi puts it: "a form of direct perceptual realism".<sup>70</sup> It is even a weak form of phenomenal realism, because Zahavi's Husserl restricts himself to describing what is given as real in our intentional experiences, without "metaphysical implications".

This is no surprise, for two reasons. Firstly, the very principle of Husserlian phenomenology is to start from prescientific first-person experience and to deal with any kind of reality one encounters always as a reality *relative to* this first-person experience. This may allow for a defense of the reality of the phenomenal world, but not for the concept of physical reality insofar as it does not appear. Secondly, one of the basic motivations which drove Husserl was his rejection of materialism and reductionism. It is very tempting to throw out the baby with the bath water and to reject not only reductionism (and eliminativism) but also the physical realism which is generally associated with reductionism. One first argues that the scientific perspective is secondary with regard to the prescientific first-person perspective, but then concludes that this must mean that physical reality *itself* must be in a sense also a mere "secondary" construct on the basis of the life world. In *Ideen II*, Husserl indeed says that "physical nature, which is determined theoretically on the basis of the 'appearances', is a secondary environmental object, the primary object of which is precisely the appearance."<sup>71</sup>

I think Husserl is in a sense right: physics and its correlates are based on the life world which precedes the turn to science. But this truth is at the same time one-sided, i.e., in need of complementation by an *ontological* point of view from which physical nature is primary. Whereas Husserl makes the physical universe dependent on the phenomenal world, the relationship of dependence between these two realities may in fact run in two directions. I will expand on this in Chapter 6. The second reason is thus connected to a certain polarization of the debates between materialism and phenomenology. As I will show in Chapter 6, Merleau-Ponty falls prey to the same mechanism of polarization.

(b) What about Heidegger—can we defend physical realism on the basis of his view? According to Taylor Carman, Heidegger has often been read in an antirealist or nonrealist vain, but Carman is not convinced by these interpreta-

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70 Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology*, 17. Cf. Shannon Vallor, "The fantasy of third-person science: Phenomenology, ontology and evidence", 12.

71 Husserl, *Ideen II*, 285/299 (translation modified).

tions.<sup>72</sup> Heidegger's philosophy amounts to an "ontic realism"<sup>73</sup>: "By 'ontic realism' I mean the claim that occurrent entities [*vorhandene Seienden*] exist and have a determinate spatiotemporal structure independently of us and our understanding of them."<sup>74</sup> The fact that entities are real in this sense means that nature as such, which is composed of such entities, also exists (or can exist) without appearing to Dasein. Carman quoting Heidegger: "Physical nature can only occur as intraworldly when world, i.e. Dasein, exists. Nature can, however, very well be in its own way without occurring as intraworldly, without human Dasein, and hence a world, existing; and it is only because nature is *by itself* occurrent that it can also confront Dasein within a world."<sup>75</sup>

Carman points out that the same cannot be said of *Being*. In Heidegger's view, *Being*, although it transcends Dasein, at the same time remains relative to Dasein. The same holds for available entities (*zuhandene Seienden*): they correlate directly with our own practical attitudes and can therefore not be regarded as Dasein-independent. Only occurrent entities, although they can be perceived and thought, exist (also) as independent of our own existence. Despite the fact that there is no view from nowhere, says Carman interpreting Heidegger, it *is* possible to have knowledge of "entities as they transcend the finite conditions of any of our interpretations of them".<sup>76</sup> There is knowledge of things as they are in themselves.

It has been argued, Carman notes, that Heidegger was an antirealist, because occurrentness (*Vorhandenheit*) is here regarded as secondary to availability (*Zuhandenheit*). "But to ascribe hermeneutic primacy to availability is not to say that, like available things, occurrent entities are themselves constituted by the practices and interpretations in which we make sense of them. . . . Heidegger considers available and occurrent entities themselves equally primitive ontically."<sup>77</sup> Ontologically speaking occurrentness and availability are on a par, but our knowledge of occurrent entities is grounded in our primordial being in the world, where availability has the primacy. I think that the distinction Carman here addresses is essential to any form of critical realism (including the realism I defend in this book). Although our knowledge of physical reality is necessarily based

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<sup>72</sup> Carman, *Heidegger's Analytic*, 156, 164.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.; German added by me.

<sup>75</sup> Heidegger, *Phänomenologische Interpretation von Kants Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 19; quoted and translated by Carman, *Heidegger's Analytic*, 157.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>77</sup> Carman, *Heidegger's Analytic*, 158.

on, and secondary to, our first-person experience of the phenomenal world, this does not mean that physical reality itself is ontically “secondary” to the phenomenal world. As noted above, this is the very distinction overlooked by Husserl and, as I will show at a later stage, by Merleau-Ponty.

Carman concedes that Heidegger did not regard himself as a realist.<sup>78</sup> Heidegger uses the term “realism” mostly in a negative sense: he identifies it on the one hand with the belief that we could *prove* the existence of the external world, and on the other hand with naturalistic reductionism.<sup>79</sup> But Carman shows that Heidegger did accept realism, if we take it in perhaps one of its more contemporary meanings, viz. as the affirmation of a physical reality which exists independent of *Dasein*. According to Carman, Heidegger thought that “occurrent entities exist and have a determinate structure in the absence of any and all views”.<sup>80</sup>

I find Carman’s interpretation of Heidegger quite convincing, especially considering the many supporting passages he cites.<sup>81</sup> At a first glance, I also find Heidegger’s physical realism which emerges from that interpretation plausible. I am adding “at a first glance” because I believe that one crucial element is missing from Heidegger’s realism: the body. Carman does not address this problem, but in a footnote earlier in his book he mentions that Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit* avoided the mind-body problem or any account of the human body, for that matter.<sup>82</sup> One of the fundamental questions we face when we develop and defend a critical form of physical realism is: what is the ontic relationship between the human being (*Dasein*) and physical reality? The fact that Heidegger avoided the question of the body, apart from some scanty observations in the *Zollikon Seminars*, is highly problematic.

Kevin Aho addresses this problem in a book with the telling title *Heidegger’s Neglect of the Body*. Although the title of the book has a critical ring to it, Aho sometimes defends Heidegger’s strategy of avoiding the problem, but he remains equivocal. Supposedly, Heidegger was not interested in the body because he was operating on a more fundamental level than questions of embodiment. According to Aho’s Heidegger, “*Dasein* is not to be understood in terms of everyday human existence or embodied agency but—from his earliest Freiburg lectures onward—as an unfolding historical horizon or space of meaning

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78 Ibid., 164.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid., 167.

81 Ibid., 157, 161, 165, 168, 173.

82 Ibid., 129, footnote 50.

that is already ‘there’ (*Da*), prior to the emergence of the human body and its various capacities.”<sup>83</sup> But Aho then claims that, nonetheless, Heidegger acknowledged that the body was a very important problem, and a problem that he did not address in *Sein und Zeit* because it was too difficult: “toward the end of his career he began to recognize that the topic of embodiment presented special difficulties that he was simply not equipped to deal with. In his Heraclitus seminars of 1966-1967, he referred to the body as ‘the most difficult problem’ (HS, 147), and in 1972 he makes his most revealing remark, admitting that he was unable to respond to earlier French criticism regarding the neglect of the body in *Being and Time*, because ‘the bodily [*das Leibliche*] is the most difficult [problem to understand] and I was unable to say more at the time’ (ZS, 231).”<sup>84</sup>

However, after quoting Heidegger’s self-criticism, Aho again chooses the other apologetic strategy, claiming that Heidegger ignored the problem because other problems were more important: “Heidegger was, at bottom, not interested in giving an account of embodied agency.”<sup>85</sup> Instead Heidegger, according to Aho, wanted to go “beyond the question of embodied agency to the structures of meaning itself. For Heidegger, it is only on the basis of these structures that we can begin to make sense of things—such as bodies—in the first place.”<sup>86</sup> I find the latter interpretation weaker than the former. It does not seem probable that, while admitting that he found the problem of the body the most difficult and regretting that he had not been able to say more about it, Heidegger at the same time thought that the problem was not fundamental. In addition, many contemporary interpreters of Heidegger’s thought feel the need to complement his view of being in the world with Merleau-Ponty’s, because they sense that Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein* is incomplete without a philosophy of embodiment.

For our purposes, the main question at this point is: can one defend physical realism while neglecting the body? When we turn to the relationship between the human being and physical reality, there are two basic options we can choose from: we claim that the human being stands apart from physical reality or we embrace the view that she is, in some essential respect, *part* of physical reality. The first option can be defended by defining the human being’s essence in terms of a supposedly pure mind. This option is not compatible with Heidegger but only with Cartesian dualism. But the first option can also be defended by assuming

83 Aho, *Heidegger’s Neglect of the Body*, 3.

84 Ibid., 4. HS in the quotation refers to Heidegger, *Seminare—Heraklit / Heraclitus Seminar*. ZS refers to Heidegger, *Zollikoner Seminare / Zollikon Seminars*.

85 Ibid., 6.

86 Ibid.

that the body proper constitutes a zone of subjectivity where objective reality does not reach. In this case we say that the human body is a lived body (*Leib*) and not a physical thing in objective space (*Körper*), as science has us believe. This is Merleau-Ponty's position in *Phénoménologie de la perception*.<sup>87</sup> It is also the option which might be compatible with Heidegger.

When we turn to the passages about the body we find in Heidegger's *Zollikoner Seminare*, we see that Heidegger indeed rejects any interpretation of the body in terms of the physical body (*Körper*) and restricts his concept of the body to the living body (*Leib*). The living body is what “bodies forth” (*leibt*) from its current position in space.<sup>88</sup> This “bodying forth” is a term for sensorimotor behavior, as understood from a first-person perspective.<sup>89</sup> The point is that this definition of the body proper as a *living* body for Heidegger excludes its definition as a *physical* body (a *Körper*), as the following example makes clear: “I will select the following question: when I am involved ‘body and soul’ in the discussion of the theme, is my body not absent, or is it no longer sitting on the chair where it was before I began to pay attention to this theme? . . . In our question, I first take the body as a physical body [*Körper*] which is occurrent [*vorhanden*] on the chair. In reality, however, *I* am sitting on the chair. This is something completely different from the occurrentness of a physical body on top of another physical body.”<sup>90</sup> So Heidegger's point is that the *I*, as the one sitting on the chair, is not the physical body (*Körper*) but the living body (*Leib*) and this holds for all our bodily practical engagements in the world.<sup>91</sup>

I think that Heidegger's description of our bodily being in the world is problematic. Although his approach is very useful if you want to examine our being in the world as a practical engagement with things in the world which can only be understood from a first-person, embodied perspective—an endeavor that I endorse and also try to contribute to in this book—, it is too restricted if you want to understand the relationship between the human being and physical reality. How can Heidegger's concept of the body sustain his physical realism? If the physical body is not a fundamental aspect of the body proper, how then can the body proper be part of physical reality?

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87 See Section 4.3.

88 Ibid., 244-245/197.

89 Ibid.

90 Heidegger, *Zollikoner Seminare*, 125/96; translation modified.

91 Heidegger's *Leib* is very similar to Merleau-Ponty's *corps vécu* (“lived body”), which I discuss in Chapter 4.

The challenge is to maintain your concepts of *Leib*, first-person experience, etc., *while at the same time* exploring how it is possible that the body proper is part of physical reality. That is the challenge which phenomenology from Husserl through Heidegger and, as I will show, Merleau-Ponty, refused to accept. It refused the challenge because its thinking was imprisoned in the opposition between two philosophical camps: on the one hand reductive materialism, with its physical realism, and its concept of the purely physical body (*Körper*), and on the other hand the phenomenological affirmation of first-person experience, the phenomenal world, and the lived body (*Leib*). The opposition limits our thinking, because we can only explore how our bodies are part of physical reality if we accept that the body as a physical body is a *fundamental* and *prescientific* aspect of the body proper as a whole.

Helmut Plessner's thinking was not restricted by the opposition between materialism and phenomenology. As Karl Löwith observes, the power of Plessner's view is that, in contrast with Heidegger's, it describes the human being as both open to the world and *occurrent* (*vorhanden*) in that same world.<sup>92</sup> Plessner was as critical of scientism and reductionism as Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty, but he did not conclude from his objections that the *occurrentness* of the human being, her being-part of objective reality, was off-limits for fundamental philosophy. Quite the opposite: he refused to leave the description of physical reality and the physical body to science or reductive materialism, and introduced a distinction between the physical and the organic aspect of our bodily being in the world. In Chapter 6 and 7 I will support and expand on Plessner's view by showing that we have first-person experiences of the physical aspect of the human body, thus disproving the assumption that the physical body (*Körper*) would only be accessible from a secondary, scientific perspective. Although Plessner never attaches the predicate "realism" to his view, he is, I argue, both a phenomenal and a physical realist. Since Plessner describes and integrates both the *Körper*- and the *Leib*-aspect of the body, his philosophy provides the key to understanding how both realisms can be true at the same time.

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92 Löwith, *Natur und Humanität des Menschen*, 74-75. As we will see in Chapter 4, Merleau-Ponty sometimes also allows that we are *vorhanden* in the world, i.e., that we are not only a subject but also an object in the world.



# Chapter 3

## Hermeneutical Considerations

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### 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.<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> 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.

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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",<sup>3</sup> (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*".<sup>4</sup> 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".<sup>5</sup> We have ideas about what is honorable or dishonorable, fair or unfair, authentic or inauthentic. Thus frameworks are sets of "qualitative distinctions":<sup>6</sup> 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".<sup>7</sup> 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.

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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.<sup>8</sup> Values would be merely projections originating from us, human beings. This conception of values Taylor calls “projectivism”.<sup>9</sup>

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”.<sup>10</sup> According to the second variant of projectivism, the experience of values is comparable to that of secondary properties.<sup>11</sup> We have no choice between perceiving or not perceiving colors; seeing and colors are inextricably intertwined.<sup>12</sup> 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 *functional* 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."<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> This is Taylor's "best account" or "BA principle".<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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

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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.”<sup>17</sup>

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.”<sup>18</sup>

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”,<sup>19</sup> 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’”.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> 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.

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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,<sup>22</sup> 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.”<sup>23</sup> 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

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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, indispensable for understanding ourselves, our experience, our lives, our stories. But the third-person point of view of science is also indispensable, 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.<sup>24</sup> 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

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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 bequeaths 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.<sup>25</sup> 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."<sup>26</sup>

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.<sup>27</sup> 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

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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”,<sup>28</sup> 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

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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”,<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup>

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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”<sup>31</sup> 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”<sup>32</sup>: 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

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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.<sup>33</sup> 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

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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.<sup>34</sup>

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*).<sup>35</sup> 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 subdiscipline 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 scientificistic<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup> 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-

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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”)<sup>38</sup> 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 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

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, § 32, 151: “die Vor-Struktur des verstehens” (“the pre-structure 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.<sup>39</sup>

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.<sup>40</sup> 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.<sup>41</sup>

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 sci-

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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.<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup> 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

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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*.<sup>44</sup> I will not go back to Dilthey here, but instead say something about Plessner's interpretation—and transformation—of Dilthey's ideas.<sup>45</sup> In his discussion of the *geistewissenschaftliche* 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 *geistewissenschaftlich*); (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*)<sup>46</sup> 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 “unfathomable” (*das Unergründliche*)<sup>47</sup> 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

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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.<sup>48</sup> 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”.<sup>49</sup>

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

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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.<sup>50</sup> 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.<sup>51</sup> Both in everyday life and in philosophy we recognize the essence of something by its "essence indicating characteristics" (*indikatorischen Wesensmerkmalen*).<sup>52</sup> 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-

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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".<sup>53</sup> 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-

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

losophy, because “a-priorism . . . inevitably leads to a universalist-rationalist ontologization of the human being”.<sup>54</sup>

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”.<sup>55</sup> He says that the point is that theory “at least should not surrender to any of the two principles of method”,<sup>56</sup> 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”.<sup>57</sup>

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.”<sup>58</sup> 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-

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 160 (caption).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>58</sup> 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.<sup>59</sup> 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".<sup>60</sup> 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

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59 Ibid., 154.

60 Lindemann, *Soziologie – Anthropologie*, 58.

as examples of such an approach.<sup>61</sup> 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”.<sup>62</sup> 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.”<sup>63</sup> 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 over-specific 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

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

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

body".<sup>64</sup> 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.<sup>65</sup> We may agree or disagree with Heidegger's view that "the understanding of being is itself an ontic determination of Dasein",<sup>66</sup> 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".<sup>67</sup> He affirms the hermeneutical conditions of phenomenology whereby hermeneutics, in accordance with Dilthey, is understood as interpretation (*Auslegung*)<sup>68</sup> and *Auslegung* is considered to be grounded in the understanding we already have before we explicitly reflect on our being in the world.<sup>69</sup> Plessner emphasizes that philosophy springs from, and remains

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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.<sup>70</sup>

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".<sup>71</sup> "Metaphysics precedes ontology",<sup>72</sup> which means that our relationship to the Other, a "meaning without context",<sup>73</sup> 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 historicism which Plessner re-

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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.<sup>74</sup> 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."<sup>75</sup> 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*).<sup>76</sup> 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.<sup>77</sup> 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*

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

75 Ibid., 181-182.

76 Ibid., 182.

77 Ibid., 183-184.

*und menschliche Natur*,<sup>78</sup> 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.<sup>79</sup> In *Elemente der Metaphysik* the question of metaphysics is summarized as “the question concerning the meaning of . . . Being”.<sup>80</sup> 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*”.<sup>81</sup> 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.<sup>82</sup>

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.<sup>83</sup> Philosophy borrows existential questions from all these different domains of life. Drawing on

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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.<sup>84</sup>

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."<sup>85</sup> Since this exploration of possibility conditions is no longer deemed dependent on an absolute, transcendental consciousness, as it used to be

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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, *Ausdrucksphänomen und Diskurs*, 204.

in Kant and Husserl, Krüger speaks of Plessner's "quasi-transcendental"<sup>86</sup> approach. Although I do not follow this usage,<sup>87</sup> I totally agree with Krüger's point: the end of "absolute subjectivity",<sup>88</sup> 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.<sup>89</sup>

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.<sup>90</sup> 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-

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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 *centrally* 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"<sup>91</sup>) recognize other persons by means of a moment of interpretation (*Deutung*).<sup>92</sup> 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".<sup>93</sup> 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".<sup>94</sup> This discipline examines the "function anthropological assumptions have within the framework of the execution of drawing the boundary between persons and other entities".<sup>95</sup>

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 13<sup>th</sup> through early 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe), Lindemann concludes: "If . . . one focuses on the an-

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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.”<sup>96</sup>

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.”<sup>97</sup> 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.

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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<sup>98</sup>? 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'."<sup>99</sup>

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.

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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.<sup>100</sup> 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,<sup>101</sup> 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 *Vorverständen*, 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-

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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*.



## **Part II**

### **The Body, the Phenomenal World, and Physical Reality**



## Chapter 4

### Merleau-Ponty and the Embodied Subject

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Part I dealt with the limitations of materialism. But there are also limitations to my criticism of Dennett and the Churchlands. It is one thing to say that there is more than objective matter subordinate to physical laws, in other words: that there is also a subject or person who lives in a real phenomenal world. It is quite another thing to show what this “also” means. The result of Part I is an opposition between the criticized position and the criticism, between physical realism and phenomenal realism, and apparently also between an objective human body and a subjective human mind.

But the first two oppositions can be overcome and the latter opposition, between body and mind, only *seems* to be the necessary outcome of my criticism of Dennett. One of the aims of the current part is to demonstrate that a plea for phenomenology is not a relapse into Cartesian dualism; it is not embracing a division between a pure consciousness and an external world. Merleau-Ponty and Plessner have in common that they regard the human mind not as an immaterial spirit who inhabits the body: according to both these thinkers, the mind is itself embodied. Subjectivity is first and foremost a *sensorimotor* openness to the world. We are not primarily thinking things but living bodies engaged in perceiving and acting upon the situations we find ourselves in. Our consciousness is located as much at our finger tips when we catch a ball or in the inner taste in our mouth as in our reasoning or use of language.

This means that the classical formulation “mind-body problem”, adopted by Dennett, is misleading. The question is not how a mind can inhabit a body; the question is how the body can be both an object—the aspect of the body science connects with—and a subject, open to a world. Of course, the mind is also a locus of imagination, thoughts, dreams, memories, and plans, but this inner world (*Innenwelt*) should be conceived in tight interconnection with our bodily

openness to the outer world (*Außenwelt*) and with our embeddedness in a shared world (*Mitwelt*).<sup>1</sup>

The current chapter is devoted to Merleau-Ponty. I will first introduce Merleau-Ponty's *The Structure of Behavior*. Then I remark on Merleau-Ponty's use of the word "subject": is there still a subject in Merleau-Ponty, or does he abandon this concept when he criticizes the classic subject-object *opposition*? In the next step, I interpret Merleau-Ponty's *The Structure of Behavior* a little bit more freely, using it as a basis to understand the structural motives behind the shifts we make from the first-person to the third-person point of view. My point will be quite simple: we turn to the objectifying perspective of science in order to heal, restore, or enhance our being in the world. The criterion for what counts as health or enhancement, however, does not spring from the third-person perspective but from our first-person, prescientific experience of being in the world. On the one hand, the proposed arrangement of perspectives affirms the primacy of first-person experience; on the other hand it gives a place to the scientific perspective within human life.<sup>2</sup>

The first two sections of this chapter lead to the conclusion that we are a body-subject to ourselves as first persons, and a body-object to science. In Section 4.3 I show that our bodies do not only have an objective existence for sci-

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1 The German terms are from Plessner, whose view I am here anticipating.

2 The *Phenomenology of Perception* famously defends the primacy of "the lived world" over the "second-order expression" of the world by science (Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, III/ix; translation modified). On the face of it, *The Structure of Behavior* seems a less obvious starting point for exploring the relationship between the first- and the third-person perspective. Merleau-Ponty in retrospect says that this work describes human behavior from the perspective of the "outsider" (ibid., *Parcours Deux*, 13) not from a first-person perspective (cf. Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, 146, endnote 21). However, as I will show, this characterization is somewhat crude. Firstly, the outsider's perspective which describes the dialectics of different forms is not a scientific but a phenomenological perspective which implies that it always tacitly presupposes human subjectivity. The physical system is for instance explained as a perceptual gestalt, which means that it is understood as relative to a perceiving subject. Secondly, the work describes a turn from this "outsider's perspective" to the insider's perspective of the first person: the stimulus is here understood as a signification *for* the animal, and the human being relates to entire ensembles of such significations. Furthermore, the advantage of *The Structure of Behavior* is that, more clearly than the *Phenomenology*, it describes the turn to a scientific perspective as motivated by a *disintegration* of higher structures.

ence but also in our own prescientific experience, for instance in the *perception* of the body proper. Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* is here the starting point. According to this work, only *parts* of our own body can be objects to us, not the body as a whole. But this is so because Merleau-Ponty restricts himself to the objective body as the possible content of *perception*. According to *The Structure of Behavior*, in contrast, we have a basic awareness of our *whole* bodies as objects (Section 4.4). We then move on to the next problem, which can no longer be solved by interpreting Merleau-Ponty: it is not clear *from what position* we have this distance to our bodies as both subject and object. In Section 4.5 and Chapter 5 I argue that, in this respect, Plessner's philosophical anthropology can complement Merleau-Ponty's view.

It might be useful to announce that I will speak of the objective body in four different senses. Firstly, in the next section, insofar as the body proper as an object is addressed, this is the body as an object *for science*. To be more precise, from the scientific perspective, the body can be either a physical thing or an organic body. Secondly, in the rest of the current chapter and in the next chapter, I discuss the body as an object *of the phenomenal world*. Our bodies are to us both subjects and objects and within normal experience “object” means a thing within the lived world of qualities and spatial orientations. Thirdly, in Chapter 6 and 7 I address abnormal experiences like perceptual illusions. Now the distinction between physical and organic body returns. It turns out that the body proper is *to ourselves* not only a phenomenal object but also an object within physical reality. At the same time we are here confronted—fourthly—with our *organic* attunement to that physical reality. Plessner's distinction between the organic and the physical aspect of the body will help us make sense of this. The physico-organic body can be made the object of science, but in perceptual illusions we become aware that we also have first-person experience of these separate aspects. For this reason I distinguish between the physico-organic body as an object of science and this body, insofar as it is already real for us *before* we turn to the third-person perspective of science. Of course, the physical, the organic, the scientific, and the phenomenal body are all one and the same body—for instance: *my body*. But we need to make these *formal* distinctions in order to understand how we can relate to our bodies in so many ways.

## 4.1 THE PRIMACY OF THE FIRST PERSON IN MERLEAU-PONTY'S *THE STRUCTURE OF BEHAVIOR*

What is the relationship between subjective experience and scientific objectification? One of the aims of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is to resist the reduction of our existence as experienced by us as first persons to a causal event as seen by science. *The Structure of Behavior* serves this aim by critically interpreting physiological and psychological research—hence its emphasis on behavior. Merleau-Ponty discusses both human and animal behavior and argues, firstly, that animal behavior cannot be reduced to a chain of physical events or to a physical system, because the animal itself (as a whole) responds to significations. Secondly, he argues that *human* behavior interacts with entire *structures* of significations. This interaction is realized by *ourselves* as subjects—a perspective which science necessarily ignores or reduces to statistical facts.

Merleau-Ponty starts out by criticizing “classical theory” (Charles Scott Sherrington, among others), which focuses on *reflex* behavior. Classical theory presumes there are pre-established pathways within our nervous system, which would allow science to describe reflex-responses in terms of cause and effect. In addition, it explains higher order behavior merely by adding levels of greater complexity. Merleau-Ponty says that the proposed solutions thus remain based on the presupposition that animal and human behavior are composed of mechanically organized, atomic elements. In Merleau-Ponty's view, *gestalt theory*<sup>3</sup> succeeds in overcoming at least one of the limitations of classical theory, namely its atomism, by showing that on all levels of nature, including the inanimate, natural processes possess “form” (*Gestalt, forme*).<sup>4</sup> This means that physical events are often (but not always) integrated in local systems of cause-and-effect relationships, which as a whole have properties that cannot be derived from the properties of the parts. Some examples of physical gestalts mentioned by Merleau-Ponty are the distribution of electrical charge in conductors, the soap bubble, and the solar system. In all these cases, the system constitutes an equilibrium with an inner tension which is diminished if a factor external to the equilibrium disturbs it.

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3 Merleau-Ponty mainly discusses Wolfgang Köhler and Kurt Koffka.

4 Whenever Merleau-Ponty does not translate “Gestalt” as *forme*, but simply uses the German, he writes the word with a capital G. Instead I follow Lester Embree's recommendation to naturalize the word by writing it uncapitalized: Embree, “Merleau-Ponty's Examination of Gestalt Psychology”, 184-185.

Merleau-Ponty accepts gestalt theory's concept of form—circular causality and equilibrium—but he is critical of the fact that gestalt theory applies this particular concept of form not only to physical systems but also to animal and human behavior. He thinks that the specific definition of form proposed by gestalt theory only applies to the physical world, not to organic entities. By treating all gestalts as systems of causal circularity, gestalt theory disregards the deeper discontinuities between various levels in nature. The crux is that the gestalt theorists remain within the framework of materialism. Merleau-Ponty's own concept of form, of which “structure” is a synonym,<sup>5</sup> is an attempt to go beyond gestalt theory by recognizing the discontinuities which divide nature into the orders of the physical, the vital, and the human (also designated as “matter”, “life”, and “spirit”<sup>6</sup>).

The most fundamental distinction within nature, in this view, is that between the structure of the physical world and the structure of behavior.<sup>7</sup> What does the difference consist of? According to Merleau-Ponty, behavior is not an effect of a cause in the external world but a response of an organism to a situation. Within the order of the animal, stimuli constitute a vital signification for the animal itself; they are not causes but rather occasions for the animal to respond in a certain way. This means that the animal has a certain play of responses: behavior follows norms on the basis of vital needs, it does not follow univocal laws.

Within the scope of “syncretic” behavior, the play of responses is still marginal, as these responses are largely predetermined by the animal's constitution. The animal responds to significations whose character is determined by the environment and the situation of the animal. The structure is unseparable from the material environment in which it is realized. Some conditioning can take place, but not “true learning”, says Merleau-Ponty (*SC*, 115/105). “Amovible” behav-

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5 Merleau-Ponty is not explicit about this, but it appears that “form” (*forme*) and “structure” (*structure*) are interchangeable. See, e.g., *La structure du comportement*, 88/79: “a phenomenon of structure or ‘form’”. Cf. Ted Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, 138, endnote 2.

6 *Ibid.*, 141/131; translation modified.

7 Note that Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the vital order deals exclusively with animals and their behavior. Some descriptions may be applicable to vegetable life, but the category “behavior” seems to exclude plant life. In fact, there is no mention of plant life in this work. This is problematic, considering that Merleau-Ponty wants to present an integrated view of the different levels of living and non-living nature. Cf. Beaufort, *Die gesellschaftliche Konstitution der Natur*, 148.

ior, in contrast, reacts more loosely to significations and is open to learning processes.<sup>8</sup> The animal responds not only to a complex of stimuli: it responds on the basis of an essential relationship between significations. The difference with syncretic behavior is that the structure has some independence from the material in which it is realized. This is where the signal fits in: a signal is a signification that stands for another signification. Signals can be inserted between the animal and the original sense, as in the famous example of Pavlov's dogs. Amovable behavior is thus subject to learning processes.

The order of the human, says Merleau-Ponty, surpasses both the physical order and the vital domain of needs. Besides syncretic and amovable forms of behavior, human beings have symbolic behavior. The symbolic domain is not restricted to the ability to use language. It pertains to our distance<sup>9</sup> to structure *as such*, which enables us to see the relationships between different “ensembles” (*ensembles*)<sup>10</sup> of significations and to experience the same meaning within these various correlative domains. Merleau-Ponty uses the word “ensembles” to describe entire systems of significations, such as the design of a musical instrument, a choreography, or a language or text. We recognize the same sense in a spoken word and a written text, or we perceive the same meaning in the analogous structures between written music, the design of a musical instrument, and a pattern of bodily movement: “The character of the melody, the graphic configuration of the musical text and the unfolding of the gestures participate in a single structure, have in common a single nucleus of signification.”<sup>11</sup> Symbolic behavior is furthermore intrinsically connected with the subject’s ability to create and possess tools and to see things under various aspects. This is the so-called “thing-structure”, which I return to in Section 4.4.

Before I get to the main point of the current section—the arrangement of perspectives—we need to address a question of interpretation. My introduction

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8 The words “syncretic” and “amovable” are not widespread in philosophy. “Amovable” is French for detachable or removable (not “un-movable”!) and it describes that this structure is subject to change within the scope of a specimen’s life. The word “syncretic” (*syncréétique*) etymologically carries the meaning of “combined”, and Merleau-Ponty probably wants to stress, by this term, that the stimulus and the response are tightly connected.

9 I use the word “distance” in order to make sense of Merleau-Ponty’s view. Below I argue that, in fact, Merleau-Ponty does not present the developed concept of distance or disengagement we need to get a complete picture of human behavior.

10 Merleau-Ponty, *La structure du comportement*, 132/121.

11 *Ibid.*

of *The Structure of Behavior* has been based on the assumption that Merleau-Ponty defends the concept of a *subject* for whom there are structures of meaning. But it might be objected that Merleau-Ponty actually wants to abandon the traditional phenomenological concept of subjectivity.<sup>12</sup> Is this criticism justified? It is true that Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the need to overcome the subject-object opposition which has been dominant in philosophy since Descartes and Kant. In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty says that “we shall have the opportunity to leave behind us, once and for all, the traditional subject-object dichotomy”.<sup>13</sup> However, I argue that Merleau-Ponty, certainly in his early works *The Structure of Behavior* and the *Phenomenology*, does not reject the notion of a subject altogether; instead, Merleau-Ponty wants to replace the idea of a subject as a pure transcendental consciousness by his own conception of a *sujet incarné*: an embodied subject.

In *The Structure of Behavior* Merleau-Ponty does not yet coin the term “embodied subject”. On the one hand he speaks of a “subject”<sup>14</sup> and on the other hand he uses the word “embodiment” (*incarnation*) to describe the nature of the subject’s intentionality: “Since the body itself is not grasped as a material and inert mass or as an external instrument but as the living envelope of our actions, the principle of these actions has no need of being a quasi-physical force. Our intentions find their natural clothing or their *embodiment* [*incarnation*] in movements and are expressed in them as the thing is expressed in its perspectival aspects.”<sup>15</sup> Instead of the term “embodied subject” we find in *The Structure of Behavior* the notion of a “phenomenal body”: “The gestures and attitudes of the phenomenal body [corps phénoménal] must have therefore a proper structure, an immanent signification; from the beginning the phenomenal body must be a center of actions which radiate over a ‘milieu’; it must be a certain silhouette in the physical and in the moral sense; it must be a certain type of behavior.”<sup>16</sup>

It is, to my knowledge, not until the *Phenomenology of Perception* that this phenomenal body is also called a “*sujet incarné*”.<sup>17</sup> This embodied subject is not to be confused with the notion of a *research* subject, or the subject in any other limited sense. The concept of a *sujet incarné* has a fundamental status and it serves the very aim of overcoming the traditional subject-object *opposition*.

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12 Mark Wrathall, personal communication.

13 Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 203/202.

14 Ibid., *La structure du comportement*, 179/166, 194/179, 196/181, 203/188.

15 Ibid., 203/188 (italics mine).

16 Ibid., 170/157.

17 Ibid., *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 64/61; 180/178; 225/225; 447/448.

This is illustrated by the passage, quoted earlier, where Merleau-Ponty says he wants to overcome the subject-object dichotomy. Merleau-Ponty here argues against the empiricist and intellectualist conceptions of *language*. In these criticized views, “[t]he possession of language is in the first place understood as no more than the actual existence of ‘verbal images’, or traces left in us by words spoken or heard”.<sup>18</sup> He then describes the two realms in which science and philosophy have mistakenly located these “traces”: “Whether these traces are physical, or whether they are imprinted on an ‘unconscious psychic life’, is of little importance, and in both cases the conception of language is the same in that there is no ‘speaking subject’.”<sup>19</sup> It is of little importance where one locates the traces, Merleau-Ponty wants to say, because in both cases the consequence is the same: there is nobody who speaks. So the “speaking subject” is here precisely what *gets lost* in views which start from the *dichotomy* of subject and object. The ensuing passage affirms this:

“Whether the stimuli, in accordance with laws of neurological mechanics, touch off excitations capable of bringing about the articulation of the word, or whether the states of consciousness cause, by virtue of acquired associations, the appearance of the appropriate verbal image, in both cases speech occurs in a circuit of third-person phenomena. There is no speaker, there is a flow of words set in motion independently of any intention to speak.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, neither physicalism nor mentalism understands speech, for in these views there is actually no room for a speaking subject, only for a third-person reconstruction of speech. The speaking subject has to be saved from accounts of language that start from a Cartesian separation between the mental and the physical. The speaking subject in the positive sense is the *sujet incarné* who is in the world, and for whom speech and thought are primarily *not divorced but one*. A further objection one might raise is that the “speaking subject” above is set between quotation marks by Merleau-Ponty, but we should note that the very same “subject” (in a positive sense) returns a few lines below and without quotation marks, namely when Merleau-Ponty says that when speech is mistakenly understood in the way described, “speech . . . does not show up the internal possibilities of the subject”.<sup>21</sup> I don’t have an explanation for the quotation marks in the earlier quotation, unless that, from the perspective of empiricism and intellectualism, it is

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18 Ibid., 203/203.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., 203-204/203.

21 Ibid., 204/203.

hypothetical to mention a “speaking subject” precisely because in these accounts there is no room for it.

The fact that I focus on Merleau-Ponty’s early work makes it relatively easy for me to defend that there is a subject in his view. It is rather in his later work that Merleau-Ponty wants to distance himself from the terms “subject” and “object”. In *Le visible et l'invisible* both terms are, when used positively, put in quotation marks and the only reason for this is that Merleau-Ponty wants to abandon the terms or at least their traditional meaning. Merleau-Ponty wants to steer clear of any view which posits a perceiving subject over against a perceived object, because he regards this as a denial of the fact that the subject is immediately part of the same perceivable world as the perceived thing. So, again, it is the *opposition* between subject and object that Merleau-Ponty is wary of: “We say therefore that our body is a being of two leaves, from one side a thing among things and otherwise what sees them and touches them; we say, because it is evident, that it unites these two properties within itself, and its double belonging to the order of the ‘object’ and to the order of the ‘subject’ reveals to us quite unexpected relations between the two orders.”<sup>22</sup>

Half a page onwards Merleau-Ponty revokes his use of the word “leaves”: “One should not even say, as we did a moment ago, that the body is made up of two leaves, of which the one, that of the ‘sensible’, is bound up with the rest of the world. There are not in it two leaves or two layers; fundamentally it is neither thing seen nor seer only, it is Visibility sometimes wandering and sometimes reassembled.”<sup>23</sup> It would go too far at this point to try to present a thorough interpretation of these passages, but it is clear that Merleau-Ponty wants to go beyond any differentiation which separates the visible from the seer, in order to arrive at what binds the two together: “a Visibility, a Tangible in itself, which belong properly neither to the body *qua* fact nor to the world *qua* fact”<sup>24</sup> But at the same time Merleau-Ponty cannot express the fundamental status of “Visibility”, or of the “universal flesh” (*chair universelle*)<sup>25</sup> for that matter, without referring to both the body proper as part of the visible world and the body proper as perceiving that same world. In the next chapter I argue, on the basis of Plessner, that ridding ourselves of these differentiations is not a necessary precondition for our ability to describe either the immediacy of our perceptual being in

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22 Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, 178/137 (translation modified).

23 Ibid., 179/137-138.

24 Ibid., 181/139.

25 Ibid., 179/137.

the world, or the “intertwining” (*entrelacs*)<sup>26</sup> of the two aspects that constitute this immediacy.<sup>27</sup>

It is not clear to what extent Merleau-Ponty wanted to rid himself of the terms “subject” and “object” in his later work and, if so, if he succeeded in disposing of this terminology.<sup>28</sup> I think that, when we speak of the order of the object and the order of the subject, we can leave out the quotation marks. We can transform the meaning of these words at our own discretion. By using the words “subject” and “object” we do not automatically commit ourselves to any inherited subject-object opposition. Transforming the meaning of certain terms, rather than abandoning them altogether, is especially recommendable if they keep urging themselves on our thinking although we thought we had good reasons to eradicate them. This is what appears to be happening with “subject” and “object” in *The Visible and the Invisible*.

This little excursion to the *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible* also supports the main point of this section: according to Merleau-Ponty, the third-person perspective is secondary in regard to a first-person perspective. This point rests upon the very presupposition that there is a subject in (early) Merleau-Ponty in the first place, because the “first person” is the embodied subject. So let us return to *The Structure of Behavior*.

Whereas the first two parts of *The Structure of Behavior* stress that behavior has a different form than physical nature and that human behavior differs from animal behavior, the third and fourth part make clear that these higher forms still presuppose the lower forms of nature: “The advent of higher orders, to the extent that they are accomplished, eliminate the autonomy of the lower

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26 Ibid., 180/138.

27 Like Merleau-Ponty, Plessner speaks of a connection between the order of the subjective and the order of the objective as something which is not the sum of two levels: in Plessner’s terminology it is a *Verschränkung* (Plessner, *Lachen und Weinen*, 240; translated as “interlacing” by Churchill and Grene, *Laughing and Crying*, 36). This word designates a crosswise connection: it means that the one aspect is fundamentally unlike the other, and yet each of both orders cannot be conceived without the other. The term is clearly very similar to Merleau-Ponty’s “intertwining” and this is one of the points where the reader wonders why Merleau-Ponty did not refer to Plessner.

28 In the *Résumés du cours* (16) from the 1950s, Merleau-Ponty still speaks of a “subject”; the term emerges at the same time as the body schema. Indeed, it is hard to understand the body schema without the notion of an embodied subject. Cf. ibid., 33, 36, 66.

orders and give a new signification to the steps which constitute them.”<sup>29</sup> In this respect the encompassing order is dialectical in a Hegelian sense. Merleau-Ponty is quite explicit about this.<sup>30</sup> But there are important differences with Hegel’s system. One difference is that, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, the highest stage of development is not absolute spirit but the world of human individuals: “In other words, matter, life and spirit must . . . represent different degrees of integration and, finally, must constitute a hierarchy in which individuality is progressively achieved”<sup>31</sup>.

The fact that the lower is retained in the higher enables the scientist to focus on the lower *within* the higher and still find something which meets his expectations. For instance, the behavior of a rat can still be regarded according to its “geographical” moment, which is “the sum of the movements actually executed by the animal in their objective relation with the physical environment”.<sup>32</sup> Behavior can to some extent be explained by exact science, because the physiological field is both “beyond” the physical field *and* “has its place” in it.<sup>33</sup> In this passage, the term “physiological” pertains to the relatively higher structure of behavior. The passage illustrates that, according to Merleau-Ponty, a physical aspect below the vital order remains accessible. The scientific approach to behavior constitutes a perspective which is reductive, but which is also still possible. This holds for the relationship between the vital and the human order, too. Let us indeed turn to human behavior: what, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, is the place of the scientific perspective in relation to our own subjective experience as human beings?

Although science is inclined to think it sees everything, taking “the physical world as *omnitudo realitatis*”,<sup>34</sup> in fact it tacitly depends on the phenomenal, says Merleau-Ponty. “Nerve functioning . . . is not itself conceivable without reference to the phenomenal field and its laws of equilibrium”<sup>35</sup> Science is dependent on the phenomenal world, not vice versa. Insofar as I have been able to check, the term “first person” (*première personne*), does not occur in *The Structure of Behavior*, and the term “third person” (*troisième personne*) is only re-

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29 Merleau-Ponty, *La structure du comportement*, 195/180.

30 Ibid., 175/161 and 191/176.

31 Ibid., 143/132-133 (translation modified).

32 Ibid., 140/130 (translation modified).

33 Ibid., 141/131.

34 Ibid., 144/134.

35 Ibid., 207/192.

ferred to once and in passing.<sup>36</sup> Both terms occur a couple times in the *Phenomenology of Perception*.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, we can say that *The Structure of Behavior* already understands science as a *secondary* perspective with regard to our own experience and self-understanding. Merleau-Ponty in this work understands behavior in terms of how the environment is meaningful *for* the subject, and he defends this understanding against views which reduce behavior to a mechanism in pure objectivity. In this sense he is already working with an implicit opposition between a first- and a third-person perspective. Philosophy is here a primary perspective on behavior, a direct description of the phenomenal world. But this leads to a further question: if the scientific conception of behavior is reductive, then what is its use? And what is its truth-value in regard to the phenomenological perspective which aims at connecting immediately with the inner structure of subjective experience?

Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that “it is not sufficient to oppose a [phenomenological, JvB] description to reductive explanations . . . It would be necessary to bring to light the abuse of causal thinking in explanatory theories and at the same time to show positively how the physiological and sociological dependencies which they rightly take into account ought to be conceived. Here we can neither treat this point completely, nor leave it aside altogether.”<sup>38</sup> At this point Merleau-Ponty has already given us the beginning of an answer. The truth-value and function of science can be related to a kind of reduction which is not epistemic, as in the case of a reductive view of animals or human beings, but ontic, i.e., an *actual* reduction of the organism itself: “Thus, the dialectic proper of the organism and the milieu can be interrupted by ‘catastrophic’ behavior and the organism momentarily reduced to the conditions of a physical system. But it is a question here of pathological cases or of laboratory phenomena.”<sup>39</sup> We are concerned with laboratory phenomena because science organizes the environment of animal and human behavior in such a way that its results come as close as possible to 1-to-1 stimulus-response relationships. This is one form of actual reduction. According to the quoted passage, the other form of disintegration is the pathological case.

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36 Ibid., 193/178.

37 “First person”: ibid., *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 99/96 and 400/405; and negatively, referring to the idea of a pure consciousness: ibid., 95/92. “Third person”: ibid., 95/92 and 203-204/203.

38 Merleau-Ponty, *La structure du comportement*, 191/176.

39 Ibid., 163/150.

Merleau-Ponty does not go into this pathological type of behavior at this point, but in relation to Freud's attempt to systematically explain behavior by the unconscious, he remarks: "The possibility of constructing a causal explanation of behavior is exactly proportional to the inadequacy of the structurations accomplished by the subject."<sup>40</sup> And when Merleau-Ponty in his discussion of the unity of body and soul addresses illness, he argues that, if the ill body becomes more determining for our behavior as a whole, this means "that the behavior had become disorganized, leaving room for less organized structures . . . Since the physical, the vital, and the mental individual are distinguished only as different degrees of integration, to the extent that the human being is completely identified with the third dialectic, that is, to the extent that he no longer allows systems of isolated conduct to function in him, his soul and his body are no longer distinguished."<sup>41</sup>

This seems to prepare the view that the scientific perspective on human behavior comes into the picture whenever our physical or mental functioning is somehow impaired so that the unity of body and soul becomes problematic. According to this *anticipated* view, we normally have a first-person, phenomenal perspective on the world and ourselves. If we fall ill, are injured in an accident, or we are traumatized by a shocking event, our existence degrades to a lower level of being, which demands mediation by an objectifying—medical, psychoanalytical—perspective. (Although mental illness does not pertain primarily to the body as object, there is here an objectivity of a higher order: a pattern of behavior beyond the influence, the will, and the intrinsic motivations of the subject.) This is however not how Merleau-Ponty elaborates his point. Merleau-Ponty now presents the example of the painter El Greco. The painter El Greco might have been astigmatic, and it has been speculated that this caused him to paint human beings as elongated figures. According to Merleau-Ponty, El Greco's alleged "anomaly of vision" should not receive a "physiological explanation", since, if the artist indeed was astigmatic, he overcame his handicap by integrating it in his way of perceiving the world, thus giving his anomaly "a universal signification".<sup>42</sup>

It has been disputed that El Greco painted his vertical figures relatively long because he would have been astigmatic.<sup>43</sup> Merleau-Ponty is careful enough

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40 Ibid., 194/179.

41 Ibid., 218-219/202-203 (translation modified).

42 Ibid., 219/203.

43 Psychologist Stuart Anstis argues that astigmatism cannot be derived from the shapes El Greco painted: <[www.psy.ucsd.edu/~sanstis/PDFs/Greco.pdf](http://www.psy.ucsd.edu/~sanstis/PDFs/Greco.pdf)>

not to present the anomaly as a fact. Although the example might raise questions, I think Merleau-Ponty is right that this is an important manner in which we deal with some deviations in our physiological and mental functioning. We realize a kind of sublimation of the anomaly so that it actually contributes to the originality of our view on the world and of our self-expressions. Merleau-Ponty presents a similar thought in *L'oeil et l'esprit*, again referring to painting. When he speaks of the painter's artistic style as issuing from his individual shortcomings (*manques*),<sup>44</sup> he does not mean that the resulting style is the artist's *remedy*. What Merleau-Ponty means both in *La structure du comportement* and in *L'oeil et l'esprit*, is that our strengths and weaknesses are inextricably intertwined, that there is a certain relativity to what is normal and what is pathological, and finally, that deviations from norms reveal new existential possibilities. Consequently, we should not turn to causal explanation too quickly.

This is a valid point, and yet it cannot be the whole story. Many illnesses, injuries, handicaps and traumas are simply too overwhelming to be transformed by the subject, sublimated by him, and reintegrated into his *style d'être*. To return to my point above, Merleau-Ponty's observations about disintegration can also be interpreted as accounting for the—quite obvious—fact that subjectivity can be impaired to such an extent that healing *is* necessary. In that case the “reductionism” of science finds a correlate over against itself: a disintegrated, reduced being in the world. In other words, in addition to Merleau-Ponty's point about El Greco, we can interpret the theory of dialectical integration and disintegration in such a way that it accounts for the fact that an impairment of our functioning can render necessary the detour over an external, scientific perspective, from which our bodies are natural objects (or from which our behavior is objective). In the case of illness we need a physician who knows about causes and effects within the scope of the organic body-object. When our sight is diminishing we need to make use of technology based on optics and the physiology of sight. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, my (tentative) conclusion is that we basically have a first-person perspective on our being in the world, and that we turn to science and technology whenever our functioning shows symptoms of disintegration, i.e., of *actual* or *ontic* reduction.

Although this conclusion is in itself correct, it is still not sufficient. Sticking to the example of optics, it is easy to understand that there is no principle boundary between technology which compensates impairments of the body, like glasses and contact lenses, and technology which *enhances* our sensorimotor ca-

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44 Merleau-Ponty, *L'oeil et l'esprit*, 31/129.

pabilities, like binoculars, telescopes, and microscopes.<sup>45</sup> This implies that the turn to a reductive perspective does not find its *exclusive* motivation in actual reductions of our being in the world. And it implies that the reductive perspective of science does not necessarily correlate with an actual reduction of our bodily being. As we saw earlier, science finds a subject-matter in *anything*. The reason for this cannot be that disorganizations of higher structures are ubiquitous. It is that the “lower structures” of the physical always remain a constitutive aspect of our being in the world. They make up its objective, technical moment, the moment which allows us to use technology and *integrate* it into our being in the world. But this does not undercut the assumption that science is a secondary perspective with regard to first-person experience, since what counts as an enhancement of our sensorimotor and intellectual capabilities depends on our needs and desires as first persons,<sup>46</sup> and the development of technology finds its fulfillment in the moment that we use it and integrate it into our own activities. The reductionism of science rather sits in the fact that it temporarily *isolates* the objective moment from the entirety of our being in the world.

Summing up this point, a critique of reductionism cannot lead to the conclusion that physics, chemistry, or physiology should concern themselves exclusively with physical nature or lower organisms, because their concern with human beings would lead to reductionism. The example of the medical treatment of illness or injury even demonstrates the absurdity of that conclusion. Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the dialectical structure of behavior provides the basis for an arrangement of perspectives according to which (a) we normally have a pre-scientific, first-person perspective on ourselves, taken seriously by philosophy as it takes the inner significations of our lives seriously, (b) we turn to science when this level of being shows symptoms of break-down or when we seek technical enhancement of our capabilities.<sup>47</sup> Science is then a secondary and, in a sense, reductive perspective on our behavior, which at the same time provides

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45 At least there is a certain relativity to the distinction. This blurry line between on the one hand healing and restoring and on the other hand enhancing renders possible the questionable use, or downright abuse, of medication and other kinds of therapy as described by Carl Elliot, in his *Better than Well: American Medicine Meets the American Dream*.

46 Cf. Fredrik Svenaeus, “Naturalistic and Phenomenological Theories of Health”, 235–237.

47 The word “technical” here has a very wide meaning, referring to any physical means to heal, restore, or enhance the functioning of the body.

the detour needed to restore or enhance the higher dialectics of the first-person perspective.

The relationship between first-person experience and scientific objectification remains paradoxical. This shows itself most clearly when we reflect on this relationship in terms of freedom and causal determinism. Roughly speaking (in that there might be exceptions), science approaches the world, including the human body, as a totality of causally determined processes, in which there is no room for a person who autonomously finds his way in the world, makes decisions, and leads his own life. As I argued in Part I, the phenomenal world, including our sense of (relative) freedom, cannot be discarded as a mere illusion. So on the one hand we have the truth of our sense of freedom, and on the other hand we have the truth of science which purports that our behavior is the result of objective physico-organic events. We might feel forced to decide once and for all whether the human being is free or not: we then wrongly understand the paradoxical relationship between freedom and nature as a contradiction. Only by distinguishing between the first-person and the third-person point of view, and by asking what is the most sensible arrangement of these perspectives, can we save both the subjective and the objective aspect of our being in the world. We regard the tension between these two aspects not as a contradiction, but as a necessary ambiguity. Accordingly, we approach the relationship between prescientific experience and scientific objectification also as a positive ambiguous structure. This approach allows the conclusion that the detour by way of an inherently deterministic perspective not only does not interfere with, but even helps to restore our basic sense of freedom.

My interpretation of Merleau-Ponty is inspired by Theo de Boer, who made a similar point with respect to psychoanalysis. De Boer argued that, if a trauma *causes* compulsive behavior, the therapist needs to have causal explanation at his disposal as one of his perspectives. But he also argued that, in addition, the psychoanalyst needs a hermeneutical perspective which is continuous with the subject's self-understanding: the therapist needs to be the patient's (or "client's") conversation partner. The hermeneutical point of view here fulfills a similar role as the phenomenological approach in Merleau-Ponty: it constitutes a primary perspective on our behavior and thereby a level of identification between the ego and the other person. Only the combination of hermeneutics and causal explanation can contribute to the patient's return back to who he actually is, with the aim of making causal explanation of this patient's behavior in the end redundant.<sup>48</sup>

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48 For the details of how this works: De Boer, *Foundations of a Critical Psychology*.

De Boer refers to the philosopher of history William Dray, who says that historical understanding starts from a level of identification with the historical agent in an attempt to understand his reasons, to fall back on causal explanation only in case this understanding of the person is no longer possible. “We give reasons if we can, and turn to empirical laws if we must.”<sup>49</sup> Although the aim of historical research is probably not (at least not only, or not primarily) therapeutic, we find in this view a similar emancipatory ideal as in De Boer: a call on science and philosophy to take seriously the way human beings themselves experience the world and their lives. De Boer catches this way of thinking in the term “the ladder of understanding”,<sup>50</sup> which in its simplest form expresses nothing other than the primacy of first-person experience, the second rung on the ladder being the objectifying perspective. Only if we do not succeed in understanding the other person as an interlocutor who is relatively free and therefore has (often implicit) reasons to live the way he lives do we turn to the third-person perspective of science in order to find what causes his behavior.

## 4.2 ARBITRARY AND NECESSARY SHIFTS OF PERSPECTIVE

In the Introduction I raised a number of issues concerning everyday self-understanding and science. Since science has acquired a place within our ordinary self-reflection, we no longer see ourselves only as relatively free persons who try to make the best of our lives under certain—easy or difficult—circumstances, but also as objective bodies with a nervous system that determines our behavior. As noted there, journalist Derek Thompson jumps arbitrarily from the first-person perspective, which includes narratives about our consumer decisions, to the third-person perspective, from which the *brain* seems to be the decision maker. This raised the question of what criterion could help us decide what is the most logical perspective in a particular situation. When do we simply say “I bought this laptop because it appealed to me (for all kinds of further explicable reasons)” and when do we alternatively say “I bought this laptop because it (apparently) triggered something in my brain”?

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49 Dray, quoted by De Boer, *ibid.*, 125/131. Merleau-Ponty seems critical of “reasons” as an essential ground of action, instead promoting “motives”. However, as I will show in Section 7.1, Merleau-Ponty only targets a specific, intellectualist, concept of “reasons”, sometimes even using “reason” as an equivalent of “motive”.

50 *Ibid.*, 124/130.

As I mentioned in the Introduction, Thompson's article is not primarily about brain functioning and nor is it about the question concerning the relationship between mind and brain. Thompson simply wants to make us aware of our consumer behavior and the information he provides is very useful. It can make us more reflective on, and critical of, the choices we make: many of us could save money without being any less happy with the things we buy. How do we become more critical consumers? A clear message from the article is that we should calculate *more* often, and follow our impulses *less* often, because our impulses are easily tricked by clever marketing. Let us suppose the article is indeed meant to be instructive: it invites the reader to modify his behavior if he wishes to do so. We can then ask the question: which perspective should we adopt when reading the article in order to benefit optimally from its content: is it the first-person consumer perspective or the consumer-brain perspective?

I argue that under normal circumstances (more about "normal" below), the first-person perspective is the most logical choice. When I plan to calculate more often when making a purchase, I would better stick to the presupposition that there is indeed an "I" (me), who can plan certain things, and perform calculations. We need to ask a simple question: how does it contribute to my self-understanding if I translate these considerations to a layperson's version of neuroscientific language? In what way do I understand myself better if I say that it is not me who is going to do the calculating but rather my brain? In what way do I understand my personal impulsivity better if I ascribe that impulsivity not to me as a first person but rather to my nervous system? If I formulate for myself the resolution to be less impulsive, should I then communicate this resolution to my nervous system, so that *it* can be less impulsive next time? But since we are then embracing the perspective of neuroscience, we might just as well accept that it is the nervous system that is adopting such good resolutions in the first place. Does this mean that the "I" can sit back and relax and drop his resolutions? We see that we get into an awkward logical predicament when we arbitrarily mix neuroscientific language and ordinary life vocabulary. We also see that in order for Thompson's article to make optimal sense to us as readers and consumers, we have to stick to our ordinary first-person perspective: only then the article is truly instructive and beneficial to our practical lives.

Does this mean that, in our everyday existence, we should abstain from turning to the neuroscientific perspective altogether? That is not the conclusion that I am proposing. First of all, the observations I am making, of course, are not meant to deny that the brain is an ontic precondition for our ability to make consumer decisions, calculate prices, and so forth. One can simply be fascinated by this objective-organic precondition, and only for this reason want to know more

about it—which should only be encouraged. But neuroscience itself cannot answer the question of which perspective is the best to adopt in a given situation. We can only answer this practically oriented question if we examine the relationship between *both* perspectives we have at our disposal. Since the first-person perspective has the primacy, we have to look for an essential motive to turn to the scientific perspective on this level of first-person experience.

Imagine that we have a friend who is often rather withdrawn and serious, and not quite the type to go shopping for all kinds of luxury goods. Now suppose that, suddenly, he has bought an awesome car that we know he can hardly afford, and he avidly invites us to go for a ride. We are confronted with a side of our friend's personality we previously had no knowledge of. At first, we may be happy to see that our friend is coming out of his shell. But when not much later he falls back into a period of melancholy and withdrawing, then followed by the next spending spree, we might begin to suspect that he is suffering from a physical condition which has a strong effect on his attitude and the way he lives his life. We might still try to understand our friend by talking to him, but he himself might not be able to understand what sometimes gets into him. Instead of explaining his actions by fitting them into his story, he starts to ask questions about his behavior as if this behavior is not his own, and we might join him in this outsider's stance: we turn from our default first-person perspective to the third-person perspective. A specialist may later diagnose our friend with bipolar disorder and point out that there is some evidence that deviant brain functioning is responsible for this condition.<sup>51</sup>

What does the example tell us? A person's consumer behavior can deviate so extremely from normal patterns that it becomes harmful to the person in question. In this situation we can no longer understand his actions on the personal level and are forced to turn to the third-person perspective of science. So the example illustrates (a) that we normally adopt a first-person perspective with respect to consumer behavior, (b) that there can be very good reasons to turn to a third-person perspective: apart from sheer fascination with the nervous system (which constitutes a good reason, but one which remains relatively separated from practical life), an abnormality of behavior can lead us to turn to the objectifying perspective, even if we are reluctant to do so, because we prefer to think of our friend as someone who is motivated to act in the way he does and can take responsibility for his behavior.

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51 Recent research indeed shows a correlation between anomalies in the brain and bipolar disorder: Strakowski et al., "The Functional Neuroanatomy of Bipolar Disorder: A Consensus Model", 313.

Let me shortly discuss a further example to make plausible the arrangement of perspectives I am proposing. If a very old relative of ours increasingly talks nonsense, has bad memory and neglects himself, then at some point we stop asking him why he displays this behavior, because we realize that it is no use addressing him as someone we can level with. We see that there is something wrong in the objective-organic body, which, in Merleau-Ponty's terms, has led to an ontic reduction of the higher structures of behavior to lower structures. The very moment we realize this, we have already adopted the layperson's version of the doctor's perspective. We stop talking to the person but instead ask questions *about* him, like: what deterioration of the brain is causing this abnormal behavior? Are we dealing with dementia, and if yes: what condition in the nervous system is causing these symptoms? We have turned away from our relative as a subject and reflect on his body as a physico-organic object. Neuroscience adopts essentially the same perspective, albeit of course a highly advanced version of it: the neuroscientist brings along a vast amount of knowledge and experience, and she has the technical and institutional means to diagnose the patient and hopefully propose treatment. The relationship with a relative with dementia is difficult, because we do not want to give up on the person as we know him. We certainly do not want to give up on him any sooner than strictly necessary: so we keep trying to approach the person as a person, and if the dementia is an unstable condition, which often it is, we may sometimes succeed in communicating normally with him and then again be disappointed. The fact that we make these attempts illustrates that, in our practical lives, the first-person perspective has the primacy over the third-person perspective.

Only from the first-person perspective do we understand each other according to the most integrated, highest dialectics of our being in the world. Since this philosophical claim connects with prescientific experience, the claim itself also includes a practical position: we express that it is worthwhile and important to treat human beings according to their highest mode of being: as a (potential) conversation partner, i.e., as *someone like us*. Philosophy does not have the neutrality of science because it seeks to understand what life is like for ourselves as human beings. Only if we include the desire to connect with one another on the same personal level, can we understand what is so dramatic about losing a family member when his mind deteriorates. We turn to the objectifying perspective only because this detour is necessary in order to understand how improvement of the condition of our loved one might be possible. But there is a tension here: anyone who has had such experiences or can imagine what this situation is like, would agree that we postpone as long as we can the moment that the objectifying perspective becomes the only perspective we have left—besides, perhaps,

the ability to show affection through physical contact and prediscursive forms of attention. We want to be able to be with, and talk to, the other person *as another person* as long as possible. The example once more illustrates, hopefully even makes plausible, (a) the priority of the first-person perspective, (b) that the structural motive to look at ourselves from a scientific perspective sits in the failure to connect on the personal level and in the desire to restore the personal level via a detour over the objective body. For us as first persons with ordinary human desires the objectifying perspective which is blind *vis à vis* the person we love is nonetheless extremely meaningful because, *indirectly*, the objectification of the body is a means that bring back that beloved person.

In order to avoid misunderstandings I add four remarks.

Firstly, as noted, the motive to turn to the objectifying perspective is not always related to illness, injury, or trauma. The other essential motive for this turn is the wish to enhance one's being in the world by means of the detour via the objective body. But although the enhancement requires a detour over the third-person perspective, the *value* or *importance* of the improvement can only be recognized on the level of personal experience, the level we return to after adopting (the layperson's version of) the scientific perspective.

Secondly, the third-person perspective characterizes scientific research but scientific praxis is not restricted to this perspective. When neuroscience correlates the addiction to smoking with the physical effects of nicotine on the nervous system, lay persons will at least recognize one half of the correlation, *viz.* the habit of smoking. This is so because the neuroscientist establishes correlations between on the one hand neural structures and on the other hand a description of behavior which connects quite directly with first-person experience. The scientist always stands with one foot in the phenomenal world, the explanation of which he seeks in physical-organic reality. In addition, as both De Boer and Krüger point out, scientific research is much more than focusing on the *object* of research: it is a practice of intensive communication with colleagues, who (normally) take each other seriously as first persons of experience and judgment.<sup>52</sup> For example, a scientist who tries to convince his colleague of a theory does not approach that colleague as a physical thing or a nervous system, but as a phenomenally present person whom he respects and regards as "one of us". As De Boer remarks, we can only be convinced on the basis of reasons, not causes.

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52 De Boer, *Foundations of a Critical Psychology*, 56-61/52-59; Krüger, *Gehirn, Verhalten und Zeit*, 98-100, 109-110, 115, 122-126, 165-166. Reflection on the social dimension of science is, of course, older than De Boer and Krüger; further references can be found on the pages referred to.

This also holds for philosophers: when I am convinced by a colleague, this cannot be interpreted as an effect of a cause, for one effect is not more “true” to me than any other possible effect.<sup>53</sup> So the objectifying perspective is embedded in a social world, and in this social world itself the objectifying perspective is not at all the default point of view.

Thirdly, I am not suggesting that there are not also many *other* motives which occasion us to turn to the third-person perspective of science. One can aspire to the prestige and the payment of a doctor or a university professor. I would argue that these motives are *derived*, because salary and reputation are predominantly based on the usefulness of science for society. However, so far I have only shortly mentioned a facet which, I admit, is not at all unimportant: scientists do what they do because they are *fascinated* by what they explore within their fields. This motive possibly provides an alternative approach to the arrangement of perspectives: what is the structural relationship between a scientist’s fascination and the personal and social world his research is embedded in? On the one hand, fascination appears to be an authentic mode of the disinterested search for something meaningful in life; on the other hand, it seems that, insofar as we bracket the usefulness of scientific knowledge, which we do when we focus on fascination, there remains always a gap between the special field which fascinates us, whether quantum physics or astronomy, and the scale and nature of our everyday lives. I would argue that the wish to theoretically address this gap requires the turn from scientific research to the philosophical interpretation of that research. This transition unavoidably leads to the further question of the role of fascination in *philosophy*, and *its* relation to life. Unfortunately, both forms of fascination fall beyond the scope of this book.

Fourthly, insofar as laypeople are concerned, I am not claiming that so long as a layperson, or his friend or relative, has no problems caused by abnormalities in the nervous system, it is useless for him to take an interest in the functioning of the objective body. The purpose of these considerations is rather to make us aware of the presuppositions of the perspectives we adopt with regard to ourselves, and to show the difference between a motivated turn to the objectifying perspective and an arbitrary turn to it. In the first case we have a reason to focus

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53 De Boer calls this the “pragmatic paradox” of scientism: De Boer, *Foundations of a Critical Psychology*, 57/53. Incidentally, in my terminology this would not be a paradox but rather a contradiction. Hans-Peter Krüger addresses a similar fallacy when he criticizes neuroscientist Gerhard Roth (Krüger, *Gehirn, Verhalten und Zeit*, 98). The same holds for Ted Toadvine in his criticism of E. O. Wilson (Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 11-12).

merely on the objective aspect of the body proper; in the latter case we simply explain our behavior one time by referring to ourselves as agents, another time to the brain as the agent, without understanding why we choose one perspective in one case, the other in the other case. If the layperson examines the nervous system simply because he is fascinated by it, this does not lead to logical problems, so long as he realizes that he has restricted himself to a limited aspect of the world and human existence. The practical or existential implications of one's findings can only be examined when the other aspects of our lives are also taken into account, notably personhood and the phenomenal world. The broader perspective required is that of philosophy, as just noted.

In the Introduction I discussed a further example of the way science penetrates our ordinary life self-reflection: Clinton's 2008 campaign speech, in which she highlights the talents of women by referring to their genetic make-up. Let me finally return to this example in order to wrap up this section. If one of our friends is very good at tennis we may be inclined to say, in a Clintonian fashion: "She's got the right genes." Another time we simply say: "She's very talented.", or: "She's got the right body for it and the right character." What are the differences between these remarks? Perhaps we want to say that "genes" is the same as "bodily constitution". Then we still face the question whether "the right character" for being competitive at tennis is also part of the bodily constitution, i.e., of our genetic make-up. Are these alternative remarks about our talented friend made from similar or fundamentally different perspectives? If we are concerned with different perspectives, how do we know which one to choose in any particular situation? How do we achieve a coherent, integrated self-understanding when we have so many perspectives at our disposal in the first place?

It is clear by now what kind of answer to these questions I am proposing. From the first-person perspective of ordinary life, talent is something we cherish and want to develop. If we have children we try, without pushing them to much, to recognize their talents and to stimulate them to become good at something, and above all: to enjoy what they do. It takes practical wisdom to find the right balance between the space of freedom we give a child (negative freedom) and the encouragement we offer in order to give some direction, and substance, to the child's personal development (positive freedom). Another tension we have to deal with is that between the individuality of the child and the demands of society, notably of school, which always only facilitates the development of some talents while neglecting others. Negative and positive freedom, individuality and the general demands of society—these are some of the concepts we might use to reflect on the upbringing of our children, and on the development of their talents. Against the backdrop of the discussion above we have to ask ourselves whether

reformulating these concepts in terms of our children's genome really improves our approach to their lives. I am of course not making the rather absurd suggestion that our genome is not an essential ontic precondition for (the passing on of) our natural properties, among which our talents. However, there is a logical price we pay for turning to the objectifying perspective of genetics: whereas it makes perfect sense to say that you need to develop your talents and thereby realize yourself, to become your *best* self; it makes no sense to say that you need to develop your genes. We do not relate to our genes when we develop our talents, because our genome is not an integral part of the phenomenal world we live in. By turning to the perspective of genetics we cut ourselves off from our talents as they exist for us.

Considering that it is important to connect with the way we experience our lives from our primary, everyday life perspective, I argue that we should only turn to the objectifying perspective of genetics on the basis of very specific *reasons*. When the hidden objective-organic precondition for our self-realization urges itself on us, because we are severely inhibited by some physical shortcoming, we turn to the perspective from which we can diagnose that shortcoming. If there is a suspicion of a genetic defect, we turn to genetics. In all other cases, the turn to the objectifying perspective does not add anything substantial to our self-understanding but rather prevents us from relating to ourselves in a way that makes sense on a practical level. Of course, one could also turn to genetics to determine which talents one has without having to try out any activity in advance. Let us suppose that, in principle, this could work. This does not detract from the fact that the ultimate proof of what our talents are is in our development of them. Someone who is obviously very good at playing the piano can never be proven wrong by a geneticist; but the other way around correction is always possible: if we were told we would be no good at the piano, but we turn out to be extremely talented pianists, then it is the task of the geneticist to find an explanation for the falsity of his initial assessment. The meaning of talent, and the criterions for judging it, are located on the phenomenal level. What a talent is, its place in life, its readiness to be developed, can only be understood from the first-person perspective of our factual, practical lives.

According to our tentative conclusions, the body appears as a *subject* to ourselves and as an *object* only from the secondary perspective of science (of which we, laypeople, adopt a laypeople's version). To science the body proper is roughly speaking either an organic object or a physical object. These different aspects of the objective body need to be explored further and integrated in an encompassing philosophical anthropology. This is the long term goal which is only prepared by the next step. We now turn to the way in which our body can

be an object not to the third but to the first person. In some respect my body is to me a *thing* even before I turn to the objectifying perspective of science. My body is a thing to me when I examine my body in the mirror, or when, in a busy street, I find myself to be in the way of other people trying to pass. I am then not concerned with my nervous system or genome. In these simple examples the body is an object but not in the scientific sense discussed above. In the next section I continue the discussion of Merleau-Ponty in order to contemplate this issue.

As we will see, Merleau-Ponty is equivocal about what I have boldly stated just now: that the body proper is not only a subject but also an object. Sometimes he states that the first person relates to himself not only as a sensorimotor subject but also as an objective body. At other times he is wary of allowing that the body proper is, besides a subject, also an object. In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty is indeed hesitant to allow the possibility that we experience our whole body as an object, leaning rather to the view that the body proper is always only a subjective openness to the phenomenal world. But in one crucial passage in *The Structure of Behavior*, and in Merleau-Ponty's later work, we find a broader point of view.

The conclusions of Sections 4.1 and 4.2 pertain to the relationship between subjectivity and the external, scientific approach to our bodies as objects. According to our account so far, we either have first person experience of ourselves and our world or we turn to a scientific perspective which objectifies self and world. If we would stop here, the resulting view would be that the subject is to himself a *body-subject*, and to science a *body-object*. This account is not false but it is incomplete, because there is a sense in which we can speak of the body as “object” which does not depend on the scientific perspective. We have first-person experience of our own body as an object among other objects within the phenomenal world. The next two sections explore this sense of objectivity. The discussion then leads to the following question: what basic structure of our subjectivity or personhood enables us to relate to both the subjectivity and the objectivity of the body proper? This problem guides my comparison of Merleau-Ponty and Plessner from Section 4.5 onwards. Of course, the relationship between the scientific and the phenomenal objectivity of the body proper will also have to be addressed, but this can only be done after the discussion of Plessner. I return to it in Chapter 6.

### 4.3 THE PERCEPTION OF THE BODY PROPER

Samuel Todes, Maarten Coolen, and Richard Shusterman have, each in his own way, argued that Merleau-Ponty neglects the objective aspect of the body. They refer mainly to the *Phenomenology of Perception*. In my view, this work indeed has this shortcoming, but in *The Structure of Behavior* Merleau-Ponty at one point adopts a broader perspective and allows that human beings have a basic awareness of the body proper as an object among objects. In the current section I discuss Todes's and Shusterman's response to one key passage from the *Phenomenology*.<sup>54</sup> In the next section I turn to *The Structure of Behavior*. Merleau-Ponty's later *Le visible et l'invisible* will then also be touched on.<sup>55</sup>

In the *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty states in various ways that our body is by no means an object to us. An external object, he says, can only be there for us if “our own body does not belong to the realm of the ‘in-itself’ [*en soi*]”.<sup>56</sup> And: “We must . . . avoid saying that our body is *in* space, or *in* time. It *inhabits* space and time.”<sup>57</sup> It is *as bodies* that we are subjects, open to the world, and it is our task as philosophers to “rediscover the relationship between the embodied subject and his world”.<sup>58</sup> “[T]he objective body is not the true version of the phenomenal body, that is, the true version of the body that we live by: it is indeed no more than the latter’s impoverished image”.<sup>59</sup> The objective body “exists only conceptually”.<sup>60</sup> But in the following passage Merleau-Ponty allows that we can at least experience parts of our bodies as objects:

My visual body is certainly an object as far as its parts far removed from my head are concerned, but as we come nearer to the eyes, it becomes divorced from objects, and reserves among them a quasi-space to which they have no access, and when I try to fill this void by recourse to the image in the mirror, it refers me back to an original of the body which is not out there among things, but in my own province on this side of all things seen. It is no different, in spite of what may appear to be the case, with my tactile body, for if I can, with my left hand, feel my right hand as it touches an object, the right hand as an object is not the right hand as it touches: the first is a system of bones, muscles and

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54 I turn to Coolen in Section 5.4.

55 From here onwards: *The Visible and the Invisible*, except in footnotes.

56 Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 161/161.

57 *Ibid.*, 162/161.

58 *Ibid.*, 180/178 (translation modified).

59 *Ibid.*, 493/501.

60 *Ibid.*, 493/502.

flesh brought down at a point of space, the second shoots through space like a rocket to reveal the external object in its place. Insofar as it sees or touches the world, my body can therefore be neither seen nor touched. What prevents its ever being an object, ever being “completely constituted” is that it is that by which there are objects. It is neither tangible nor visible insofar as it is that which sees and touches.<sup>61</sup>

According to this passage, my body *can* be an object (in a non-scientific sense) to me, but always only partly, not as a whole. By perceiving my body as an object I bring about a kind of virtual boundary between my perceiving body and my body as perceived. I see *with* my eyes, and so my gaze can never become an object to me. So, according to Merleau-Ponty, there is always at least a zone of subjectivity in my body which cannot be objectified. What do we make of this?

According to Todes, Merleau-Ponty is right that my attempt to make my seeing body the object of my gaze, i.e., to see myself seeing, is bound to arrive too late: I cannot catch myself looking at myself. Incidentally, Todes says that this also holds for *thinking*: the objectification of any particular thought comes after the thought. But he argues that in tactile *feeling* this is different: “However, I hold that in the *very act* of feeling something, e.g., feeling a smooth surface by moving my hand across it, I feel myself feeling it. In vision as in thought, in order to catch sight of myself making sense of things, I must do so in a second-order act taking my first as object. I must do so, in short, reflectively. But feeling is *reflexive*; I make sense of my own making sense of something within the first order of sense-making.”<sup>62</sup>

Shusterman takes a position similar to Todes: “one *can* simultaneously have experiences of touching and being touched, of feeling our voices from inside while hearing them from without, even if the prime focus of our attention may sometimes vacillate rapidly between the two perspectives within the very short duration of time we phenomenologically identify as the present and which, as James long ago recognized, is always a ‘specious present’, involving memory of an immediate past.”<sup>63</sup> By stressing the possibility that our attention vacillates between subjectivity and objectivity, Shusterman seems to echo Merleau-Ponty himself, since the latter also writes: “When I touch my two hands together, it is not a matter of two sensations felt together as one perceives two objects placed side by side, but of an ambiguous set-up in which both hands can alternate the

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61 Ibid., 107-108/105.

62 Todes, *Body and World*, 266. This is a quotation from Appendix I, a posthumously published note dating from 1993.

63 Shusterman, *The Silent, Limping Body of Philosophy*, 174.

roles of ‘touching’ and ‘being touched’.”<sup>64</sup> But there is a subtle difference. Contrary to Merleau-Ponty, Shusterman recognizes that touching and being touched are simultaneous: it is only the *attentive* touching/being touched which vacillates. The emphatic forms of perceptual consciousness are here understood as a figure against the background of a preconscious layer of sensations. Because these sensations are as yet indeterminate they can constitute a reciprocal contact between ourselves as touching and as touched.<sup>65</sup> Only if we restrict ourselves to the more emphatic or explicit forms of self-perception can we distinguish between a part of the body which operates as the body-subject and a part which undergoes perception passively. But this attentive seeing a body part, or feeling it, is embedded in the sphere of immediate sensations and inner feelings of our bodies, the feeling of pain or simply a quite neutral *thereness* of our limbs and organs, or the inner taste in our mouths.

I agree with the general purport of both Todes’s and Shusterman’s critiques. Feeling is reflexive, as Todes puts it, while seeing is not. In my view, hearing is also *not* reflexive in this strict sense: we may feel our voices but we do not hear ourselves hearing something. Neither do we taste ourselves tasting our food or smell ourselves smelling the scent of a flower. I may smell myself *while* smelling a flower, but this is not the same as smelling my smelling. So there is something exceptional about feeling: it is reflexive in that the body part operating as a subject of perception can at the same time belong to the objective field of perception.<sup>66</sup>

We can reformulate this in terms of exteroception and proprioception. Exteroception is perception of the outer world. This includes some perceptions of the body proper, for instance when I look at my hand. Proprioception is the *internal* perception of the body proper, for instance the light strain in my muscles I feel when I walk up the stairs, sensations of genuine pain, or the “neutral” sense

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64 Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 109/106 (translation modified).

65 I am loosely interpreting Shusterman, *The Silent, Limping Body of Philosophy*, 169. It should be clear from the context that the “sensations” I refer to are not the “layer of ‘impressions’” rightly criticized by Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 9/4).

66 Taylor Carman in “The Body in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty”, 334-335, reminds us that Husserl already addressed this exceptional property of feeling. Cf. also Zahavi, *Husserl’s Phenomenology*, 104-105 and Bernet, *The Body as a ‘Legitimate Naturalization of Consciousness’*, 46-55.

of my stomach and other organs.<sup>67</sup> Proprioception is a permanent background phenomenon of exteroception; it is there as a precondition of all sensorimotor functioning.<sup>68</sup> It accompanies our exteroceptions, as in the example mentioned by Todes: when I feel the surface of my desk by stroking it I have an exteroception of the desk and at the same time a proprioception in the outer layers of my fingers. I thus feel myself feeling the desk.

Self-perception thus has two forms: exteroception, e.g., when I see my hand, and interoception, e.g., when my legs hurt. In both these forms, self-perception constitutes the contact of the body-as-subject with the body-as-object. Merleau-Ponty would only partly agree with this description. He allows that the hand that I see, in a sense, becomes an object. But he does not allow that proprioception is a perception of the body as an object. There is something intuitive about his position because when, for instance, I feel my muscles, it seems impossible to determine what zone of the body is subjective and what zone objective. But it does not follow from this that the body that feels its muscles is therefore a mere subject. The *thingness* of the organism is a precondition for it to feel, and to feel itself. I feel a body part (also) because it is physically *there* in the first place. I agree with Todes that “the human body is . . . a material thing in the world”.<sup>69</sup> As we will see, the thingness of the body was also elaborately discussed by Plessner, in his *Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*. Proprioception is unthinkable without the materiality or thingness of the body. Instead of attributing bodilyness to the subject we should attribute subjectivity to the thing that is the body. Human beings are things with an inner sensuousness, proprioception, which is a necessary condition for exteroception.

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67 Merleau-Ponty mainly works with this twofold distinction between exteroception and proprioception, but he derives it from Sherrington's *threefold* distinction between exteroception, proprioception *and interoception* (Sherrington, *The Integrative Action of the Nervous system*, 316–318). According to Sherrington, the proprioceptive field is the “deep field” of internal receptiveness to stimuli incited by the organism itself (mainly in movement) in response to the environment; the “surface field” is then divided into the exteroceptive field, which is the organism's receptiveness at the outer surface of the body, including touch, hearing and vision, and the interoceptive field, which is “in contact with the environment” but “less freely open to it” (*ibid.*, 317): this mainly concerns the digestive system. In modern phenomenology, “interoception” is rarely distinguished and simply assumed to be a form of proprioception.

68 Merleau-Ponty, *La structure du comportement*, 98/89.

69 Todes, *Body and World*, 88.

But it remains true that in the case of a feeling in the muscles (e.g. in pain, or in straining oneself, or the “neutral” background feeling of our bodies), we cannot distinguish a zone or location which is subjective and a zone which is objective. The reason for this is that, in proprioception, feeling and being-felt are both completely dispersed over the body or body part.<sup>70</sup> Our bodies are, as a whole, in an ambiguous state: they are both perceiving bodies and things perceived. We should understand the word “things” accordingly. Because of the “reflexivity” (in Todes’s sense) of proprioception, our bodies are never *mere* things, but always *also* things. If we pay attention to specific proprioceptions, one body part might act as a subject and the other as the object, but this is not so much a revelation as it is a specific *realization* of a previously indeterminate immediate contact of the body with itself. This is in accordance with Merleau-Ponty’s rejection of “critical thinking” and with his primacy of the body: we are not *first* a mind which *then* has certain perceptions of its body. But in my view this means that we are a body-object with an inherent reflexive sensuousness.

The underlying thought of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body is that subjectivity and objectivity exclude one another: something which is an object to the subject cannot at the same time be that subject. This assumption automatically leads to the conclusion that only parts of the body, viz. outside a certain zone of subjectivity, can become objective to me, but that, when they are, they retreat from the subjective body, the body through which I am open to the world.

I do not see why we should agree with that presupposition. Merleau-Ponty is right that my own body will never be an object to me *in the same sense* as, for instance, a use-object on my table, but we do not have to deduce from this that my body is not an object at all. The alternative explanation for the difference with the use-object is that my body is *at the same time* a subject and an object. The ambiguity of subject and object changes the whole essence of the body. This alternative explanation is logically sound and, phenomenologically, it has certain advantages as we will see.

Why does Merleau-Ponty, at least in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, regard the subjectivity and objectivity of the body proper as mutually exclusive? Why does Merleau-Ponty in this work not allow that the embodied subject is at the same time, and as a whole, an object in the world? What is so threatening about the idea that our bodies are things like other things in the world?

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70 There are exceptions: if one of my bones is dislocated I will feel it as an object within my flesh.

I think Merleau-Ponty is cautious because he identifies objectivity with a one-sided scientific approach to the body. The body is here only approached as an “object” in the sense defined by empirical science which forms the basis of a materialistic and reductionistic account of our bodily being in the world. It is no coincidence that, in the *Phenomenology*, the chapter on the body as an object is called “The Body as Object and Mechanistic Physiology”.<sup>71</sup> Merleau-Ponty’s critique of materialism motivates him to avoid calling the body an object or a thing in any sense whatsoever. But what we really need here is a distinction between (the body as) an object of the phenomenal world and (the body as) an object as defined by science. This is precisely the distinction which in Merleau-Ponty often gets blurred.

Let me elucidate this with a concrete example. When Merleau-Ponty discusses the spatial structure of our being in the world, he says that “[i]f my arm is resting on the table I should never think of saying that it is *beside* the ashtray in the way in which the ashtray is beside the telephone. The outline of my body is a frontier which ordinary spatial relations do not cross.”<sup>72</sup> Merleau-Ponty adds that “my hand is not a collection of points”, and then mentions “cases of allochiria”, whereby stimuli in the right hand are experienced as located in the left hand, and vice versa. The experience of the body proper follows the body schema, not locations in objective reality. Merleau-Ponty concludes that the subject’s hand is not “a mosaic of spatial values”.<sup>73</sup>

Incidentally, these and similar considerations lead Merleau-Ponty to agree with certain psychologists who say that the body schema is “‘dynamic’” because “my body appears to me as an attitude towards a certain existing or possible task. And indeed its spatiality is not, like that of external objects or like that of ‘spatial sensations’, a *spatiality of position*, but a *spatiality of situation*.<sup>74</sup> The body schema is thus defined exclusively in terms of an awareness (a knowing<sup>75</sup>) of the body proper as a *subjective* body. This awareness, the body schema, is a background of “non-being”<sup>76</sup> which together with the background that is the external world renders possible the appearance of something *against* this double background. Let me return to the body schema below and first discuss the example of the arm on the desk.

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71 Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 81-105/84-102.

72 Ibid., 114/112.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid., 116/114-115.

75 Ibid., 114/112-113: “je connais la position de chacun de mes membres”.

76 Ibid., 117/115 (translation modified).

I agree with Merleau-Ponty that my arm will always appear to me in a different mode than some use-object on my desk, because it is an integral member of the body that I am, and through which I am in the world. My body is a subject and as such it is the origin of spatial orientations.<sup>77</sup> (As we will see, Plessner's view is in this respect similar to Merleau-Ponty's.) But the question is: do both aspects, the subjective and the objective, exclude one another? Is it correct to say that where the objective body is, the subjective body cannot be? The alternative is that we say that *in one respect* my arm *is* an object on the table. If my desk is becoming too full, I might need to clean the place up so that I have space to put my arms when I am working. It only makes sense to say this if we accept that the arm and the ashtray occupy sections within the same objective space.

When Merleau-Ponty first says that my arm is not like the ashtray and then concludes that "my hand is not a collection of points", he ignores the fact that the ashtray is primarily not a collection of points either: it is not a scientific object to us but an object in the prescientific sense. From Merleau-Ponty's own point of view this means that the ashtray is a phenomenal unity which, in virtue of its motivational structure, invites the subject to behave in certain ways (smoke, park his cigarette). If we say that our arms are *in some respect* objects on the table like the ashtray, we are referring to this phenomenal meaning of "object", not to a scientific theory which refers to the object as "a collection of points". In addition, I argue that my objective body can motivate me in a similar fashion as the ashtray. When I notice that my hair is quite long this motivates me to go get a haircut, and when I see that I cut my finger, although I had not even felt it, I go get a band-aid. The passage quoted above shows that, insofar as his discussion of the body proper is concerned, Merleau-Ponty does not consistently distinguish between, on the one hand, an object as we experience it from our first-person, everyday life perspective, and on the other hand the object as it appears from a scientific perspective. Since Merleau-Ponty wants to steer clear of scientific reduction, he is wary of calling the body an object or a thing. However, the phenomenal thing is not a scientific object in the first place: it has secondary qualities, spatial orientations like a top and a bottom, and it carries motivational meanings which are inextricably connected to it. Furthermore, so long as we acknowledge that the body proper is an object *and at the same time* a subject, our body remains incomparable to both the scientific object and the mere phenomenal thing, such as the use-object on the table.

Merleau-Ponty seems to have a further reason for his hesitation, in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, to accept that our body is an objective thing to

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77 Ibid.

us. Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that we *know* the body proper as a subject, but insofar as our body as object is concerned he limits himself to the *perception* of the body proper. Why should our *experience* or *knowledge* of the body proper as an object be limited to having specific perceptions of it? Because of this limitation we feel obliged to answer the question whether we can experience the whole body or only body *parts* as objects. The assumption that our relationship to the objective body proper is per definition perceptual in nature seems characteristic of the *Phenomenology*, but not of *The Structure of Behavior*. In the latter work we find a broader outlook: our being in the world includes a basic *awareness* of the body proper as an *object*. A relationship in the sense of an awareness is not restricted to parts of the body. Awareness is more encompassing than any perception can be: although we can always only see one side of the body at a time, we can be aware of our whole bodies as things among other things. I am referring to Merleau-Ponty's account of the differences between human and animal behavior on the basis of Köhler's chimpanzee experiments. Let us now turn to this.

#### **4.4 HUMAN DISENGAGEMENT AND THE BODY AS A THING AMONG THINGS**

According to *The Structure of Behavior*, human beings and animals have distinctive ways of perceiving a thing: contrary to animals, human beings can recognize one and the same object throughout a series of very diverse appearances by which the object shows itself. Merleau-Ponty bases this distinction mainly on Wolfgang Köhler's chimpanzee observations.<sup>78</sup> In one experimental setting, a chimpanzee, attracted to a piece of fruit hanging high above it, uses a box to stand on so that it can reach the fruit. But the ape's first achievement does not guarantee further success. In future set-ups the animal recognizes the same box as an instrument only under similar favorable circumstances. If the situation has

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78 After Köhler, the behavioral sciences have of course further explored the differences between human and animal behavior, and the theoretical interpretation of these empirical results has also proceeded. Although it is certainly worthwhile to take notice of these developments, I will have to leave out this detour. For the latest scientific results and their theoretical interpretation, I refer to Michael Tomasello and Josep Call, *Primate Cognition*, to Tomasello's work in general, and to Hans-Peter Krüger, who in his *Gehirn, Verhalten und Zeit*, assesses Tomasello's view from a Plessnerian perspective.

changed because, for instance, another chimpanzee now sits on the box, the first no longer recognizes the thing as the same object with the same instrumental function: “the box-as-seat and the box-as-instrument are two distinct and alternative objects in the behavior of the chimpanzee and not two *aspects* of an identical *thing*.<sup>79</sup>

This lack of a “thing-structure” (*structure chose*)<sup>80</sup> in the world of the animal is linked to the way the animal relates to the body proper. In another experiment pieces of fruit are presented in a construction which allows the chimpanzee to reach the fruit only if it first pushes it away from its own body. The chimpanzee has difficulty fulfilling its task. In contrast, when the ape *itself* needs to make a detour to get to a piece of fruit, it has no trouble at all reaching its goal. Something similar happens when apes are stimulated to build a tower out of boxes. Although the animals are perfectly able to balance their own bodies, they often fail to build a stable tower out of these alien objects. The reason for this, says Merleau-Ponty, is that apes lack the symbolic function which human beings possess.

According to Merleau-Ponty, symbolic behavior pertains to the human ability to see structural relationships between entire “ensembles” of structures, such as different languages.<sup>81</sup> Not only can we perceive a thing or a situation as a symbol for another thing or situation, we are also flexible enough to play with these relationships. To us, the words of our language never have only one meaning and yet we have a grip on these words, because we can stabilize their meaning according to context. Animals can play with objects, but not with the structures between them; neither do they have the flexibility to vary the meanings of signals. Even if one signal can have different meanings in different contexts,<sup>82</sup> the individual animal has no role in determining the interaction between context and meaning.

As already noted, symbolic behavior is not limited to the use of language. Interestingly, its wider meaning includes the way we relate to the *objectivity of our body*. In his discussion of the chimpanzee experiments, Merleau-Ponty indeed interprets symbolic behavior in terms of the human ability, and the animal’s *lack* of such an ability, to regard oneself as an object: “What is really lacking in the animal is the symbolic behavior which it would have to possess in order to find an invariant in the external object, under the diversity of its aspects,

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79 Merleau-Ponty, *La structure du comportement*, 127/116.

80 Ibid., 129/119 (translation modified), 130/120.

81 See Section 4.1.

82 Cf. Tomasello and Call, *Primate Cognition*, 244-246.

comparable to the immediately given invariant of the body proper and in order to treat, reciprocally, its own body as an object among objects [*comme un objet parmi les objets*]. In the same manner the ape, which knows how to balance itself so well, that is, to re-establish the vertical position of its body by appropriate movements, does not succeed in balancing its constructions.”<sup>83</sup>

Merleau-Ponty compares the body proper to an object, suggesting that there is a degree of interchangeability between the body and the external thing: both can be in or out of balance. The chimpanzee is very well able to keep its own body in balance, but compared to this its ability to balance a tower of boxes is minor. The reason is that the animal is unable to realize, through a kind of pre-discursive reflexivity, a level of identification with the things surrounding it. Symbolic behavior here means that I regard my body as a symbol for the thing opposite me, and vice versa. I am not only at the center of the structural ensemble that is *my* situation but I can also put myself into the heart of the ensemble that is the *object*’s situation; I know what it means to be in the position of the object. The identification works both ways: we regard ourselves not only as subjects but also as objects, and we see the object as the “subject”.

Of course, the latter does not imply that the thing is to us literally a subject: it means that we regard *its* center as the center of the complicated movement we would make if we would be in its place. The best example of this is probably the piece of fruit that needs to be pushed away from the body before it becomes available. As just noted, the chimpanzee has trouble seeing the piece of fruit as the center of movement. What is the reason for this? “Why is the detour of the object not just as actual as the detour of the body proper? This is because, in animal behavior, the external object is not a thing in the sense that the body itself is—that is, a concrete unity capable of entering into a multiplicity of relations without losing itself.”<sup>84</sup> Whereas the body proper is to the animal a unity throughout all the movements it realizes, the thing opposite it does not possess the same stable identity. Consequently, the animal does not recognize the interchangeability of its own sensorimotor center and the “core”<sup>85</sup> of the thing. The thing-structure, i.e., the relation between the object’s core and its properties, is a precondition for this recognition. Only if the subject faces an object which does

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83 Merleau-Ponty, *La structure du comportement*, 128/118 (translation modified).

84 Ibid. (translation modified).

85 The word “core”, referring to the thing as the bearer of properties, is actually Husserlian and Plessnerian language; Merleau-Ponty instead uses the word “invariant”. It should be noted that the “core”, in this sense, is not literally the center within the objective space of the thing: it is the ground of its unity through its diverse aspects.

not lose its identity throughout a series of quite diverse, spatially and temporally scattered appearances, can this subject put itself in the place of the object and realize that it is itself also still a thing among other things.

When we compare this passage from *The Structure of Behavior* to the descriptions of self-perception in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, an important difference presents itself. We have seen that, in the *Phenomenology*, only a body *part* can be an object to us, because the body only becomes objective when it is the content of specific perceptions.<sup>86</sup> In *The Structure of Behavior*, the objectivity of the body proper is not discussed as the *content* of perception, but rather as an integrated moment of the *structure* of perception. To be more precise, our relationship to the objective body has the form of a preunderstanding which accompanies and transforms perception.<sup>87</sup> The invariant core of the thing is part of a structure, namely the relationship between the core itself and the thing's varying appearances. Likewise, the invariant of the body is not given *in* perception: it is there for us as part of the relationship between the properties given in proprioceptions, which express our sensorimotor possibilities, and the body itself as the center of these possibilities. The awareness of the body as an object among objects is based on the analogical structure between these two relationships of core (or center) and properties. The awareness of the objectivity of the body is not the result of any perception: it is *presupposed* in all perception and action. This pre-supposition renders possible that the body is to us a subject and an object at the same time, and it removes the restriction that only *parts* of the body can be objects to us.

I regard *The Structure of Behavior* as, in this respect, a more accurate account of our bodily being in the world than the *Phenomenology*. We can now better understand the example discussed in the previous section. Even if I do not notice that my arms occupy space because I keep my desk in order, I have an implicit awareness of the fact that they take up an amount of space in very much the same way as other objects on my desk do. This awareness is needed for my

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86 Note that something perceived, in Merleau-Ponty's view, is never a pure *content* within the *form* of perception: it is at the same time a modification of the flexible structure of perception, what Merleau-Ponty calls a "modulation" (Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 319/321, 491/499).

87 Some might be inclined to say that we should be able to analyze this awareness of the body proper in terms of a form (consciousness) and a content (the body as subject and object), but the distinction between form and content does not apply to an awareness which exists on the level of preunderstanding. Cf. Kelly (2002) on the difference between intentionality and motor intentionality.

sensorimotor functioning, because I know, for instance, that I cannot put my arms where there are other objects. The trivial nature of the example illustrates how basic this knowledge is. The comparison between humans and animals in *The Structure of Behavior* shows that the awareness of the objective body is presupposed in the successful carrying out of the sensorimotor tasks we face. Consequently, the body schema cannot be restricted to an awareness of the *subjective* body as the background of the perception of objects: it must include, or be complemented by, this awareness of the body proper as an object in phenomenal space. The knowledge I have of my body as a background of sensorimotor functioning must include both its subjective being directed at tasks and the objective aspect of the body.

We cannot reserve any zone in the subjective body which would not at the same time be a part of the objective body, as Merleau-Ponty suggests in the *Phenomenology*. If I stick my head through a hole in the fence and the hole turns out to be too small I get stuck. I, the subject, am then struggling with the size of my head, the object, in relation to the hole in the fence. The head shows its ambiguity precisely because it is both subject and object: it is *not* a zone of subjectivity which retreats from the objective periphery of the body. The comical character of the situation sits in the very break between the subjectivity of my body and its objective shape which makes my subjective efforts futile.<sup>88</sup>

Whereas the *Phenomenology of Perception* only allows for a basic awareness of the body as a subject (“*je connais la position de chacun de mes membres*”), *The Structure of Behavior* recognizes a fundamental ambiguity which distinguishes the body proper from any use-object it finds in the world: that it is both a subject and an object. However, something is lacking from *The Structure of Behavior*, too.

We are indeed arriving at a boundary of what we can understand on the basis of Merleau-Ponty’s view in either *The Structure of Behavior* or the *Phenomenology of Perception*. A basic awareness of the body proper as both an object and a subject is not only a new, “higher” structure: it implies that the lower structures are somehow *given* to someone who is at a distance from them. The ape is not aware of the interchangeability of subject and object. The margin of its engagement is too small to allow for such awareness. Human beings thus combine engagement with a degree of *disengagement*, which reveals the deeper structures of their being in the world to them, if only on the level of preunderstanding. This might be what Merleau-Ponty has in mind when he says that, con-

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88 The example illustrates that slapstick is inconceivable without this break between the subjective and the objective body.

trary to the ape, even a child is already able “to detach itself from the elementary structure” (*à se déprendre de la structure élémentaire*)<sup>89</sup> of the situation. It might also be what he means when he suggests that structures are “more available” (*plus disponibles*)<sup>90</sup> for the human being than for the animal.

However, Merleau-Ponty does not define this detachment, I mean this capacity to “se déprendre de la structure élémentaire”. Nor does he give a systematic account of the distance we need to have, the position in which we need to be, in order for structures to be “disponibles” to us. The principle of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is that behavior is a response to something meaningful to the subject, so that the question rises to whom these deeper structures—“la structure chose” and the body proper “comme objet parmi les objets”—are given. For whom are they real? They must be real for someone who is in a position at a (potential) remove from these structures. The fact that every new distance creates a new structure in itself (*an sich*) which is not yet for itself (*für sich*)<sup>91</sup> does not detract from this necessity, because we may assume that the human subject is at least at a remove from the analogy between his subjective situation and the situation of the object. He is at least so disengaged from the world that the body proper is to him both a subject and an object. From what position do we have this distance to our being a thing among things in the world and to our being open to that very same world?<sup>92</sup>

Incidentally, if we are able to find a systematic account of this position at a distance from our being in the world, an account which somehow does not erase our immediate *engagement* in that world, then this does not contradict but rather complements Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. The hypothesis of a structural distance we have from our bodily existence only makes it easier to give a place to some of Merleau-Ponty’s claims. This distance renders possible (a) that the thing constitutes a stable unity throughout a wide variety of appearances, (b) that we see this stable unity as in some sense interchangeable with the unity of our bod-

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89 Merleau-Ponty, *La structure du comportement*, 119/109.

90 Ibid., 130/120.

91 I am here not using “an sich” and “für sich” in the sense Merleau-Ponty uses “en soi” and “pour soi” because the latter terms precisely do not apply to the structure of behavior.

92 This question is inspired by Krüger, who argues that Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of time, in *Phénoménologie de la perception*, remains on the level of Plessner’s “centric positionality” (Krüger, *Zwischen Lachen und Weinen*, Volume II: *Der dritte Weg Philosophischer Anthropologie und die Geschlechterfrage*, 139-141). Plessner’s distinction between centric and eccentric positionality will be addressed below.

ies, so that we can make the thing move as if it were a subject, and the subject reveals itself to be still also a thing. We would be able to understand that, as humans, we are engaged in the world and at the same time at a remove from it, so that the world's deeper structures are given to us, as well as the ambiguous nature of the body itself.

Of course, the distance we have to our bodies should not be understood as a pure mind or *res cogitans*. Therefore, the second question this account would need to answer is: how is this disengaged position *embodied* by us? The mind-body problem which guides our explorations necessitates this question. Sticking with the terminology in which this problem is stated we can say that humans have a different kind of “mind” than animals. If we want to avoid a dualism of body and mind, then we have to accept that all forms of mind must be realized in some form of embodiment. We cannot escape this task by restricting ourselves to a defense of embodied subjectivity because animals are also embodied subjects. But animals do not have a distance to this subjectivity or to the objectivity of their own bodies. Both human beings and animals have bodies which possess a subjective and an objective aspect, but in *what form of embodiment* is the typically human disengagement from these aspects realized? Otherwise put: granted that animal subjectivity is our starting point, how does human disengagement transform our concept of embodied being in the world?

I have not been able to find an answer to these questions in *The Structure of Behavior*. The *Phenomenology of Perception* will not bring us further either. As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty in this work emphasizes that the body proper is a sensorimotor subject. One of its main aims is to overcome “intellectualism” not by rethinking the relationship between disengagement and engagement, but by rediscovering only our *engagement* in the world.<sup>93</sup> More importantly, according to this work only parts of the body can become the objective content of perception. The whole body as “an object among all others”<sup>94</sup> (i.e. all other *objects*) only occurs in its negative, reductionistic meaning. But the objectivity of the entire body is the dialectical presupposition of the kind of disengagement or distance we are trying to grasp. So we cannot expect to find in the *Phenomenology* an elaboration of the kind of awareness of the body proper that we find in *The Structure of Behavior*.

If one would nonetheless want to find a more elaborate account of the ability “to detach” oneself “from the elementary structure” of a situation, two no-

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93 Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, ix/xvi, 97/94, 253/254, 324/326-327, 358/361-362, 382/386.

94 Ibid., 68/64.

tions can be considered. The first is the human being's personal existence in contrast with his prepersonal existence and the second is the cogito. However, personal existence needs to be interpreted in relation to both the natural and the habitual body, not to the subjective and the objective body. This approach is not false, it is simply not the approach that we are looking for. How about the cogito, then? The cogito is fundamentally understood as "the simultaneous contact with my own being and with the world's being."<sup>95</sup> In other words, the cogito is an immediate relationship both with myself (as prepersonal and personal *subject*) and with the world I am thus *subjectively* open to. There is much more to say about these concepts, but we can conclude that they do not answer the question which ensues from *The Structure of Behavior*: what is the nature of our position so that (a) the thing shows thing-structure and (b) our bodies are to ourselves immediately both subjects open to the world, and things among other things, placed in that very same world?

Merleau-Ponty's later work does not address this issue either. I will restrict myself to a remark on *The Visible and the Invisible*. In this work, Merleau-Ponty again addresses the issue of the subjectivity and objectivity of the body. Is the objectivity of the body here perhaps restricted to body *parts*, as it is in the *Phenomenology of Perception*? This may seem to be the case when Merleau-Ponty returns to the example of the hand which both feels and is felt. Merleau-Ponty's question is how tactile perception is possible. "This can happen only if my hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible, for my other hand, for example, if it takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of them, opens finally upon a tangible being of which it is also a part."<sup>96</sup> However, after exploring how touch and vision are intertwined, Merleau-Ponty continues: "Hence, without even entering into the implications proper to the seer and the visible, we know that, since vision is a palpation with the look, it must also be inscribed in the order of being that it discloses to us; he who looks must not himself be foreign to the world that he looks at."<sup>97</sup> So although Merleau-Ponty initially formulates his main argument by referring to the hand which can become a perceived object to me, in the end he works towards the conclusion that the whole body belongs both "to the order of the 'object' and to the order of the 'subject'".<sup>98</sup>

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95 Ibid., 432/438-439.

96 Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, 174/133.

97 Ibid., 175/134.

98 Ibid., 178/137.

As I remarked in Section 4.1, it is not clear to me why the apparently indispensible terms “subject” and “object” need to be put in quotation marks. After all, it is clear from the context that Merleau-Ponty does not defend a subject/object-opposition, but rather addresses the ambiguous relationship between a subjective and an objective aspect. But this is now not the main point. We should first observe that Merleau-Ponty’s view here has something in common with the view in *The Structure of Behavior*: the whole body is regarded as part of the order of the objective, as a thing among other things. This is now explained in a different way which may or may not be compatible with *The Structure of Behavior*, but I will leave these differences aside. The question I want to focus on is: why does Merleau-Ponty neglect the fact that the “subjective” and the “objective” order are, in their ambiguity, also *given* or at least *sensed* by human beings, which presupposes that human existence possesses a dimension which transcends the subjective and the objective? Merleau-Ponty argues that, in order for us to be able to perceive the world, our bodies must already be part of that same world. They must belong to “the order of things” (*l’ordre des choses*),<sup>99</sup> which then leads to the description of this order as “universal flesh” (*chair universelle*).<sup>100</sup> We can observe that, although *The Visible and the Invisible* in some respects differs from both *The Structure of Behavior* and the *Phenomenology*, there is one important similarity: Merleau-Ponty fails to describe the position from which we are aware of the two orders, that of the subject and that of the object. Nor does he describe how this position at a remove from our subjectivity and objectivity transforms our bodily existence.

Of course, the question of how the *world* is given in perception is addressed. “For if the body is a thing among things, it is so in a stronger and deeper sense than they: in the sense that, we said, it *is of them*, and this means that it detaches itself upon them, and, accordingly, detaches itself from them.”<sup>101</sup> This detachment renders possible that the human body “concentrates the mystery”<sup>102</sup> of visibility, i.e., that it is a “subject”. Since we are reading the word “detachment” here we might expect to find an answer to our question. But the problem is that this kind of detachment is rather a detachment “of the first kind” which only constitutes subjectivity.

Let me explain what I mean by this. Merleau-Ponty should agree that the animal, too, belongs to the order of the subject and to that of the object, because

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99 Ibid., 179/137.

100 Ibid.

101 Ibid.

102 Ibid.

it, too, can *perceive* the world only on condition that its body fundamentally *belongs* to that world. And yet, human beings alone emphatically *live* this ambiguity. We humans can both sense, and reflect upon, the *ambiguous sphere* which is constituted by the “intertwining” (*entrelacs*)<sup>103</sup> of the objective order and the subjective order. The animal has no sense for the mystery of the visible. Only to us the perceivable is both something given and something which intrigues us. This is so because we are not only detached from the order of things, not only subjects, but also detached from this detachment, that is: from our subjectivity *itself*.

## 4.5 THE SENSE OF THE NEGATIVE

The question regarding the nature of human disengagement evoked by Merleau-Ponty’s *The Structure of Behavior* thus remains open. I think that we need to look for an answer outside Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, and that, to be more precise, Helmuth Plessner can complement his view at this point. Some time before Merleau-Ponty, he formulated the structure of our being in the world in terms which are very similar to Merleau-Ponty’s. For example, the intertwining (*entrelacs*) mentioned above is not exactly the same as, but quite similar to Plessner’s “interlacing” (*Verschränkung*)<sup>104</sup> of the subjective and the objective order. Plessner also discusses Köhler’s experiments with animals, specifically chimpanzees, and like Merleau-Ponty, Plessner interprets these experiments against the backdrop of Husserl’s phenomenology, so that he too arrives at a description of the limitations of animal behavior in terms of the structure of the thing, which is hidden from animals. I will conclude this chapter by presenting a few crucial points from Plessner’s interpretation of Köhler. This is a bridge to the next chapter, where I present a more thorough account of Plessner’s conception of being in the world.

On the basis of Köhler’s experiments, Plessner argues that the animal’s environment constitutes a field with a *gestalthaft* and sometimes complex character. For *higher* animals, the latter means that they are able to make detours to reach a goal, as in the examples discussed in the previous section. The animal has a certain degree of insight in the structure of the field. It recognizes similarities between different objects or situations, but these similarities belong, as it were, to the surface of the appearance. In fact, there is nothing *but* a surface of

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103 Ibid., 180/138.

104 Plessner, *Lachen und Weinen*, 240/36.

appearances, because, in Plessner's view, the animal has no sense of the existence-in-itself, i.e., of the surplus of possible ways in which the thing can appear. There is here no distance between the appearance of the thing and the thing in-itself as the "source" of the appearance. In this sense, there are no "genuine things" (*echte Dinge*) for the animal;<sup>105</sup> there here is no real "objectivity" (*Gegenständlichkeit*).<sup>106</sup>

Likewise, there is for the animal no distance, no gap, between the particularity and the generality of what is given in perception. This does not mean that there is no relationship at all between the particular and the general: the animal sees in the *particular* things surrounding it immediately the *general* correlate of its own needs and playful interests. However, the field is only given as a direct answer to these needs and interests, and the animal's insight in the field enables it to make detours, but not to recognize the general structures *as such* that govern its behavior. In other words, the general is for the animal not present as separate from the concreteness of the situation.

In human beings this is different, in two ways:

(1) The human being regards the thing not only as a structural moment of the field, which together with the other moments constitutes the totality of the field including its meanings, but precisely also as detachable from this context, as a thing with a proper existence and an unlimited reserve of possible appearances (albeit restricted by its nature as *this* thing). The thing "appears as a unity of properties organized around a core",<sup>107</sup> and always some part of all properties is hidden. This duality of givenness and hiddenness constitutes true objectivity (*Gegenständlichkeit*), which defines the structure of the human world.

(2) As regards the general/particular-distinction, it is quite common to ascribe to the human being the ability to think and develop concepts, but Plessner points out that these capacities are founded on something which precedes conceptualization. They are founded on a high level of reflexivity *inherent to perception*: "In order to subordinate the structure of a thing, for example, to the conceptual unity of the 'ladder', one first needs to grasp the prelinguistic, schematically intuitable 'ladder-ness' as the pure gestalt which can correspond to a thousand variations."<sup>108</sup> Drawing on Kant, Plessner in this contexts speaks of "schemata" to designate a special, general kind of "Gestalt".<sup>109</sup> The schema is an

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., *Stufen*, 270/340.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 270/341.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 81/128.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 273/344.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 273/344.

“emptiness” (*Lehre*), a general “framework” (*Rahmen*), according to which the world of perception is automatically organized.<sup>110</sup> According to my interpretation, the schema is a unity of essence indicating characteristics (*indikatorische Wesensmerkmale*),<sup>111</sup> i.e., properties which are indicative of a certain essence or category. A multitude of particular gestalts, in this case ladders of different materials, shapes and colors, are still in accordance with the general schema “ladder”. The “framework” not only refers to this general, perceivable gestalt, but also to the correlating category “ladder” as the object with this specific essential function.<sup>112</sup> In contrast to animal experience, human experience is structured by the gap between, on the one hand, the general category (and its schema) and the particular thing here-and-now.

How are (1) and (2) interconnected? There is indeed an intrinsic relationship between the structure of the genuine thing and the gap between the particular and the general. The example of the “box-as-seat and the box-as-instrument” from the previous section shows that there is one thing “underneath” these different categorial appearances, which also means: that different categories (here: seat and instrument to stand on) apply to an object which is to us, but not to the animal, *one and the same thing*. So the fact that the human can recognize one individual thing throughout a range of very diverse appearances (even in different times and places) *and* the fact that he can recognize the thing as one of many instances of the *general* category “ladder”, “box”, “rope”, and so forth, are *both* founded on the transcendence of the thing with regard to its appearance, i.e., its proper, stable reality as the bearer of a multitude of properties only some of which are given at any moment in time.

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110 Ibid.

111 Ibid., 115/168.

112 It seems hard to intuit “ladder-ness” without imagining a concrete, perceivable ladder. But we are dealing with levels of experience with different degrees of independence from empirical perception. The empirical properties of any concrete ladder are the least independent from perception. The set of general characteristics of the ladder, i.e. its typical form, mediates its perceptual recognition as a *ladder*. This typical form is gestalhaft but it cannot be pinned down in terms of very specific qualities. Imagination often dwells on this “general perception” level. Finally, the logic of the function of the ladder, and what is implied in it (e.g. physical object, use-object, the human ability to climb), is the level of experience which is most independent from specific empirical qualities. It allows us to accept a-typical objects (e.g. a box or table) as a ladder and also to use the word “ladder” metaphorically.

This is all roughly in accordance with Merleau-Ponty, but there are two major differences between Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Köhler and Plessner's. Contrary to Merleau-Ponty, Plessner emphasizes that the objectivity of the thing over against the subject is imbued with *negativity*: the surplus of possible appearances and the thing in-itself as the carrier of its properties and source of its appearances are all “negative” in the sense that they go beyond the superficially given appearance. Therefore, they are hidden from a sensorimotor perception which only recognizes what correlates with its abilities, its needs, and its playful interests. Plessner indeed argues that the absence of a genuine thing, of real *Gegenständlichkeit*—Merleau-Ponty's *structure chose*—from the animal world, is due to the animal lacking “the sense of the negative” (“der Sinn fürs Negative”).<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, the schematically present category which governs perception and which forms the basis for explicit reflection, reasoning and so forth, is an *empty* category and precisely for this reason it is meaningless—that is: non-existent—for the animal. In the field of the animal there can be no distance between the concrete and the general because recognizing this distance presupposes the sense of the negative which is typical of human beings: “Genuine individuality and genuine generality . . . are based on the presupposition that consciousness is able to grasp the negative as such, the lack of something, the deficiency, the emptiness.”<sup>114</sup>

There is in this respect a second difference between Merleau-Ponty and Plessner. When we focus on the structure of the thing and on the relationship between the particular and the general, we explain negativity only in terms of the structure of the things given to us, i.e., the way in which our world is organized so that it is indeed a genuine *world*. But the main possibility condition for the structure of the world is the manner in which the human being, as a body, takes his *place* in that world. This condition is what Plessner calls the human being's *form of positionality*.

As we will see in the next chapter, the crux of everything that distinguishes a human being from an animal is that the human has a different form of positionality. The negativity inherent to the human environment, its inner discontinuities and its transcendence, is due to the gap between the two modes of our being in the world which we have been discussing: subjectivity and objectivity. According to Plessner, our being in the world is therefore characterized not by a twofold but by a threefold structure. Firstly, we are in the world in the sense of part of the world of things: our bodies are things among things within phenome-

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113 Ibid., 270/340. I removed the italics.

114 Ibid., 276/347.

nal space. This is the objectivity of our bodily existence. Secondly, we are in the world in the sense of open to the world: we are a center of convergence of world experience—this is the subjective aspect of our bodily being in the world. So far, Plessner's view is quite similar to Merleau-Ponty's. But thirdly, according to Plessner, we are also at a distance to both the objectivity and the subjectivity of the body: this distance is what makes us different from animals. Whereas animals are “centrally positioned”, human beings are “eccentrically positioned”.

This triple structure defines Plessner's concept of personhood. Consequently, the person is not the same as the subject: it is the person who is aware of, and mediates between, his being objectively part of the world and his subjective openness to the world. I argue that we need this concept of eccentric positionality in order to understand the structure of the thing, and also—for our purposes even more importantly—in order to understand that we are to ourselves both subjects and things among other things. Before I turn to this, let me shortly recapitulate this chapter.

In Section 4.1 I addressed Merleau-Ponty's view, in *The Structure of Behavior*, on the relationship between subjective experience and the scientific objectification of the body. I agreed with Merleau-Ponty's critique of materialism (i.e., classical theory and gestalt theory): being in the world cannot be reduced to a set of causal events, even if the set of events concerned constitutes a system which is more than the sum of its parts. My interpretation of *The Structure of Behavior* led to the conclusion that science constitutes a secondary perspective in regard to first-person experience. It also clarified what generally motivates us to shift from the first- to the third-person perspective: we make this shift whenever we seek healing or technical enhancement of our functioning. We make a detour, via the objective body, back to our first-person perspective, because only from this personal point of view can we value and enjoy our restored or enhanced being in the world. In Section 4.2 I presented a number of examples to illustrate this point, and to demonstrate the difference between arbitrary and necessary shifts of perspective.

In Section 4.3 I explored in what way we are an objective body, not to science, but to ourselves as first persons. I began with a discussion of the *perception* of the body proper according to the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Merleau-Ponty on the one hand leans to the view that our body cannot be an object *at all* to us, since the body is first and foremost a subject open to a world; on the other hand he allows that *parts* of the body proper can be an object to me. We found a broader outlook in *The Structure of Behavior*: an *awareness* of the body proper is more fundamental than specific perceptions of it (Section 4.4). The subject not only perceives parts of his body as objects: his whole body is to himself both a

sensorimotor subject and “an object among objects”. The body schema turned out to be one-sided because it only incorporates our awareness of the body proper as a subject open to a world, not, in addition, as an object placed *in* the world.

We learn from *The Structure of Behavior* that a critique of materialism does not necessarily lead to the position that our bodies have no objective aspect at all. We can resist materialism and still say that the body is, besides a subject, also an object in the world. It is important to note that neither the body part in the *Phenomenology* nor the “object among objects” in *The Structure of Behavior*, is an object as seen from a scientific perspective. The body part is perceived as integrated in the phenomenal world and the ability to treat one’s own body (or a body part) as an object among objects is constitutive of the inner structure of first-person human experience. The difference between a phenomenal object and a physical object will be discussed in Chapter 6. Only then can we address the questions, firstly, in what sense our bodies are part of physical reality; secondly, how physical realism and phenomenal realism are reconcilable; and thirdly, how science connects with the prescientific experience of the objective body.

Merleau-Ponty’s view raises an important question: from what position is the subject at a distance from the structure of the thing and from the double character (subject and object) of the body proper? From what position is she immediately aware of the analogy between the situation of her own body and the situation of the thing facing her? Neither the *Phenomenology* nor *The Visible and the Invisible* answers this question.

In the current section I have introduced the thought that will be elaborated in the next chapter. Plessner’s concept of being in the world is quite similar to Merleau-Ponty’s. Plessner also analyzes our bodily being in the world in terms of the subjectivity and the objectivity of the body proper. In addition, Plessner complements Merleau-Ponty because he presents a systematic account of our structural disengagement; he describes elaborately the position from which we are at a distance to both the subjectivity and the objectivity of the body.



# Chapter 5

## Plessner's Philosophy of Eccentric Positionality

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### 5.1 FORM OF POSITIONALITY AND FORM OF ORGANIZATION OF PLANTS AND ANIMALS

On the basis of Merleau-Ponty it is hard to understand what form of embodiment renders possible that we have a certain disengagement with regard to our own body as both subject and object. Symbolic behavior allows us to establish a “structure of structures”,<sup>1</sup> but what is the structure of the human being’s distance as such to these structures and meta-structures? What kind of embodiment is required in order that an entity coincides with its being in the world *and* is at the same time disengaged from it?

We have seen that Merleau-Ponty’s *La structure du comportement* (1942) situates human existence in relation to nature as a coherent unity of lower and higher structures. Within Plessner’s oeuvre, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* (1928) fulfills a similar role. In the current chapter I argue that the central concept of this work, “eccentric positionality” (*exzentrische Positionalität*), answers the questions we are facing. It is from our eccentric position that we relate to both the subjective and the objective aspect of our being in the world. Plessner bases his philosophical anthropology on a philosophy of organic life, which in turn departs from an account of the difference between living and non-living things. I will first introduce Plessner’s view of nature and then his concept of eccentric positionality.

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1 Merleau-Ponty, *La structure du comportement*, 133/122.

According to Plessner, the criterion for the distinction between the animate and the inanimate has to do with the *boundary* (*Grenze*) between a thing and the medium in which it is placed. In the case of non-living things, the boundary between the thing and what is external to it belongs neither to the thing nor to the medium. The boundary is simply the transition from one matter into another. It does not exist as such and, in this sense, it is “virtual”.<sup>2</sup> In living things this is different. Here, the boundary is “real” because it belongs to the thing itself: “The boundary really belongs to the body, which as a consequence not only . . . guarantees, at its contours, the transition to the contiguous medium but rather *carries through* this limitation and *is* this transition.”<sup>3</sup>

Insofar as living things are concerned, the boundary belongs to the thing itself because, in contrast with non-living entities, living beings themselves *realize* their boundary to the medium. The medium, thus specified in relation to the living thing, is called the “surrounding field” (*Umfeld*). The living thing is dependent on this surrounding field, for instance on the substances available in it, but this dependency does not detract from the organism’s “autonomy” (*Selbständigkeit*).<sup>4</sup> Autonomy and dependence are here not mutually exclusive. The living thing’s own organization is the *mode* of its dependence on what is other to it. Since living things realize their boundary to the surrounding field, they *take* the place which is given to them. This Plessner calls “positionality”. Positionality is the essential property of all life.

At this point an epistemological problem presents itself. Positionality is not a directly visible or audible feature. We do not literally perceive this essential property. But we do immediately recognize living things around us, which in Plessner’s view means that we see beings which possess the essential property of positionality. This is where “essence indicating characteristics” (*indikatorische Wesensmerkmale*)<sup>5</sup> come into the picture. These features play a mediating role in making the essence perceptible: they indicate the essence of the being we are faced with. It is usually not one but a combination of such characteristics that enables us to recognize a thing as living.

I restrict myself to two such characteristics discussed by Plessner. The first is “plasticity” (*Plastizität*)<sup>6</sup>: all living things can be stretched, pushed together or bended. This plasticity shows itself more concretely in development, growth, re-

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2 Plessner, *Stufen*, 103/154

3 Ibid. (I have added extra italics to increase readability).

4 Ibid., XX/30 and 104/155.

5 Ibid., 115/168.

6 Ibid., 124/178.

generation, and movement which are essential to all life. Secondly, all living things show the characteristic of “regular irregularity” (*regelmäßige Unregelmäßigkeit*).<sup>7</sup> Plessner refers to Buytendijk’s illustration of the principle at hand. Buytendijk observes that, if we subsequently look at the contours of a circle, an ellipse, an egg, and a lime leaf, we attain an increasingly strong impression of life. The reason we regard the contour of a lime leaf as more alive than, e.g., the ellipse, is that the degree of irregularity increases, although the appearance of a kind of regularity and organization of the gestalt remains intact. Plessner refers to this as an example of a *static* expression of regular irregularity. Dynamically, we encounter the principle of regular irregularity in the *rhythms* characteristic of various expressions of life. The organism’s attunement to day and night or to the change of seasons does not follow a mechanical pattern: it is determined by a periodization, i.e. by regularity, but at the same time by a certain irregularity.

The properties mentioned in the previous paragraph do not belong to the essence of living things (positionality or autonomous realization of the boundary), but they are not merely coincidental properties either.<sup>8</sup> They are essence indicating characteristics. They indicate whether we are dealing with a thing which possesses its own boundary and thus has positionality, or with a thing which does not possess its boundary and does not emphatically take the place which it happens to have. Plessner also calls these characteristics “empirical characteristics of the essence” (*empirische Wesensmerkmale*).<sup>9</sup> By “empirical”, Plessner does not mean that these properties show themselves only to empirical science, but rather that they are a relatively contingent, *a posteriori* given of perception. However, because at the same time they indicate the inner essence of the thing which appears, essence indicating characteristics constitute the divide between what is *a posteriori* and what is *a priori*, i.e., between what is contingently given in perception and the *a priori* category of being which shows itself in and through that appearance. In addition, it is important to note that the term “*a priori*” has a double meaning here. *A priori* conditions on the one hand constitute a framework for experience, and on the other hand they constitute the mode of being (life, positionality) of the thing that we encounter in the world. They define

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7 Ibid.

8 For this reason Plessner’s choice of the term *indikatorische Wesensmerkmale* is less than perfect, because it suggests that they are univocally characteristics which belong to the essence of the thing. Better would have been *wesensindikatorische Merkmale*. Accordingly I have translated the term into “essence indicating characteristics”.

9 Ibid., 117/170.

the ground structure of the being over against us and our relationship to it, which adjusts to its structure.<sup>10</sup>

It might be objected that Plessner's account does not do justice to the immediate nature of our recognition of living things. Essence indicating characteristics seem to stand in between the perceiving subject and the object, so that the subject would have to infer the essence from the appearance. But we can remove this objection by appealing to Plessner's concept of "mediated immediacy" (*vermittelte Unmittelbarkeit*).<sup>11</sup> Our intuition of something living as opposed to something inanimate is immediate in the sense that we do not actively have to do anything to know that we are dealing with something living, but nonetheless this recognition is mediated by the perception of certain characteristics which all living entities share.

The explanation for this is that, when we learn categories, the relationship between indicating characteristics and essences sediments into habits. It becomes part of our familiarity with the world. In virtue of this familiarity we immediately recognize something as alive through its appearance.<sup>12</sup> Essence indicating characteristics are the "appearances of another sphere of being".<sup>13</sup> We see life in the plasticity and regular irregularity of the gestalt facing us. The relationship between indicating characteristics and the essence is, as it were, compressed into one single presence. The relationship itself can again come to the fore when we are not sure whether we are dealing with a living or a non-living thing. At first the flower on the table of the restaurant looks real, but then we get suspicious. On closer observation of its characteristics we decide that it is not a real flower after all. Only if we do not know for sure what category of being we are dealing with does the relationship itself as it were unfold and does the distance between the empirical characteristics and the essence which they (seem to) indicate make itself felt.

Before I turn to the different levels of the organic in Plessner, I want to point out an important difference between Plessner and Merleau-Ponty. Interest-

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10 See also my explanation of Plessner's concept of categories in Section 2.1.

11 Plessner, *Stufen*, 48-49/90. The principle is here still formulated hypothetically. To my knowledge, Plessner does not explicitly apply it to the relationship between essence indicating characteristics and essences. Below we will see how Plessner applies it in his analysis of the different forms of life.

12 In fact, we unlearn to see non-living things as personal, living things, Plessner says, because the starting point of experience is the assumption that our world is animated: *ibid.*, 301/374.

13 *Ibid.*, 117-118/170.

ingly, both have developed their views partly in response to Köhler's gestalt theory. On the one hand, they agree with Köhler that physical systems are more than the sum of their parts and they accept the term "gestalt" for such systems. On the other hand, both Plessner and Merleau-Ponty criticize Köhler for not recognizing the distinction between physical systems and organisms.

As we saw in Section 4.1, Merleau-Ponty wants to go beyond Köhler's theory of physical systems by showing that animal behavior is not an effect of a cause in the external world, but a response of the organism to a situation. Stimuli constitute a vital signification for the animal itself; they are not causes but rather occasions for the animal to respond in a certain way. Merleau-Ponty defines "life" immediately in terms of "behavior". This makes it extremely hard to give plant life a place within one's philosophy of life, and, indeed, *The Structure of Behavior* simply ignores plant life.

Plessner's view does not have this shortcoming. Plessner criticizes Köhler by connecting with Hans Driesch's objection to Köhler's view. According to Driesch, the unity of the parts of the organism does not depend merely on the co-incidental location within the "topography" of the parts, as Köhler assumes. Contrary to the physical system, the organism is an *essential* unity.<sup>14</sup> Driesch calls this kind of unity a "whole" (*Ganzheit*).<sup>15</sup> Plessner adopts this distinction between gestalt and whole, but he does not accept Driesch's vitalistic concept of an *entelechy*, instead founding the wholeness of the organism on the principle of autonomous boundary realization, as described above.

In Plessner's view, there are basically three levels of living things: plants, animals and human beings.<sup>16</sup> On each of these levels, positionality is realized in

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14 Ibid., 95/144.

15 Ibid., 94/144.

16 Although more differentiated than Merleau-Ponty's view in *The Structure of Behavior*, this division still raises important questions. Since Plessner simply speaks of plants, where does he leave fungi and unicellular organisms? As a biologist, Plessner is aware of the rich diversity of existing life forms. At least one passage (*Stufen*, 235/301), implies that, according to Plessner, fungi have the same kind of positionality as plants. As regards life on a microscale, Plessner's phenomenological perspective leads him to start rather from life forms which we are familiar with because they exist at the same scale as we, human beings, do. Nonetheless, Plessner also discusses microorganisms, some of which, viz. viruses, are not organisms in the full sense but borderline cases which require careful examination: *ibid.*, 356-359/435-439. It is important to note that Plessner's view of life, notably in the *Stufen*, is much more detailed and differentiated than I can represent here.

a different way. On the level of vegetable life, positionality is realized in the passive mode of simply *being* organized. The parts of the plant are organs, whose function refers to the organism as a whole and its vital needs. In this way the whole is mediated through the parts. This internal mediation renders possible the *immediate* integration of the organism into what is other to itself. To make this more concrete: the plant's outer surfaces are open to substances and energy from the surrounding field, and the plant is thus liable to the chemical-physical forces which are part of its biocycle (*Lebenskreis*). The plant does not exert these forces itself, but it *does* organize them, or better put: it *is* the organization which gives these forces an aim beyond the realm of the physical-chemical, viz. its own life and the life of the species. Insofar as the plant is subject to the forces of the surrounding field, this relationship is an *immediate* one. Insofar as the forces receive a function through the plant's internal organization, the relationship is at the same time *mediated* by that organization. This going together of mediation and immediacy is an instantiation of the principle of "mediated immediacy" mentioned above. It recurs in different forms on all levels of the organic.

Some passages in the *Stufen* seem to suggest that the plant is only characterized by immediacy and not at the same time by mediacy. Plessner says: "Open is that form [of organization], which *immediately* integrates the organism, in all its expressions of life, into its environment and makes it a heteronomous part of the biocycle which corresponds with it."<sup>17</sup> This creates the impression that plant life is not characterized by mediation but only by an immediate relationship to the environment—period. It is true that Plessner in his discussion of plant life emphasizes the directness of the relationship to the medium and that, in his discussion of animal life, he emphasizes the indirect character of the relationship to the environment. But Plessner recognizes that, on a more fundamental level, mediation and immediacy always go together: "The above analyses were meant to make clear that the living as such possesses the structure of mediated immediacy. This structure arises from the nature of the boundary posited as real."<sup>18</sup> This also means that, since any form of organization is the organism's "compromise" between autonomy and heteronomy, the description of plants as "heteronomous" should not be taken as absolute. The plant's form of organiza-

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17 Ibid., 219/284 (italics mine).

18 Ibid., 324/400. Cf. ibid., 260/329, where Plessner speaks of "[t]his peculiar relationship of an indirect directness, a mediated immediacy between organism and world . . . which is in the deepest sense founded on the ontic structure of life".

tion is heteronomous not in absolute terms, but compared to the form of organization that belongs to the animal.

Before I turn to the form of positionality of the animal and show how the principle of mediated immediacy is specified there, let me remark on Plessner's terminology. There is a subtle but important difference between the terms "form of organization" and "form of positionality". The form of organization defines the relationship between the whole and the parts (the organs) of the objective-organic body, and, in addition, the relative openness or closedness of the body to the medium. In other words, the form of organization is the "answer" of the organism to the problem that, on the one hand, it needs to be open in order to sustain itself, and on the other hand, it needs to be closed in order to protect the integrity of its body.<sup>19</sup> The form of *positionality* of the plant is tightly interconnected with this form of organization but it is not the same thing. "Positionality" designates the level of ideality realized in this real being, and the specific *mode* in which the organism, in virtue of this ideality, occupies its position in relation to the environment. Whereas the form of organization pertains to the objective-organic body, the form of positionality pertains to the question of whether subjectivity is realized in the living thing and, if it is realized, in what form: centric or eccentric. The mode of positionality which corresponds with the plant's form of organization can be defined as passive and as lacking subjectivity, i.e., lacking a sensorimotor center.

This characterization already implies the comparison with animal life, so let us indeed turn to the animal. I will first focus on its form of positionality, and then remark on the form of organization which makes this form of positionality possible. On the level of animals, the principle of mediated immediacy returns in a different form than in vegetable life.<sup>20</sup> The animal has an *active* mode of realizing the boundary between itself and the medium—which is then called its "environment" (*Umwelt*).<sup>21</sup> Animals have "centric"<sup>22</sup> positionality: they live from and

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19 Ibid., 218-219/283.

20 I restrict myself to Plessner's account of *higher* animals.

21 So Plessner distinguishes between "medium" (*Medium*), a term that is applicable to both the non-living and the living thing, "surrounding field" (*Umfeld*), applicable only to the living, "environment" (*Umwelt*), applicable only to animals and human beings, and, as we will see, "world" (*Welt*), applicable only to human beings. The word "surroundings" (*Umgebung*) Plessner uses quite freely in different situations. As regard the other terms, Plessner is not always consistent. Cf., e.g., *ibid.*, 201/264, where Plessner speaks of the environment (*Umwelt*) in relation to the organism in general, regardless of the question whether it concerns a plant or an animal: "between organ-

towards an ideal center of perception and action. According to Plessner, animals *are* their body and *have* their body. They “have” their body in the sense that they use the body to fulfill their needs. The animal’s body is both a subject and an object. This structure renders possible that the animal uses its body as an instrument.

We have to be careful about how we understand this. According to Plessner, the relationship between the subjectivity and the objectivity of the body is “interlaced” (*verschränkt*). The word interlacement (*Verschränkung*), in Plessner, means that two aspects are fundamentally different—Plessner says: “divergent”<sup>23</sup>—and yet inextricably intertwined.<sup>24</sup> In the case of the animal this means: the body-as-subject differs essentially from the body-as-object but both aspects belong to one and the same body, and one aspect is unthinkable without the other—unless we give up altogether the phenomenon of the animal.

This mutual determination between aspects has a dialectical structure. The body *used* by the animal to perceive or perform an action is always at the same time the body that the animal *is*: an organic unity with a sensorimotor relationship to the surrounding field. The body that the animal uses is an “object”, but it is not a non-living thing. Its objectivity is of a higher order than that: the objective body is “already” an organism. Only an objective-*organic* body can be wounded, grows, grows old, dies. This should determine our reading of the word “instrument”. According to Plessner, the animal indeed uses its body as an instrument but, of course, this is not to be taken in the sense of the man-made tool. The body is a “thing” but not an inanimate thing. The relationship between subjective body and objective body comes to expression when we say, for instance, that an animal “turns *its* body around”, “licks *its* wounds”, or “throws *itself* on a prey”. The animal has a reflexive relationship to itself. It has “ein Sich”, Plessner says: “an *itself*”<sup>25</sup>

According to Plessner, the animal realizes its relationship to the environment *through* its body. There is an inhibited transition from perception to action,

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ism and environment”. And *ibid.*, 260/329 (quoted in footnote 4 above): “between organism and world”, where “organism” refers to all levels of living being.

22 *Ibid.*, 291/364.

23 *Ibid.*, 80/127 and *passim*. This is in accordance with the general meaning of *Verschränkung* in science and philosophy. Cf. Steizinger: *Verschränkung* is “the connection of heterogeneous spheres” (“*Verschränkung. Exempel und Paradigma interdisziplinairer Begriffsgeschichte*”, 123).

24 Cf. Ingerslev, “My Body as Object: Self-Distance and Social Experience”, 165.

25 Plessner, *Stufen*, 288/360.

which gives the animal a certain play of responses to a situation. Animals thus have a certain distance to the objects of need-fulfillment, which shows itself clearly in hoarding or altruistic behavior but also in the search for, and finding of, solutions to simple practical problems like those described in the previous chapter. This is the way *mediation* comes in. But the animal lacks the “sense of the negative”. Consequently, it has no intuition of the ambiguity of immanence and transcendence of the things surrounding it. It cannot call into question the way in which a thing appears to it and it does not regard the appearance as one among many appearances (or meanings, or functions, etc.), presenting themselves over a period of time, of one and the same object.<sup>26</sup> The reason of this limitation is that the animal cannot distance itself from its relationship to the environment. “Inasmuch as the animal is itself, it is absorbed in the here and now.”<sup>27</sup> In this sense its relationship to the surroundings is, although mediated, at the same time an immediate one.

Insofar as the animal *has* its body, it not only realizes itself as a subject but it also relates to the thingness of the body. Does this imply that the animal is at a distance to the body-as-subject and to the body-as-object? And if so, does this not undercut the presupposition of my reading of both Plessner and Merleau-Ponty, according to which only human beings have a distance to the subjectivity and the objectivity of their bodies? It is true that, in Plessner's view, the animal *is* its subjective body and *uses* its objective body, but this only implies a distance to the objective body. It does not imply that the animal is also at a distance to itself as a body-subject. In Plessner's view, the animal does not have this distance from itself. There is, *for* the animal, no interspace and therefore no emphatic mediation between the two aspects. For this reason, Plessner in regard to the animal speaks of an “oscillation” (*Oszillation*)<sup>28</sup> between being the body and having the body.

Being the body and having it from a sensorimotor center characterizes the positionality of animals. But what form of *organization* renders possible centric positionality? Whereas the plant's form of organization is open, Plessner says, the organization of the animal body is closed. This means that the emphasis is now on mediation and on the autonomy of the organism. Whereas the physical-chemical processes in the plant are integrated immediately in the lifecycle so that these processes, as it were, have the same direction as that cycle, the processes in the animal belong to organs which stand in antagonistic relationships to

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26 Ibid., 329/405.

27 Ibid., 288/360.

28 Ibid., 237/303.

one another, which cooperate by working “against” each other, thus integrating the animal indirectly into the environment.<sup>29</sup> This may sound abstract, but Plessner mentions a number of more specific essential properties to illustrate this point. Let me sum up a number of them. Note that some of these characteristics allow exceptions.<sup>30</sup>

Due to their direct, relatively unmediated dependence on the medium, plants generally do not move themselves; animals have greater autonomy, are active, and movement is part of their way of realizing their boundary to the environment. In plants, the development of tissue happens predominantly on the outside of the body; in animals this growth is a process internal to the body. Animals depend on organic nourishment; plants can make proteins, carbohydrates and fat out of inorganic substances. (However, here fungi are the exception.) In the plant, the parts have a low level of specialization and can therefore easily be detached from the whole. We see this when we take cuttings from a plant. The plant is a “dividuum”, Plessner says.<sup>31</sup> Animals, in contrast, are literally *individuals*: the unity and integrity of their bodies is absolute. Even if amputation of a member does not necessarily kill the animal, it is not possible to grow a new specimen from the amputated part.<sup>32</sup> Whereas animals have a final stage of development, after which they only grow old, plants are never really finished. Conditions permitting, they will keep growing—a process which is crossed by the gradual decay towards the end of their life.

It is not possible for me to do justice to the sophistication of Plessner’s differentiated descriptions of plants and animals, or of lower and higher animals. So this introduction must remain somewhat sketchy. Let me finish by adding just one further differentiation which is relevant to the discussion of the brain. Plessner, within the sphere of animals, distinguishes between two types of closed or-

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29 Ibid., 218-221/282-286.

30 However, the fact that there are exceptions does not imply that the general description falls short. The decisive criterion for determining that a description of the essential properties defining a category is adequate or not is rather the question whether we need the general principle as a *basis* for describing the exception. If we emphatically understand the exceptional form of life as a deviation from a category, or an intermediate form in between two categories, then this understanding affirms that the categories make sense. Alternative approaches quickly lead to scepticism.

31 Ibid., 220/285.

32 The cloning of animals in our time seems to qualify this claim. I do not think it proves Plessner wrong, but these new techniques do challenge us to rethink the “individuality” or “dividuality” of plants and animals—something which cannot be pursued here.

ganization: the centralized and the decentralized type. It is important to note that “centralized” (organization) is not the same as “centric” (positionality). According to Plessner, higher animals have a centralized organization which means that they have a *central nervous system*. This renders possible the interruption between stimulus and response, i.e., the hiatus between noticing (*Merken*) and working (*Wirken*) which defines the structure of *consciousness*. “Noticing is equivalent to inhibited excitation, working to uninhibited excitation. The sphere of consciousness stretches between these two; the transition from noticing to working takes place through consciousness.”<sup>33</sup>

Subjective consciousness is the relatively strong realization of centric positionality which is reserved for higher animals. Lower animals like jellyfish and sea urchins only have a neural net and a nerve ring, no brain and therefore no consciousness. Their consciousness is, metaphorically speaking, “turned off” (*ausgeschaltet*).<sup>34</sup> We are here concerned with a relatively weak realization of centric positionality: the meanings of things correlate *directly* with the animal’s drives, i.e., without the pause of consciousness. This distinction is a further illustration of the relationship between organization and positionality. The nervous system belongs to the form of *organization* of the animal, because it is part of the objective-organic body. But this form of organization renders possible the animal’s subjectivity, which is its form of *positionality*.<sup>35</sup>

## 5.2 THE PARTICULARITY OF THE HUMAN BODY AND ITS ONTOGENESIS

The previous section has prepared us for Plessner’s view of human beings. Plessner says that, insofar as their form of organization is concerned, human beings are still animals. Both animal and human bodies have a closed organization, and the organization of the human body is “centralized” like that of higher ani-

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33 Ibid., 245/312.

34 Ibid.

35 Perhaps the distinction between form of organization and form of positionality becomes clearer the higher we climb up the levels of the organic. This might be due to the fact that the form of organization refers to the objective-organic being of the organism, which in the case of the plant is about all there is to it: there is here no subjectivity (i.e., centric positionality), let alone a being-at-a-distance to this subjectivity (i.e., eccentric positionality). In other words, the difference between form of organization and form of positionality is increasingly realized on higher levels of life.

mals. However, according to Plessner, human consciousness is of an essentially different kind than animal consciousness. Although the organization of the human body is the same as in animals, human beings have a different form of *positionality*. Whereas animals are centrically positioned, human beings are eccentrically positioned. Humans are at a distance from their sensorimotor center and this renders possible that the world shows the double structure of immanence and transcendence. It also renders possible symbolic communication, advanced technology, institutions, and the performing of social roles within this institutional environment.

Before I discuss Plessner's concept of eccentric positionality in greater detail, let us dwell for a while on the relationship between this form of positionality and the form of organization which characterizes the human body. The simplest interpretation of Plessner purports that the human body, as an organism, is no different than that of animals. This interpretation emphasizes that the human body has a closed form of organization and a nervous system just like all (other) animal bodies. As Plessner puts it: "If the character of being-outside-itself turns the animal into a human being then it is clear, since eccentricity does not render possible a new form of organization, that the human being must physically remain an animal."<sup>36</sup> Plessner suggests that all further differences, such as the human being's upright position and his relatively big brain are *empirical* differences, which means that they are gradual and they do not *essentially* change the organism's form of organization. Plessner continues in this vein that "[b]eing human is not tied to a particular gestalt and (to recall an imaginative conjecture by the paleontologist Dacqué) could just as well occur under a variety of gestals that do not correspond with the one we know. The character of the human being is tied only to the centralized form of organization, which forms the basis of his eccentricity."<sup>37</sup>

Interestingly, Plessner himself seems to have changed his mind about the finer points of the problem. In *Die Frage nach der Conditio humana*, where Plessner returns to this issue (without, however, referring to the passage from the *Stufen*), he arrives at a slightly different conclusion. Let us take a closer look at this text.

Plessner is here concerned with the question of how the human being's "physical constitution and behavior . . . are intertwined".<sup>38</sup> He discusses a number of distinctions between human beings and animals which have more than

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36 Plessner, *Stufen*, 293/365.

37 Ibid., 293/365-366.

38 Plessner, *Die Frage nach der Conditio humana*, 169.

merely empirical value. The basis of these considerations is Portmann's interpretation of the distinction between altricial and precocial animals, or more precisely: between *nidicolous* animals (*Nesthocker*) and *nidifugous* animals (*Nestflüchter*).<sup>39</sup> Altricial animals, like many birds and most rodents, remain highly dependent on the care from their parents for a long time after their birth. In contrast, precocial animals, like most higher mammals, are soon physiologically fit to independently find their way in the environment. A newborn elephant or horse, for instance, can walk and follow the herd within hours after birth.

Human beings share some important characteristics with these higher mammals: a long gestation period, a relatively small litter, thermal homeostasis, more or less fully functioning sense-organs at birth, and the phenomenon of *youth*: a period in which the animal/human being can play, and thus learn patterns of behavior which are not purely instinctive (not purely “syncretic”, in Merleau-Ponty's terms). Theoretically this would lead us to conclude that, like these other mammals, human beings are precocial animals. But, of course, human beings remain highly dependent on the care of their parents for a long time after their birth. They are therefore regarded as altricial animals. Portmann emphasized their exceptional properties by calling them “secondary *nidicolous* animals” (*sekundäre Nesthocker*).<sup>40</sup> Plessner argues that this peculiar combination of properties already points to the essential difference between human beings and animals. Whereas higher animals have consciousness but are not aware of their consciousness because they cannot distance themselves from it, human beings are eccentrically positioned: they stand both *in* and *above* their conscious relationship to the world.

The latter statement is clearly *phenomenological* and not *empirical*, but the relationship between the essential and the empirical properties of human beings is not arbitrary. On the one hand human beings share with higher mammals the

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39 Strictly speaking, “*Nesthocker*” should be translated by “*nidicolous animal*”, because it literally refers to animals that stay at their nest, which is reflected in the latin origin of “*nidicolous*”: *nidus* (nest) + *colere* (to inhabit). For similar reasons, “*Nestflüchter*” should be translated with “*nidifugous animal*”: the animal which flees the nest (at an early stage after birth). However, the words “altricial” and “precocial” are more common. They refer to the physiological *stage of development* which renders necessary that the animal stays at the nest for a long time after birth or renders possible that it flees the nest (or place of birth) soon after birth. Although both distinctions are not the same, it is clear that they are narrowly interconnected, and both Plessner and Portmann describe these characteristics as part of one single phenomenon.

40 Portmann, *Einführung in die vergleichende Morphologie der Wirbeltiere*, 290.

characteristics which make these animals intelligent and relatively independent from their surroundings. According to Plessner, warm-bloodedness (as a form of homeostasis) facilitates, on an organic level, a higher form of autonomy with regard to the climate of the environment. Playing and learning render possible an interaction with the surroundings which is not restricted to instinct-driven responses to stimuli; there is literally “play” or bandwidth in the responses of the higher animal or human being. It is in relation to such play of possible responses that we can, also in relation to higher animals, speak of “intelligent” behavior.<sup>41</sup> In the human being these characteristics are combined with the *extra long* preparation period in the many years of the child’s development after birth. On the one hand, the postponement of full participation is necessary because the postnatal development of the nervous system stretches into the human’s late teens. On the other hand, this postponement allows for an extremely long trajectory of learning behavior in all of its generally human, and its specific cultural and individual forms. In Plessner’s view, it is this combination of characteristics, on the one hand from precocial animals and on the other hand from altricial animals, which renders possible the advanced character of human consciousness and behavior and brings it to a higher level.

Plessner discusses a number of further properties unique to the human physical constitution. One of the most important physical characteristics of human beings, as has long been recognized, is the upright posture of the human body: “Precisely because in human beings [the upright posture] is the normal posture and not, as in animals, a response depending on the situation (fear, curiosity, defense), it is immediately connected to our approachability as persons.”<sup>42</sup> So, on the one hand this position widens the human gaze and deepens the social character of his world, where people meet as persons. The face-à-face of the human social world is much more outspoken than in primates: it helps create the sphere of verbal and non-verbal communication, and of the social roles we play, embedded in an institutional framework. And on the other hand the upright position frees the hand, so that an advanced form of the construction and use of tools becomes possible. Plessner here speaks of the “emancipation of the visual and tactile field”.<sup>43</sup>

In sum, Plessner does not regard the gestalt of the objective human body as merely coincidental in relation to the *essence* of human beings: the eccentric position. So when, in this context, Plessner again refers to the paleontologist

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41 Plessner, *Stufen*, 272-276/343-347.

42 Ibid., *Die Frage nach der Conditio humana*, 170.

43 Ibid., 171.

Dacqué, he is no longer captivated by his imagination: “If one pictures to oneself from this perspective (of a maximum of autonomy, which must express adaptability to the surroundings and independence from it) the human design, then Dacqué’s thought, that the human being could also have existed in the physical form of an amphibian, a fish, or a reptile, becomes an absurdity.”<sup>44</sup>

And yet it would be an exaggeration to state that the particular combination of precocial and altricial properties, the upright posture, or the free, multifunctional hand would themselves belong to the essential core of being human. This would be a step too far because eccentric positionality is not unthinkable without these properties. So what is their status?

They are at least “essence indicating characteristics”, i.e., characteristics which belong to the specific content of perception which at the same time convey what is essential to what appears *through* these characteristics.<sup>45</sup> But perhaps we are starting to see that essence indicating characteristics are, generally, not just indications: their relation to the essence is not coincidental but *intelligible*. They do not have the character of a symbol which might just as well be replaced by another symbol so long as we agree on its meaning. The relationship between an essence indicating characteristic and the essence indicated by it *makes sense*. It makes sense that a being who develops an upright posture, a posture that frees his hands, is capable of bringing tool-creation to a higher level, that she is capable of regarding tools as tools, i.e., as things whose identity and function does not get lost under varying circumstances. And it is not a coincidence that a being who is relatively hairless compared to primates, the species closest to him, disposes of the “tool” called clothing and, on a more existential level, is a being whose existence is defined by shame and its antipode pride.<sup>46</sup>

Although the human being’s upright posture and relative hairlessness make sense (are intelligible) in relation to the essence of the human being, it is strictly

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44 Ibid., 166.

45 Cf. Mitscherlich, *Natur und Geschichte*, 245.

46 Plessner mentions nakedness and clothing (Plessner, *Lachen und Weinen*, 244–245/40), but, to my knowledge, not in relation to the human being’s relative hairlessness as an essence indicating characteristic.

Incidentally, it is no use asking which came first: the freeing of the hand by the upright position or the hand-tool, “because it is the wrong question. The upright position and the ‘invention’ of the tool constitute one and the same structural relationship.” (Plessner, *Die Frage nach der Conditio humana*, 171.) The same can be said of the relationship between on the one hand nakedness and shame and on the other hand clothing.

speaking not unthinkable that human beings would have a dense fur and would walk on all fours. The concept of the eccentric position does not depend on these properties. But one physical gestalt of the body supports this form of positionality more easily than another; it is the more logical, more probable precondition for it than another. So Plessner did not disqualify his remark in the *Stufen*, that “[b]eing human is not tied to a particular gestalt and . . . could just as well occur under a variety of gestalts that do not correspond with the one we know”, because strictly speaking this observation is correct. The remark is *qualified* by an account of the intelligible relationship between the physical form of the human body and eccentric positionality. I will not present a complete or definite answer to the question of what the exact nature of these properties (upright posture and so forth) is, but it is clear that they are located somewhere in between a priori and a posteriori, and in between logically necessary and coincidental. From that intermediate position they fulfill their role as indicators of the essence, but their meaning is not exhausted by this function, because their relationship to the essence makes sense.

This also holds for Plessner's mentioning of the human being's “highly complicated cortex”,<sup>47</sup> compared to other mammals. It is generally accepted up to this day that human being's are unique in terms of the relative complexity and size of their brains. We have the greatest brain mass in relation to the mass of our entire body, and this fact is to a large extent due to the size of the cortex. It is hard to regard as arbitrary the relationship between the eccentric nature of human consciousness (and the differentiation and depth of the phenomenal world entailed thereby) and the size and complexity of his brain.<sup>48</sup>

Despite their meaningfulness, we should not overestimate the role of physical essence indicating properties, because we can in the process of interacting with a being also receive indications which do not reside on the physical level but on the level of interpersonal communication. Consider the example of the

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47 Ibid., 170.

48 Hans-Peter Krüger (*Gehirn, Verhalten und Zeit*, 88-89, 120-121) cites neuroscientific research which proves that, compared to the brains of primates, human brains are characterized by a large amount of so-called “metarepresentations” (ibid., 121), i.e., neural connections correlated with *self-referential* behavioral functions. Krüger explains these functions philosophically in terms of eccentric positionality. He does not refer to Plessner's “essence indicating properties” here, but it seems that we can interpret this high quantity of metarepresentations in the human brain as a further essence indicating property of eccentric positionality, but one that is only accessible from the third-person perspective of science.

chat function on many service websites. Often it is not clear whether the “person” on the other side of the line is a human being or a computer program. We may thus wonder whether Anna, the helpdesk girl we encounter on the website of furniture retailer Ikea, is a real person or not. If you ask Anna all kinds of information about couches and tables for sale, Anna’s flexible way of answering might give us the impression that Anna is indeed a real person. But there are limitations to this flexibility. Although Anna even answers the question whether she likes working at Ikea (she does!), she cannot tell you how long she has been working there. And she seems to miss the point of our jokes—which admittedly happens between people as well. When asked whether she is real, Anna admits that she is not: “I am a ‘Bot’; my name is Anna, and my task is to provide you with online help about IKEA.”<sup>49</sup>

This example illustrates that it is ultimately our personal *interaction* which is decisive in determining whether the person over-against us is indeed a person or not. It is in the praxis of interacting, of living *with*, a being that we discover its true nature. When we watch Disney classics like *Jungle Book* or *Bambi*, we understand immediately that Baloo the Bear or Bambi are in essence not centrally positioned animals but persons.<sup>50</sup> If we would encounter an animal of *this* kind in real life, we would be able to interact with him or her as a person, simply because these animals express themselves as eccentrically positioned beings. These examples illustrate that, besides *physical* essence indicating properties, there are essence indicating properties which show themselves in (quasi-) interpersonal communication. Anna’s awkward way of answering questions is an illustration of such essence indicating properties. It reveals that we only thought we were communicating with a person, whereas in fact we were receiving programmed or computer-learned responses.

Let me return to the question I started with: to what extent is there an *essential* difference on a physical level between human beings and animals? The answer is a little more subtle than it seemed at first sight. The core of the answer is already in the *Stufen*, when Plessner says that “physically speaking, the human being must remain an animal”. This claim refers to the form of organization of the human body. The human being shares with higher animals the closed form of organization, and more specifically, the centralistic variant, which is characterized by a central nervous system. However, in *Die Frage nach der Conditio humana* Plessner makes clear that the physical gestalt of the human being is by no means arbitrary or coincidental: there is a certain intelligibility to the fact that

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49 <http://www.ikea.com/gb/en/> (accessed: 4 April 2013).

50 Example borrowed from Krüger, personal communication.

precisely this species possesses a different form of positionality than the species naturally closest to it.

Consequently, Gesa Lindemann overstates the point when she argues that “organic particularities” play no role whatsoever in determining “whether entities are personal or not”.<sup>51</sup> Although social interaction also provides us with essence indicating properties, we should not consider this interaction in isolation from the species, the human being, capable of such interaction. I agree with Olivia Mitscherlich that Lindemann “detaches eccentric positionality from the human being as a natural entity”,<sup>52</sup> and that she “reduces eccentric positionality to social-worldliness [*Mitweltlichkeit*]”.<sup>53</sup> Lindemann’s sociological concept of personhood and eccentricity is so broad that, depending on the sociohistorical community she is concerned with, it can include not only animals but also “gods and other powers”.<sup>54</sup>

As regards gods, Plessner convincingly demonstrates that only an organism has positionality, and that only an organism with a centralized organization can be eccentrically positioned. This not only excludes inanimate things, plants, and lower animals from the domain of potential persons, but also entities which do not have a physical-organic nature at all, like angels or gods. It also rules out Ikea’s helpdesk computer program or the computer on which it is run. Lindemann is right to the extent that, in principle, non-human higher animals could in principle be persons. However, as I have tried to show, despite the contingency of essence indicating properties of eccentricity, the relationship between these properties and eccentric positionality is not arbitrary but makes sense. It is by no means a coincidence that specifically human beings are eccentrically positioned, compared to, for example, mice or chimpanzees, or dogs.<sup>55</sup>

### 5.3 EMBODIED PERSONHOOD

Let us turn to the nature of human positionality. What kind of positionality do human beings have? What level of ideality is realized in the human body? What does this mean for the structure of the human environment?

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51 Lindemann, *Soziologie – Anthropologie*, 55.

52 Mitscherlich, *Natur und Geschichte*, 338 (footnote 373).

53 Ibid., 339 (footnote 373).

54 Lindemann, “The Lived Human Body from the Perspective of the Shared World (*Mitwelt*)”, 287.

55 Cf. the discussion of Lindemann’s position in §3.5.

Similar to animals, human beings *are* their body and *have* their body, Plessner says, but they also have a position outside their sensorimotor center. Being a body pertains to our being part of the outer world. Having the body happens from the subjective center of perception and action. In addition, we are at a distance to this situation, so that, in comparison with animals, we have a double distance to the body. This is the human being's eccentric positionality “the living is body, in the body (as inner life or soul) and exterior to the body as the point of view from which he is both. An individual that is positionally characterized in these three ways, is called a *person*”<sup>56</sup>

Accordingly, the world of the person has a threefold structure.<sup>57</sup> Plessner indeed regards the world as a constellation of *three* worlds: the outer world (*Außenwelt*), the inner world (*Innenwelt*) and the shared world (*Mitwelt*). Each of these worlds is the correlate of one of the three moments of our being. The outer world correlates with our *being* our body: the body that we are is part of the world of things. The inner world correlates with our *having* our body: the “soul” (*Seele*) is the subject of having the body but also relates to its inner self, thus constituting an inner world. Plessner uses the word “double aspect” to designate the relationship between body and soul, i.e., between external and inner world. It is from our eccentric position that we relate to both these aspects, and that we can experience, or reflect on, the discontinuity between them. I will present an example of such experience in the next section. I also return (still in the current section) to the question of why the eccentric position is fundamentally a *shared* position, and thus correlates with the “shared world” (*Mitwelt*).

For now, it is important to note that the outer world and the inner world are not isolated structures: they are always already determined by eccentric positionality. As noted in the previous chapter, according to Plessner, the thing is a unity of properties organized around a core, and it is this unity throughout a multitude of different appearances, potentially over a long period of time. The outer world thus shows a double aspect of immanence and transcendence which correlates with the eccentric position of the human being as a sensorimotor subject. The inner world also shows a double aspect. Insofar as I simply live my inner life and fall together with it, the inner life is in the “self-position” (*Selbststellung*).<sup>58</sup> We can understand what Plessner means when we think of being in a certain mood without really realizing it. We are simply absorbed in our psychic life. This inner life in self-position Plessner also calls the “soul” (*Seele* in the

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56 Plessner, *Stufen*, 293/365.

57 Ibid., 293-308/365-382.

58 Ibid., 297/370.

narrow sense, as this term also refers to the inner world as such). But the inner life can also be in the “object-position” (*Gegenstandstellung*).<sup>59</sup> It is then the object of an inner experience. This is a “psychic” object, i.e., a *Gegenstand* within the inner world. Eccentric positionality guarantees that we can always in principle take distance from our inner life in this way and we constantly move between simply being in a certain mood, state of mind, etc., and realizing that we are in that mood or state of mind, so that many forms of our psychic life are “transitions”<sup>60</sup>.

Let us dwell for a moment on Plessner’s description of eccentric positionality: “the living is body, in the body (as inner life or soul) and exterior to the body as the point of view from which he is both. An individual that is positionally characterized in these three ways, is called a *person*.<sup>61</sup> It is important to note that the spatial expressions Plessner uses often do not have an external but rather an ideal meaning. At the same time the “ideal” always refers to a form of embodiment. The subject is “in” the body, Plessner says, but the subjective center is not literally located within the body. Nor is the center purely immaterial: it is the body itself according to its subjective aspect. So it is the body-subject that has the body-object. Materially speaking, both subject and object are the same body.<sup>61</sup> A similar observation can be made in regard to our eccentric position. From what place do we have this distance to the world and ourselves? The only right answer is: from the here-now of the organism that we still are. We only have a distance to our embodied existence *from* the position that we have, and *through* the body that we are.

As regards the external world, Plessner would agree with Merleau-Ponty that for humans this world is characterized by a “thing structure”, but Plessner explains this on the basis of his concept of eccentric positionality. A thing is a “unity of properties organized around a core”;<sup>62</sup> only some properties of the thing appear at a particular moment, while others remain hidden. This structure not only pertains to individual things, but to the outer world as such:

The human being lives in a surrounding field that has the character of a world. Things are given to him as objects, real things that *in* their givenness appear as detachable *from* their

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59 Ibid., 296/369.

60 Ibid., 297/370.

61 In a paradoxical way, the body is itself “in” the body. In *Lachen und Weinen* (240/36), Plessner puts it this way: “as physical lived body—in the physical lived body” (*als Körperleib—im Körperleib*).

62 Plessner, *Stufen*, 81/128.

givenness. Their essence includes the surplus of their own weight, of existing-for-themselves, of being-in-themselves, without which we would not speak of them as real things. Nevertheless, this surplus moment, this surplus weight becomes manifest in—their appearance, which of course belongs to reality, but does not reveal all of reality, and which, in objectivity, only presents the side of the real that is turned toward the subject in a real, that is, direct way. As a result, the subject can only grasp reality through the mediation of this appearance—in the manner of immediacy, because the surplus weight of being-in-itself, of being more than appearance, immediately appears ‘in’ the immediate presence of the appearance.<sup>63</sup>

We are again concerned with a form of mediated immediacy: we are immediately out there, *with the things*” (*bei den Dingen*), but our perceptual consciousness is the necessary medium of this attending to things.

Human beings are tacitly aware of this mediatedness of experience. The eccentric position therefore entails the ambiguity of immanence and transcendence of the external world. On the one hand the perceiver can at any moment become emphatically aware of this moment of mediation, i.e., of the immanence of consciousness in regard to which the world is transcendent. On the other hand, insofar as we are immersed in the world, its transcendence manifests itself as the “in itself” of the world which we grasp *through* its appearance. The transcendence of the world is then not a totally obscure in-itself, but rather the inexhaustible depth of its qualities and meanings. The world always has a hidden side, a “surplus” (*Überschussmoment*) of possible appearances. These shifts of the boundary between ourselves and what is other to us define various modes of the same ambiguity between immanence and transcendence. They illustrate that eccentric positionality does not mean that there is a fixed intermediate layer, a filter, which detaches us from the world. Rather our *disengagement* shows itself within the structure of our *engagement* in the world.

In Plessner's view, the subjective relationship to the outer world is embedded within a social sphere. The fact that the eccentric position correlates with the social world implies that the human being's positionality is not the form of existence of an isolated ego: the ego immediately understands his own position “as the sphere of other people”.<sup>64</sup> The decenteredness of the self implies that I identify with other human beings, because the distance I have to their being in the world is not essentially different from the distance I have to my own existence.

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63 Ibid., 327/403.

64 Ibid., 302/375.

At the same time our position remains one of “frontality” (*Frontalität*)<sup>65</sup>: we live as distinctive individuals facing one another. We are frontally positioned within all three worlds: each individual lives within and over against his own inner world, possesses a subjective perspective within and on the outer world, and has a personal perspective within and on the social world. So the formal interchangeability of persons goes together with a material diversity of identities or points of view and this happens in all three world-relationships.

On all three levels, the body is positioned in the world, open to the world and it lives as the “break” (*Bruch*) or “hiatus” (*Hiatus*)<sup>66</sup> between these two aspects. We can thus speak of “embodied personhood”. This includes and surpasses “embodied subjectivity”, which is, strictly speaking, restricted to the person’s relationship to the external world.<sup>67</sup> Eccentricity neither refers to the outsider’s perspective in the sense of the scientific third person (although it includes this possibility), nor to a divine perspective from which one oversee and fathom all. Rather it inserts a dimension of negativity in our being in the world. The person stands where he stands, but he is structurally aware that this is the case. He “stands in the center of his standing”.<sup>68</sup> Or, as Plessner also puts it: he stands “in nothing”.<sup>69</sup> I will return to this “negativity” below, when I address the “psycho-physical neutrality” of human existence.

At the end of Section 4.1 I posed the question: what is it about our mode of existence that renders possible our switching between structurally different perspectives? Why can human beings, contrary to animals, shift from a first-person perspective to the third-person perspective of science and why can they, in addition, also reflect on such shifts? Merleau-Ponty presupposes that the concept of a sensorimotor subject suffices for understanding not only the animal’s monoperspective but also the differentiation of the human perspective. His concept of the body remains restricted to our being both a subject and an object among other objects and the fact that the animal body also possesses these aspects is not addressed as a fundamental problem. When Merleau-Ponty introduces symbolic forms in *The Structure of Behavior*, this is not supported by a fundamental revision of the concept of embodiment.

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65 Ibid., 305/379.

66 Ibid., 292/365.

67 Plessner himself does not use the terms “embodied subjectivity” and “embodied personhood”. I use these terms to clarify the difference between Plessner and Merleau-Ponty.

68 Ibid., 290/362.

69 Ibid., 292/364.

Plessner agrees with Merleau-Ponty that our relationship to the world is first and foremost symbolic. The importance of the symbolic is illustrated by the prominence of language, which serves as the main medium of the distance we have to ourselves and the world. Through human language, which is of a different kind than animal signals, human beings have a grasp of times and places remote from the here-now of their organic bodies. We realize ourselves as beings who are not unreservedly *where* we are, and who are not unreservedly *when* we are. Facial expressions, “body language”, but also our ability to create advanced technology and institutions are all inscribed in this symbolic domain. All these powers require the type of higher structures Merleau-Ponty refers to, but these higher structures must be founded on a mode of embodiment that is specific for human beings. The advantage of Plessner’s philosophy is that it addresses this form of embodiment. Symbolic behavior presupposes that we are structurally at a distance from the double aspect (subject and object) of our existence. It is our eccentric—i.e. fundamentally variable—position that enables us to shift from a first-person to a third-person perspective, or to a point of view from which we reflect on the implications of such shifts.

Eccentric positionality means that we are at a distance to ourselves as both subjects and objects, but this does not imply that we are constantly emphatically concerned with either aspect, or with the relationship (the hiatus) between these two aspects. In Plessner’s view, our distance to both aspects opens a new space which is “spiritual” (*geistig*)<sup>70</sup> and “psychophysically neutral” (*psychophysisch neutral*).<sup>71</sup> This spiritual and psychophysically neutral sphere actually clarifies why we are so often *not* concerned with the subjective or the objective body. Let me first elucidate this by explaining Plessner’s use of the terms “spiritual” and “psychophysically neutral”. Then we can also see in what sense this spiritual life is at the same time an *embodied* life.

The word *Geist* (“spirit”) belongs to a tradition that distinguishes between the individual soul (or mind, subject, consciousness, etc.) and the social sphere of which this soul is a part (subjective spirit realizing itself through objective spirit, intersubjectivity, culture). The term used to refer to both social and religious life at once: Hegel’s philosophy of spirit is a case in point. Although Plessner, at the end of the *Stufen*, also addresses something like a religious dimension of life, I think that his concept of *Geist* is much more secularized than, for instance, Hegel’s. On top of that, Plessner’s “spirit” does certainly not imply a specific religious orientation or any relation to the now-fashionable “search for

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70 Ibid., 303/377.

71 Ibid., 292/365.

spirituality". The core of Plessner's concept of spirit is not religious but social: the eccentric position implies a moment of interchangeability of individuals, because each of us is able to see herself through the eyes of another. As noted, this principle is brought into balance by the principle of frontality which separates us from one another. The frontality of our perspective determines its limitations, it gives us our unalienable freedom and responsibility, and it opens the perspective on an otherness which escapes the dimension of interchangeability of individuals. "Spirit" refers to this sphere of the *Mitwelt*, the shared world, of which I am an immediate part but within which I also *face* the others.

The word "psychophysical neutrality" is essential to a good understanding of Plessner.<sup>72</sup> Instead of presenting a close reading of relevant passages I will illustrate what I think Plessner has in view by considering the way we tell stories about ourselves. When I tell a story of success or failure, or of love, friendship, or animosity, we cannot say that these words refer exclusively to bodily states. We can neither say that they only describe subjective mental states. However, such narrative terms do presuppose a physical and a psychic *aspect*. Falling in love, for instance, can set free physical processes that seem to lead a life of their own. The physical aspect of our being detaches itself somewhat from the wholeness of the person, perhaps even more than we like. But falling in love often also entails that we cannot stop *thinking* about the person we are in love with. We become dreamy, lost in our inner world, and detached from what happens around us. The phenomenon of falling in love encompasses both aspects, the physical and the psychic, and it may bring one of them to the fore at a particular moment, but it is itself not limited to either of the two: it is "psychophysically neutral". At one time the physical aspect makes itself felt, at another time the inner world of reflection and imagination comes out strongly, but many expressions pertaining to being in love do not emphatically refer to either one aspect. We say that we long for the other, that we are happy with a message or a phone call, that we feel insecure and at the same time hopeful about the future. None of these terms is restricted to a bodily feeling or to a mental process. Neither can we make sense of terms like "longing", "insecurity", "hopefulness" or "anticipation", by referring to the *sum* of physical and mental processes.

Instead we are concerned with meanings which belong to the situation of a person in the social world. The meanings of falling in love are not restricted to representations or concepts which I, this ego, have about the world. The whole

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72 Incidentally, Plessner was not the one who introduced the concept of psychophysical neutrality. Plessner borrowed the term from Max Scheler, but he also adjusted it, merging it with his philosophy of eccentric positionality.

process of falling in love is inscribed in a symbolic order which is shared by a culture, and even by humanity. Although falling in love is a highly personal experience, we cannot claim that its meaning for us is in all respects completely individual and original. Nonetheless, it would go too far to say that the social environment predetermines entirely what a personal experience means to me. This is why Plessner says that our eccentric positionality, which embeds our personal life directly in a symbolic, social order, is kept in balance by the frontality of our being in the world: I am still also an individual facing the others. I can hide my desire from another person, and I can express my feelings in a way which, although it depends on a pre-given symbolic order, is at the same time unique and personal.

Our mode of existence is neither restricted to the outer world nor to the inner world. When in philosophy we are concerned with history, with narrative, esthetics, or morality, we often do not refer to the physical or the mental. We are simply concerned with knowledge, moral decisions, values, freedom, stories, beauty, and so forth. When Taylor sets out to expound his view of the disenchantment of the Western world he makes clear that he does not need to present a solution to the mind-body problem in order to achieve his aim.<sup>73</sup> Taylor is right: we can leave out an account of the different aspects of the human body, and still say something essential about history, narrative, politics, and other issues. Although I think that many problems, e.g. concerning life and death, illness, sexuality, *do* require a philosophy of the body, I agree with Taylor that our philosophical language can often remain remarkably neutral with regard to the question of body, mind and spirit, and yet be rich in its power to describe the phenomena at hand. It is then still interesting to ask how this is possible. I think that Plessner's conception of the psychophysical neutrality of our existence answers the question. The reason we philosophize about many issues without addressing something like the mind-body problem is precisely that we live in a sphere which is neutral with regard to the physical and the psychic nature of the processes and events involved. However, ironically, this also means that only a philosophy of the body explains why we often do not need a philosophy of the body.

The term “neutral” in “psychophysically neutral” can lead to misunderstandings. On the one hand this neutrality renders possible that we describe our

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73 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 30: “I am not attributing to our lived understanding some kind of Cartesian dualism, or its monist materialism, identity theory, or whatever; or even a more sophisticated and adequate theory of embodied agency. I am trying to capture the level of understanding prior to philosophical puzzlement.”

lives in terms which are unspecified in terms of body, psyche, and spirit. On the other hand, the psychophysically neutral sphere must encompass the mental and the physical aspect of our existence. This sphere *surpasses* the physical and the mental *dialectically*, which means that the physical and the mental are *retained* within a higher unity. However, Plessner's dialectics is not synthetic, like Hegel's: it respects the fundamental discontinuities within our being in the world which Plessner refers to in terms of "negativity", "hiatus", "paradox" and "ambiguity".<sup>74</sup> The example of falling in love clearly demonstrates this, and it illustrates that there are logically three possibilities: (a) the mental aspect comes to the fore, e.g. when one cannot stop thinking about the other; (b) the physical aspect makes itself felt: this happens when the libido, urging itself upon the person, shows itself to be an autonomous force, or when the body shows symptoms of excitement or nervousness from which we feel alienated; (c) both aspects remain implicitly presupposed or they are integrated in a more holistic experience which would be characterized by neutral terms. The latter possibility applies when one simply longs for the other, enjoys her company, or is miserable in her absence—these words all have meanings which cannot be reduced to something either psychic or physical. This does not mean, however, that specifically physical or mental connotations do not play a role at all.

Psychophysical neutrality does not mean that human beings live as purely immaterial spirits who are divorced from their bodies. Rather the term announces a new form of embodiment. When you gesture with your arm to brush aside a ridiculous suggestion made by your friend, this physical movement cannot be understood as merely an operation of a subject within the outer world. The gesture *includes* a movement in the outer world, but its sense clearly surpasses its physical effects: the sense is *neutral* with regard to these effects. This means that it is at a distance to them, but the distance is not absolute. I might hit the coffee cup from the table in making my gesture, or my friend might feel a slight breeze when I wave my arm. On the one hand we should acknowledge that the meaning of the gesture cannot be understood on the level of external objects, because the same meaning can also be conveyed by a spoken word. So the gesture can only be properly understood within the sphere of the symbolic. We recognize the same structure in different ensembles. But on the other hand, this symbolic level *lends* its meanings to our actions in the external world: the broken coffee cup becomes a symbol of my temperament and the slight breeze and the proximity of my arm to the face of my friend might be intimidating and even affect the friendship. According to Plessner, the embodiment of our spiritual lives does not

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74 Cf. my Introduction (3)

stop at the boundaries of our bodies: the external world rather becomes the “stage” (*Szene*) of the roles we play within the social world.<sup>75</sup> In addition, we learn from this that the lives of our bodies are themselves spiritual, i.e. psycho-physically neutral. So on this higher level, the physical embodies a spiritual life: the body is spirit, and the spirit is embodied. This higher form of embodiment is the pivot of Plessner’s theory of expression.<sup>76</sup>

I have been arguing that, according to Plessner, the human body is a subject, an object, and an eccentric body that is at a distance to these two aspects. However, I face the same objection as in my interpretation of Merleau-Ponty: one could argue that Plessner’s philosophy is an attempt to go beyond the subject/object-opposition we find in Descartes and that therefore Plessner’s philosophy does not center on subjectivity and objectivity.<sup>77</sup> On the one hand it is without doubt true that Plessner, like Merleau-Ponty, wanted to leave behind the polarized relationship between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* we find in Descartes. On the other hand, the words “subject” and “object” are still very useful and it would be a pity if we would give these wonderful terms away to thinkers who choose to remain within the Cartesian tradition.

I do not need to argue against Plessner, because Plessner himself uses both “subject” and “object” in the ways I have been using these terms. Although Plessner mostly uses “personhood” to describe the eccentric position, this notion does not make the concept of subjectivity superfluous. In the section on the second anthropological principle,<sup>78</sup> Plessner frequently uses the terms “subject” (*Subjekt*) and “subjectivity” (*Subjektivität*) in a positive way. When applied to human beings these notions should, of course, not be confused with the centric positionality of the animal. Contrary to animal subjectivity, human subjectivity has itself eccentric structure, viz. a form of mediated immediacy that gives the outer world the double structure of immanence and transcendence. Subjectivity is the human being’s first distance to the body which is modified by the second distance, i.e. of the person. It is also the position from which the human being *has* his body. In *Anthropologie der Sinne*, “subject” does not only occur as the opposite of “object”, as one would expect, but also as a signifier of the person

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75 Plessner, *Zur Anthropologie des Schauspielers*, 411. For Plessner’s theory of social roles, see also his *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft* and *Soziale Rolle und menschliche Natur*.

76 See Plessner, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Volume VII: *Ausdruck und menschliche Natur*, a collection of Plessner’s texts on expression.

77 Hans-Peter Krüger, personal communication.

78 Plessner, *Stufen*, 321-340/396-418.

who knows of the rupture between subject and object and who struggles with this rupture: “My own being a body presents itself to me, the subject, as a *conflict* whose insolvability is given with the rupture between subject and object.”<sup>79</sup> So sometimes Plessner even uses the word “subject” where those familiar with his philosophy might expect “person”.

What about the notion “object” (*Objekt*)? Plessner uses the word “object” both in reference to the scientific subject/object-opposition and in a prescientific sense. Although most of the time Plessner denotes the material aspect of the human body by “thing” (*Ding*), he also calls it an “object”. The topic of philosophical anthropology, according to Plessner, is “the human being as subject-object of culture and as subject-object of nature”.<sup>80</sup> Consider also, again, the passage from *Anthropologie der Sinne* I quoted above. In order to highlight the dialectic between objectivity and subjectivity, I prefer the word “object” to “thing” as a signifier of the human body as *Ding*—even when the body is not considered as the object of perception, consciousness or action. The systematic argument for this choice is that something which can appear as an object to a subject, must in some sense have already been an object before it appeared as such. As we saw in the previous chapter, this principle also holds for the human body: we do not only perceive a part of the body, thereby making it the object of perception; we also have a basic awareness of the objective aspect of the body proper as a whole.

The objectivity and instrumentality of the body proper can recur on different levels within the more encompassing dialectical structure of eccentric positionality. They can even refer to a whole pattern of behavior. For instance, we can say that Iago uses Othello as an instrument to achieve his secret goals. The word “instrument” implies that Othello is to Iago an object of manipulation, but of course Othello is not manipulated in the way one manipulates a hammer and a nail. The object, Othello, is moved to do something himself, in this case murder his wife Desdemona. In this example, the objectification of behavior still presupposes a level of subjectivity or personhood of the one who is manipulated. The fact that we are concerned with a dialectical structure implies that we can analyze such structures on different levels of our being in the world, and that the terms “subject” and “object” can in principle recur on all these levels.

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79 Plessner, *Anthropologie der Sinne*, 369.

80 Plessner, *Stufen*, 32/70.

## 5.4 THE EXPERIENCE OF THE BODY PROPER AS AN OBJECT OF THE PHENOMENAL WORLD

According to both Plessner and Merleau-Ponty, human beings have a basic awareness of the subjectivity *and* the objectivity of their bodies in the world. Nonetheless, there is an important difference between the two ways in which this awareness is understood. As we saw in the previous chapter, one key passage from *The Structure of Behavior* opens a broad perspective on the body as an object, because the objective body is here not exclusively considered to be perceptual content, as it is in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. According to *The Structure of Behavior*, our body is to us an object inasmuch as we intuit the analogy between, on the one hand, the relationship of the thing's core to its appearances, and on the other hand, the relationship between the body proper and its various possibilities and manifestations. At the end of the previous chapter I raised the question: from what position does the subject have the basic awareness of this meta-structure? If the animal's bodily existence is our starting point, how does our insight in the human "aptitude . . . to detach himself from" (*aptitude . . . à se déprendre de*) the situation, change this concept of bodily existence?

The answer I propose is Plessner's "eccentric positionality", which implies a self-awareness without principle limitations. This does not mean that our knowledge is infinite; it means that we always have some intuitive preunderstanding of every aspect of our being. In this sense we can say that "we know what we are just insofar as we already are what we are."<sup>81</sup> The psychophysically neutral body knows that it is a thing in the world, that it is a bodily subject open to that same world, and that it is at a distance to these two aspects of his existence—a distance which it embodies.

When I claim that the objectivity of the body is just as originally given to us as the body's subjectivity and our eccentric position itself, this may seem to contradict the primacy of first-person experience defended in Part I and in Sections 4.1 and 4.2. Am I suggesting that, besides opening ourselves to the world, we are always at the same time objectifying the body proper? This would be a misunderstanding. I have distinguished between the scientific perspective on the objectivity of the body and our own first-person experience of the objectivity of the body. Human beings are first of all persons who live in a phenomenal world, who can then turn to the objectifying perspective of science in order to restore,

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81 This is a variation on Samuel Todes, *Body and World*, 64.

heal or enhance their mode of being in the world. The discussion of self-perception, and also of Köhler's chimpanzee experiments, showed that there is a first-person experience of the body proper as an object. The turn to the scientific perspective is only possible because our bodies are to us primarily "things" in this sense, i.e., objects of the phenomenal world. The turn to science is not the same as the experience of one's body as a thing, but it is rooted in this experience, in the sense that our bodies must already be objects of the phenomenal world, before science *isolates* this aspect from the ambiguous whole it is a part of. We can only fully appreciate this after we distinguish between the organic and the physical aspect of the human body. I turn to this in the next chapter.

Although the objectivity of the body proper is, in virtue of our eccentric positionality, always already preunderstood by us, there are situations in which we become more emphatically aware of the hiatus between subjective and objective body. Let me illustrate this with an example from Coolen. In Section 4.3 I mentioned Coolen as one of the philosophers who criticized Merleau-Ponty for neglecting the objective aspect of our being in the world. Coolen also defends Plessner as, in this respect, a better alternative, and my comparison of Merleau-Ponty and Plessner can partly be read as an elaboration of Coolen's criticism of the *Phenomenology of Perception*.<sup>82</sup> Coolen borrows some of his examples from art. He argues that installation art can remind us of the fact that we, who look at art, are not only subjects but also things that we need to give a place when we get poised to look at something. One of the most compelling examples Coolen discusses is Bill Viola's video installation *Passage*. This is the example I want to discuss.

When the visitor of the museum arrives at Viola's installation, he is led into a long T-shaped corridor (figure 3, lower drawing). On the back wall inside the space there is a video projection of a children's party. However, due to the narrow corridor leading all the way to the back wall, the viewer cannot find the right position to see the projection: he either sees only part of the screen, or he sees it from a position too close to it.

The visitor loses his attentiveness to the images of the birthday party, and instead senses a concern with where he is standing and how he is looking. He has not decided to do this after an explicit intellectual reflection on his situation, it just happens to him. But it is an experience only embodied beings can have . . . The specific spatial characteristics of the environment prevent the viewer—the lived body he is—from finding an appropriate position for himself—this living body as this physical thing—in it. Before any intellectual rep-

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82 Coolen, *Bodily Experience and Experiencing One's Body*.

resentation of his situation, he has a bodily sensation of not being able to find the right place to be, and, at the same time, of actually being in a place where there is no right place to be.<sup>83</sup>

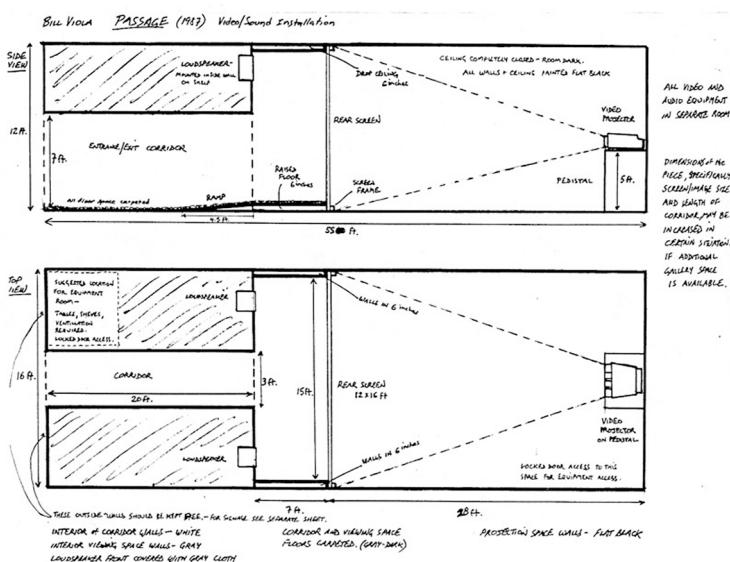


Figure 3. An early sketch of the installation *Passage* (side and top views) by Viola from 1987<sup>84</sup>

The installation invites us to look at a birthday party video. However, it is clear that this is not what the work of art is about. The movie on the wall motivates us to explore, as subjects, what is there with our eyes, to lose ourselves in what we see, but due to the objective location of our body this perceptual engagement is at the same time severely inhibited. The real invitation of the work of art therefore pertains to the experience of the ambiguous relationship between the subjectivity and the objectivity of our bodies. The experience Coolen describes amounts to a heightened awareness of the possibility conditions of perception and the ambiguities involved. On the basis of my own experience inside the in-

83 Coolen, *Being and Place*, 161.

84 San Francisco Museum of Modern Art website:

[http://www.sfmoma.org/media/features/viola/pass\\_n1.html](http://www.sfmoma.org/media/features/viola/pass_n1.html). Although it is hard to read the handwriting, the sketch gives us a good impression of the shape of the installation's inner space.

stallation, I can say that Coolen is right to emphasize the curious sense of place the installation gives us: the installation offers our bodies a place which is not really a place to be for us as subjects. We can thus experience the negative dimension of our being in the world: the hiatus between subjectivity and objectivity.

I have tried to shed some light on the similarities and differences between the philosophies of the body we find in Plessner and Merleau-Ponty. To what extent have I answered the questions I formulated at the end of the discussion of Taylor (Section 3.2)? The question concerning the arrangement of perspectives (question (A)), has been addressed in Section 4.1. First-person experience has the primacy: we are first human beings living in a phenomenal world, and this is also both the starting and the returning point for switching to the scientific perspective. In the current chapter we have seen that the possibility of such shifts of perspective is founded on our eccentric positionality. Only a being that can decenter from her being in the world can turn to a third-person perspective, which isolates the objective aspect of her existence from her subjectivity and her personhood. This does not imply that the eccentric position falls together with the third-person perspective. As we have seen, the structure of first-person experience is itself modified by eccentric positionality. On top of that, the point of view from which we reflect on these matters is also only possible if we decenter from the perspectives involved. The eccentric position lends its structure to all modes of engagement and disengagement.

We have also made some progress with the mind-body problem (question (B)). Rather than thinking of a body and a mind, we should contemplate a subjective and an objective body and, in addition, a personal body that is at a distance to the subjectivity and the objectivity of the body. But this is not the whole answer to the problem; our account of embodied being in the world is by no means complete. So far we have been concerned only with the phenomenal world, not with physical reality. Materialism challenges us to take position on the question whether physical reality is indeed a reality or rather an artificial construction by human beings. In the Introduction and Part I, I expressed my support for Dennett's physical realism, but I have not yet backed this up with an account of physical reality. On the basis of which arguments do I support physical realism (question (C))? This problem automatically leads to the final question we asked at the end of Part I: how can we reconcile physical realism with phenomenal realism (question (D))?

My story is incomplete because a certain discrepancy has crept into my thinking, a discrepancy which now needs to be lifted. I have begun the current part of my book by discussing in what way the human body is a *scientific* object.

To science the human body is a physico-organic thing. Science does not reflect on the relationship between this object and the phenomenal world of the first person. I then moved on to the question how the body proper can also be an object to ourselves as first persons. This caused me to present Plessner's "eccentric positionality" as an elaboration of Merleau-Ponty's rudimentary "aptitude à se déprendre de la structure élémentaire". So hopefully we now have a better understanding of the ways in which we are an object to ourselves. But in what sense have we, after the discussion of scientific objectification, been speaking of an "object"?

So far, when we say that our bodies are objects to us as first persons, this formulation describes the way we use our bodies *within the phenomenal world*. This is clear in the case of self-perception, but also in the case of the sensorimotor functioning of human beings compared with chimpanzees. The awareness of the body proper as an object is constitutive of our activities within the phenomenal world. The same goes for Coolen's example: although the experience described by Coolen does not primarily pertain to the body insofar as it *appears* to ourselves and others, it *is* about finding one's place within the world of appearances. The point is: this is not the only way in which we can address the objectivity of the body. The body proper is not only an object of the phenomenal world, but also an object of physical reality. And it is an object of physical reality, not only to science, but also—in a different way—to ourselves as first persons. I will demonstrate this in the final two chapters.

In the next chapter I introduce the body proper not as an object of the phenomenal world, but as an object of physical reality. In accordance with both Plessner and Merleau-Ponty, I mean by "physical reality" non-living matter that is subject to laws of causality. In this conception, the physical in some sense precedes and supports organic life, human life, and the phenomenal world. I argue that Merleau-Ponty's view of physical reality is not entirely consistent. On the one hand Merleau-Ponty presupposes that physical reality supports the higher dialectics of the vital and the human. On the other hand he negates that there is a physical reality in-itself, i.e., *prior to* or *beyond* the human world. Physical reality would be a human construction on the basis of the lived world, and physical structures would be ultimately structures of perception. As I will show, a Plessnerian approach is not restricted in this way: it includes an ontology which goes beyond phenomenology (in the narrow sense<sup>85</sup>) and affirms the existence of physical reality as both supporting and transcending the phenomenal world.

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85 See Section 3, point (2), of the Introduction.



## Chapter 6

# Physical Reality and the Phenomenal World

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### 6.1 THE QUESTION OF FOUNDATION

Before I continue the comparison of Plessner and Merleau-Ponty, I want to introduce a framework for the discussion of the present chapter and Chapter 7. Let me first sketch the three steps I am about to make. (1) I introduce the meaning in which I will speak of “physical reality”. I argue that, in a sense, the physical *transcends* the phenomenal, and at the same time I forewarn the reader that this concept of “transcendence” does not have any existential-moral meaning. (2) Then I interpret, for now in a sketchy manner, the relationship between physical reality and the phenomenal world in terms of a problem of *foundation*. The question is: is the phenomenal world ultimately founded on physical reality, or is physical reality a concept or structure dependent on the phenomenal world? I show that the question is relative to an ontological-epistemological framework. This framework is necessary for a philosophical understanding of physical reality but it is also limited. A more thorough justification for this ontological-epistemological perspective must wait until the end of the next chapter. (3) I argue that the question whether the phenomenal world is founded on physical reality or vice versa cannot be answered in terms of either/or, because we are dealing with two opposite *directions* of foundation which complement one another. My thesis is that only if we respect the two directions of foundation and the ambiguous relationship between them can we avoid *foundationalism*.

(1) “Phenomenal world” and “physical reality” imply two different concepts of nature. Firstly, nature is the phenomenal world insofar as it is unaffected by human interference. Nature includes landscapes, weather conditions, animals, plants and non-living things, which appear according to the principles of the phenomenal world, such as spatial orientation, qualities (including secondary

qualities), perceptual gestalt-unities and motivational structures. Secondly, nature can be defined as physical reality in the strict sense of the word, i.e., as the inanimate universe of physical bodies subordinate to physical laws. In both cases, the term “nature” refers to something which in some sense *transcends* the human world. Let me explain this for either case. Incidentally, I am not suggesting that these are the only two sensible concepts of nature, but these are the ones I now want to work with.

As regards nature in the sense of phenomenal world, we have seen that there are a number of similarities between Plessner and Merleau-Ponty—despite the differences discussed in the previous chapters. Both Plessner and Merleau-Ponty include a conception of embodied subjectivity in their understanding of human beings. Merleau-Ponty’s description of the thing-structure in terms of an invariable with variable aspects is close to Plessner’s. This is due to the fact that both draw on Husserl’s conception of the perception of things. In both Merleau-Ponty and Plessner, the phenomenal world in which things appear is organized by spatial orientations like up, down, left, and right. Merleau-Ponty would agree with Plessner that, contrary to the animal’s *Umfeld*, the human world constitutes a boundary between immanence and transcendence.<sup>1</sup> Supposing that there is a level of agreement here, we can say that, according to these views of human existence, the transcendence of nature with regard to the human world manifests itself *within* the framework of the phenomenal, namely as the inexhaustible depth of qualities, shapes, entities, objects, landscapes, constellations of figures and grounds, and meanings. The world has a qualitative depth which renders possible a plurality of experiences but which does not allow for just any experience.

So why do I want to distinguish physical reality from the phenomenal world? Are physical objects and forces not already part of that world? Do I not see gravitation at work when I see an apple falling from a tree? It is true that in our normal, everyday life experience we are also concerned with physical forces, like gravitation, machines which work on the basis of the laws of physics, physical objects like the sun and the moon, or the ground we stand on. This is certainly one aspect of the relationship between physical reality and the phenomenal world. The examples show physical reality as *integrated* in the phenomenal world, which means that primary properties like mass, volume, or movement are not divorced from secondary properties like color, sound, smell, or taste. In addi-

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1 Merleau-Ponty, *La structure du comportement*, 201/186: “Perspective does not appear to me to be a subjective deformation of things but, on the contrary, to be one of their properties, perhaps their essential property. It is precisely because of it that the perceived possesses in itself a hidden and inexhaustible richness, that it is a ‘thing’”.

tion, the physical is here integrated in a world which is organized by spatial orientations.

In the current chapter and in Chapter 7 I want to speak of physical reality also in a different way. Physical reality must have already existed before there were living things, and specifically human beings. It must now continue to exist as what it must have been before we came to be, i.e., before we brought along our phenomenal world. The physical can only appear to a *living* being, specifically to higher animals and human beings. If we restrict ourselves to human beings, we can say that the human world is a transformation of the physical into the phenomenal; it is thereby a concealment of physical reality as it is in itself.<sup>2</sup> Physical reality, as it were, hides behind the structure of the phenomenal world. In this sense, the physical *transcends* the phenomenal.<sup>3</sup> In the sections to come I will present examples to illustrate this transcendent dimension of physical reality.

(2) Is it possible to say anything positive about physical reality as it is in itself? This is in fact one of the central questions of this chapter. I believe that a fruitful approach to the problem has two aspects. Firstly, we are concerned with a problem of what comes first: being or our *thinking* of being. The problem thus reflects the interdependence of ontology and epistemology, and it should therefore be addressed from an ontological-epistemological perspective. Secondly, we are concerned with a problem of *foundation*. Let me explain what I mean by this. My explanation draws on Plessner and Merleau-Ponty, but in the current section I only sketch my own position. From the next section onwards I will elaborate my view and back it up with the necessary references.

From an ontological perspective, physical reality is the ultimate ground of the world, because human existence is founded on the occurrence of life, and the organic in turn presupposes the existence of physical reality. However, ontology is never completely independent from epistemology. This dependence renders the question regarding the foundation of the world ambiguous. Nature is our existential basis, but it is also given to a subject or person, or contemplated by her

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2 “Concealment” here does not mean that it was not concealed before human beings came to be: it was neither concealed nor revealed. Appearance and hiding develop simultaneously.

3 I am aware that my formulations lead to awkward combinations if we take the metaphors involved literally: the *basis* of human existence would at the same time *transcend* it. The first expression points down; the second suggests upward (or forward) movement. Unfortunately, there are no better alternatives. Since we are concerned with dead metaphors (in Ricoeur’s sense), I trust my account is still understandable.

theoretically. In addition, the person's knowledge is socially embedded. This means that, from the ontological-epistemological perspective, our relationship with nature has two poles which are both candidate for constituting the foundation of our being in the world: on the one hand physical reality and on the other hand the socially embedded ego (the first person of experience). The ego depends on physical reality as an ontic presupposition for her bodily existence, but at the same time the physical can only be real *to* somebody if there is a person in the first place.

When we search for a foundation of our existence in nature we aim not only at understanding how lower nature is integrated in the higher levels of living nature. We want to understand how nature at the same time persists as what it must have been before the organic and human life came into existence. In Merleau-Ponty's view of natural history, the physical is integrated into the order of the vital and the human. Plessner's view is in this respect similar: physical nature is transformed into (a) plant life and correlatively the medium of the plant, (b) the animal and correlatively the surrounding field (*Umfeld*), and (c) human beings and correlatively the phenomenal world. In both Merleau-Ponty and Plessner, physical reality is at the same time regarded as a *precondition* for life, human life, and the phenomenal world. This leads to the paradox mentioned: the physical appears to us as a phenomenal world, and yet we know, on the basis of the history of nature, that it must at the same time precede our relationship to the phenomenal and persist as this precondition. Insofar as it precedes and supports the phenomenal world, physical reality *is not phenomenal*. This is a logical necessity.

(3) I argue that we should not discard this paradox as a contradiction but rather accept it and think it through. This is what some philosophers fail to do. Both reductive and eliminative materialism only accept physical reality as the foundation of our existence. As I will show in the sections to come, Merleau-Ponty's case is more complicated, because he is not entirely consistent. In some passages he embraces both phenomenal realism and physical realism, but in other passages he treats physical reality either as a mere perceptual structure or as a theoretical construct on the basis of the phenomenal world. He then denies the physical universe its reality independent of a subject. When Merleau-Ponty rejects physical realism in the name of phenomenal realism, he takes the position exactly opposite to the materialism that he wants to overcome. Although I embrace physical realism, I do not accept the materialistic reduction of the phenomenal to the physical. And although I accept Merleau-Ponty's phenomenal realism, I do not subscribe to his claim that physical reality is a mere perceptual structure or an intellectual construction.

The alternative to these positions is that we rephrase the problem by saying that there are two *directions* of foundation, which are complementary.<sup>4</sup> That is the view which I think ensues from Plessner's double aspect of subject and object. But as noted above, Merleau-Ponty's dialectical approach in *The Structure of Behavior* contains the same productive paradox. In my view, there are two directions in which we can seek a ground of our existence: nature as the ground for our perceptual and reflective openness to the world, and our openness as constitutive of nature's appearance and of our contemplation of nature. Only in this way can we reconcile physical realism and phenomenal realism. The aim of this chapter and the next is to argue this point.

As just noted, the question of foundation is relative to an ontological-epistemological framework. This may be a controversial aspect of my account. Existential philosophy, phenomenology, and hermeneutics often want to go beyond ontology and especially epistemology, because these approaches would be too neutral or too abstract, or because they would be foundationalist or representationalist. At the end of the next chapter I argue that these criticisms do not apply to the framework I am here presenting. But at the same time I agree that the ontological-epistemological perspective is not all there is. I will also reflect on the differences and interconnections between this framework and the broader ex-

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4 The idea of “two directions of foundation” is inspired by Plessner, but the way I use this phrase also deviates from Plessner’s use. Although Plessner’s aim, in *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, is to understand the relationship between nature and the human world, “nature” in the sense of physical reality is not extensively discussed. When Plessner describes his approach of the relationship between the human being and nature, he mentions two directions of exploration: the horizontal and the vertical. The horizontal direction, says Plessner, explores human existence as “it is manifest in his acts and his suffering” (*Stufen*, 32/70). The vertical direction explores man’s place “as an organism within the chain of organisms” (*ibid.*). Plessner states that the *Stufen* is dedicated to the vertical direction, and this is largely true, but Plessner here also describes how we are subjectively open to the external world, and how we are persons in a social world—which are elements of a horizontal approach. The question of the current chapter and the next is inspired by the doubleness of Plessner’s horizontal and vertical directions, but there is also a difference: my question aims at an understanding of the place of human beings, not only among other organisms, but also in relation to the physical. As I will show, the *Stufen* nonetheless provides the right framework to deal with physical reality and Plessner’s *Die Einheit der Sinne* provides further support for my approach.

istential-moral framework philosophy has to work with. I will show that both approaches overlap and are complementary.

## 6.2 PHYSICAL SYSTEMS AS PERCEPTUAL GESTALTS

On the face of it Merleau-Ponty seems to support a balance between two directions of foundation. Insofar as the foundation of nature in the human world is concerned, the “structure of structures” describes the principle of our relationship to the outer world which sets us apart from animals. We find here a deeper foundation of perception in the higher, symbolic structure of our behavior. The higher structure can be called a “foundation” because it is an organizing principle which *restructures* all being. For instance, on the basis of human disengagement (our ability to *se déprendre de la situation*), the external world receives the structure of the thing, i.e., the ambiguity of immanence and transcendence.

As regards the foundation of the human world in nature, it seems that, according to Merleau-Ponty, human disengagement with regard to perception at the same time remains dependent on what *precedes* perception: the structures of *the physical order* which are later integrated into the order of the vital and the human.<sup>5</sup> This dependence on physical nature would complement the foundation of our existence in the human world. Merleau-Ponty would then be both a phenomenal and a physical realist. But Merleau-Ponty never calls himself a physical realist, because to him physical realism belongs to reductionistic materialism or to Cartesian dualism. I have argued that physical realism does not necessarily imply reductionism or dualism and I think that, at this point, Merleau-Ponty’s view leads to problems. These present themselves clearly in his criticism of Köhler. I will first sketch the main point and then elaborate.<sup>6</sup>

According to Köhler, physical reality consists to a large extent of systems of causes and effects. These systems constitute gestalts which possess properties that cannot be reduced to the properties of the parts. Examples of such systems are molecules or planetary systems. Merleau-Ponty accepts this definition of a physical gestalt, but he also criticizes Köhler by making the following two claims. (a) Physical systems are indeed gestalts, but this means they are not real: they do not exist beyond the human world. Rather they are forms of perception,

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5 See my introduction of *La structure du comportement* in Section 4.1.

6 The following critique is inspired by Thomas Baldwin’s criticism of Merleau-Ponty’s “idealism” (Baldwin, “Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological critique of natural science”)

more precisely: of the *scientist's* perception. (b) Physical systems are taken over by and integrated into higher dialectics which have their proper structure and which become the principle of the physical, determining them as lower structures. I argue that (b) presupposes that physical systems are real *beyond* human perception, which is not consistent with (a).

Ad (a). Although Merleau-Ponty accepts Köhler's definition of the gestalt (*die Gestalt, la forme*) in terms of wholes and parts, he radically rejects Köhler's realism: "But in speaking of physical gestalts, Gestalt theory means that structures can be found *in* a nature taken in-itself and that the spirit can be constituted from them. However, the same reasons which discredit the positivist conception of laws also discredit the notion of gestalts *in-themselves*."<sup>7</sup> Note that Merleau-Ponty rejects both the reality of physical gestalts and the reality of physical laws, as both are interdependent. According to Merleau-Ponty, physical gestalts are *structures* and all structures are relations of perception or relations on the *basis* of perception, so that "[a] gestalt is not a physical reality, but an object of perception; without it physical science would have no meaning, moreover, since it is constructed with respect to it and in order to coordinate it."<sup>8</sup>

I do not think Merleau-Ponty's analysis is accurate. But what makes Köhler vulnerable to Merleau-Ponty's criticism is that he uses "gestalt" and "system" as synonyms. Both gestalts and systems are more than the sum of their parts, but only the word "gestalt" carries the strong connotation of being subject-relative. We can agree with Merleau-Ponty that gestalts are forms of perception but still also agree with Köhler that physical systems exist in themselves, independent of subjects.

In the *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty also denies the fundamental character of physical reality, but for a different reason. Here he emphasizes that physical reality is an intellectual construction by science which remains dependent on the lived world: "The whole universe of science is built up on the world as directly experienced, and if we want to subject science itself to rigorous scrutiny and arrive at a precise assessment of its meaning and scope, we must begin by reawakening the basic experience of the world of which science is the second-order expression."<sup>9</sup> Merleau-Ponty's aim in this book is therefore to return to the lived world of perception, i.e., to "the world as this pre-objective individual".<sup>10</sup> In addition, contrary to what science says, geometrical space

7 Merleau-Ponty, *La structure du comportement*, 151/140 (translation modified).

8 Ibid., 155/143 (translation modified).

9 Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, II/ix.

10 Ibid., XIII/xx.

would be a construction on the basis of the *oriented* space of the prepersonal body: “Nature is *not* in itself geometrical”.<sup>11</sup> And finally, the formation of the earth 4.5 billion years ago “is not behind us, but in front of us, in the cultural world”,<sup>12</sup> because the concept of such a formation presupposes our conscious being in the world. I return to the latter passage below.

Ad (b). Let us return to Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the mind-body problem, and see how it is connected with his view of the physical order. Merleau-Ponty says that physical systems constitute a lower dialectics which historically and systematically precede the higher dialectics of the human order. This thought is part of his argument against “critical thinking”. Critical thinking tells us that the lower dialectics of nature can only be *present to* consciousness, and not historically and ontologically prior to it. Critical thinking thus denies the *past* of consciousness, says Merleau-Ponty: “For life, as for the spirit, there is no past which is absolutely past . . . Higher behavior retains the subordinated dialectics in the present depths of its existence, from that of the physical system and its topographical conditions to that of the organism and its ‘milieu’.”<sup>13</sup>

What does it mean that the lower dialectics are the “past” of consciousness, as Merleau-Ponty says? We would like to know this in regard to both types of lower structures mentioned in the quoted passage, the physical system and the organic, but Merleau-Ponty only explains it for the organic: “While critical thought pushed the problem of the relations of the soul and the body back step by step by showing that we never deal with a body in-itself but with a body for-a-consciousness and that thus we never have to put consciousness in contact with an opaque and foreign reality, for us consciousness experiences its inherence in an organism at each moment; for it is not a question of an inherence in material apparatuses . . . but of a presence to consciousness of its proper history and of the dialectical stages which it has traversed.”<sup>14</sup>

So Merleau-Ponty says that our past must, in a latent manner, remain constitutive of our existence, so that we experience it as a “foreign reality” within ourselves. This is a promising starting point, but we see that Merleau-Ponty only explains this with respect to the organic character of our body. The physical structure of the body proper is now described in the terms of the reductive materialism of classical theory which needs to be rejected: “it is not a question of an

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11 Ibid., 69/65. Cf. *ibid.*, 340/343.

12 *Ibid.*, 494/502. Merleau-Ponty’s remark is in fact restricted to “Laplace’s nebula”, but the thought can be easily extended.

13 Merleau-Ponty, *La structure du comportement*, 224/207-208 (translation modified).

14 *Ibid.*, 224-225/208.

inherence in material apparatuses". But how is the "*physical system*" retained in the "present depths" of "higher behavior"? How is our organic and subjective body still part of physical reality which constitutes the vastness of its latent past? Can I experience my body as part of the "foreign reality" of the physical? Merleau-Ponty does not pose these questions, let alone answer them.

Although Merleau-Ponty seems to avoid an answer because he wants to steer clear of scientism, these questions actually do not address physical reality from a scientific perspective: only in philosophy does it make sense to consider physical reality (or the organic, for that matter) as the "latent past" of our present being in the world, or as part of our "present depths". Science would reject such formulations as vague and ambiguous. I think we are indeed dealing with an ambiguity, but in a positive sense. I argue that, although philosophy is not physics, it can still positively speak of physical reality, as long as it addresses the ambiguous relationship between physical reality and the human world. If philosophy takes this ambiguity into account, it can also be informed by science without having to fear a relapse into reductionism.<sup>15</sup>

Whereas Merleau-Ponty's dialectical view of nature is based on the assumption that physical reality precedes and supports the higher dialectics of life and of the human world, thus affirming the *reality* of the *physical*, his response to Köhler implies that he rejects physical realism because physical "reality" would be a mere set of perceptual gestalts. This is a contradiction which remains unresolved. Merleau-Ponty's rejection of physical realism entails that the "physical aspect" (Plessner) of the human body remains unaccounted for. It disables us from understanding how the body proper is besides an organism also still part of the physical universe.

Now let us turn to the passage from *Phenomenology of Perception* referred to above. Here physical realism is also discredited, but in a slightly different way: physical reality is not portrayed as a set of perceptual gestalts but as an intellectual construction on the basis of the lived world.<sup>16</sup> The question at stake is whether there was an earth before there were human beings. Note the equivocation of "earth" and "world" in the following passage:

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15 Lester Embree makes a similar point referring, more specifically, to causality: "It is rather curious that, given its role in science and technology, causality receives so little attention in phenomenology. Perhaps most phenomenologists throw the baby of causality as perceived in primary passivity out with the bath of naturalistic-scientifically constructed causal explanation and thus naturalism." Embree, *The Impression of Causality: Merleau-Ponty on Michotte*, 319.

16 Cf. Soraya de Chadarevian, *Zwischen den Diskursen*, 69.

For what precisely is meant by saying that the world [*le monde*] existed before consciousness? An example of what is meant is that the earth [*la terre*] originally issued from a primitive nebula from which the combination of conditions necessary to life was absent. But every one of these words, like every equation in physics, presupposes *our* prescientific experience of the world and this reference to the world in which we *live* helps to constitute the proposition's valid meaning. Nothing will ever bring home to my comprehension what a nebula that no one sees could possibly be. Laplace's nebula is not behind us, at our remote beginnings, but in front of us in the cultural world. What in fact, do we mean when we say that there is no world without a being in the world? Not indeed that the world is constituted by consciousness, but on the contrary that consciousness always finds itself already at work in the world.<sup>17</sup>

The world in which consciousness is always already at work is the *phenomenal* world. So Merleau-Ponty says that we have a prescientific experience of the phenomenal world and that physical reality, including our conceptions of the earth's early stages, can only be a cultural construction on the basis of that pre-scientific experience.

It is true that our conceptions of the earth in its early stages are *human* conceptions of nature, but this is precisely the ambiguity we need to address. Merleau-Ponty in this passage dissolves the ambiguity by suggesting that something like the "early stages of the earth" is only part of the human world, nothing "behind" us but only something "in front of us". But the earth is not the world. We should rather say that the earth in its earliest stages is both in front of us *and* behind us. The earth in the sense of "behind us" is not a world, but it *is* a reality. Merleau-Ponty here gives priority to only one direction of foundation: the grounding of being in the phenomenal world. He ignores the dialectic of the physical, the vital, and the human, which he discusses in the *The Structure of Behavior*. According to that dialectic, human life is based on the lower forms of life which in turn depend on the pre-existence of physical reality, including the earth. The early stages of the earth are an undeniable ontic precondition for the development of life and human life.<sup>18</sup>

The one-sidedness in Merleau-Ponty's account of physical reality can be avoided if we respect the two directions of foundation introduced above. On the one hand human life is based on the organic and on physical reality; on the other

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17 Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 494/502.

18 Cf. Thomas Baldwin, "Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological critique of natural science". Referring to the quoted passage, Baldwin argues that Merleau-Ponty, if he wants to be consistent, has to discard "much of contemporary cosmology", 210.

hand we live in a phenomenal world, and whatever we say about physical reality, we cannot detach ourselves from our human perspective. Our being bound to a human perspective does not imply that we cannot say sensible things about physical reality as something pre-human and pre-cultural. We can explore physical reality as the necessary ontic precondition for life and human existence. In addition, we need to integrate a critical moment in our reflection: we turn to epistemology in order to examine the way in which these ontic conditions are *known* by a *knower* whose existence is already presupposed. We should not try to solve the paradox, but rather think it through. A good starting point for doing that is Plessner's view of the physical. In the next section I discuss Plessner's account of physical reality in *Die Einheit der Sinne* and in the *Stufen*. Then I return to the deadlock in Merleau-Ponty.

### 6.3 THE BODY PROPER AS AN OBJECT OF PHYSICAL REALITY

Plessner finished his *Einheit der Sinne* five years prior to *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*. Later Plessner distanced himself somewhat from the former text, so it needs to be treated carefully.<sup>19</sup> I limit myself to some of Plessner's considerations about the relationship between perception and physical reality, which in my view bear the test of criticism. Then I will connect this interpretation with the concept of the body proper we find in the *Stufen*. Whereas *Die Einheit der Sinne* addresses perception mainly in terms of secondary qualities, the passage from the *Stufen* that I want to discuss focuses on spatial orientation. But this difference is not an obstacle for a comparison of the two works: both

19 *Die Einheit der Sinne*, first published in 1923, was not particularly well received (cf. Hans-Ulrich Lessing, *Hermeneutik der Sinne*, 38-42). Josef König wrote an extensive letter to Plessner which was very critical of the basic thoughts expounded in the work. This *Briefessay* appeared in: Josef König and Helmuth Plessner, *Briefwechsel 1923-1933*, 225-310. For an assessment of König's criticism, see Lessing, *Hermeneutik der Sinne*, 331-359. Thereafter the philosophical world more or less ignored *Die Einheit der Sinne*. In 1975, more than 50 years after its conception, Plessner describes this early work as rather a stage in his thinking than something he had been able to build upon (Plessner, *Selbstdarstellung*, 318). But he certainly does not abandon it altogether. In 1970 he publishes *Anthropologie der Sinne*, which he describes as the distillate of everything worthwhile from *Die Einheit der Sinne* (Plessner, *Selbstdarstellung*, 318-319).

secondary qualities and spatial orientation are constitutive moments of the human world which cannot be attributed to physical reality.

In *Die Einheit der Sinne* Plessner takes a realistic position in regard to physical nature, but at the same time he is aware of the ambiguities involved in this realism. Without an organism that can perceive, Plessner says, there would just be matter subordinate to physical laws: “But suppose it were the case that all human beings . . . would lack eyes and ears and thereby their central sensory fields; then there would no longer be light or sound as qualities of consciousness; their real basis in the energetic conditions of matter would, on a sensory level, remain hidden from us; these conditions could at best be known indirectly, via their effects on the appearances of the tactile and olfactory senses.”<sup>20</sup> So, according to Plessner, if we would not have eyes and ears at our disposal, the qualities corresponding to these senses would not exist, but the underlying physical processes would exist, although they could only be known indirectly (if at all).

Plessner makes a similar observation in regard to light, which renders possible visible qualities in the first place. Living beings which dispose of organs of sight seem to have evolved this ability by adapting to sunlight, which, it seems, must have existed before there were organisms with sight. But what is sunlight before there is sight? The answer cannot be univocal, because at the outset of evolution light as we know it did not yet exist: “The animal does not have eyes because there is light, although it is true that it needs its eyes in order to see light and colors. And eyes did not develop because the organism, by adapting to the environmental quality of light, which without eyes it could not see, wanted to triumph over other organisms. Rather, to the extent and in the manner that eyes developed, the environmental quality of light existed for the bearers of eyes.”<sup>21</sup> The phenomenon of light does not exist prior to but comes to be *along with* the evolution of an organism that can see. In the *Selbstanzeige* Plessner puts it this way: “Nature, without an eye that sees it, an ear that hears it, would not be really shining, but possibly shining, not sounding, but possibly sounding.”<sup>22</sup>

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20 Plessner, *Die Einheit der Sinne*, 38-39.

21 Ibid., 111-112.

22 Plessner, *Selbstanzeige*, 382.

Cf. Du Bois-Reymond’s 1872 paper, *Über die Grenzen des Naturerkennens*, 445:

“The Mosaic ‘there was light’ is physiologically false. Light first was when the first red eye-point of an infusorian for the first time distinguished between light and dark. In the absence of the visual and auditory sense-substance, this colorfully glowing, sounding world around us would be dark and mute.”

In short, if there were no organisms with senses, reality would not come to appearance but only *possibly* come to appearance. What materially underlies our ability to see, what precedes human sight, is not the phenomenon of light, but the possibility of light insofar as it sits in physical processes. The eye realizes a possibility which matter already had: matter is “lightable” (*leuchtabar*).<sup>23</sup> In more general terms, Plessner speaks of “the chance, given in [the world’s] essence, to become objective to consciousnesses”.<sup>24</sup> In all these passages Plessner attempts to address being or reality insofar as it *precedes* its appearance to a subject. Reality is characterized by the *possibility* (“chance”) to become the content of perception and consciousness. This “chance” applies to physical reality itself.

But this is only half of the story. If we start from the visible world, which might seem to be located only at a distance from our gaze, we are inclined to imagine physical reality as the behind-the-scenes of the appearance over against us. But once we human beings exist, the body proper is not merely an organism which finds a physical thing across from it, and physical reality is not the Kantian *Ding an sich* behind the appearance. The physical is external reality *including* our bodies, *insofar as* they are physical. So the other half of the story is about our own bodies as part of physical reality. In order to understand the relationship between body and physical reality we need to return to *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*.

In the *Stufen* Plessner distinguishes between two aspects of the body. We are concerned with a further differentiation on the basis of the double aspect of body-subject and body-object explained in Chapter 5. Both aspects which are now introduced are aspects of the *objective* body. The first is our body as a *physical* body (*Körper*), i.e., the body as a “physical thing” (*Körperding*), or a “thing among things” (*Ding unter Dingen*).<sup>25</sup> The second aspect of the objective body is the *lived body* (*Leib*).<sup>26</sup> It is by now clear that the use of the word *aspects* is typical of Plessner’s thinking. The term expresses that we are concerned with two moments which materially constitute one and the same body, but which at the same time cannot be brought to a *conceptual* synthesis: “Both aspects exist be-

<sup>23</sup> Plessner, *Selbstanzeige*, 384.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., *Die Einheit der Sinne*, 59.

<sup>25</sup> Both quotations: ibid., *Stufen*, 294/367.

<sup>26</sup> The translations of *Körper* and *Leib* are borrowed from James Spencer Churchill’s and Marjorie Grene’s translation of Plessner’s *Lachen und Weinen: Laughing and Crying*, e.g. 34-35. Incidentally, Churchill and Grene use both “lived body” and “living body” for *Leib*.

side one another, mediated merely in the point of eccentricity, in the non-objectifiable I.”<sup>27</sup>

The reason for the irreconcilability of the two aspects is that, from a strictly logical point of view, the essential properties of the physical are not commensurable with those of the organic. This incommensurability can be addressed in different ways. In the passage under discussion it is addressed in terms of spatial orientation: as a lived body the human being is “in the middle of a sphere which, in accordance with his empirical form, has an absolute up, down, front, back, right, left”.<sup>28</sup> The physical body, then, is the body proper insofar as it is interchangeable with other material objects, i.e., with concentrations of matter within “the spatiotemporal totality in which directions are relative” (*das richtungsrelative Raum-Zeitganze*).<sup>29</sup> So whereas the organic body has a top, a bottom, a left, and a right, the physical body is unspecified in terms of spatial orientations. This means that we are addressing the body proper in a way which deviates from all concepts of the body discussed so far. The *Körper* in this narrow sense is neither the body that I perceive, nor the objective body of which I am tacitly aware in all my sensorimotor actions. Or rather: it is the partial aspect of this body, the aspect which is turned away from the body’s phenomenality. The lived body prefigures our experience of a phenomenal, oriented space; the physical body is a volume within external space in which orientations do not matter. We cannot separate physical and living body: they constitute one and the same entity. At the same time we can never entirely make sense of this, because there is no conceptual transition between the two aspects: they are “nicht überführbar”.<sup>30</sup> Let us consider a couple of examples, starting with the living body (*Leib*). The examples are from me, not Plessner.

If a person sees that her hand is bleeding, she is at that moment an embodied subject (*Leibsubjekt*) who perceives a condition of her objective living body (*Leib*). This person is not relating specifically to her physical body, since only a *living* body can bleed. In the same way, only the organic body has a phenomenal structure and thus has a top, a bottom, a left, and a right. When we look at a sleeping body we immediately recognize a functionality which is indicative of subjectivity. In terms of spatial orientation this means that the organic body has a higher part and a lower part (regardless of where exactly we draw the boundary) which correlate with this person’s usual upright position, and she has sense

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27 Plessner, *Stufen*, 295/368.

28 Ibid., 294/367.

29 Ibid., 294/366. Here the word “directions” refers to the orientations up, down, etc.

30 Ibid., *Stufen*, 295/367.

organs and limbs to move. This living body not only *has* a higher section and a lower section, the way any phenomenal (not *physical*) object possesses such orientations. In the case of the human body this spatial organization prefigures the body's ability to open up to the phenomenal world and immediately recognize spatial orientations in it. Another way of saying this is that the living body, as the partial aspect of the body-object, is the objective prefiguration of subjectivity. But as long as the person is asleep, the subjectivity thus prefigured in the objective body is not (or only marginally) realized. Only when the person awakes from her sleep and we follow her gaze through the room are we witness to the transition from the living body (*Leib*) to the embodied subject (*Leibsubjekt*). In sum, the living body is not the same as the embodied subject; it is rather its objective prefiguration.<sup>31</sup>

If a person grabs a ballpoint from the table he performs the act of an embodied subject. Since the person oversees his action as a means to a goal (making a grocery list, going to the supermarket), he uses his body as an instrument. The body he uses is an organic body, not specifically a physical body. This is different in the following cases. If I talk to a friend whose eyes are blinded by the sun shining from behind me, I might be able to move my body to a position where it is in between my friend's eyes and the sun. I am using my body as an instrument, but now in the basic sense of "physical object", since my body can be replaced by a sunshade. If I let my body sink into a full bathtub, I might cause the water to spill over the edge, like a non-living object of the same volume would. In this situation it is also the physical aspect of the objective body which comes to the fore.

The everyday-life context of these examples includes spatial orientations, colors, use objects, and so forth. But the principles at work here are not specified

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31 I am here discussing the *narrow* senses of *Körper* and *Leib*, which we find in the passage from the *Stufen* under discussion (293-295/366-368). In Plessner's *Lachen und Weinen* (238-242/34-38), the *Leib* is discussed in a wider sense, as *Leib-sein* (being the lived body) in connection with *Körper-haben* (having the physical body). There, the *Leib* is not a partial aspect of the *objective* body, but rather the embodied subject who controls and uses his objective body (which is then the *Körper* in a wide sense). This use of the body can pertain to actions in the external world and to expressing oneself in the social world. So the *Leib* is here the *Leibsubjekt* of the external world and the embodied person of the *Mitwelt*. Both *Körper* and *Leib* in this wider sense presupposes that the body has a physical and an organic aspect (in the narrow sense), which allows Plessner to use the combination *Körperleib* (physical lived body) for both *Körper* and *Leib* in the wide sense (*ibid.*, 240/36).

in regard to these orientations, colors, and the like. When we reflect on these examples we focus on one aspect of the body which becomes thematic, without forgetting that the other aspects of our being in the world remain constitutive of our experience.

In all these situations, this thematization of the physical body is dependent on reflection—why is this so? What does it mean that when we are *engaged* in these simple, everyday life situations we are not focused on the physical or the organic aspect of the body? Why is the body “as sun-shade” to us not shockingly different from the body that has a skin color and that can bleed? Or better: why are we rather inclined to regard the body simply as the living thing which it (also) is?

Here, it is important to note that the relationship between the physical and the organic aspect of the body is not symmetrical. Since the living body constitutes the body’s higher dialectics, it *includes* the physical body. Otherwise put, the relationship between physical body and lived body corresponds to that between physical reality and phenomenal world. Physical reality is *integrated* in the phenomenal world in a way which makes the distinction between primary and secondary properties irrelevant. I do not distinguish between the weight of the ball that I am holding and its color: all properties are phenomenal. Likewise, primary properties of the body proper are integrated in the totality of the body’s properties. They are embedded in the living body (*Leib*).

This may seem to affirm the view that what we regard as physical reality rather constitutes an abstraction from the lived world. If this view would be the *whole* truth of the matter, then there would only be one direction of foundation: physical reality would be an abstract construction on the basis of the phenomenal world. However, I have introduced Plessner’s distinction between physical body and organic body because it enables us to understand what it means that, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, physical reality constitutes the *past* of consciousness which, in some latent manner, still supports its higher dialectics. The two aspects of the body in fact represent the two directions of foundation I want to keep in balance. I want to use Plessner’s view as a framework for my argument that physical reality is indeed a reality, i.e., more than a perceptual gestalt or an intellectual construction. But it can more convincingly serve my aims if we look at experiences of a fundamentally different kind than those discussed above.

The examples discussed so far limit our possibilities because, in those examples, philosophical reflection is required in order for the distinction between the physical and the organic aspect of the body to become thematic. As noted, in the examples described it does not make a difference for my own experience which properties are merely phenomenal (secondary) and which belong to phys-

ical reality itself (primary). The eccentric position allows us to disengage from the situation through explicit thought, and *then* address that difference, singling out the physical aspect of our bodily being in the world. But, as noted above, eccentricity does not only enable reflection: it also restructures our *engaged* experience in the world, inserts a dimension of negativity or disengagement *into it*. The limitation of the examples above is due to the fact that they concern experiences which can be called “normal” in the sense that the physical is integrated in the phenomenal and tacitly supports human life and perception. What is tacit first needs to be made explicit by reflection. However, what I am getting at is that there is a different kind of experiences, which we can call “boundary experiences”, in which the physical aspect of the body, and of the world, becomes thematic *on a pre-reflective level*.<sup>32</sup>

One such type is the experience of the threat of a natural disaster. Science informs us that non-living nature preceded living nature and also formed the basis for human life. In addition, inanimate nature continues to function in a way which supports our existence, if only by remaining relatively stable. Our existence depends on the stability of our circumstances on earth, which in turn depends on the stability of the universe. A change in the constitution of this natural balance can disrupt the preconditions of our lives. We experience this when natural disasters occur.<sup>33</sup> A person confronted with an approaching tsunami or avalanche is immediately aware of the futility of her body’s resistance to the enormous powers heading towards her. If we are confronted with the threat of disaster we are reminded of the fact that our bodies are vulnerable to the powers of physical reality. More precisely, according to their *organic* aspect, our bodies are indeed *vulnerable* to these powers. This presupposes that, according to their *physical* aspect they are, like all other real objects, *susceptible* to the powers of nature.<sup>34</sup>

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32 In the past few years my thought on this subject has developed. I used to think that, although we can have knowledge of physical reality as it is in itself, we cannot experience it (van Buuren, *Plessner and the Mathematical-Physical Perspective*). I am now convinced that we *can* experience physical reality in its transcendence.

33 This can be extended to natural, small-scale, accidents, like a rock falling on a rock climber’s head. It can also be extended to disasters or accidents caused by human beings, such as traffic accidents, in which physical forces of course play a crucial role. I have restricted myself to natural disasters in order to avoid having to disentangle human and natural factors.

34 I am restricting myself to the ontological-epistemological dimension of such experiences. There is also an existential-moral dimension to natural disasters, which can be

These distinctions are hard to make on the basis of Merleau-Ponty's account or our bodily existence. Merleau-Ponty would probably not deny the self-evident fact that we are vulnerable and susceptible to brute physical forces, but it is important to note that we can only account for this fact if we accept that *in one respect* (according to one direction of foundation) inanimate nature precedes and supports our being in the world. When natural disasters occur, this tacit support of our existence comes to the fore precisely insofar as it withdraws. It is clear that we are here dealing with *causally structured* nature since it makes no sense to speak of destructive powers without reference to causes and effects. Meteorites, earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, avalanches, and floods all have traceable causes and can kill many people at a time. The question to what extent cause-and-effect relationships are integrated in physical systems which are more than the sum of their parts is of secondary importance. Since Merleau-Ponty rejects both a realism of physical systems and of physical laws, we do not have to decide this issue here.

But the concept of a perceptual gestalt remains crucial for our concerns. In our relationship to the powers of nature we are also dealing with nature's *appearance*. From this point of view nature is a phenomenal world which includes appearing shapes, qualities, and spatial orientations. The confrontation with the threat of natural disaster involves moments of perception which integrate physical reality into a constellation of perceptual gestalts (unless we are struck by something we never saw coming). These observations enable me to restate my point: if the physical powers which can appear to us as perceptual gestalts, can also destroy our lives, i.e., destroy the very possibility of perception, then these powers must at the same time *transcend* the structures of perception. The stability of the circumstances in our direct environment, on earth, in the solar system, and so forth, shows itself to be an ontic precondition of our existence and, implied therein, of our ability to perceive. This means that physical reality is not exhausted by either the content or the form of our perceptual experience. I conclude from this that Merleau-Ponty's rejection of physical realism is not tenable.

Both Plessner and Merleau-Ponty find a foundation of our existence in the human world, but this needs to be complemented if we want to do justice to *all* distinctive possibility conditions of our being in the world. We need two directions of foundation which, as it were, keep each other in check. In Merleau-Ponty, all that is real is structure, and structure is always a structure of percep-

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interpreted in terms of trauma, the nothingness of human life vs. the sublimity of nature, meaningfulness vs. meaninglessness, and similar concepts.

tion or on the basis of perception,<sup>35</sup> so there is no room here for thinking the transcendence of physical reality. But we do need to think physical nature as transcendent, because its stability is an ontic possibility condition for human life and the phenomenal world. We are especially reminded of this when nature threatens to become the condition for the *impossibility* of the human world and of perception. Our awareness of physical reality is then a more-than-perceptual awareness, as it grasps a reality beyond the world as it appears to us. The implication for philosophy is that it cannot restrict itself to phenomenology in the narrow sense. The issues under discussion force us to surpass the description of perceptual structures or structures of consciousness. The ontology of nature needs to go beyond the external world as a phenomenal world, in an attempt to comprehend nature insofar as it precedes, transcends, and renders possible our

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35 It is important to note that Merleau-Ponty in one sense does address a materiality or quality of nature beyond structure, but then he always remains within the domain of the phenomenal world. Consider, for instance, the following contemplation of the experience of *color*, which, in a sense, goes beyond structure: “As I contemplate the blue of the sky I am not *set over against* it as an acosmic subject; I do not possess it in thought, or spread out towards it some idea of blue such as might reveal the secret of it, I abandon myself and plunge into this mystery, it ‘thinks itself within me’, I am the sky itself as it is drawn together and unified, and as it begins to exist for itself; my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue.” (Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 248/249.) The emphasis on color illustrates that Merleau-Ponty is here exploring “transcendent nature” in the first sense I distinguished in Section 6.1: the transcendent depth of *phenomenal* nature. This is a perfectly legitimate starting point but it does not address the question of foundation in its ontological-epistemological form, which refers to nature not only as phenomenal world but also as physical reality.

Ted Toadvine, who quotes the same passage, interprets Merleau-Ponty in the context of questions concerning environmental ethics and politics and, like me, he formulates the problem as one of “foundation” (Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 131). However, since he remains loyal to Merleau-Ponty’s focus on the phenomenal world, Toadvine concludes, in my view one-sidedly, that “the world of perception as revealed through experience” is “the foundation of environmental philosophical exploration rather than the secondary world of scientific realism” (*ibid.*). Toadvine only addresses *scientific* physical realism but, as noted, once we start to reflect on the ambiguous relationship between the physical and the phenomenal, physical realism is no longer scientific (let alone scientificistic) and physical reality is no longer univocally secondary in relation to the phenomenal world.

perceptions of it. Of course, this ontology of nature does not replace phenomenology but complements it, in the same sense that the two directions of foundation are complementary.

## 6.4 PHYSICAL REALISM AND QUANTUM MECHANICS

Much of the debate about physical realism in roughly the last ninety years focuses on quantum mechanics, so why am I not talking about this apparently important topic? The reason for this restriction is that I am connecting with our *prescientific* experience of physical reality. This means on the one hand that I present philosophical (non-scientific) considerations about the nature of physical reality and on the other hand that, insofar as I reflect on scientific explanation, my implicit framework is not quantum but classical physics and perhaps the theory of relativity.<sup>36</sup> Let me explain in more detail why quantum mechanics is irrelevant to my purposes.

The central argument of the current chapter is that we can experience the transcendence of physical reality in the threat of natural disasters such as earth quakes and tsunamis. In the experience of such threat we can come to realize that human existence, and thus the phenomenal world, tacitly depends on the stability of the universe and of our conditions on earth.<sup>37</sup> The universe, and especially earth and its specific properties, is the possibility condition of human life and therefore also of the phenomenal world. When natural disasters occur this possibility condition turns into the condition for the *impossibility* of our existence. These events remind us that the universe is, as a matter of speaking, “indifferent” to human beings. I am referring to the universe as the reality which already existed before life, and human life, came to be. Although this reality appears to us as a phenomenal world, it must at the same continue to exist as what it must have been before there was life or human life. In this respect the universe precedes *and* supports the phenomenal world, and consequently, it can to this

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36 I am saying “perhaps” because, in fact, I do not discuss specific physical laws at all. I only talk about causal laws in general terms.

37 By speaking of the stability of *the* universe I do not mean to pass judgment on the question how far this relationship of dependence reaches *into* that universe. We could restrict ourselves to speaking of the stability of the Milky Way or even the Solar System as a precondition for life and human life, but I think it remains hard to decide where exactly we have to draw the boundary.

extent *not be phenomenal*. This is what we mean by physical reality *in itself*, or *in its transcendence*.

The discussion about quantum physics has a different focus. When we turn to subatomic particles such as electrons and photons and try to measure their location and their momentum (or velocity), it turns out that we can only measure one variable accurately, while the other variable necessarily remains uncertain. When we measure the particle's momentum, its location is obscured and vice versa. This is Heisenberg's famous uncertainty principle. According to the common interpretation held by Heisenberg himself and many others, the measurement of the researcher necessarily influences the outcome of the measurement. Our dependence on measurement techniques determines that we cannot know both the location and the momentum of quantum particles. Heisenberg and also Niels Bohr concluded from this that, at least on the quantum scale of physical reality, we have to give up the idea that we can really *know* reality as it is in itself. This thesis has become famous as the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics. Some have drawn more radical conclusions from the results of quantum physics, conclusions which surpass the domain of *knowledge* and enter the domain of *being*. According to Richard Conn Henry, for instance, “The Universe is entirely mental.”<sup>38</sup> In this view, we have to give up the idea that a physical reality exterior to our minds exists at all.

At the other end of the spectrum there is debate about the question whether the uncertainty established by quantum physics is in fact not a property of the reality itself which is measured, rather than a property of the relationship between subjective measurement and object.<sup>39</sup> This debate has been fuelled by recent research which, on the basis of weak measurements before and after the interaction between particle and the “strong” measurement apparatus, suggests that the uncertainty is in the physical system as such, independent of our observation of it.<sup>40</sup> Whereas the Copenhagen interpretation appears to point to the subject-relativity of physical reality, these more recent findings seem to imply that quantum mechanics does not make physical reality any more subject-relative than

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38 Conn Henry, “The Mental Universe”, 29.

39 Rohrlich, in *From Paradox to Reality*, 147-152, 175-180, defends the realist position, as does, more recently, Karakostas in “Realism and Objectivism in Quantum Mechanics”. Both authors point out that quantum reality differs essentially from classical reality, but that both are aspects of physical reality as a whole.

40 Rozema et al., “Violation of Heisenberg’s Measurement-Disturbance Relationship by Weak Measurements”. For a criticism of Rozema’s article, cf. Busch et al., “Proof of Heisenberg’s Error-Disturbance Relation”.

Newtonian mechanics. I am not competent to judge this issue, but it is interesting to note that theoretical reflection on quantum mechanics does not automatically lead to the rejection of physical realism, as is often believed. In fact there is a wide array of positions regarding the philosophical consequences of quantum mechanics.

What is more important within the present context is that quantum mechanics does not affect my own argument concerning physical realism, which as just noted is based on a completely different approach. I do not start from problems concerning the certainty of empirical knowledge about the true location or momentum of subatomic particles, let alone use such considerations as a spring-board for ontological/metaphysical claims about the existence or nonexistence of the physical universe. I start from physical reality as it appears on the scale of our factual, prescientific lives, while at the same time addressing how physical reality *transcends* our lives. I discuss natural disasters because they reveal a side of physical reality which is normally turned away from us. Although we may be uncertain about the location/moment of a particle on a microscale, we cannot doubt the physical forces which present themselves on a human scale. If an avalanche (or tsunami, lava stream, meteorite, and so forth) approaches you and threatens to get to you before you can get out of the away, there is absolutely no room—no time, in fact—for a theoretical doubt of the whereabouts of the avalanche. Incidentally, quantum physics does not give you reason for such scepticism in the first place: according to the widely accepted correspondence principle first formulated by Bohr, quantum and classical mechanics complement one another so that we can keep relying on classical mechanics when dealing with physical forces on a human or larger than human scale. If we would nonetheless want to call into question the independent reality of the physical, this doubt cannot be upheld in the case of threats from physical nature such as an approaching avalanche. Like any natural event, the avalanche is in some sense relative to perception, measurement, or theoretical reflection. But if an avalanche threatens to kill us this means that, despite its subject-relativity, it threatens to destroy the very ability to perceive, measure, or reflect. In this respect physical reality presents itself not as *relative* but as *absolute* with regard to our subjective faculties. We recognize in this capacity to destroy human life the transcendence of physical reality with regard to our existence. Our physical environment is not only a *phenomenon*; it is not only relative to our subjectivity: it can also *destroy* our subjectivity and this possibility proves that it is more than subject-relative. If it can kill you, it is real.

There is a second argument in favor of physical realism which is also not affected by the debate ensuing from the rise of quantum mechanics. The rejec-

tion of physical realism implies that it is nonsensical to speak of physical reality as it was before there were human beings, or more generally, before there were organisms on earth. It is common sense that human life presupposes animal and vegetable life, and that life as such presupposes a physical, inanimate environment which is hospitable first to primitive and then to more complex life forms. This view is not only common sense but it also constitutes the basis of a vast amount of scientific knowledge, among which evolution theory. However, it presupposes that there must have been a physical reality before there was life, and it implies that a physical universe without life is possible in general. If we are tempted to think that physical reality only exists as relative to our perception, measurements, or reflection, then we have to accept the conclusion that human beings have existed precisely as long as the universe. Clearly, this does not make sense from the perspective of natural history.

These two arguments are not affected by a nonrealist interpretation of the uncertainty principle, simply because I choose a different starting point. It might be true that we cannot know, on a quantum scale, the definite properties of reality as it is in itself. But this does not mean, firstly, that there *is* no physical reality in itself, and secondly, that we cannot say *anything* about that reality. We can still say about physical reality what classical mechanics says about it and ascribe the causal mechanisms described by physics to physical reality itself. After all, these mechanisms are real enough to kill a person. We can also argue that a physical reality without life, and specifically without human beings, is possible, that this physical reality does not possess secondary properties or spatial orientations, and that at least within a limited spatiotemporal framework it must have the right *primary* properties to support life and human life. The fact that we use our subjective-social language, concepts, and institutions to investigate physical reality, does not detract from its transcendence. It simply means that we are always in touch with transcendence *through* immanence.

## 6.5 ELECTRICITY AS A CONDITION FOR THE POSSIBILITY OF THE NERVOUS SYSTEM

I have been arguing that in *The Structure of Behavior* there is a tension between two of Merleau-Ponty's claims: (a) Physical systems are not real: they do not exist beyond the human world. Rather they are forms of perception, more precisely: of the *scientist's* perception. (b) Physical systems are taken over by and integrated into the higher dialectics of the vital and the human, dialectics which have their proper structure and which become the principle of physical systems, de-

termining them as lower structures. Thesis (b) not only affirms that the higher structures of behavior, once they have come to be, constitute the foundation (the principle) of lower structures; it also presupposes a relationship of foundation which runs in the opposite direction: physical reality must already have existed before living beings and specifically human beings came to be, it must in some paradoxical sense continue to exist as what it must have been, and this existence must function as an ontic support for life and human life.

So far I have addressed the tension between these two claims by focusing on the macroscale, or intermediate scale, of the human body as susceptible and vulnerable to the physical powers that manifest themselves in natural disasters. I then argued why the discussion about physical realism in the context of quantum mechanics does not touch on my argument. But I do want to address the microscale of neural processes. Does the same tension within Merleau-Ponty's claims present itself in his discussion of the brain?

In the first two parts of *The Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty shows that physical and chemical mechanisms on the microscale of the nervous system cannot explain how the organism as a whole responds to the situation it finds over against it. He points out, for instance, that a local lesion in the cerebral cortex can cause global changes in the organism's behavior, and that, vice versa, a set of scattered lesions can cause one definable change in a part of the behavior of the organism.<sup>41</sup> Illnesses which have a clear physical cause can be traced down to a location in the brain where the illness started, but with mental illness without physical causes this is often impossible. Here, the principle holds true that "the symptom is an organism's response to a question from the milieu".<sup>42</sup>

Notwithstanding this holistic approach, Merleau-Ponty acknowledges, albeit in passing, that physical-chemical processes on the microscale simply *need to take place* in order for the organism to function on its proper scale: "This whole [of nerve events] can be only the *condition of existence* of such and such a sensible scene; it accounts for the *fact that* I perceive but not for *that which* I perceive, not for the scene as such since this latter is presupposed in a complete definition of the nerve process."<sup>43</sup> Although Merleau-Ponty is here criticizing the reduction of perception to a set of neural events, he makes clear that these neural events are an ontic (but not causal) precondition of our perceptual experience. Here it seems that Merleau-Ponty keeps open the two directions of foundation distinguished above. The quoted passage precedes the one about the disintegra-

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41 Merleau-Ponty, *La structure du comportement*, 66/62.

42 Ibid., 67/63.

43 Ibid., 222/206.

tion of higher structures discussed in Section 4.1. As noted there, Merleau-Ponty on the one hand emphasizes that the physical and the organic are integrated in higher structures of behavior; on the other hand, he shows that disintegration is always possible. When this happens, the lower structures resurface so that, as I have called it, an *ontic* reduction of human behavior takes place. Apart from the forms of disintegration discussed in Section 4.1, Merleau-Ponty also mentions death, which is ultimate disintegration: “the body which loses its meaning soon ceases to be a living body and falls back into the state of physicochemical mass; it arrives at non-meaning only by dying”.<sup>44</sup>

To return to the nervous system, does Merleau-Ponty indeed acknowledge the organism’s dependence on the micro-events in the brain? And does this imply an endorsement of physical

realism on his part? After reading that the totality of nerve events in the brain are “the *condition of existence* of such and such a sensible scene” and “accounts for the *fact that I perceive*”, one can argue that Merleau-Ponty at least in passing acknowledges that the microscale of physicochemical reality is an ontic precondition for the organism’s global functioning. But let us not forget that any kind of affirmation of physical reality is to Merleau-Ponty a form of materialism. Merleau-Ponty distances himself from the materialism inherent in both Sherrington’s classical theory and Köhler’s gestalt theory by treating physical systems not as systems in reality (in themselves/ *en soi*) but rather as perceptual gestalts. So the problem discussed above returns, or rather: it never disappeared because it was never solved. The crux of the matter is that, if physical mechanisms which exist on a microscale truly are an ontic precondition for our functioning on our own human scale, then physical systems are not exhausted by perceptual gestalts. They are not exhausted by the structure of the perceived world of the neuroscientist when, for instance, he looks at an MRI-scan. They must possess a dimension of transcendence with regard to the phenomenal world and can logically only on this condition be the ontic precondition of human consciousness and perception.

Let us take a closer look at this aspect of our dependence on physical reality. My starting point is that the organism is the result of a transformation and integration of physical matter into a being whose structure is not reducible to the properties of physical reality which we find on a microscale. The organism is, as it were, the result of an “appropriation” of physical-chemical properties through which these properties receive a form and a function beyond their physical reality. To make this more concrete, the *brain* makes use of physical mechanisms

44 Ibid., 226/209.

and properties which in some form already existed before organisms with brains evolved. These mechanisms and properties are in themselves physical, but insofar as they are *embedded* in the organ that is the brain, their structure is transformed. A good example of such a property is electrical charge:

A neuron fires an impulse when it receives signals from sense receptors stimulated by pressure, heat, or light, or when it is stimulated by chemical messages from neighboring neurons. The impulse, called the *action potential*, is a brief electrical charge that travels down the axon. A layer of fatty tissue, called the *myelin sheath*, insulates the axons of some neurons and helps speed their impulses . . . When the action potential reaches the knoblike terminals at an axon's end, it triggers the release of chemical messengers, called *neurotransmitters*. Within 1/10,000<sup>th</sup> of a second, the neurotransmitter molecules cross the synaptic gap and bind to receptor sites on the receiving neuron—as precisely as a key fits a lock. For an instant, the neurotransmitter unlocks tiny channels at the receiving site. This allows electrically charged atoms to enter the receiving neuron, thereby either exciting or inhibiting its readiness to fire. Excess neurotransmitters are reabsorbed by the sending neuron in a process called *reuptake*.<sup>45</sup>

Electricity already existed on earth before there was life. It existed in the form of piezoelectricity, i.e., the electrical charge caused by pressure on materials like crystals. Another example is the difference in electrical charge between cloudy regions within the atmosphere, which can cause discharges in the form of lightning. I am not referring to lightning as the bright, ramifying appearance we see in the sky, but rather to its physical reality prior to perception. That it is a reality in this sense is illustrated by the fact that lightning can kill a person without that person having perceived the phenomenon. If electricity did not exist and could not exist on the basis of the structure in itself of the universe, organisms with nervous systems could not have developed. Of course, something *like* a nervous system could presumably make use of *different* physical mechanisms, but this only gives the dependence of human beings on physical reality a slightly different face. The point remains that, although the organism transcends (dialectically) the domain of the physical-chemical, it remains dependent on ontic preconditions belonging to physical reality. This also means that these mechanisms need to exist prior to the organism's emergence. It means that these conditions for the possibility of the nervous system can show their "other side": they can, theoretically speaking, turn into the condition for the *impossibility* of the functioning of the nervous system.

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45 David G. Myers, *Exploring Psychology*, 38-39.

It is hard to give concrete examples of such an event in the case of electricity in the nervous system. Without doubt, extreme temperatures or extremely low or high pressures at some point disturb normal brain functioning, but these factors threaten our whole *organic* functioning, including the physical mechanisms which take place on a microscale. In other words, these circumstances threaten not electricity and the like *as such* but rather the *embeddedness* of physical events in the organic brain. But we can alternatively understand the nervous system's dependence on physical mechanisms by looking at the medical treatment of certain *defects* in brain functioning. Parkinson's disease, for instance, can be treated by sending electrical signals into the brain. This is called "deep brain stimulation" or DBS. A brain pacemaker which sends electrical signals to the brain can be implanted into the body, so that symptoms of Parkinson's disease, such as tremors, are reduced.<sup>46</sup> Exactly how this works is not yet known, but it is clear that DBS is an intervention in the organically embedded electrical pulses (action potentials) in the nervous system.

As we saw above, Merleau-Ponty argues against "critical thinking" by stating that the lower dialectics of human existence, the latent past of the organism, must be preserved within that organism, but he only elaborates this in terms of the organic. I quoted: "for us consciousness experiences its inherence in an organism at each moment; for it is not a question of an inherence in material apparatuses . . . but of a presence to consciousness of its proper history and of the dialectical stages which it has traversed."<sup>47</sup>

The example of deep brain stimulation illustrates that not only the organic but also physical reality belongs to the "latent past" of the organism which is integrated in its present. In this sense "physical apparatuses" *are* integrated in the body. It illustrates that physical mechanism on a microscale is an ontic precondition for the holistic functioning of the human organism. As noted earlier, the objection that we have now turned to a scientific (neurophysiological) perspective does not hold, because we are not reducing behavior to causally determined matter but rather exploring the ambiguous relationship between the physical aspect of the human body and its organic aspect, and between the lower dialectics of causal mechanism and the higher dialectics of first-person experience of the world. So although we are processing scientific results, we are doing so on a level where we can try to bridge the gaps between the various perspectives involved. There is, however, a certain logical condition for this to work, which I

46 J. Volkmann, "Deep Brain Stimulation for the Treatment of Parkinson's Disease" (review).

47 Merleau-Ponty, *La structure du comportement*, 224-225/208.

have not yet addressed: as Merleau-Ponty rightly points out, physical reality is an ontic condition for human behavior but not a causal condition. This implies that there is *discontinuity* between the different levels (and scales) of being under discussion. I will end this section by extending this thought. In the next section I try to sum up in what sense the physical is *real*. I also explain the difference between the *experience* of physical reality's transcendence and our *contemplation* of it.

My criticism of Merleau-Ponty aims at his rejection of physical realism. However, as noted, Merleau-Ponty is not consistent about this: sometimes he *does* presuppose the reality of the physical. We need to take this side of Merleau-Ponty seriously, too. The discussion in the previous section of Merleau-Ponty's view of physical reality implies that an account of the relationship between the human world and physical reality needs to fulfill two requirements. On the one hand we need to steer clear of a reduction of our being in the world to a complex system of physical events. On the other hand we need to recognize physical reality as the past of our being in the world which remains constitutive of it. It seems impossible to fully understand how both demands can be met. Perhaps this is what leads Merleau-Ponty to ultimately accept only one direction of foundation. The alternative is that we accept that in a sense it *is* not fully understandable how physical reality still supports our being in the world, in all its dimensions and its richness.

Let me explain what I mean by this. In the discussion of eccentric positionality we addressed the problem of a fundamental hiatus between our openness to the outer world and our being objectively part of that world. In this context Plessner speaks of the “unfathomable character” (*Unergründlichkeit*)<sup>48</sup> of our existence. We accepted more discontinuities of this kind, for instance when we tacitly agreed with Merleau-Ponty that there are essential differences between the physical, the vital, and the human, or again with Plessner, that there are such differences between inanimate matter, plants, animals, and human beings, or between the physical and the organic aspect of the objective body. In fact, natural science implicitly appreciates these fundamental ambiguities or discontinuities as well, namely insofar as it accepts that none of the scientific disciplines (physics, chemistry, biology, meteorology, geology etc.) will ever be able to subsume the others under its own denominator, because the various regions of nature which they address are governed by different principles. And even *within* these domains there are discontinuities. Physics, for instance, accepts fundamental hia-

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48 Plessner, *Lachen und Weinen*, 235/31. There is no perfect translation of *Unergründlichkeit*. Churchill and Grene prefer “impenetrability”.

tus in nature by embracing wave-particle duality. One important reason to accept such discontinuities in philosophy is that the richness and inner differentiation of our being in the world requires us to resist a reduction of one sphere to another.

I think this is the basic logical precondition for meeting both requirements mentioned above: only if we accept unfathomable hiatus (plural) in nature, and in our relationship *with* nature, can we be realistic about physical reality and at the same time avoid materialistic reductionism or eliminativism. This means that we can avoid a foundationalism of physical reality as well as a foundationalism which dissolves physical reality into culture. The principle of the unfathomable character of reality is thus the main precondition for avoiding foundationalism.<sup>49</sup> This is not the end of understanding: we need to locate the discontinuities and think through how categorically different modes of being are connected by ambiguous relationships or interlacings (*Verschränkungen*).<sup>50</sup> As noted in the previous section, as long as philosophy does justice to these hiatus, it can (and should) learn about nature from science, at the same time going beyond the univocality of scientific theory. Human beings have evolved from other life forms, which themselves have developed from inanimate nature. According to a dialectic of life which takes its past into account this means that there is still a physical aspect to the human body, which cannot be brought to a conceptual synthesis with the organic aspect of the body or with nature as a phenomenal world.

There are further implications for philosophy. Our discipline is not only about positive descriptions of phenomena but also about exploring the boundaries of experience and knowledge. Plessner's "eccentric positionality" describes the fundamental condition for understanding these boundaries. Only because we are eccentrically positioned, because we "stand in nothing", do we stand in a relationship to the discontinuous aspects of our being. These aspects reflect hiatus in nature which were already there before humans existed. We can even say that the negative dimension of our being in the world is a *realization* of these hiatus in nature. In Hegelian terms, but with a Plessnerian twist, the negativity in nature *an sich* (in itself) becomes *für sich* (for itself) in human experience and self-reflection.

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49 Cf. Mitscherlich, *Natur und Geschichte*, 48-53. My reading of Plessner is similar to Mitscherlich's, which also targets foundationalism. One of the differences is that, unlike Mitscherlich, I interpret the principle of *Unergründlichkeit* within the limited ontological-epistemological framework that centers on the relationship between eccentricity and physical reality.

50 Cf. *ibid.*, 50-51.

## 6.6 THREE WAYS IN WHICH THE PHYSICAL IS REAL

The question concerning the compatibility of physical realism and phenomenal realism requires that we explore the *hiatus* between physical reality and the phenomenal world. In the next chapter I show that this discontinuity not only makes itself felt in the threat of natural disasters but also in perceptual illusions. In the threat of natural disasters the tension between physical reality and our entire existence becomes thematic. In perceptual illusions the tension between physical reality and, more specifically, *perception* comes to the fore. In both kinds of experience we get a sense of the transcendence of physical reality with regard to the phenomenal world.

I hope the examples I present in the next chapter will make this more concrete, because I realize that the phrase “transcendence of physical reality” may still sound a little awkward. Physical reality is ultimately real in the sense that it is a reality in itself, which is both historically and systematically presupposed in our being in the world. Since we do not live in a physical reality but in a human (phenomenal) world, this presupposition of our existence is hidden from view. Precisely because it is hidden, we can get the impression that physical reality is only a model or theoretical construction conceived by human beings. To avoid confusion we need to distinguish between three senses in which the physical is real. This classification was already anticipated above; it is loosely based on Plessner.

(A) The physical is *integrated* in the lived world. It concerns conditions or facts which constitute the aspect of strict measurability of the world, such as the weight of the body proper, the distance I walk today, which is in absolute terms *longer* than the distance I walked yesterday, et cetera: “In our dealings with things, which occur to us as big, heavy, slow or fast, hard or weak, i.e., as completely quantifiable according to grades, and which offer a corresponding hold, what can be grasped in number, measure, and weight belongs to a dimension of *qualities*.<sup>51</sup> Technology is also integrated in our lives in this way, because we do not use the devices which surround us by adopting the scientific perspective which was needed to design them. Because in our prescientific experience physical properties are normally part of the dimension of qualities, the distinction between the physical and the phenomenal is not an issue in everyday life. This is also where the Bill Viola example from the previous chapter fits in: I cannot find the right place within the installation because the walls, by their physical resistance, prevent me from doing so, but the properties of the walls are integrated

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51 Plessner, *Anthropologie der Sinne*, 323.

in an experience of the phenomenal world. The phenomenality itself of the world is here not undermined, which means that the relationship between the phenomenal world and physical reality does not become thematic. I see walls that have a color, I see shades, and I only see from the corner of my eye the parts which are not at eye level. In short, I am in an oriented, phenomenal space in which physical properties, like mass, volume, or hardness (resistance) of the material are experienced as qualities among other qualities. For this reason I discussed this case as an example of the experience of the body proper as an object of the phenomenal world, i.e., not specifically of physical reality.

(B) Physical reality is an *abstraction* insofar as science extracts the physical aspect from our world and systematizes it *in isolation* from the lived world in which it is integrated: “Methodical procedure always follows the path of isolation. Isolation, in turn, implies abstraction. If one knows what one has abstracted from in order to attain the isolation of particular ‘factors’, this isolation will not conceal the original context. But science has frequently made the mistake of taking the abstraction on which it rests for ready cash, for reality itself, as if its basic concepts and fictions were themselves set like building blocks in the original context itself.”<sup>52</sup>

Science thus brackets the vital and symbolic norms of the phenomenal world. It is not reductive or eliminative as long as it makes no claims beyond its proper domain. Only *scientism* can be defined as reductionism/eliminativism. From a Plessnerian point of view, the physical is real only in its ambiguous relationship with the other aspects of human existence. The error of materialism is therefore not its affirmation of physical reality but rather its claim that the physical is all that exists. That claim negates the ambiguity science springs from. It univocalizes our being in the world in mathematical-physical terms, and comes home in causally determined matter and mathematical relationships as the final foundation of our existence. Materialism circumvents the problem of the *givenness* of physical reality to a subject. It thus constitutes a form of *naïve* realism. Whereas Merleau-Ponty in some passages wants to do away with both materialism and realism, I have been arguing that a critique of materialism restores the ambiguity of our being in the world, thus transforming naïve realism into well-founded realism.

According to my interpretation of Merleau-Ponty in Section 4.1, science constitutes a secondary perspective with regard to our first-person point of view. But in my view the secondary character of the scientific *perspective* does not

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52 Ibid., *Lachen und Weinen*, 215-216/15-16 (translation modified). Plessner here mentions psychology and physiology, but his point also applies to physics.

imply that the physical *universe* is also “secondary”. Scientific theories are intellectual constructions but they *refer* to something exterior to the theory. Merleau-Ponty, however, seems to mix these two issues up. Consider the following passage from the *Phenomenology of Perception* (the last sentence was already quoted above):

It is a matter of describing, not of explaining or analyzing. This first directive Husserl gave to phenomenology in its early stages, to be a ‘descriptive psychology’, or to return to the ‘things themselves’, is first and foremost a foreswearing of science. I am not the result or the interlacing of numerous causal agencies which determine my body or my ‘psychism’. I cannot conceive myself as a part of the world, a mere object of biology, psychology, or sociology. Nor can I shut the universe of science above me. All that I know of the world, scientifically, I know from a point of view that is my own, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless. The whole universe of science is constructed upon the lived world, and if we want to conceive of science in a rigorous manner and arrive at a precise assessment of its meaning and scope, we must begin by reawakening this experience of the world of which science is the second-order expression.<sup>53</sup>

Merleau-Ponty speaks of the “universe *of science*” (italics mine) and says that this universe is “constructed upon the lived world”. But in what sense does the physical universe *belong* to science? Or better: should we not distinguish between a sense in which it does indeed belong to science and a sense in which it does not? Should we not distinguish between immanence and transcendence? Merleau-Ponty here mixes up the *reality* of the universe with the scientific *concept* of the universe. Consequently, he not only regards science as a “secondary” perspective—which I agree with—but he also considers the universe *itself* to be secondary with regard to the phenomenal world. According to one direction of foundation this is indeed correct: we live in a phenomenal world and apart from a peculiar kind of boundary experiences, our experience is not specifically directed at physical reality. But according to the other direction of foundation, the phenomenal world *ontically* depends on a pre-existing physical reality, as argued above.

The proposition that science constitutes a secondary perspective in our practical lives can also be argued starting from Plessner,<sup>54</sup> but with Plessner we

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53 Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, II-III/ix (translation modified).

54 Plessner, *Lachen und Weinen*, 215-216/15-16, and *ibid.*, *Die Deutung des mimischen Ausdrucks*, 77-78. Plessner does not use the terms first-person and third-person expe-

can furthermore understand that science positively connects with a physical aspect of our being in the world which precedes the turn to the scientific viewpoint, an aspect which can be experienced and reflected upon from the first-person perspective. In this view, science is not a mere construction on the basis of the lived world. When Plessner says that the physical aspect of the body proper “[leads] to the mathematical-physical conception”<sup>55</sup> of the world, he means that (a) the body’s physical aspect is real to us from a prescientific point of view, and (b) this prescientific reality of the physical body is the *potential* object of science. In other words, Plessner is here not integrating a scientific perspective into his view, but rather laying bare the ontic-objective foundation of the possibility of science. This enables him to avoid scientism. At the same time he can understand that science relates to a reality which it does not itself construct. Only in this way can we maintain that scientific theories refer to something. We can attribute to science its truth-value.

(C) Physical reality is *transcendent* in regard to the human world. From a Plessnerian point of view (but not expressed by Plessner in these terms), the dialectical development of organic forms leads in human beings to the sphere of immanence of experience, and thereby implies a transcendence, viz. the otherness of physical reality in regard to the immanence of the phenomenal. The universe sustains our existence by remaining relatively stable, and in this sense it transcends the human world. Transcendence, in this meaning, is not dialectical, since we are not saying that the human world is a lower structure which is dialectically integrated in the higher structure of physical reality. The ontic transcendence of physical reality with regard to the human world is not analogous to the dialectical integration of physical reality into the organic and the human world. The relationship between the two foundational directions is a-symmetrical. Only on this condition can we accept in the first place that there are two directions of foundation.<sup>56</sup>

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rience (or understanding), but uses the classical distinction between *verstehen* (to understand) and *erklären* (to explain).

55 Plessner, *Stufen*, 294/367.

56 I appreciate Jan Beaufort’s careful reading of the *Stufen*, but he overlooks that there are two directions of foundation in Plessner (Beaufort, *Die gesellschaftliche Konstitution der Natur*). The title of Beaufort’s book perfectly describes its outcome: although, initially, Beaufort seems to want to do justice to the double direction of foundation (which Beaufort reconstructs somewhat differently than I have done), he concludes that, according to Plessner, nature is in the end “socially constituted” (*ibid.*, 237). Beaufort’s conclusion presupposes that we have to choose which of the two di-

We never experience the transcendence of physical reality as a pure transcendence. It is not even clear what that would mean. The suggestion that this is possible is a relapse into naive realism. All that we can experience sometimes is the ambiguity itself between immanence and transcendence. We experience this from *within* the immanence of our being in the world. One form of this experience we discussed above: when forces of nature threaten our existence we are reminded of the fact that nature is not merely a domain within our lives, that it is not merely a sector within the infrastructure of our being in the world. Physical nature supports the human world and is at the same time “indifferent” (*gleichgültig*) to it.<sup>57</sup>

When Plessner speaks of nature’s “indifference”, he is not using some kind of anthropomorphism, and neither am I. I mean by this term that physical nature is not only a possibility condition of our existence, but also potentially (and sometimes in reality) a condition for the *impossibility* of our existence. The occurrence of natural disasters illustrates this. It furthermore illustrates that “transcendence” does not mean that nature-as-other is a pure exteriority. Nature is exterior to the immanence of experience but not to the body proper. This is the significance of the physical aspect of the body. Physical nature hides “behind” or “underneath” the human world but it encompasses the human body, and in this sense it encompasses human existence. Physical reality includes the body insofar as the body possesses a physical aspect. The otherness of physical reality is therefore also an otherness of our own bodies. Because the body possesses this aspect it is susceptible to the powers of nature.

I have already touched on the difference between *reflection on* and *experience of* physical reality. The eccentric position not only restructures the world; it also allows human beings to withdraw from the world in order to contemplate, theoretically, its structure. On the junction of inner world and social world, i.e., through symbolic thought and communication, we distance ourselves from the here-now of perceptible things. This allows us to grasp a reality beyond the

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rections of foundation is the most fundamental one. I have been arguing that “physical nature” and “human world” (or “social world”) represent two different kinds of foundation and that we should avoid subordinating one to the other. I have shown that Plessner’s view supports this account. I agree with Volker Schürmann that, in Plessner’s *Stufen*, philosophy of nature and philosophical anthropology are equally fundamental (Schürmann, *Natur als Fremdes*, 46-48).

57 Plessner, *Elemente der Metaphysik*, 187. Cf. Bitbol et al, *Constituting Objectivity*, 1: “a transcendent object is supposed to wait for us ‘out there’, and is indifferent with regard to our intervention”.

phenomenal world.<sup>58</sup> We *see* that the mountain has a top and a foot, that we can go around it on its left side or on its right side, but in our theoretical reflection we *know* that these spatial orientations cannot be ascribed to the mountain as part of physical reality. The theoretical nature of this reflection does not detract from the fact that it reaches out to a reality which is relevant to our own lives. What is under discussion is the reality *of* the appearing world, but then precisely insofar as this world does not appear. So the object of thought is not arbitrary, not without relation to the phenomenal world, not some arbitrary X.

This is where Merleau-Ponty's reference to Laplace and to the earth the way it was (or is thought to be) before there was life fits in. If I state that the earth must already have existed before there was life, someone who only accepts the human world as a foundation of physical reality will point out that it is still *me* who thinks this. The statement I make depends on *my* existence. He will say that, unless you have a naive world view, "impossible" always also means "unthinkable". A universe without life, then, is unthinkable because without a being who can think the universe cannot be thought in the first place. So it is "impossible" in this critical sense.

The argument is flawed and based on a one-sided focus on one direction of foundation. A universe without thinking beings is only unthinkable *de facto* but not *de jure*. Such a universe is possible, which implies that it is *thinkable* provided that, at some point in time, there are beings capable of thinking the thought concerned. In other words, although it is *me* who speaks of a universe without human beings, this state of affairs does not detract from another state of affairs: that a planet with certain properties is a necessary precondition for the evolution of life and human life. The fact that it takes a human being to think this simply does not make that condition any less necessary objectively. If there were no human beings the condition would remain unthought but it would still be a condition.<sup>59</sup> It is rather the task of our sceptical interlocutor (and, as a matter of fact,

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58 Cf. Baldwin's criticism of Merleau-Ponty in "Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological critique of natural science": "If we can only understand things as 'perceived' or 'perceivable', then it follows that we can have no coherent understanding of an uncentered, objective, space; for any space we can perceive is bound to be perspectival" (210; cf. 209, 213). Baldwin is absolutely right that we should be able to conceive such an objective space: this is Plessner's "spatiotemporal totality in which directions are relative" discussed above.

59 Cf. Jeff Malpas, in "The Fragility of Robust Realism", 99: "that the *conception* of an object is dependent on the mind—all conceptions are—implies nothing about the dependence on the mind of the *object* that is conceived."

of Merleau-Ponty) to show how it is possible that the earth in its early phases does not belong to our past, i.e., how it is possible that human beings always already existed—not in a *certain* sense, but unambiguously.

Eccentricity renders possible that reflection reaches past the phenomenal world in order to address reality insofar as it does not appear but helps to render possible appearance. In the same move, reflection discovers the body's physical aspect, i.e., the *physical* body insofar as it does not *specifically* occur in our *normal* experience or awareness of the body as a whole. Thought thus reaches beyond our attunement to the phenomenal world in order to reveal a condition of it which normally remains hidden.

I have argued that the eccentrically positioned ego has knowledge of transcendent physical reality. But this knowledge would remain mere theory if human beings did not have boundary experiences. “Eccentricity” would be a bad concept of disengagement if it would not at the same time structure our perceptual *engagement* in the world and lend it a particular ambiguity. So the ambiguous relationship between physical reality and phenomenal world can be explored on two levels, reflection and experience, which are not radically divorced. From an ontological-epistemological perspective, the experience of the threat of natural disaster is a more-than-perceptual experience because it reveals physical reality as an original condition of our existence, and by implication, of human perception. But the threat of natural disasters is only one way in which the transcendence of physical reality makes itself felt. We can also become aware that physical reality is indifferent not to our existence as a whole *including* perception, but *specifically* to our ability to perceive. This happens in perceptual illusions, as I will show in the next chapter.

## Chapter 7

### Perceptual Illusions

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Speaking of the phenomenal world I have, up to this point, focused mainly on qualities and spatial orientation. An oriented space would be totally empty without the perception of qualities, but it is important to note that qualities are themselves a relatively abstract element of perception.<sup>1</sup> In ordinary life we do not just see colors: we see landscapes, interiors, and things which *have* certain colors. We do not just hear sounds: we hear the door being shut, we listen to music, or we hear the story someone is telling us. Even if we do just hear a sound, seemingly without a meaning, without a context, we cannot help wondering what its origin is. We want to know whether it is a natural sound or a sound made by a human being or a machine. The quality is normally embedded in a whole network of qualities, held together by the unity of a situation. If the situation centers on things in the external world, these things are perceived against the backdrop of an interior when we are inside, or a landscape when we are outside. Of course, there are all kinds of in-between cases.

According to Merleau-Ponty, our prescientific experience is all about giving meaning.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, the various elements within our phenomenal

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1 Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 261/263. Cf. Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 63, and Taylor's criticism of the "percept": *Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture*, 36-37.

2 Here, "meaning" is not *primarily* meant in an existential-moral sense, i.e., not in the sense of—to use Taylor's expression—"what life makes worth living" (Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 4). We are rather concerned with the whatness or specificity of things that gives the world of perception its phenomenal depth. However, for Merleau-Ponty this difference is rather gradual. "Meaning" always has the sense of a certain—if only vital—value or a norm which guides our being in the world. Especially

world give meaning to each other. The red of the woman's hair make the green of her coat greener, and vice versa. The distance Jim ran today is short only against the backdrop of the marathon he ran last week; it is long compared to the distance his friend John is able to run. Things possess meanings relative to a context of other meanings. On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty stresses that we give meaning to our world by responding to situations that "invite" us to certain actions. The perceptual field is not a *fait accompli* but a field of possibilities. These possibilities are already perceivable for us even when we are merely passively looking around. Merleau-Ponty's concept of motivational structure refers both to the field of pre-given meanings which interact with each other and to the same field as a field of possibilities, i.e., of our own interaction with the world.

One of the things I would like to show in this chapter is that, according to Merleau-Ponty, spatial orientation belongs to a very basic kind of motivation. On this basic motivational level, the elements of the world's structure give each other meaning in such a compelling manner that direct intervention by the perceiver is impossible. Perceptual illusions can make us aware that there is indeed such a level of compelling motivations. I find Merleau-Ponty's description of illusions in terms of motivations, i.e., in terms of the inner structure of the phenomenal world, quite convincing. However, as I will argue, something essential is lacking from his account: in perceptual illusions we also experience the tension between the phenomenal world and *physical reality*. Since Merleau-Ponty is inclined to absolutize the phenomenal world at the price of physical realism, he is not in a position to address this tension.

In Section 7.1 I introduce the concept of motivation, showing that the kinds of motivation discussed by Merleau-Ponty are very diverse. Merleau-Ponty does not create any explicit order in this diversity. I think there are two ways of arriving at a categorization of motivations. On the one hand, we can distinguish between syncretic, amovible, and symbolic motivations. Merleau-Ponty does not make this categorization but as we have seen, in *The Structure of Behavior*, he does distinguish between syncretic, amovible, and symbolic *behavior* and *gestalts*. On the other hand we can use the distinction from the *Phenomenology*, between the prepersonal, habitual, and personal level of existence.

There is some overlap between the two distinctions. If we take our prepersonal, natural being in the world in a narrow sense, excluding habits which are subject to change, then this is the same as syncretic behavior. For example, in the *Phenomenology* Merleau-Ponty says that "visible beings . . . are at the dis-

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towards the end of the *Phénoménologie de la perception* the significance of responding to meanings in the world attains a truly existential-moral sense.

posal of my gaze in virtue of a kind of primordial contract and through a gift of nature, with no effort made on my part; from which it follows that vision is prepersonal.”<sup>3</sup> This is similar to syncretic behavior, which according to *The Structure of Behavior* is bound to the smallest play of responses from the animal or the human being.

However, when we turn to the higher levels of behavior in *The Structure of Behavior* we cannot make similar connections with the *Phenomenology*. Amovable behavior does not correspond one-on-one with the so-called “habitual” level of existence, and symbolic behavior is not exactly similar to the “personal” level.<sup>4</sup> As I understand Merleau-Ponty, amovable behavior always relates to the external world: it is the learnable sensorimotor relationship to the environment which human beings share with animals. Habits, however, can also be symbolic in nature: calling your wife “mother”, for instance, can be a habit but it is not an action which centers on the world of things. The other way around, not all amovable behavior is action out of habit. A brilliant move by a basketball player is amovable behavior. It presupposes a layer of habits, but the move is brilliant to the extent that his action transcends the habitual level and becomes a unique answer to the situation. In order to create some continuity with Plessner’s distinction between the external world and the social world (“shared world”/ *Mitwelt*), I prefer to leave the distinction between prepersonal, habitual, and personal existence aside and present a categorization of motivations according to Merleau-Ponty’s distinction, in *The Structure of Behavior*, between the syncretic, amovable, and symbolic levels of behavior.<sup>5</sup> I demonstrate that syncretic motivations constitute the *natural* motivational background against which we respond *freely* to amovable and symbolic motives.

The categorization of motivations is discussed in Section 7.1. In Section 7.2 I explain that spatial orientation belongs to the lowest, syncretic type of mo-

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3 Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 250-251/251.

4 It should be noted that the distinction between natural, habitual, and personal levels of existence easily leads to misunderstandings and is somewhat controversial. For instance, the word “general” can refer both to the natural level of existence *and* to sedimented habits. And it is a point of discussion whether habits are part of the personal or of the prepersonal level of existence. Cf. Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 145.

5 Lester Embree also works with this distinction when he argues that the impression of causality, as produced in Albert Michotte’s experiments, cannot be a symbolic or amovable gestalt, and must be a syncretic gestalt. Embree, *The Impression of Causality*, 317-318.

tivational structure, which means it is not subject to learning processes. However, as two perceptual illusions discussed by Merleau-Ponty show, although spatial orientation (in the basic sense under discussion here) cannot be learned, it is subject to processes of *adaptation*. What criterion gives direction to the adaptation? What is phenomenal space anchored in? Merleau-Ponty restricts himself to a criterion intrinsic to the phenomenal world: our striving to get a grip (*prise*) on the world contributes to the establishing of a new spatial level. I agree with Merleau-Ponty that our disposition to increase our purchase on the environment helps bring about the physical adaptation needed in order to establish a new spatial framework. But in Section 7.3 I call into question whether such an immanent criterion suffices for our understanding of spatial orientation. Here I call in Samuel Todes's help. Todes's distinction between the horizontal and the vertical field opens a perspective which allows us to think beyond the phenomenal world and connect this world with physical reality. In Section 7.4, finally, I try to demarcate the ontological-epistemological perspective, adopted in Chapters 6 and 7, by relating it to the existential (or "metaphysical", "meta-ethical") perspective of philosophy.

## 7.1 THREE TYPES OF MOTIVATION

In *The Structure of Behavior* the word "motivation" in the sense of the *Phenomenology of Perception* has not yet entered the vocabulary. But we find descriptions here which have the same purport as this term. In his discussion of animal life, Merleau-Ponty uses the word "occasions" (*occasions*)<sup>6</sup> to make clear that the stimuli belonging to a situation do not constitute a cause but rather a signification, "eliciting a global response"<sup>7</sup> in the animal. When he discusses human behavior, Merleau-Ponty draws an example from the game of soccer: "For the player in action the football field is . . . pervaded with lines of force (the 'sidelines'; those which demarcate the 'penalty area') and articulated in sectors (for example, the 'openings' between the adversaries) which call for [*appellent*] a certain mode of action and which initiate and guide the action as if the player were unaware of it."<sup>8</sup> So instead of the terms "motive" and "motivation" we come across "occasions" and "to call for" (*appeler*). I think that we are essentially

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6 Merleau-Ponty, *La structure du comportement*, 174/161.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., 182-183/168 (translation modified).

dealing with the same thing. Occasions and “appeals” in *The Structure of Behavior* equate motives in the *Phenomenology of Perception*.

To my knowledge, the term “motivation” in the sense under discussion first occurs in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Merleau-Ponty gives the example of the position of the moon. When the moon is very low at the horizon it seems much larger than when it is high up in the sky. “When I look freely, from the natural attitude, the various parts of the field interact and *motivate* this enormous moon on the horizon, this measureless size which nevertheless is a size.”<sup>9</sup> The constellation of figure and background, the relationships between the moon and the elements surrounding it, make the moon large compared to its appearance in the opposite situation, when the moon appears as an isolated object high up in the sky.

A quite different example presented by Merleau-Ponty is the death of a friend which motivates a person to go on a journey: “Thus a death motivates my journey *because* it is a situation in which my presence is required, either to console a bereaved family or to ‘pay one’s last respects’ to the deceased, and, by deciding to make the journey, I validate this motive which puts itself forward, and I take up the situation.”<sup>10</sup> Merleau-Ponty gives this example in order to show that motives are neither causes nor elements of a purely mental life, like the premises of a conclusion.<sup>11</sup> If the things which motivate us were causes, we would not be the subjects of our own actions and there would be no freedom. If they were purely mental elements, the subject would be completely detached from the world and his freedom would be absolute. In Merleau-Ponty’s view, both these accounts of human agency are false. Our motives are in the world and we realize ourselves by taking them up. Our lives get meaning through our interaction with the meaningfulness of the world. The subject is situated, and freedom is real, but not absolute.

The examples show that the range of motivations is extremely diverse. The common denominator in the example of the soccer player and in that of the person making a journey is that the situation we find ourselves in immediately calls for a certain response. Part of Merleau-Ponty’s own underlying motivation is that he believes that we realize our freedom by engaging ourselves, by getting

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9 Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 40/36 (translation modified). Cf. *ibid.*, 300/302.

10 *Ibid.*, 299/302.

11 Cf. Mark Wrathall, *Motives, Reasons, and Causes*.

involved with the meanings the world presents to us. Our motives are outside us, in the world, and we either answer to their appeal or live halfheartedly.<sup>12</sup>

However, it seems that in Merleau-Ponty's view not all motives can be considered the material of free self-realization. In the soccer example or in the example of the deceased friend the motive invites us to respond in a certain way within a play of possibilities. But some of Merleau-Ponty's examples, like that of the variable appearances of the moon, describe a very basic kind of motivation, one that can hardly be explained in terms of "being motivated" to do something. The situation in which we see the moon either large or small is so compelling that there is not really a play of responses. It is not by our own free interaction with the spectacle that we see the moon the way we do. Merleau-Ponty actually does not say that *we* are motivated to see a large moon: the interaction between the parts motivate the moon itself to appear in a particular way. This is not meant in an anthropomorphic sense. Merleau-Ponty describes the relations of influence between various elements within the same phenomenal constellation. This way of formulating actually underscores that we do not intervene in this mutual influencing of the elements of the phenomenal world.<sup>13</sup> Although seeing the moon large or small is meaningful, it can hardly be regarded as a form of free self-realization. It rather belongs to our nature to see things this way. Although Merleau-Ponty himself does not make this categorization, I think it is safe to say that we are here concerned with the *syncretic* level of perception.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, this motivational structure is to be located at the same level as the "atmosphere of generality"<sup>15</sup> of perception addressed by Merleau-Ponty in a later chapter, where "motivation" is no longer explicitly mentioned: "Every perception takes place in an atmosphere of generality and is presented to us anonymously. I cannot say that I see the blue of the sky in the sense in which I decide to devote my life to mathematics. My perception, even when seen from

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12 I think the end of *Phénoménologie de la perception*, including the Saint-Exupéry quotation, offers the clearest support for this interpretation. *Ibid.*, 519-520/529-530.

13 It should be noted that in the example of the death, motivating me to go an journey, Merleau-Ponty does not ascribe the motivation to the person either: he says that the *journey* is motivated by the death. But this way of phrasing seems more adequate to the example of the moon. The difference is that the journey is my response. The large size of the moon is not my response.

14 We are not talking about the way a large moon might, for instance, affect my mood. This affective aspect joins the basic spatial constellation which we are here focusing on.

15 *Ibid.*, 249/250.

the inside, expresses a given situation: I can see blue because I am sensitive to colors, whereas personal acts create a situation: I am a mathematician because I have decided to be one.”<sup>16</sup> Since Merleau-Ponty does not speak of motivation at this point, it is not clear whether he would say that my seeing blue is motivated by the blueness of the sky. What is clear, however, is that seeing the moon large or small can be ascribed to the same level of prepersonal, natural being in the world as seeing blue. What is also clear, I would argue, is that the example of deciding to become a mathematician is similar to the example of going on a journey because a friend or family member has died. I return to the latter examples below.

The fact that by daylight the sky appears to me as blue, or that under most circumstances blood appears to me as red, is not the result of my reaction to what is visible before me. We are here concerned with the most basic level of behavior—or perhaps better: the structural basis *of* behavior. In contrast, amovible behavior is really carried out by ourselves as sensorimotor subjects: there is a certain play of possible reactions one of which we realize on the basis of our needs and an intuition of what seems right. Contrary to syncretic structures, amovible behavior is learned; it can also be fine-tuned or unlearned. I think the example of the soccer player, who is invited by a certain opening in the field, a pass from a teammate, or an inattentive goal keeper, fits in the category of amovible behavior, since the sportsman who moves around the field is not primarily expressing himself on a symbolic level. He is not primarily acting as a person, Plessner would say, but rather as a subject in the outer world. His behavior nonetheless still fits the criterion of being intrinsically open to learning processes. Soccer is a game which we learn; we appropriate both technical skills and strategic insight.

Amovible behavior is therefore relatively free, but it is bound to the here-now of the stimuli that we encounter. This is the level of behavior where signals play a role. A stimulus can be a signal for something else, but only on the basis of the spatiotemporal contiguity of signal and what is signaled.<sup>17</sup> For example, our habitual, automatized response to a green traffic light—start driving or riding—belongs to the level of amovible behavior. It is learned and it could be unlearned if we all decided that green lights from now on mean “stop”.

The fact that we are here concerned with amovible behavior does not mean that other, syncretic and symbolic, motives are not involved. When we are dealing with human beings this is always the case, because human life is essentially

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16 Ibid.

17 Merleau-Ponty, *La structure du comportement*, 115-116/105-106.

characterized by all three levels of behavior. A white ball will seem bigger to the soccer player than a black ball, and a green ball will be hard to see at all, especially from a distance. Such syncretic structures play an important role in playing soccer. As regards the symbolic level, the sportsman might be in it for the money or for the fame. He might feel like a hero after a goal, or like a loser after a poor shot or after losing the match. He might be an extremely good team player, with a great talent for bonding with, and encouraging, his teammates. In Plessnerian terms, being a soccer player is also a social role in the shared world (*Mitwelt*). So although playing soccer is primarily a form of amovable behavior, both syncretic and symbolic behavior are also involved.

Many motor skills function on the basis of signal recognition. If the learning of a motor skill involves the use of language, which often it does, then this process is mediated by a system of signifiers/significations incomparable to a set of signals. Animals use signals but not words. According to Merleau-Ponty, the signal is there for the animal, but the *system* of signals is not there for the animal.<sup>18</sup> Only human beings can treat this system as a language and switch between different grammars. Whereas the system of signals as such is never *there* for the animal, a word is for us per definition part of a linguistic context: a conversation, a text, the language one masters. And whereas the signal functions solely on the basis of the contiguity of signal and signaled, a spoken word or text is not bound to the here-now of the environment. It can refer to something absent in space and time. As the example of the traffic light shows, human beings also use signals. However, animals do not use language (in the sense here presented).

I am illustrating Merleau-Ponty's concept of the symbolic domain, which is quite similar to Plessner's sphere of spirit (*Geist*), by referring to language, but the symbolic domain is not restricted to the use of language: all interaction that works with different domains of structures, which is based on the analogies between them, is symbolic. I call to mind Merleau-Ponty's favorite example of the analogical structures between a melody, a written score, and the design of a musical instrument. Although the thing-structure, the ability to see one thing throughout a set of quite different appearances, is rendered possible by the symbolic level of behavior, it rather belongs to amovable behavior, i.e., to our sensorimotor relationship to the external world in the here-now. It is a lower structure restructured by a higher structure. Or in Plessnerian terms: the eccentric position not only constitutes the social world but also reorganizes the physical environment, turning it into a true *world*.

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18 Cf. Section 4.1.

In *The Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty speaks of syncretic, amovable, and symbolic *behavior* but also of syncretic, amovable and symbolic “formes”. As noted, the French “forme” (form) and “stucture” (structure) are roughly equal to the German “Gestalt” (form, gestalt).<sup>19</sup> But traditionally a gestalt is something which is *there* for us: it means something like “appearing figure”. If we expand this meaning to the symbolic domain as relatively detached from the here-now of the external world, then “gestalt” can also apply to a structure which is present to us in a psychophysically neutral sense. A teacher understands the mistake of her pupil better than the pupil himself, because she observes a recurring moment within a broader pattern of learning she recognizes in many pupils. To her, the situation is there as a gestalt, and more precisely, as a psychophysically neutral gestalt, because the “learning pattern” does not depend on a specific kind type of appearance in the external world. The pupil can make the mistake in spoken or in written word, or the mistake can be derived indirectly from his reaction to a question which he turns out to have misunderstood.

The example also illustrates that it is relative to perspective which structure is really there for us, and which is not. The pupil is simply *part* of the situation, and he does not have to understand this type of learning situation in order to learn the right answer. I propose we use “gestalt” specifically for the presence to us of a structure, i.e., for a structure which is there for the person. Motives are also there for the person, and they are clearly part of the structure of behavior. So we can define a gestalt as a concrete motivational unity. Of course, the motivations incorporated by the use-objects around us are in a dormant mode most of the time: the telephone, for instance, is present only as part of the background, until it rings or I need to make a call. Only then does it motivate my behavior.<sup>20</sup>

Above we came across the examples of the decision to become a mathematics teacher and of the journey motivated by a death. Both fit into the category of symbolic behavior. Merleau-Ponty cannot resist speaking of having “reasons” (*raisons*)<sup>21</sup> to go on a journey, despite the fact that earlier he had insisted that a motive is neither a cause nor a “reason” (*raison*).<sup>22</sup> That should not be a problem: it illustrates that an immediate response can still be well-advised. Even when we respond immediately to a symbolic motive, we are still able to answer the question “Why do you do that?” This means that reasons are implicitly part

19 Ibid.

20 Cf. Erik Rietveld’s distinction between figure solicitations and ground solicitations (Rietveld, “Context-Switching and Responsiveness to Real Relevance”).

21 Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 299/301-302.

22 Ibid., 60/56.

of the response. We can define them as the subjective affirmation of the motive which preceded the response and which is not primarily subjective but in the world. We should keep in mind that Merleau-Ponty's critical stance with regard to reasons aims only at an intellectualist explanation of behavior which misunderstands decisions as based on an autonomous mental process. It is this kind of intellectualist, overly detached attitude, and the illusion of absolute freedom connected to it, that Merleau-Ponty wants to overcome. Merleau-Ponty only rejects reasons which are detached from motives.

The concept of a "symbolic motivation" seems to have some inner tension. The word "motivation" signifies that we respond immediately, but the level of symbolic behavior suggests consideration, the passing of time, mediation. Although it can become clear to me without much reflection that I need to go on a journey, the detour over reflection and conversation is clearly an option here. Can we still speak of motivated behavior if the decision is preceded by a thought process? I think that the possibility of preparing a decision by reflecting on the available options does not necessarily detract from the principle that we realize our freedom by responding immediately to a situation. Even if we weigh all the pros and cons of the journey in advance, the decision, if truly motivated (in Merleau-Ponty's sense), is not taken on the basis of a rational calculus, for it is not possible to *quantify* the weight of these pros and cons. In the end we decide because we *feel* their respective weight: we feel what is most important in the situation or what action would bring out its best possibility. This feeling is something prediscursive and intuitive: it is nourished by explicit considerations, but it can never be fully explained by them. To use Plessner's terminology, we are dealing with a form of "mediated immediacy": our explicit self-reflection and conversation with others is the mediation which feeds into the immediacy of the decision we ultimately make. Motivated decisions are not irrational or impulsive. Although they *are* taken on the level of our immediate, intuitive rapport with the world, they are not hostile to explicit reflection and rationality.

In the sections below I focus on syncretic behavior, which contrary to amovible and symbolic behavior is not subject to learning processes. We do not learn to see a larger moon when it is low at the horizon, and a small one when it is high above us, and we cannot unlearn to see the moon the way we see it. Likewise, we cannot learn to see the sky as red, and blood as blue. Examples like these confront us with our own nature, and they illustrate that we can get our nature in view without turning to a scientific perspective. This is because we are dealing with the natural framework intrinsic to our phenomenal world. There is an interaction between part and whole, an interaction between meanings within the phenomenal world, which implies that we cannot reduce this phenomenon to

a series of events within physical reality. Only on the level of first-person experience do these phenomena show themselves.<sup>23</sup> But at the same time we are dealing with a very basic level of first-person experience. There is no play of possible responses which requires a direct and at the same time well-advised reaction from the subject of perception. The principles determining the interaction between the scene's elements are inescapable; the scene is what it is without the perceiver's intervention, "with no effort made on my part".<sup>24</sup> The only "contribution" of the person perceiving lies in the fact that he is a human being with a human mode of perception. This is characteristic of the syncretic structure of experience.

## 7.2 SPATIAL ORIENTATION AND THE ADAPTATION OF SYNCRETIC STRUCTURES

Where does spatial orientation fit in? In the context of this book spatial orientation is not the ability to find one's way by means of a compass and a map, but rather, on a much more basic level, the spontaneous recognition of an up, a down, a left, and a right in the phenomenal world. I refer to this recognition as "spatial orientation" (singular) and to the up, down, left, and right as "spatial orientations" (plural). Spatial orientation, thus defined, belongs to the syncretic level of sensorimotor functioning. The variety of our spatial framework is bound to the smallest play and it is not open to learning processes. However, although spatial orientation is not something that we learn, it is of course something that ontogenetically *develops* in the human being. And once developed, it can also be subject to processes of *adaptation*.

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23 Thomas Baldwin argues that, insofar as there is no normativity involved in perception, it can in principle be explained by natural science (Baldwin, "Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological critique of natural science"). The example of the moon, which is located at the natural level of perception, shows that Baldwin's argument does not hold. An objectifying approach overlooks the fact that the elements within the visual field motivate each other, thus constituting a *meaningful* whole which is only there for a perceiving subject. Even if science can produce some objective explanation of this phenomenon, it has then already turned away from the phenomenon as such, i.e., as it presents itself to us as perceivers. Baldwin only asks whether science *can* make an object of perception, which it can in a rather obvious sense. But he fails to ask what is gained and what is lost by this objectification.

24 Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 251/251.

Although Merleau-Ponty does not use the word “adaptation” in this way (at least not as a central term), I think it follows from some of the experiments he discusses that we are indeed concerned with adaptation. In one experiment, first carried out and described by George M. Stratton, the subject is made to wear special glasses which turn the visible world upside down:

If a subject is made to wear glasses which correct the retinal images, the whole landscape at first appears unreal and upside down; on the second day of the experiment normal perception begins to reassert itself, except that the subject has the feeling that his own body is upside down. In the course of a second set of experiments lasting a week, objects at first appear inverted, but less unreal than the first time. On the second day the landscape is no longer inverted, but the body is felt to be in an abnormal position. From the third to the seventh day, the body progressively rights itself, and finally seems to occupy a normal position, particularly when the subject is active.<sup>25</sup>

The experiment shows that the ceiling or the sky does not appear above us because particular isolated mechanisms within our bodies cause us to see it there. The phenomenal world has an inner structure which correlates directly with the structure of the phenomenal body: the body schema. As argued in Section 4.4, this body schema includes both the subjective and the objective body, because sensorimotor functioning includes an awareness of the body as interchangeable with the things surrounding it. This subjective-objective space is organized by spatial orientations.<sup>26</sup> The totality of this system, when being brought out of balance, adapts to the situation and spontaneously finds a new balance in a restored spatial framework.

Since in the experiment only vision has been inverted, the order of the world of touch is retained the way it was. So there is a discrepancy between what the subject sees and what he feels when he explores the environment. The restoration of the world’s structure happens quicker if the subject actively uses his sensorimotor abilities. The framework is re-installed by a kind of counterfactual anticipation (my formulation) inherent to sensorimotor activity. The *active* subject persists in being a subject, more emphatically so than a *passive* subject.

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25 Ibid., 282-283/285.

26 The oriented space includes the body as an object of the *phenomenal world*. The body as an object of physical reality falls beyond oriented space.

It is the subject's "original faith" (*foi originaire*)<sup>27</sup> in the world which helps to bring about the world he has faith in.

This is a faith of an usual, of a very fundamental kind. In Merleau-Ponty's view, this is not the kind of faith one can have or not have. We all have this faith, and only in pathological cases, in the case of experiment, or in perceptual illusions is it shaken or undermined. This indicates that the norms of spatial orientation are not part of the human being's free self-realization but rather constitute one of its basic preconditions. These norms are part of human nature, but they are *norms* because they define a healthy and successful relationship to the world. The syncretic level of our being in the world constitutes the intermediate domain between nature and freedom, between fact and true, moral normativity.

When the subject is wearing the glasses, he needs to learn anew to find his way in this alienated environment. We might thus be tempted to regard this transformation, which literally sets his world aright, as a learning process. But the subject does not regain his full capacities by finding his way in an inverted world. He does not change the world by changing his habits. Rather, the transformation by which the ceiling again appears at the top and the floor appears at the bottom renders possible that the subject can resume his old habits. He can do things in the same way as he used to do them. Merleau-Ponty is not explicit about this, but in my view, this means that the transformation taking place is not a learning process. It is a process of adaptation that concerns the comparatively inflexible *framework* of the phenomenal world, i.e., the framework that allows us to develop and change habits, i.e., to realize ourselves as free beings in the first place.

Let me try to elucidate the difference between learning and adaptation in terms of the subjectivity and objectivity of the body. In many forms of sensorimotor learning, both ways of transforming our bodily being in the world—learning and adaptation—go together. In sports, the learning of a new technique is a process of appropriation of a pattern of perception and action by a subject. It is the subject who is learning to use his body in a certain way. An important aspect of subjective learning is looking at someone else performing the action and imitating the required movements. But at the same time we make certain muscles stronger and more flexible so that our bodies are also objectively fit to carry

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27 Ibid., 371/375. Colin Smith translates "primary faith". Cf. different formulations in ibid., 381/385 (translation modified): "the belief [*croyance*] in the thing and the world" and ibid., 395/400 (translation modified): "a kind of primordial faith or opinion" ("une sorte de « *foi* » ou d'« *opinion primordiale* »"); Merleau-Ponty here refers to Husserl's "Urdoxa" and "Urglaube".

out the technique. That is the aspect of adaptation of our bodily transformation. We are here on the level of proprioception: an intimacy of subject and object characterizes our experience of, for instance, making our muscles longer by stretching them. As subjects we feel immediately in our sensuous bodies what stretching is like. But patience is required because we depend on the spontaneity of a process which happens in the objective-organic body: if we stretch too far, we harm our muscles instead of making them more flexible. In this sense, processes of adaptation are brought about more indirectly than learning, because we bring the objective body in a situation where this organism can gradually adapt to the circumstances.<sup>28</sup>

The same holds for the recovery of spatial orientation in the experiment with the space-inverting glasses. Due to the resistance of the physiological body, the subject depends on a spontaneous process within the organism that he is. On the one hand we, as first persons, experience the transformation because we are troubled by things looking unreal or upside down. On the other hand the process of adaptation is a *natural* one: we can only influence it indirectly, viz. by actively trying to resume our habits. So although we, as first persons, are involved, we become aware of the relative autonomy of the objective-organic body, with which our personal experience is interlaced (*verschränkt*).

On this level, I am not responding to anything, not even within a small play. Recognizing an up and a down in the world is not my decision, and neither is seeing snow as white instead of black. This autonomy of the objective body is the reason why the syncretic level of behavior easily gives rise to one-sided objectifying approaches which focus exclusively on the relationship between organism and physical reality. The reason why materialists are so fond of perceptual illusions is that these seem to prove that personal experience is not true to the world. They seem to provide evidence that all experience is rendered possible by physical mechanisms which operate behind the subject's back. It is much harder to attack the first-person perspective by referring to personal decisions like going on a journey.

But we should not create a watershed here. We should not claim the amovible and symbolic levels of behavior for phenomenology and give the syncretic level of our existence away to materialism. What should prevent us from turning to objectification too easily is that spatial orientations are there *for us* and only in this way they constitute a *meaningful* structure. At the same time we

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28 Learning is also a form of mediation and in this sense it is also indirect, but the process of learning is carried out by us directly. In contrast, the process of adaptation is not carried out directly.

have to acknowledge that we are here concerned with a very basic structure of experience. The syncretic level of our being in the world is not the level of free self-realization. It is rather always presupposed in that self-realization, as its steady underground.

So I propose that we distinguish between learning processes which belong to amovible and symbolic behavior, and processes of adaptation which are located on the syncretic level of behavior. I am not suggesting that all forms of syncretic functioning are subject to processes of adaptation. It is hard to imagine that there is a process of adaptation which changes our perception of the moon as relatively large in one case, relatively small in the other. But all adaptation (in the sense here discussed) happens on the syncretic level of behavior.

The difference between learning a skill and letting one's body adapt to a new situation is that the former process is carried out by us directly while the latter is effected only indirectly. When we climb a mountain, from about 3000 meters up, the altitude can begin to have noticeable effects on the functioning of our body. If we are careless we risk altitude sickness, which is caused by the low density of air and thereby oxygen. Symptoms of altitude sickness include headaches, nausea, vomiting, dizziness, and sleeplessness. In severe cases this condition develops into pulmonary or cerebral edema, which can ultimately cause death. We prevent problems by climbing in stages. For instance, we first climb to 2500 meters and only the next day to 3500. At very high altitudes the climbing plan even includes stages of descending to a lower altitude, only then to go back up again. In this way we let the body get used to high altitudes. We are not *teaching* ourselves how to function at high altitudes; rather the body is adapting—a process which needs to be repeated every time we go climbing.

We should keep in mind that in the example, as in any example we choose, the symbolic and the amovible are never completely absent from the situation described. Adapting to high altitudes requires that we use our sensorimotor abilities to go up there in the first place. That is amovible action. It also requires that we were told about the conditions for successful adaptation, or we read about it on the internet. We thus learned about the right way to climb a mountain via symbolic communication. Any example brings to the fore a specific aspect of our being in the world, without, however, making the other aspects redundant.

The syncretic level of our existence does not consist of responses to particular motivations; it rather constitutes the basis of such responses. This basis is relatively solid, but within certain margins our mode of being in the world adapts to variable circumstances. Now the question is: what are we, are our bodies, adapting *to*? My thesis is that both in the example of spatial orientation and in the example of adapting to high altitudes, we are adapting to physical reality

insofar as it precedes and supports our being in the world. This hypothesis presupposes that we accept physical realism.

Before I present my argument, let us focus on Merleau-Ponty's view, because Merleau-Ponty would not agree. When we enter a new spatial framework, as in Stratton's experiment with the space-inverting glasses, we lose our normal orientation. How do we win it back? According to empiricism (as presented by Merleau-Ponty), we fall back on the unchanged spatial orientation of our tactile field. Or the memory of our ordinary experience *before* the experiment helps us regain our original visual orientation. "The reply [of the empiricist, JvB] will run: after putting on the glasses the visual field appears inverted in relation to the tactile and bodily field, or the ordinary visual field, which, by nominal definition, we say are 'upright'. But the same question arises concerning these fields we take as standard: their mere presence is not enough to provide any direction whatsoever."<sup>29</sup> So the question is: what are spatial orientations based on? Where does the criterion for their restoration come from?

In another experiment discussed by Merleau-Ponty (originally from Max Wertheimer), the subject looks into a room via a mirror which "reflects [the room] at an angle of 45° to the vertical".<sup>30</sup> Initially, everything that happens in the room, a man walking, a piece of cardboard falling, seems to happen obliquely. The room appears to be part of an aslant world. But the experiment demonstrates that if the subject looks long enough, the events in the scene start to appear according to normal orientations. Merleau-Ponty explains what happens by distinguishing between two different spatial levels. The first level is defined as the perception of space before the experiment. This level provides a framework for the experience of the room we see by means of the mirror at 45°. The world is aslant *relative to* the first framework of ordinary experience. In the course of the experiment the objects in the other room start to operate as "anchoring points", Merleau-Ponty quotes Wertheimer, which establish the oblique world as no longer oblique but as normal, "causing the previously established level to tilt sideways."<sup>31</sup> The second spatial level, the room we see in the mirror, increasingly operates as the norm of the world we see, not in the mirror, but directly.

Drawing on this example, Merleau-Ponty argues that every new installation of the body in a space is relative to a previous spatial framework: "It remains to be seen what precisely is this level which is always ahead of itself, since every

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29 Ibid., 285/287.

30 Ibid., 287/289.

31 Ibid., 288/290 (translation modified).

constitution of a level presupposes a different, preestablished level”.<sup>32</sup> According to Merleau-Ponty, our experience of space is not founded on anything outside the system of the body and the phenomenal world. But there is a criterion which guides our inhabiting a new space: “What counts for the orientation of the spectacle is not my body as it in fact is, as a thing in objective space, but as a system of possible actions, a virtual body with its phenomenal ‘place’ defined by its task and situation. My body is where ever there is something to be done.”<sup>33</sup>

In other words, spatial orientation is relative to a criterion, but the criterion is not something exterior to the phenomenal world; it is immanent to it. What counts is the degree to which I get a meaningful world in view, i.e., the success of my sensorimotor interaction with the phenomenal world: “The constitution of a spatial level is simply one means of constituting an integrated world: my body is geared onto the world when my perception presents me with a spectacle as varied and as clearly articulated as possible, and when my motor intentions, as they unfold, receive the responses they expect from the world. The maximum of sharpness of perception and action points clearly to a perceptual *ground*, a basis of my life, a general setting in which my body can co-exist with the world.”<sup>34</sup>

The implicit, intuitive criterion which guides us in finding bearings on a new spatial level is the degree to which we get a “grip” (*prise*)<sup>35</sup> on our environment. Spatial orientation is part of the relatively fundamental framework we can call the syncretic level of our existence. I agree with Merleau-Ponty that our sensorimotor grip on the world functions as a criterion for the installation of a new spatial framework, but the question is: is this criterion sufficient if we want to understand what a spatial level is based upon? What kind of criterion is our striving to increase our grip on the world?

I argue that increasing grip is a higher structure which reorganizes the lower structure of space. It answers our aspiration to find a foundation in the direction of the human world. Can we also find a foundation of oriented space in the alternative direction: the direction of nature? As just noted, “[w]hat counts for the orientation of the spectacle is not my body as it in fact is, as a thing in objective space”. Merleau-Ponty does not seek to ground phenomenal space in physical space. From his perspective it makes no sense to ask for a further *ontic* ground of oriented being: “Thus, since every conceivable being is related either directly or indirectly to the perceived world, and since the perceived world is

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 288/290.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 289/291.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 289-290/292.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 289/291. Colin Smith translates “prise” with “gearing”.

grasped only in terms of direction, we cannot dissociate being from oriented being, and there is no occasion to find a basis for space or to ask what is the level of all levels.”<sup>36</sup>

### 7.3 THE PHYSICAL FOUNDATION OF PHENOMENAL SPACE

I think that this explanation of what happens in the two experiments discussed (Stratton’s and Wertheimer’s) cannot be the whole story. But let me start with what I agree with. I agree with Merleau-Ponty that the body proper and the phenomenal world constitute one structural system which functions on the basis of principles that cannot be explained in terms of its partial processes, such as, for instance, events in the brain. There is a certain teleology at work in our relationship with the world. The body strives towards an equilibrium in which sensorimotor action is possible. We need to be able to “inhabit” (*habiter*)<sup>37</sup> a world, as Merleau-Ponty puts it. The partial processes, notably our brain functioning, need to be understood by starting from our embodied being in the world, not vice versa. Only in this way can we explain that the subjective-objective body spontaneously adapts to a new situation, as in the experiment with the space-inverting glasses or the experiment with the mirror positioned at an angle of 45°. This is another way of expressing what we have established before: the phenomenal world has its proper structure which requires phenomenological description, not the isolation of the objective aspect of the body proper. Of course, this does not detract from the possibility of correlating phenomena with processes in the nervous system.

I also agree with Merleau-Ponty that our disposition to perceive the world as clearly as possible, and in a way which gives us purchase for action in that world, functions as an organizing principle which helps to *reorganize* the spatial structure when the setup of the perceptible world has been changed. Merleau-Ponty enables us to understand the transition from one spatial level to another. I think that our “faith in the world” indeed plays an essential role in both learning and in indirect mediations which aim at adapting to fundamentally new situations.

However, Merleau-Ponty’s account suggests that there is a certain relativity to what spatial level we are on at any given moment for, as we saw, he says that

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36 Ibid., 293/295.

37 Ibid., 359/363.

“every constitution of a level presupposes a different, preestablished level”. The new situation is relative to the old situation, and vice versa. There is no framework outside these frameworks which would further define their relationship. According to the passage quoted above there is no “level of all levels”. The only criterion of adaptation is our increasing grip on the world. I think something is missing from this account. I want to show this in two steps. In the first step I follow Samuel Todes’s view of spatial orientation. I quoted Todes above, in Section 4.2, because he addresses the objectivity of the body proper in self-perception. I now want to look into his view of space, which connects directly with his conception of the body proper as both a subject and an object. In the second step, drawing on that view, I return to the relationship between the phenomenal world and physical reality.

Todes demonstrates that we do not only live in a horizontal field, as both Plessner and Merleau-Ponty stress, but also in a vertical field which stretches from the sky above us down to earth below:

In practical sense experience, the vertical field appears to be the field of the common world in which we find ourselves thrown together with objects. And the horizontal field, by way of contrast, appears to be the field of our experience in this world. We orient ourselves in the horizontal field by orienting ourselves in respect to *objects* we find in this field, which is itself *centered in us*. But we orient ourselves in our vertical field by orienting ourselves in respect to the *field* itself, which is *not* centered in us; we find ourselves near the bottom of the vertical field, in like manner with the objects around us.<sup>38</sup>

As we see, the vertical field primarily correlates with the body’s objectivity; the horizontal field correlates with the body’s subjectivity. But this does not mean that our bodies are completely passive in regard to their position in the vertical field. Todes makes a convincing distinction between *balance* and *poise*. The transition from the vertical field to the horizontal field is mediated by our own orientation in the vertical field, i.e., by our balancing our bodies in it. In the practical orientation within the horizontal field, then, we are poised to interact with the objects surrounding us. Our balance is so taken-for-granted that it is easily overlooked, but Todes shows that without being in balance with regard to the vertical field, we cannot be poised to do anything in the horizontal field.

Because poise presupposes balance Todes insists that, phenomenologically speaking, the vertical field has “priority”<sup>39</sup> over the horizontal field. This could

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38 Todes, *Body and World*, 122.

39 Ibid., 124.

raise questions. One could defend against Todes that not the vertical field but the horizontal field has priority because, in our everyday lives, we are *primarily* concerned with the things surrounding us in this horizontal plane. Our activities in the horizontally organized world give a context and a meaning to the relatively abstract fact of our being balanced. The cook in his kitchen has a horizontal orientation: his stoves, ovens, and cooking gear are all in a circle around him. As long as the cook does not drink too much during his cooking, he is balanced, for sure, but this is not what matters most about his activity: it does not describe the art of cooking. We can make similar observations about most of our ordinary occupations. Our activity in the horizontal plane constitutes the higher structure which gives the lower structure—being balanced—a meaning in the first place.

Arguing in the latter way, we are seeking a foundation (or a “priority” or “primacy”) of our being in the world in the direction of the higher structures of the human world. I think this argument is valid. But Todes is also right. We could say that according to the alternative direction of foundation, the horizontal field is founded on the vertical field, simply because, as Todes points out: “Balance in the vertical direction may exist without poise in respect to circumstantial objects; but poise in respect to circumstantial objects without balance is impossible.”<sup>40</sup> Poise *technically speaking* presupposes successful balancing, not vice versa. However, Todes’s view is one-sided as well, because existentially speaking our balance is but a technical *moment* in our horizontally oriented existence. I think that both arguments are valid, and that this shows that we are dealing with two directions of foundation. On the one hand, we look for a foundation in the direction of the higher structures of our existence. On the other hand, we search this foundation in the direction of the syncretic level of our being in the world, and finally, in the relationship between this syncretic level of existence and physical reality. Let us pursue this a little further.

Balancing oneself is an achievement of an organism on the surface of a body which exerts gravitation on the body proper. Todes does not go into the question what this means for the relationship between the phenomenal world and physical reality. But he makes a step in the direction which I have characterized as the foundation of the human world on nature—the complement of the foundation of nature on the human world. The next step is simply the acknowledgement that spatial orientation does not only have possibility conditions which are immanent to the body-world system, such as our disposition to increase our grip on the world. We have to acknowledge that spatial orientation is also founded on conditions exterior to that system: it rests on the undeniable reality of a dense

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40 Ibid., 124.

concentration of matter that we call “earth”, and the power of gravitation it exerts on much smaller physical bodies, regardless of the question whether they are inanimate objects, organisms, or specifically human beings. Our way of being, our phenomenal world, depends on this natural-ontic precondition. If there were only scattered matter in the universe, and no solid bodies about the size of the earth, which could retain water on its surface and have all the additional conditions for life, then human beings and their phenomenal world would not exist.

The spatial level constituted by the mirror at 45° might be real for us in the sense that we can inhabit it and experience it as a fully natural space in which we could act if we were really part of the scene. However, our grip is in this case limited, because we are *not* really part of the scene. The scene—a real room, but mediated distortedly—is a construction relative to our real position in regard to the surface of the earth and the gravitational force which is vertical to it. We have an experience of this verticality by means of a very particular kind of perception. Our sense of balance is mediated by the vestibular system. Of course, this system can also be tricked, so that we could again speak of different spatial levels. But in regard to such cases I argue that one of these levels is more *realistic* than others because it has an uninhibited and undistorted connection to the horizontal plane of the earth and to the verticality of gravitation. Accordingly, the “first level” in the experiment with the mirror at 45° is the starting point and the foundation for the “second level”. After the experiment is over, the subject returns to the world where his vestibular system, his vision, and his tactile sense are cooperatively attuned to the physical preconditions of his life.

We can think of other examples taken from computer generated virtual realities. We can appropriate these worlds and become magnificently skilled in finding our way in a virtual space of a computer game. Merleau-Ponty would be right to point out that we would nonetheless lose our grip if we would want to live only in that virtual world. (People have died neglecting their real bodies while playing video games.) So for Merleau-Ponty the *basic* level would be the spatial level where we do *not* lose that grip on ourselves and our world. But what is the possibility of having a grip on something founded upon? And what do we experience when we make the transition, not to another spatial level, but from “normal” perception to technically mediated perception, as in the case of the space-inverting glasses? When we establish ourselves anew in the world, what do we establish this new phenomenal world *in*? Insofar as we are concerned with things, with a ground to stand on, with the weight of the body proper, the phenomenal world is re-installed in physical reality. It is tempting to forget this when we focus on the inner structure of the phenomenal world, because that structure on the one hand integrates the physical and turns it into phenomena and

on the other hand hides the physical insofar as it remains the pre-phenomenal ontic support of the phenomenal world.

The reflection on the syncretic level of behavior shows that we need a concept of physical reality as something which, in a sense, precedes the motivational structure of the world. So my claim is that syncretic motivations pertain to a level of perceptual adaptedness and adaptation of the human body to physical reality. My second claim—connected to the first—is that we can only understand this ambiguity if we accept that physical reality both *supports* and *transcends* the phenomenal world.

I do not propose that we substitute Merleau-Ponty's criterion of having a grip on the world. Rather I suggest that we recognize that this criterion belongs to the relatively higher structures of behavior. We could look for even higher structures, by giving a more existential twist to the concept of having a “grip” on the world. People who make big existential mistakes, or are affected by traumatic events, can lose their grip on their lives, which immediately entails a deterioration of their perceptual abilities. In the movie *Ordinary People*, Calvin Jarrett goes for a run and falls without there being any object to trip over. We, the viewers, are not surprised, because we have followed Calvin's struggle with family problems and we have seen that, during his run, his head has been spinning with all kinds of confused impressions and thoughts. We understand that his fall is an *existential* fall. Golyadkin, the protagonist of Dostoyevski's *The Double* is so perplexed and devastated by what his enemy is doing to him that, in a restaurant, he cannot remember whether he just ate the meal the rests of which he finds in front of him. He offers to pay for the meal that in fact was someone else's. In these cases, perception is inhibited because people lose their grip on the world, but “loosing one's grip” is here not understood on the level of amovible behavior but of symbolic behavior, because in both cases the problems of the characters are of a social and existential nature.

Merleau-Ponty might agree with this flexible use of “having a grip on the world”, which goes beyond *literally* getting a grip on an object through touch, or getting a clear view of an object through vision. There are structures on an existential level which ultimately give direction and meaning to the relatively lower structures of seeing this or that object—in accordance with Plessner's distinction between “subject” and “person”. But Merleau-Ponty *would* object when I say that the search for a foundation of our existence in such higher structures of our being in the world does not suffice. In my view, this direction needs to be complemented by a foundation in the opposite direction—of nature. As argued above, this means that we face the task of describing the relationship between phenomenal world and physical reality.

It is by now clear that this also means we need to address the syncretic level of motivated behavior as it shows itself in perceptual illusions. After all, the two experiments discussed above *are* such illusions. It concerns the way the organic subject is attuned to a reality which consists for the most part of inanimate matter. When you are on the beach and you perceive, in the distance, a child bouncing its beach ball, it occurs to you that you first *see* the ball bounce, only then to *hear* the same event. This does not prove Merleau-Ponty wrong when he says that synesthetic perception cannot be reduced to the sum of its parts—the parts here being the ball’s visual appearance and its sound. On the contrary, normally we hear and see an event at the same time; the *style* of the visible permeates that of the audible and vice versa, without us even distinguishing between the ways in which the event is there for us.

The example of the beach ball only illustrates that the way our senses are rooted in physical reality is imperfect. It does not imply that our human world is nothing but a complex mechanical system. It reminds us of the fact that the higher dialectics of the human world, which are incomparable to physical nature, are nonetheless still also based on that nature, rendered possible by it in a way which can never be fathomed completely by science or philosophy. In the asynchronous perceptions of the beach ball we experience the tension between the norms of the phenomenal world and physical reality’s indifference with regard to these norms. As noted above, “indifference” means that physical reality is not only the *possibility* condition of perception but also its *impossibility* condition, and that the relationship of “rendering possible” can show itself to be a contingent one. This happens in the threat of natural disasters: then we are concerned with nature as the (im-)possibility condition of our whole existence. In perceptual illusions, by contrast, nature presents itself more specifically as the (im-)possibility condition of perception. Here, our existence is not threatened but our sensorimotor functioning is undermined. But it also happens in perceptual illusions or distortions, such as in the example of the beach ball which we first *see* bounce only then to *hear* it hit the ground. The speed of sound happens to be much slower than the speed of light. Under most circumstances this fact of physical reality does not undermine perception, but in this case it does. If physical reality would *not* be “indifferent” to what it renders possible, if it would constitute a perfect support for the phenomenal world, then the speed of sound and of light should have been the same, rendering possible a synchronic perception of sound and vision under all circumstances.

In perceptual illusions we do not experience the depth of phenomenal qualities and shapes, but rather the tension between our organic-subjective openness to the phenomenal world and physical reality. We experience the tension

between the *norms* of the phenomenal world and the *laws* of physical reality. The norm at work in the example of the beach ball is that the whole is more than the sum of the parts, whereby the spatial and temporal contiguity of various elements motivates what counts as a whole: the sound is “supposed” to be synchronous with the visible scene. Such norms can be undermined because the phenomenal world is only imperfectly founded on physical reality and because physical reality is indifferent with regard to what it renders possible.

I will not attempt to give an overview of all norms of perception—presuming that this is possible in the first place, but it might be helpful to add another example. Let me return to horizontality and illustrate how it is a norm of the phenomenal world. Our active attitude is attuned to the situation of being surrounded by things in a circle from left to right (or from right to left) around us which are present against the backdrop of a (visible or invisible) horizon. Once we are balanced, which we normally are whenever we are awake, our world is a horizontal one. But we can also experience discrepancies between the norm of horizontality and the factual constellation of things in objective space. When we walk high up in the mountains and we look down on a village in the valley, the village can appear to us to be “more under” us than “in front of” us. We really have the sense of looking *down* on the village. Or more precisely, we intuitively estimate the horizontal distance to the village to be shorter than the vertical distance, so that we would expect the angle of your vision to be more than 45° compared to looking straight forward. However, when we look on the map, which in this case needs to have contour lines showing the altitudes, we may discover that the horizontal distance is in fact greater than the vertical distance. The line of our gaze seemed steeper than it was in fact; it turns out that the angle of this line is still closer to horizontal than to vertical. This optic illusion occurs because we experience a situation which strongly deviates from the norm of horizontality. The situation is preconsciously experienced as an anomaly, as something excessive in comparison with our predominantly horizontal world. Consequently, we experience the spatial situation (ourselves in relation to the village) as “very vertical”, which translates into estimations of an angle greater than 45° compared to the horizontal. In small discoveries like these, of discrepancies between intuitive estimation and measurement, we experience the tension between phenomenal world and physical reality. We discover that our perception is not neutral but guided by norms which under “abnormal” circumstances can lead to a distorted awareness of our situation.

It might be useful to address a misunderstanding my account so far might evoke. I have been saying that physical reality precedes, transcends, and *supports* the phenomenal world. The word “support” is not to be misunderstood.

The discontinuity between physical reality and phenomenal world guarantees that the phenomenal cannot be reduced to a physical mechanism. So when I say that physical reality supports the phenomenal world, this should not be interpreted as meaning that it *causes* the phenomenal world. The latter statement is rather the position of reductive materialism which both Merleau-Ponty and Plessner reject. To the extent that physical reality is not chaotic, it is in itself causally structured. Physical reality is also a possibility condition for the phenomenal world, but its status as possibility condition pertains to the relationship *between* this causally structured reality and a world structured by meanings and motivations. The relationship is one between the causal domain and *something else*, so that the relationship *itself* cannot be of a causal nature. It connects two aspects which are fundamentally unlike. In such cases Plessner uses the word “hiatus”. So physical reality is not a causal condition of the phenomenal world, but it is nonetheless an *ontic* possibility condition: we cannot exist without it.

Only if there is a disintegration of higher structures are we dealing with a causal relationship between the physical and the lived world, but insofar as the first person of experience is alive and conscious, the discontinuity now sits between physical reality and an *epiphenomenal* world (the world as symptom). For example, if a person gets lost near the South Pole and she is about to freeze to death, the poor state of her perceptual consciousness is *caused* by the low temperature of the surroundings of her body. But her diminished openness to the world still constitutes an aspect of her existence which is distinct from the process of increasing hypothermia, in that consciousness (diminished or not) cannot be understood in terms of physical properties like temperature, or in terms of the objective-organic effects of temperature. So although her awareness of the world is then gradually turning into the mere symptom or epiphenomenon of a bodily state which has physical causes, this dramatic process can only be understood if we maintain the distinction between her openness to the world and the physical causes that threaten it.<sup>41</sup>

Let me sum up the latest results of the discussion. Our starting point was the three types of behavior Merleau-Ponty distinguishes: syncretic, amovable, and symbolic behavior. I have argued that we can apply this distinction to the scope of *motivations* (in the Merleau-Pontyan sense of elements of the situation’s structure which immediately motivate us to respond to that situation in a particular way). I focused especially on the spatial character of the world, showing that, in Merleau-Ponty, spatial orientation belongs to the most basic level of motivations: the syncretic. On this basic motivational level, the elements of the

41 Cf. Bernet, *The Body as a 'Legitimate Naturalization of Consciousness'*, 55-57.

world's structure give each other meaning in such a compelling manner that direct intervention by the perceiver is impossible. That there is such a level of compelling motivations becomes clear especially in perceptual illusions. The main example here was the experiment with the glasses which turn the subject's world up side down. These glasses *force* me to see the world in this inverted mode. The experiment shows that after a number of days of wearing the inverting glasses the world will start to right itself again. On the syncretic level, we can at best influence the structure of perception *indirectly*, in this case by *actively* moving around in the world which to us is up side down.

I find Merleau-Ponty's description of such illusions in terms of motivations, i.e., in terms of the inner structure of the phenomenal world, very convincing, but I have also argued that something is missing: in perceptual illusions we experience the tension between the phenomenal world and *physical reality*. Merleau-Ponty is inclined to restrict himself to the description of the inner structure of the phenomenal world. In the case of our distorted experience of an up and a down in the world, he suggests that our experience of the horizontal plane is relative only to the *phenomenal* situation we find ourselves in, i.e., to the extent we can get a *grip (prise)* on the world.

This was the reason I turned to Samuel Todes, who focuses on the fact that our experience of an up and a down is based on our experience of *gravitation*. On the basis of Todes, I argued that only *some* possibility conditions of spatial orientation are intrinsic to the phenomenal world. Other conditions, the ontic-natural ones, belong to physical reality. And we can say this without turning from philosophy to science. Gravitation is a possibility condition of the latter category. I hope the broader meaning of this argument is clear: Merleau-Ponty is inclined to absolutize the phenomenal world and to neglect the foundation of the world on physical reality. Plessner's physical realism enables us to complement Merleau-Ponty's view, and to respect that there are two directions of foundation, neither of which has the primacy. Just like the discussion of natural disasters in the previous chapter, the discussion of perceptual illusions leads to the conclusion that both phenomenal realism and physical realism are indispensable if we want to make sense of our bodily being in the world.

In order to further clarify the connection between the human being's eccentric position and his relationship to physical reality, I will discuss two more perceptual illusions: the illusion of the moving train, and the illusory experience of movement which astronaut Gus Grissom had in outer space.

Merleau-Ponty discusses the illusion of the leaving trains both in the *Phenomenology* and in *Sens et Non-Sens*.<sup>42</sup> It is a situation most people are familiar with: I am waiting for my train to leave, and all I can see through the window of my compartment is the train right next to mine; if the other train leaves first, I will be tricked into believing that it is in fact my train which is leaving at that moment. Merleau-Ponty refers to Koffka, who points out that whether *my* train or the other train appears to be in motion, depends on whether I have been focusing on the other train or on the interior of my own compartment: “The chief rule for these ambiguous cases is this: that the objects which form the (dynamic) center of our visual world are at the same time our points of anchorage. When I am playing cards in my compartment I see the train move on the next track even if it is in reality my own train which is moving, but when I am looking at the other train, searching perhaps for an acquaintance in the coach, then it is my own train which seems to be moving.”<sup>43</sup>

The word “dynamic” in this passage refers to the activity or possible change within one of the two spaces: we automatically presume the spatial framework, i.e., the background, of the “dynamic” center of our attention to be *at rest*. There are two important conditions for the illusion to work. Firstly, my visual field should not include too many elements from the world outside the two trains. Secondly, if it is *my* train which is leaving (and I am led to believe that it is the other one which is put in motion), then this should happen at a slow pace and in a smooth way. If these additional conditions are fulfilled I will be tricked.

In *Sense and Non-Sense*, Merleau-Ponty argues against the view that there is a stable layer of sensations which is interpreted by an intellect which is detached from those sensations. In the example of the leaving trains, there are two ways of experiencing the situation but, according to Merleau-Ponty, it is not by an intellectual hypothesis that I determine which of the two ways will be realized: “Movement and rest distribute themselves in our surroundings not according to the hypotheses which our intelligence is pleased to construct but according to the way we settle ourselves in the world and the position of our bodies assume in it”<sup>44</sup>

Considering Koffka’s observations in the passage quoted above, it seems that Merleau-Ponty is right: our experience depends on the way we inhabit the

42 Hereafter: *Sense and Non-Sense*, except in footnotes.

43 Koffka, “Perception: An introduction to the *Gestalt-Theorie*”, 578. Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 324/326.

44 Merleau-Ponty, *Sens et non-sens*, 92/52.

situation, notably on where our focus of attention is. However, in my view this explanation is not sufficient. Again, Merleau-Ponty tries to explain a perceptual illusion by referring only to criteria which are intrinsic to the phenomenal world. With Merleau-Ponty we can understand why we experience the situation of the trains in one way *or* in the other, but he does not help us understand why one of the two experiences is illusory while the other is veridical. And therefore he does not address that, when we experience an illusion like that of the leaving trains, we often *know* we are experiencing an illusion. Often in this situation, our state is not simply one of being tricked: it is one of being troubled because we already feel that we are being tricked.

Suppose I know that it is not yet the right time for my train to leave. This is a theoretical knowledge in the sense that it is, at that moment, not supported by particular perceptual motives. If I nonetheless have the strong sense that it is my train which is leaving, then I am not ignorant of the *real* situation. I am *troubled* because two “interpretations” of my situation are competing with one another. If I know quite certain that it cannot be my train which is leaving, I may even stick to my conviction but at the same time have this peculiar sense in my stomach, and experience a kind of dizziness and disorientation which almost make my body lose its conviction. If one is tricked the experience is “false”; if one is troubled one has a perception and at the same time a disengaged awareness of the truth of the perception, which lies beyond it. This truth refers to the situation in its objectivity: which vehicle is moving relative to earth. It is our eccentric positionality which renders possible that we are not simply tricked, that, instead, we have a double experience: on the one hand of the situation as conveyed by perceptual motives; on the other hand of the situation as we know it to be. We feel dizzy or disoriented in our situation because we experience the hiatus between these two aspects of our being in the world, the physical and the phenomenal.

Gus Grissom, the third person ever in outer space, tells an anecdote about his return to earth. He is preparing his spacecraft, which is moving at a constant distance from earth, for reentry into the earth’s atmosphere. The spacecraft is fitted with so-called retrorockets which bring the capsule to a halt, so that the turn towards the earth can be made. “His mission almost over, Grissom prepared his spacecraft for reentry and manually fired the bank of three retrorockets, right on schedule. ‘It was a strange sensation when the retros fired’, he would later write. ‘Just before they went, I had the distinct feeling that I was moving backwards—which I was. But when they went off, and slowed me down, I definitely felt that

I was going in the other way. It is an illusion, of course. I had only changed speed, not direction.”<sup>45</sup>

Grissom has a similar experience as we sometimes have in the train, except that the meaning of his situation was to him relative only to the previous situation: a movement backwards. Because Grissom lacked any cues belonging to an external context, he had to experience his deceleration as a movement in the opposite direction. His movement had become his normal situation and had literally started to function as a norm, as a stable background, in relation to which the deceleration had to be experienced as something *positive*: a movement in the direction opposite to the “previous” movement. What furthermore makes this example interesting is that Grissom is not simply tricked. The success of his space travel depends on him trusting his *knowledge* about his situation more than the *perceptual cues* he receives. In other words, Grissom’s sensomotoric actions can only be successful if he sometimes ignores the motives the world offers to him and acts on a disengaged kind of insight. The reason for this is that sometimes his knowledge is true to his objective situation, whereas his phenomenal experience is not.

Because human beings are eccentrically positioned, they are able to resist the invitations the world offers them and to grasp an objective physical reality which lies beyond the phenomenal. They are not only in the world but both in *and above*, or beyond, the world of perception. So we see that there is an intrinsic connection between Merleau-Ponty’s failure to grasp our *disengagement* from the world of perception and his failure to recognize the transcendence of physical reality. With Merleau-Ponty we cannot understand the fact that our physical situation sometimes contradicts the motivational structure of the world and that our non-perceptual knowledge is then more true to our situation than our perceptions. There is a correlation which stretches from an eccentrically positioned ego, across and beyond the phenomenal world, to physical reality which is *known* by the ego. Only if we take distance from our sensorimotor attunement to the phenomenal world and see how a thinking I reaches beyond the motivational structure of the world can we make sense of perceptual illusions such as the one of the two leaving trains or Grissom’s experience in outer space.

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45 Francis French and Colin Burgess, *Into that Silent Sea*, 80.

## 7.4 LOOKING BACK: THE PLACE OF ONTOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY WITHIN PHILOSOPHY

In this final section I want to reflect on the ontological-epistemological framework which I have adopted in Chapters 6 and 7, and especially on its limitations. I will do so by looking at some of the common suspicions regarding ontology and epistemology.

Let me start with ontology. One suspicion we might have is that ontology aims at describing reality without taking into account the fact that (a) the philosopher is a human being who is always already part of the reality he attempts to grasp in his descriptions, (b) reality is always in some way *given* to this human being, which means that our thinking about being is mediated, colored, or filtered by our sense-organs, by the intrinsic structure of perception, presuppositions, concepts, or language. An ontology in the sense of pre-critical metaphysics is thus out of the question.

This suspicion brings us to the necessity of complementing ontology with epistemology: we cannot speak of the things we know without reflecting on the conditions of knowledge. Reality is always given to a subject who is also part of this reality. We can specify this in terms of *physical* reality: according to the physical aspect of our bodies we are part of the physical universe. And yet by addressing the topic of physical reality we seem to claim, implicitly, that we are at a distance from it, and thereby that we have this reality fully in view and at our disposal. The critical response to ontology leads to epistemological questions: which are the conditions for the possibility of knowing physical reality? How do epistemological considerations affect our attitude towards physical realism?

If asking these questions summarizes the project of epistemology, then it starts to sound like a sensible project—and I think it is. But there are suspicions against epistemology as well. On the one hand there are suspicions based on systematic reasons which are inextricably intertwined with the essence of epistemology. Below I argue that this does not mean that epistemology is useless and without any truth value, but rather that its truth value is limited. On the other hand there are suspicions which respond to particular historical *forms* of epistemology which have been so dominant that they have given epistemology a bad name. When Charles Taylor criticizes epistemology he is in fact responding to two such currents of epistemology: foundationalism and representationalism.<sup>46</sup> The question rises whether these predicates (these -isms) apply to my interpreta-

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46 Taylor, *Overcoming Epistemology*.

tion of Plessner and Merleau-Ponty and whether, consequently, the criticism of these forms of epistemology applies to my view.

We can be short about representationalism: this predicate does not apply to my account of the relationship between physical reality and the phenomenal world. Plessner's principle of mediated immediacy excludes this interpretation. First-person experience of the outer world was not explained in terms of mental representations which occupy a position in between the subject-pole of experience and the world experienced. It was explained in terms of categories, i.e., bodily relationships to the essences of the beings around us. The medium is here our categorial attunement to situations and things of various sorts. These categories are thus attitudes embodied by us, so that subject-pole and medium fall together. That is the basic structure of mediated immediacy: if subject-pole and medium coincide, then the medium is no longer *in between* me and the world; I am then directly "with the things" (*bei den Dingen*). Of course, this does not rule out that explicit mediation through representations *can* be involved in our interaction with the world. This happens for instance when we explicitly reflect on what we are doing. In that case mediation and the immediate dimension of life, disengagement and disengagement, are temporarily separated like during a time-out. As regards Merleau-Ponty, Taylor in fact bases his own criticism of representationalism on Merleau-Ponty's view.<sup>47</sup> I think my reading of Merleau-Ponty is in line with that interpretation.

Insofar as foundationalism is concerned, my account of the relationship between physical reality and phenomenal world in terms of two *directions* of foundation aims precisely at *avoiding* foundationalism. Dennett's physical realism is foundationalist because it seeks to ground the phenomenal world in physical-neural reality. In this view, there is but one reality and Dennett regards our access to it as surprisingly unproblematic and unambiguous.<sup>48</sup> Merleau-Ponty is a more complicated case. It would go too far to accuse him of foundationalism, but as noted, in some passages he bases physical reality one-sidedly on the phenomenal world. This one-sidedness leads to problems: physical reality can no longer be considered a reality once we dissolve it into perceptual structures or intellectual constructions. Here there is only one direction of foundation and, consequently, one aspect of reality is neglected.

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47 Ibid., *Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture*.

48 Cf. David L. Thompson, *Phenomenology and Heterophenomenology*. Thompson argues that Dennett should abandon his "naïve scientific realism" (ibid., 216) and acknowledge that "scientific"—i.e. physical—reality itself depends on subjective experience.

A final suspicion with regard to both ontology and epistemology is that they are restricted to a theoretical perspective which leaves out the practical, metaphysical, or existential dimension of our lives. This is a valid point but, as I argue, it does not imply that the ontological-epistemological framework has no role to play beside the metaphysical framework.<sup>49</sup>

The idea of a foundation implies that we are dealing with the most fundamental and in that sense the most important things in philosophy. The reason I introduced the problem of a foundation of our being in the world by saying that it was relative to an ontological-epistemological framework is that I wanted it to be clear that this “fundamental character” and “importance” need to be qualified, but this is easier done after I have shown what ontology and epistemology look like in the context of the chapters concerned (Chapters 6 and 7). I wanted to set the discussion apart from those philosophical approaches which address what is most “fundamental” or “important” in another sense of these words.

In our factual lives our fundamental questions concern things like freedom, meaning, values, death, family, sexuality, trauma, friends, work, needs, society, politics, experiences of meaningfulness in nature, art, or love, and so forth. From the wider metaphysical perspective which addresses such questions, it cannot be true that physical reality (foundation in nature) or the person who experiences or knows physical reality (foundation in the human world) constitute the most fundamental topics of philosophy. In our everyday lives the most important things are the things which ultimately make our existence meaningful. For some people this is art or exploring nature. For other people God is a source of meaning in this existential sense. For almost all people, the people we love constitute such “moral sources” (Taylor). This is why I said that the foundations discussed in Chapters 6 and 7 are the most fundamental things *only* within the restricted framework of ontology and its complement epistemology.

So why do I insist that an ontological-epistemological perspective tells us anything important at all about our being in the world? The reason is that in some questions regarding our place in nature, we are restricted to knowledge in the pure sense of the word. By this I mean that, on the ontological-epistemological level, we are not (directly) trying to create a constructive view of the world, one which contributes to our societies or the things we value or one which would recognize or affirm values in the first place. The connection between the ontological and the epistemological aspect of this approach is that the ontic conditions under discussion are *natural* conditions and therefore we can only *know* them.

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49 I will from hereon refer to the moral-existential framework as “metaphysics”.

What does this mean? What can we *not* do with these conditions? Our approach to these conditions cannot have a positive influence on them. There is, here, no “seeing which also helps effect what it sees”,<sup>50</sup> in the moral-existential sense meant by Taylor. To illustrate this, in contrast with theoretical knowledge, our knowing a friend is never a pure knowing but also at the very same time an appreciation which plays a role in the selective functions inherent to perception and understanding. Getting to know someone is always at the same time getting to like or dislike, love or hate, someone. Our knowledge is here never neutral. To continue this example on a philosophical level: a phenomenology of friendship already presupposes the value which friendship has for us in our personal lives and it does not offer a neutral description but also affirms this value and teaches us something about it. So this kind of philosophy is clearly not restricted to the ontological-epistemological framework. Or, another example, our knowledge of society is embedded in an idealistic (or cynical) view of that society which bears on our perception and colors it. A philosophy which tries to grasp our *Zeitgeist* will always attempt to understand the world in such a way that it contributes to positive development, even if it does so only by expressing criticism, thus constituting a negative moment in an anticipated positive development. Even a philosophy which would cynically refuse to offer constructive criticism affirms that it operates within a metaphysical framework, because ontology and epistemology are never cynical: they are morally neutral.

In contrast to the value-oriented approach of metaphysics, the epistemological-ontological approach is defined by “knowledge of nature”, whereby nature refers to being which simply *is*, regardless of considerations of good and evil, regardless of our morality and our existential questions. Insofar as the immanence of experience is concerned, this distinction coincides with another distinction, viz., between the most basic, syncretic, motivations and relatively higher motivations: those on the amovible and symbolic level. The moon as seen relatively large because it is low on the horizon is in itself not an object of a need or of an esthetic or romantic desire, although such motivations can join the basic structure of its appearance. The spatial constellation of the sky, the moon, and the horizon serves as a foundation for our vital needs and for such higher motivations. The relationship between a relatively large moon and the physical reality of a moon whose size does not change is a purely natural relationship. On the one hand, the appearance of the moon has different sizes; on the other hand we know that, in fact, it only has one size. This knowledge is theoretical because it refers to a natural object which is indifferent to our attitude towards it. The

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50 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 449.

knowledge is in itself not of metaphysical or existential significance. We can also know *why*, under certain conditions, we see the moon as relatively large. Then our knowledge includes an insight in our *own* nature, i.e., in a structure of perception that we cannot change. So when we explore basic motivations, we examine the relationship between our own nature and external nature. This is not a form of naturalism, because the perspective remains loyal to first-person experience: we explore the *intrinsic* structure of perception in relation to a reality which transcends it.

The fact that we are concerned with the relationship between our nature and external nature implies that a practical perspective cannot interfere in these matters. We are restricted to ontology and epistemology. The ontological-epistemological perspective relates to our daily lives in a relatively indirect manner compared to metaphysics which explores our freedom and our orientation towards moral sources. But perhaps this book makes clear that the ontological-epistemological framework is a necessary complement to metaphysics. Hopefully it contributes to our insight in the relationship between science and first-person experience and to our understanding of freedom by exploring freedom's natural preconditions.

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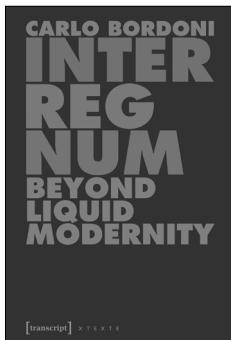
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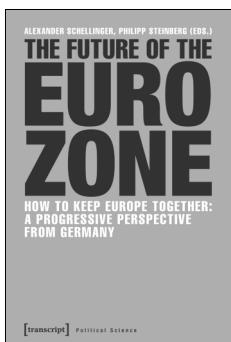
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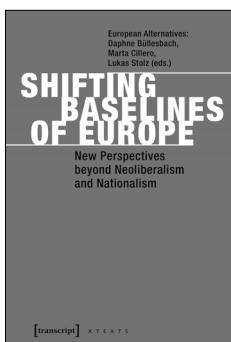
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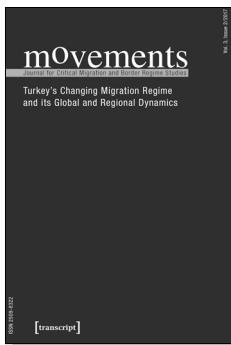
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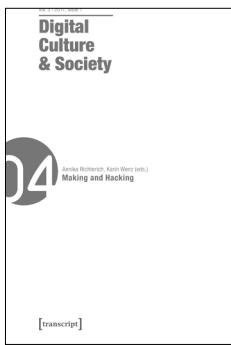
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