The Possibility of Philosophical Anthropology[*]

Jo-Jo Koo

Is a conception of human nature still possible or even desirable in light of the "postmetaphysical sensibilities" of our time? Furthermore, can philosophy make any contribution towards the articulation of a tenable conception of human nature given this current intellectual climate? I will argue in this paper that affirmative answers can be given to both of these questions. Section I rehearses briefly some of the difficulties and even dangers involved in working out any conception of human nature at all, let alone one that is philosophically informed. Section II sketches what I argue to be three necessary aspects of a tenable philosophical anthropology.[1] Finally, section III argues that such a philosophical anthropology is only justifiable, given our postmetaphysical sensibilities, by its use of "transcendental arguments" in justifying its claims, ones that nonetheless must repudiate a common but damaging assumption that arguing for the conclusions of such arguments commits one necessarily to a hyper-strong conception of subjectivity. In general, my primary aim in this paper is only to make plausible, not so much to justify, let alone defend, adequately the aspects of a conception of a tenable philosophical anthropology as sketched below.[2]

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[1] It should be noted that I use the label "philosophical anthropology" in a *broad* sense as simply synonymous with the idea of a philosophically informed conception of human nature in general. Although there are no doubt some areas of common interest and overlap, I am not referring in using this label to the line of thought that connects certain 20th century German thinkers such as Scheler, Plessner, Gehlen, and Cassirer, who are regarded as the central figures of the specifically German tradition of philosophical anthropology. For an excellent and critical overview of this tradition, see Honneth and Joas 1988, ch. 2; for a discussion of what philosophical anthropology, broadly construed, could be, see Schacht 1990.

[2] Some caveats are thus in order before we begin. Given the space constraints of this paper, the line of thought worked out below cannot adequately explicate nor defend the arguments of various philosophers (especially those of Kant, the later Wittgenstein, the early Heidegger, Gadamer, Sellars, Davidson, Dennett, Haugeland, Brandom, McDowell, and Taylor), but must rely instead on some prior familiarity on the part of the reader with them. On the other hand, playing up the convergence of these philosophers regarding their implicit conceptions of human nature does not thereby eliminate by any means their more specific and nontrivial disagreements about other philosophical issues.

I

How do our postmetaphysical sensibilities complicate the difficulties and even dangers involved in providing any conception of human nature? To begin with, I mean simply in using the expression "postmetaphysical sensibilities" to refer to the intellectual climate today where philosophy at least, since the advent and consequences of the Scientific Revolution in the seventeenth century, can no longer derive non-empirical and yet determinate knowledge of the fundamental nature of the universe *from putatively indubitable a priori first principles*.[3] Modern philosophy can no longer simply stand sovereign over the empirical-experimental natural and social sciences and assess "from its armchair" the status of their knowledge claims. Rather, its primary service and achievement has come to consist in making explicit and assessing the various ambiguities, presuppositions, implications, contradictions, etc., that underlie and inform the theories and practices of the empirical-experimental sciences. More ambitiously, and also more meaningfully, it can try its best to bring such critical assessments and reflections into connection with our need to understand and improve both our individual and collective human flourishing. In any case, as far as modern philosophy is concerned, finding ourselves with postmetaphysical sensibilities means, at the very least, the abandonment of the dream of acquiring non-empirical and yet substantive knowledge of the fundamental nature of reality as derived from supposedly indubitable and *a priori* first principles.

At their most extreme, postmetaphysical thinkers urge us to reject any commitment to all forms of *essentialism*, i.e., to reifying ways of understanding the world that illegitimately assume that the features or characteristics of our objects of understanding instantiate *static or fixed atemporal essences* that can be isolated and understood apart from any entanglements in the larger socio-historical contexts in which

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[3] See Habermas 1988, pp. 35-60. He writes: "Unter Vernachlässigung der aristotelischen Linie nenne ich in grober Vereinfachung 'metaphysisch' das auf Plato zurückgehende Denken eines philosophischen Idealismus, der … bis zu Kant, Fichte, Schelling und Hegel reicht." (*Ibid*., p. 36.) He focuses in particular on three central themes of *metaphysical* philosophy in this sense: *viz*., "auf das Einheitsmotiv der Ursprungsphilosophie, auf die Gleichsetzung von Sein und Denken und auf die Heilsbedeutung der theoretischen Lebensführung, kurz: auf Identitätsdenken, Ideenlehre und starken Theoriebegriff" (*ibid*.; see pp. 36-40 for elaboration). For quite a different conception of what thinking postmetaphysically comes to, see Rorty 1979, esp. ch. VIII; 1991; and 1998.

we encounter them.[4] Furthermore, these anti-essentialists also reject the demand that our understanding the world can and must be "*value-free*" or *apolitical*. They argue instead that all understanding and explanation of reality and of ourselves presuppose as well as implicate certain power relations and the political structures that sustain such relations. In short, anti-essentialism takes the significance of postmetaphysical thinking to mean that we ought to accept and even to embrace the way in which reason is *radically contingent*: It is historically and culturally situated, linguistically conditioned, embodied and sustained through complexes of practices, and implicated, whether consciously or not, in determinate constellations of power relations and political structures.[5]

Now, why is it important to situate the idea of a conception of human nature in this intellectual space? The reason has to do with the problems that plague both naturalistic investigations of human nature and the anti-essentialist reaction to them. In light of the influence of evolutionary theory and its connection with current research on the genetic basis of the human species, naturalists believe that the biological sciences provide the key towards adequately understanding human nature. Two recent, and controversial, scientific research programs that investigate human nature in this vein are sociobiology and evolutionary psychology.[6] At their extremes, these research programs envisage a *reductive* conception of human nature, for they claim that all essential aspects of human behavior, and hence of being human, can be explained without remainder in terms of evolutionary theory in connection with the genetic basis of the human species.

This is not the place to explicate or evaluate the plausibility and explanatory power of this strong claim. What is relevant for our purposes here is that a common

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[4] This is actually just *one* understanding of what it means properly to think postmetaphysically. The other, and perhaps more dominant, understanding is reflected in the attitude of *naturalism*, i.e., the stance that overcoming metaphysics leads to an "underlaborer" conception of philosophy in relation to the empirical-experimental sciences. For a classic expression of this attitude, see Carnap's "The Elimination [*Überwindung*] of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language", in Ayer 1959. But there is no space here to elaborate this naturalistic understanding of what it is to think postmetaphysically.

[5] Habermas 1988, pp. 41-60. He writes: "*Vier Motive* kennzeichnen den Bruch mit der [philosophischen] Tradition. Die Stichworte lauten: nachmetaphysisches Denken, linguistische Wende, Situierung der Vernunft und die Umkehrung des Vorrangs der Theorie vor der Praxis – oder Überwindung des Logozentrismus." (*Ibid.*, p. 14, emphasis in the original.) I should emphasize that my reference to Habermas's characterization of what postmetaphysical thinking is in general does *not* imply that I endorse his own specific vision of what doing this involves and commits one to in terms of his theory of communicative action.

[6] For a paradigm statement of the program of sociobiology, see Wilson 1978; for a helpful and critical overview of the program of evolutionary psychology, see Scher and Rauscher 2003a.

criticism of such programs is that they fail to take into account not only the capacity of human beings to be influenced by their social and cultural environment, but also their capacity to act for reasons that cannot be reduced to explanations couched in terms of natural or sexual selection.[7] That is, practitioners of these programs who are prone to biological reductionism and determinism fail to take seriously the great extent to which human beings are *reflective* creatures who can decide what they should think and do. The claim is that the reflective and self-interpreting character of human beings presents an insurmountable obstacle for reductionistic scientific investigations of human nature. Even worse, however, a related criticism of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology emphasizes how they may unintentionally provide ideological ammunition to cultural and political conservatives who, e.g., try to justify the inequalities among the different human races and the sexes by appeal to differences in biology. Nazism was only the most extreme and horrible expression of this social-Darwinian way of thinking. This exhibits the dangers involved in providing any conception of human nature: Whether intentionally or not, any account of human nature courts the danger of being exploited in such a way that it serves to provide ideological justifications for certain unequal social and political relations in a society.[8] Social constructivists and especially feminists have often made damning criticisms of naturalistic investigations of human nature along both of these lines.[9] Not only do such investigations of human nature fail to do justice to the reflective and self-interpreting character of the phenomena they set out to explain, they may also unwittingly (and, on occasions in the past, with full complicity!) provide ideological justifications for oppressive political policies and practices. The problem for the more radical social constructivists and feminists who make these criticisms, however, is that they tend to overemphasize the *plasticity* of our acquired, second nature at the expense of our merely biological, first nature. Although human beings are no doubt dramatically influenced by their socio-cultural environment, and in so doing alter their own nature in a

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[7] For an example of this sort of criticism as applied to evolutionary psychology, see Dupré 2001. For a sharp critique of Dupré and a defense of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology that makes them out to be nonreductionistic but still naturalistic scientific research programs, see Holcomb 2002.

[8] See Rousseau 1971. The whole of Rousseau's *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité* can serve as the background that underlies the remarks of this section.

[9] See, e.g., Benhabib and Cornell 1987; Butler 1990, 1993.

significant way, they are not *so* plastic as to be able to *transcend totally* their biological being.[10]

In short, we are faced with two horns of a dilemma. One horn is the reductionistic spirit of full-blown biological investigations of human nature that fails, however, to account for the reflective and self-interpreting character of human beings; the other horn is the tendency to overemphasize on the part of various postmodernists the radical plasticity of human nature at the expense of its biological being. The extreme versions of these two positions, as with all extremes, are not only unpalatable, but in some sense arrogantly presumptuous. Are we thus compelled in the face of this dilemma to abandon any attempt to work out a conception of human nature at all?

II

How then is a conception of human nature possible given these difficulties and even dangers? What can philosophy contribute to its articulation? I will argue that a tenable philosophical anthropology must at least take into account the following three aspects of what is involved in being *properly human*, i.e., being a *rational animal*:

(I) Being *properly* human, i.e., in contrast to being merely biologically human, requires that an entity satisfy the conditions of *personhood*. (1) One of the necessary conditions of personhood is *rationality* in a certain sense. (2) Another necessary condition for personhood is the *capacity to evaluate* our first-order desires in terms of *higher-order* desires or considerations; this capacity expresses the sort of *self-consciousness* that is central to personhood. (3) Although (1) and (2) jointly suffice for personhood, there is also a sense in which a person can only acquire a "depth" and hence any "character" at all insofar as he or she can engage in "strong evaluation".

(II) In order for (I) to be possible at all, persons must speak and understand a *language*. More strongly, our existence as *linguistic animals* fundamentally transforms our interactions with our environment, such that we live and move in the *linguistic dimension* and thus in a *world* rather than a merely natural environment.

(III) Living and moving in the linguistic dimension is interwoven with the way in which we are *embodied*: There is an *intimate*, not merely *relational*, connection between our embodiment and existence as linguistic and hence minded creatures.[11]

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[10] Ironically, radical postmodernists who argue that it is culture all the way down simply reverse in effect – without striving for a satisfactory *supersession* (*Aufhebung*) that would really transcend the dualism of mind (culture) and body (nature) – the traditional philosophical prejudice against the embodiment of human beings. In this way they are only platonists in reverse, despite their rhetoric to the contrary.

[11] No doubt these three aspects can be formulated in different ways. I take them, however, to capture some core but unarticulated intuitions that I presume we have about what it is to be a rational animal.

(I) To begin with, what is special about the nature and status of personhood, such that being a person is distinguishable from being merely biologically human? Although we tend in ordinary language to use these terms coextensively, there are circumstances when we hesitate to identify the concept of a person with that of a merely biological human. Thus, we may, on the one hand, want to ascribe personhood to creatures that we discover one day, perhaps inhabiting distant planets or visiting us here on earth, who are not biologically human; on the other hand, we have reasonable reservations against treating certain groups of human beings, e.g., infants or the mentally impaired, as full-fledged persons. These thoughts bring out the way in which being a *person* involves the acquiring of a certain *moral-legal* and, less obviously, *ontological standing*, not the possession and realization of a specific biological system. What follows in this section can be understood as a clarification of the *ontological* standing or "way of being" of being a person, which is surely related to, but also distinct from, his or her moral-legal standing.

(1) In what sense exactly is *rationality* one of the necessary conditions of personhood? It is important first to clarify the sort of rationality in question, for it is neither primarily instrumental rationality nor full-fledged discursive rationality in the sense of the explicit justification of one's theoretical and practical reasoning to oneself or to others, though both of these sorts of rationality are in some sense equally in play.[12] Rather, the rationality in question concerns the *holistic constraints on belief and desire ascription*; to give it a label, we could call this "interpretive rationality" in the sense in which Dennett and Davidson articulate it.[13] More precisely, it concerns the nature and status of the constraints that make it necessary and useful to make sense of the behavior of anything, whether living or not, by means of the ascriptions of beliefs and desires to it. The reason for focusing on interpretive rationality in particular is that it enables us to examine, without begging important questions, just what it is about (the behavior of) an entity that distinguishes it as possibly meriting the status of personhood. For it is a cheat, on the one hand, to stipulate dogmatically that all and only human beings are persons,

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[12] I thank Julie Zahle for making me clarify the exact sort of rationality under consideration here.
[13] Davidson 1984e, Essays 9-11, 13-4; Dennett 1981a, 1987a.

which would be a "speciesist" prejudice;[14] on the other hand, there remains the need to specify what it is that persons *are* or, more precisely, what they *can do*, such that they are fundamentally different from non-persons. The suggestion is that the examination of the nature of interpretive rationality best enables us to achieve this aim.[15]

But before considering Dennett's and Davidson's convergent conceptions of the constraints at work in the process of interpretation, we should briefly note a more specific but nontrivial divergence between them, particularly as they pertain to the conditions of personhood. For Dennett, *anything* whose behavior can be (at least sometimes) successfully explained and predicted from the "intentional stance", i.e., the pragmatic strategy of explaining and predicting (at least sometimes) the behavior of something by ascribing beliefs and desires to it, qualifies *ipso facto* as an "intentional system". Since we cannot help but adopt the intentional stance toward sophisticated inorganic systems and many nonhuman animals (e.g., chess programs and dogs), we treat them in so doing as intentional systems. But clearly we do not thereby consider them to be persons. As Dennett himself notes, being an intentional system is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of personhood.[16] By contrast, Davidson's conception of interpretation is more restricted than Dennett's in the sense that it is conceived primarily as the explanation of what is necessarily involved in our ability to interpret and understand *speakers of language*. For this reason Davidson's holism about belief-desire ascription, unlike Dennett's, encompasses *candidate meanings*, i.e., something that is not only *describable and explainable in semantic terms*, but also *expresses itself in such terms*. This anticipates one of the central points made below, namely, that learning and using a language, once we reveal all that must be involved in the ability to do so, suffices for being a person. Davidson's interpretivism, then, diverges from Dennett's because it already has the concept of a person in its view, whereas Dennett's concept of an intentional system as such does not. This divergence is irrelevant, however, for the

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[14] Singer 1990: "'Speciesism', by analogy with racism, … is a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of others" (p. 6).

[15] For want of space I cannot justify here why we should begin with the focus on interpretive rationality rather than on instrumental or full-fledged discursive rationality as the appropriate point of departure for articulating a tenable philosophical anthropology.

[16] Dennett 1981b, p. 272. Rovane has emended in a sympathetic spirit Dennett's line of argument in his "Conditions of Personhood"; see Rovane 1994. For Dennett's endorsement of her emendation, see Dennett 1994, p. ?

elaboration of the constraints on belief-desire ascriptions (i.e., interpretation), about which they are in significant agreement, and so it should make no difference whether Dennett's or Davidson's conception is sketched below in this respect.

What, then, does the exercise of interpretive rationality involve or presuppose? In making sense of the behavior of something by means of intentional explanations or predictions, we must implicitly ascribe countless other relevant beliefs and desires that serve as the background against which the beliefs and desires under examination are identified, i.e., given content.[17] For a necessary condition of identifying a belief is that the belief be located in a pattern of background beliefs. But this pattern of background beliefs that we ascribe must be assumed to be mostly true *by our lights*, for otherwise the entire process of interpretation, i.e., of ascribing beliefs and desires in intentional explanations and predictions, could not even make any sense at all.[18] In order for the process of interpretation to be possible at all, then, there must be a working, shared background of common beliefs. This necessary assumption regarding the process of interpretation puts significant constraints on the degree to which we can and should ascribe false or irrational beliefs to what we are interpreting. As Davidson writes:

> It isn't that [the ascription of] any one false belief necessarily destroys our ability to identify further beliefs, but that the intelligibility of such identifications must depend on a background of largely unmentioned and unquestioned true beliefs. To put it another way: the more things a believer is right about, the sharper his errors are. Too much mistake simply blurs the focus.[19]

This is the point of Davidson's and in effect Dennett's well-known, but also often misunderstood, *principle of charity*. It requires that interpreters *must assume* that its object of interpretation is *rational*, a believer of mostly true and coherent beliefs, if it is going to *be* an *object* of interpretation *at all*. We must make this assumption in order to get the process of interpretation off the ground at all:

> Since charity is not an option, but a condition of [interpretation], it is meaningless to suggest that we might fall into massive error by endorsing it. … Charity is forced on us; whether we like it or not, if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters.[20]

But in order already to forestall common misunderstandings of this principle, it is crucial to understand how "being charitable" in this particular sense toward one's object of

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[17] For the sake of simplicity, only the case of belief will be discussed here.
[18] The justification of this constraint is sketched in section III below.
[19] Davidson 1984b, p. 168.
[20] Davidson 1984c, p. 197.

interpretation is a *methodological*, not *substantive*, attitude or strategy. Its purpose is to get the process of interpretation going so that meaningful agreements *and* disagreements are indeed possible at all. Its aim is definitely *not* to give an *a priori* argument for the indefensible thought that anything we can recognize as a rational creature must *in fact agree with us* on most matters as the process of interpretation unfolds:[21]

> [T]he aim is not the absurd one of making disagreement and error disappear. The point is rather that widespread agreement is the only possible background against which disputes and mistakes can be interpreted. Making sense of the utterances and behaviour of others, even their most aberrant behaviour, requires us to find a great deal of reason and truth in them. To see too much unreason on the part of others is simply to undermine our ability to understand what it is they are so unreasonable about. If the vast amount of agreement on plain matters that is assumed in communication escapes notice, it's because the shared truths are too many and too dull to bear mentioning. What we want to talk about is what's new, surprising, or disputed.[22]

Now, what is relevant for our purposes here is that the holistic constraints of belief-desire ascription, and its necessary application of the principle of charity, apply straightforwardly to *persons*. For nothing can count as a candidate person, let alone a full-fledged one, unless it is subject to the constraint of *interpretive rationality* as required by "the constitutive ideal of rationality"[23] or "the intentional stance".[24] Obviously, this does not imply at all that all persons are in fact rational – surely not. Rather, the thought is that unless we interpret and understand something *as subject to the intentional stance or the constitutive ideal of rationality, it could not show up or manifest itself as a rational-intentional entity, i.e., a person, at all*. Treating it as being mostly rational is a *conditio sine qua non* of treating it as a person at all.

(2) What is required, then, for an intentional system to count as a person? The answer is that it must also have the *capacity to evaluate* its first-order desires in terms of *higher-order* desires or considerations.[25] It is the exercise of this capacity for evaluation

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[21] In the apt words of my friend Endre Begby, the point of the principle of charity is definitely *not* to serve "as a tool for establishing the cognitive supremacy of the Western mind on spurious a priori grounds, a thinly disguised case for an 'epistemic ethnocentrism'" (Begby, "The Ethics of Radical Interpretation", p. 4).

[22] Davidson 1984a, p. 153. Dennett makes the same point when he argues that "false beliefs that are reaped grow in a culture medium of true beliefs" (Dennett 1987a, p. 18; see also p. 19 and the long footnote on that page).

[23] Davidson 1980a, p. 223.

[24] Dennett 1981a and 1987a.

[25] Frankfurt 1988a, p. 12: "Besides wanting and choosing and being moved *to do* this or that, men may also want to have (or not to have) certain desires and motives. They are capable of wanting to be different, in their preferences and purposes, from what they are. Many animals appear to have the capacity for … "first-order desires" …, which are simply desires to do or not to do one thing or another. No animal other than

that really shows a candidate person to be *self-conscious*. Second-order desires are ones whose aim is the having (or not) of certain first-order desires; third-order desires or considerations are ones whose aim is the having (or not) of certain second-order desires, and so on. For example, I can have the second-order desire that I not satisfy my first-order desire to smoke cigarettes because doing so damages my health. Moreover, I may have in turn a third-order desire, i.e., a desire about a desire about a desire, that is an evaluation about whether it is in turn good to hold the second-order desire in question, e.g., always refraining from smoking for the sake of my health. Thus, I may decide upon reflection that to be always slavishly assessing everything I wish to do in terms of its effects on my health goes against, at least on certain occasions, the greater worth that I may place (all in moderation, of course) on living an epicurean human life that is of higher value for me, even if it may, when done to excess, damage my health. In addition, the capacity to consider higher-order desires can clearly extend to ones that other people can have (e.g., my wish to get you to believe that I have given up smoking so that you think me a healthier person, etc.). Evidently, this capacity to consider, evaluate, and realize one's lower-order desires as a consequence of evaluating and realizing higher-order ones can become quite complicated and sophisticated, not to mention also potentially duplicitous and manipulative.[26]

What is significant, then, is that nothing counts genuinely as a person unless it can *evaluate* its desires in this manner, and insofar as nonhuman animals, infants, or mental impaired human beings are not able to engage in this sort of evaluation of their appetitive or affective propensities, they are not persons in the relevant sense. Something that can evaluate its desires in such a higher-order way is evidently *self-conscious*, for it can not only reflect upon what desires it ought to satisfy, but also become aware that it is satisfying (or refraining from satisfying) its appetitive and affective propensities on the basis of reasons. In other words, it has, through the exercise of this capacity, made the transformation from an intentional system to a genuine person, a self-consciously reflective and responsible agent.

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man, however, appears to have the capacity for reflective self-evaluation that is manifested in the formation of second-order desires." Although Frankfurt distinguishes between second-order desires and second-order volitions (p. 16-22), this distinction is not directly relevant for the purposes of this paper.

[26] This is another aspect of the human condition that Rousseau already senses vividly and emphasizes in the Second Discourse; see Rousseau 1971.

(3) I also claimed above that (1) being interpreted as being mostly rational and (2) being self-conscious about one's exercise of rationality suffice for personhood. Having argued this, it is also significant to understand the distinction between first-order and higher-order evaluations of motivational propensities in terms of Taylor's distinction between "weak and strong evaluation".[27] Both are modes of practical reasoning exercised by persons regarding (among other things) how to decide between different courses of action. But what distinguishes weak from strong evaluators is that only the latter evaluate different courses of action with respect to their *non-instrumental worth*. For when one undertakes strong evaluation, the worth of a course of action concerns essentially the kind of *quality of life* that one thinks is worth living. This is illustrated in the example above, where the third-order consideration of living an epicurean life overrides, at least on occasion, the second-order desire of refraining from, say, doing something that gives pleasure but also damages one's health if done to excess (e.g., smoking). This sort of evaluation of the *worth* of doing (or not doing) something in relation to the quality of life one should realize and live up to is not available to the weak evaluator. But it is not that the weak evaluator cannot choose qualitatively between different courses of action, for he can also apply a distinction between first- or second-order desires as well as a standard according to which some of these desires should on occasion be satisfied but not on others. But this standard is merely instrumental *qua* the calculation of the optimal circumstantial satisfaction of a given set of desires. What is unavailable to the weak evaluator, however, is a standard of choosing between courses of action that realizes and expresses *the sort of life he thinks is worth living*. By contrast, the strong evaluator acquires in her evaluation a *depth* that is absent for the weak evaluator. And it is only the deployment of an ethically rich vocabulary that includes distinctions like 'shallow' or 'wise', 'honorable' or 'shameful', 'courageous' or 'cowardly', etc., which makes strong evaluation possible. Having at one's disposal such vocabularies pertaining to the worth or lack thereof of one's chosen quality of life gives *character* to the self-consciousness in view in (2), along with all the struggles and joys of self-understanding and self-transformation that the exercise of these capacities can

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[27] Taylor 1985a, pp. 16-27.

provide.[28] In sum, although (1) and (2) suffice for mere personhood, it is only on the basis of strong evaluation that persons can acquire *depth* and hence *ethical (or non-ethical character,* which is something we take to be bound up with *how* one is a person.

      (II) Now, if nothing counts as a person unless (1) it can be interpreted as mostly rational; (2) it is capable of engaging in higher-order evaluations of her appetitive and affective propensities; and (3) it undertakes strong evaluations; it is very difficult to see how these capacities can be actualized without being a speaker of *language*. For one thing, it is in using language that persons can engage in "intentional ascent", i.e., in the ability to have higher-order thoughts and desires about lower-order ones by adopting various attitudes toward the latter (e.g., "There is evidence that *p*", " It seems to me that *p*", "I desire that *p*", "I am ashamed that *p*", "I want you to feel guilty about *p*", etc.).[29] But the claim that being a linguistic animal is essential to being fully human is stronger and more fundamental than the thought that language is an *instrument* whose use enables us to exercise certain sophisticated and useful abilities (e.g., to communicate our thoughts to others) or to achieve certain ends via the performance of speech acts (e.g., to effect certain social statuses and institutions). For this instrumentalist conception of language tends to assume that the ability to have thoughts and intentions is independently intelligible apart from their linguistic expressions; on this view (using) language is *posterior* in the order of explanation of the intelligibility of thoughts and intentions as such.[30] But this instrumentalist conception of language as it stands is quite inadequate unless it is mediated by the idea of language as the *indispensable medium* within which human beings *qua* persons encounter the world.[31] According to this *expressivist* conception of language, the ability to speak a language is *prior* in the order of explanation to the ability to think and intend. But more significantly for our purposes, this expressivist conception of language implies a certain conception of human nature by

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[28] Taylor 1985a, p. 23-6.
[29] Pettit 1996, ch. 2, pp. 54-76.
[30] Brandom 2001, Introduction; Taylor 1985c, 1985d, 1995a.
[31] Taylor 1985e, esp. Parts I and III. For an illuminating account of the intellectual background to the so-called expressivist movement that began in the 1770s in Germany, see Taylor 1975, ch. 1, esp. pp. 13-29. My remarks in what follows are much indebted to Taylor.

contending that being a linguistic animal fundamentally transforms the way in which human beings are aware of themselves and their environment.[32]

In what sense, then, is language the *indispensable medium* within which human beings necessarily encounter the world? The best way I know how to begin to make sense of this claim is with Sellars's conception of what he (perhaps misleadingly) calls "psychological nominalism". This view holds that

> *all* awareness of *sorts*, *resemblances*, *facts*, etc., in short, all awareness of abstract entities – indeed, all awareness even of particulars – is a linguistic affair. According to it, not even the awareness of such sorts, resemblances, and facts as pertain to so-called immediate experience is presupposed by the process of acquiring the use of a language.[33]

In other words, Sellars is making the strong claim that knowing how to use a language is a necessary condition of the possibility of the distinctive sort of awareness, *viz*. *classificatory* or *conceptual* awareness, that we humans enjoy. Or to put the claim even more clearly and baldly: For us persons, *all* awareness of *anything*, even in "immediate experience" (e.g., sensory perception), is *necessarily linguistically mediated*. Sellars's imagery of placing items "in the logical space of reasons" as a necessary condition of their epistemological significance at all can serve also as another way of capturing his commitment in effect to an expressivist-constitutive conception of language and its relation to intentional states in general.[34]

The justification of "psychological nominalism" turns on the *interdependence of the holistic and normative character* of conceptual awareness. In order to count as applying a concept, one must not only have an understanding of what makes its application in a situation right, but also a sense of what would count as applying it *wrongly*. The merely reliable and discriminate responses to the environment that systems like radars, elevators, or parrots can display are insufficient to count as concept-applying activities, because conceptual awareness involves more than just reacting in a regular, differential way to environmental stimuli.[35] What is necessary for conceptual awareness is the *recognition* of something *as instantiating a certain feature or property*. The reason is that if something is to count as applying a concept, it must also have an implicit grasp

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[32] I will henceforth use 'human being' and 'person' interchangeably in the text.
[33] Sellars, 1991a, §29, p. 160, emphases in the original.
[34] *Ibid*., §36, p. 169.
[35] Brandom 1994, esp. ch. 4, pp. 213-29.

of some other concepts that *contrast in content* with it. It would have to understand, e.g., that one applies the concept of apple correctly not with respect to its size or weight, but to its being a fruit of a certain sort. Notice that not just any contrastive concept will do; someone who thought that the concept of weight is the *appropriate* contrastive concept of apple could not be judged to have real mastery of the concept of apple. A concept that floats free of its embeddedness within any semantic field that makes it determinate cannot be said to be a concept, for it would have no determinate range of application.[36]

From another angle: Consider the case of chimpanzee behavior.[37] It has been well documented that chimpanzees can not only learn to respond reliably and discriminately to signs, they can also even display signs on their own to express what they want. Here we seem to have a difficult case because we have creatures that display behavioral evidence of *creativity* in the use of signs, which is in turn evidence for something like thought or intention. But what distinguishes the chimp's dealings with signs from those of a human being who has mastered a language is that "getting it right or wrong" in the case of the chimp is *itself* determined in terms of some *non-linguistically specified task or result* (e.g., the chimp sees the sign for getting the banana and thereupon successfully performs this task). By contrast, the rightness or wrongness that a human being who has mastered a language manifests in her understanding and use of signs cannot *itself* be adequately explained in this non-linguistic way. Rather, the sort of normativity in question here can only be made intelligible in terms of the use of other relevant signs (better: *symbols*); it cannot be reductively explained in terms of some non-linguistic phenomena.[38] For what is unavailable to the chimp is precisely the set of *appropriately contrastive symbols* (concepts) that renders the application of a symbol (concept) *determinately contentful* in its *elicited and explicit* judgments about things and states of affairs of the world.

An entity that can be aware of itself and its environment in this conceptual manner *acquires and lives within the linguistic dimension*: Such an entity is "sensitive to

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[36] Cf. Sellars's point that "one can have the concept of green only by having a whole battery of concepts of which it is one element" and the context in which he argues for it; see Sellars 1991a, §19, p. 148.

[37] I owe this example and its discussion to Taylor 1995b, pp. 83-7.

[38] The program of behaviorism and its demise illustrate this point quite vividly.

irreducible forms of rightness in the [symbols] it deploys".[39] Its linguistic, and hence

conceptual, mode of intentionality realizes and expresses what Herder calls "reflective

awareness" (*Besonnenheit*). On this expressivist conception of language, one cannot

properly learn and use a word, and thereby make elicited or explicit judgments, unless

one is *already situated within a medium or complex of holistic and normatively*

articulated significance:

> [Reflective awareness] is defined by the capacity to focus on objects by recognizing them, and thus creates, as it were, *a new space around us*. Instead of being overcome by the ocean of sensations as they rush by us, we are able to distinguish one wave, and hold it, in clear, calm attention. It is this *new space of attention, of distance from the immediate instinctual significance of things*, which Herder wants to call reflection.[40]

Speaking and understanding a language is thus the necessary condition of possibility of

reflective awareness, which *discloses* the linguistic dimension at all in its full

significance; the linguistic dimension is the *indispensable medium or background* that

makes possible our distinctively conceptual way of being directed at the world. So

conceived, language has the character of a *web*:

> [It is] present as a whole in any one of its parts. To speak is to touch a bit of the web, and this makes the whole resonate. Because the words we use have sense only through their place in the whole web, we can never in principle have a clear oversight of the implications of what we say at any moment. Our language is always more than we can encompass; it is in a sense inexhaustible.[41]

Moreover, using a language and hence availing ourselves of the articulacy that it provides

enable us to experience the range of typically human ways of acting and feeling

emotions, of establishing and sustaining the quality and character of the rapport among

persons, and, indeed, of what it is to be a full-fledged self. Language in this sense is not

only the medium of reflective awareness, but constitutes, in a more culturally specific

way, how human beings make sense of the world and themselves.[42]

But one should not be misled into thinking that one is in this way "a prisoner of

language", as some structuralists and their poststructuralist or postmodern descendants

would have it. For using language is just as much "a form of activity in which, through

expression, reflection is realized. Language, as Humboldt puts it, has to be seen as

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[39] Taylor 1995b, p. 84.

[40] *Ibid*., p. 88, emphases added.

[41] *Ibid*., p. 96. Taylor appropriates this image of language as a web from Humboldt.

[42] This is a central theme in Taylor's whole way of thinking; see esp. 1985b and 1985d, pp. 255-73. Although this important point deserves greater elaboration, it cannot be provided here.

speech activity, not as work already done: as *energeia*, not *ergon*."[43] That is, one must

not *reify* the linguistic dimension as some sort of supra-individual entity that hovers

mysteriously and ominously above and beyond the linguistic-conceptual activities of

human beings. It does not *fully determine,* but rather *conditions* as enabling constraints,

no less but also no more, the reflective awareness of human beings. Furthermore,

because it is not a distinct entity over and above the activities of individual human beings,

it must be constantly reconstituted and sustained through its ongoing use and

actualization, which can alter and reshape the web of language – we are sailors on

Neurath's ship on the open sea. There is an *interdependent* and hence *dialectical* relation

between reflective awareness and the use of a language.

In summary, when Sellars's psychological nominalism is coalesced with Taylor's

elaboration of what it is to be in the linguistic dimension in its full significance, being a

linguistic animal involves the actualization of

a pattern of activity by which we express/realize a certain way of being in the world, that which defines the
linguistic dimension; but the pattern can be deployed only against a background which we can never fully
dominate. It is also a background we are never fully dominated by, since we are constantly reshaping it.
Reshaping without dominating it, or being able to oversee it, means that we never fully know what we are
doing to it. In relation to language, we are both makers and made.[44]

To be and move in the linguistic dimension through our reflective awareness is thus to

constitute a realm of *conditioned freedom*, i.e., a realm within which there is no antinomy

between being conditioned by our linguistic heritage (tradition) and being equipped or

put in a position to exercise one's freedom and creativity precisely in speaking a

language.[45] *It is being at home in this linguistic dimension of conditioned freedom,*

actualized in reflective awareness, that truly distinguishes human beings (persons) from

non-linguistic animals and other intentional systems. McDowell, following Gadamer,

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[43] Taylor 1995b, p. 97.

[44] *Ibid*. Consider the following resonance between Sellars and Taylor on the significance of learning and
using language. Sellars writes: "if there is a logical dimension in which other empirical propositions rest
on observation reports, there is *another logical dimension* in which the latter rest on the former" (Sellars
1991a, §37, p. 170, my emphasis). This is in one sense *the central and culminating point* of "Empiricism
and the Philosophy of Mind". I have in effect been trying to show that *this other logical dimension* on
which observation reports rest, namely, the space of reasons and the significance of being placed in it, *is
precisely the linguistic dimension* that Taylor has worked to articulate in his own way. I think this shows
the underlying influence of Hegel and the later Wittgenstein on both. In so doing, Sellars and Taylor, on
this reading, put us finally in the position to understand and appreciate Gadamer's rather dark and alarming
claim that: "*Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache*" (Gadamer 1990, p. 478).

[45] Brandom 1979. The title of this paper, "Freedom and Constraint by Norms", captures precisely the idea
of conditioned freedom that is also expressed in the Taylor passage just cited above.

puts this thought by arguing that only linguistic animals like human beings can have a *world* (*Welt*), whereas non-linguistic animals can only have an *environment* (*Umwelt*).[46] Being and living in the linguistic dimension, as discussed above in (2), equips linguistic animals with the capacity for higher-order evaluations of their appetitive and affective propensities. They are not solely driven by the biological propensities of their animal mode of existence, but can effect and maintain a "free, distanced orientation" toward their environment and themselves. This orientation or comportment (*Verhalten*) both realizes and expresses their *second nature*.[47] By learning and using a language, linguistic animals acquire reflective awareness, a new dimension or medium within which all entities and their features or aspects show up, a new space of conditioned freedom within which to cope with entities and states of affairs in terms of *significance*, not only biological propensities. But this conception of how having a language constitutes the world that transcends merely living in an environment must be understood correctly. Being in the linguistic dimension does not enable linguistic animals to create *ex nihilo* or "socially construct" reality, as if a linguistic being were some sort of God who could enjoy what Kant calls "*ursprüngliche bzw. intellektuelle Anschauung*".[48] Rather, this way of comporting oneself toward reality *lets it be* with the ontological character of being a *world*[49] – this mode of comportment *discloses the world* (*Welterschließung*) – by being directed at the environment in which it lives and moves in the mode of reflective (conceptual) awareness.[50]

(III) I have thus far sketched the way in which a tenable philosophical anthropology can account for the way in which human beings are *rational* and, more

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[46] McDowell 1996, pp. 115-19; cf. Gadamer 1990, pp. 442-60, esp. pp. 447-49.

[47] McDowell 1996, Lecture IV. The expression 'free, distanced orientation' comes from Gadamer 1990, p. 448.

[48] Kant 1993, B72.

[49] See Heidegger 1993, §18, p. 84f.: "Bewendenlassen bedeutet ontisch: innerhalb eines faktischen Besorgens ein Zuhandenes so und so *sein* lassen, *wie* es nunmehr ist und *damit* es so ist. Diesen ontischen Sinn des >sein lassens< fassen wir grundsätzlich ontologisch. Wir interpretieren damit den Sinn der vorgängigen Freigabe des innerweltlich zunächst Zuhandenen. *Vorgängig >sein< lassen besagt nicht, etwas zuvor erst in sein Sein bringen und herstellen, sondern je schon >Seiendes< in seiner Zuhandenheit entdecken und so als das Seiende dieses Seins begegnen lassen* [my emphasis – JJK]."

[50] There is no space to argue why this conception of the linguistic dimension is not a form of what Kant calls empirical (or dogmatic) idealism à la Berkeley. For two recent attempts to show how the world-constituting or world-disclosing character of being in the linguistic dimension can be at the same time constrained by the very same world that it constitutes or discloses, see McDowell 1996, Lecture II and Haugeland 1998a. These arguments are also clearly transcendental; see section III below.

specifically, realize and express *reflective awareness* by being in the linguistic dimension. But any adequate philosophical anthropology must also do justice to and include an account of the way in which human beings are also, after all, *animals*. Specifically, any such account must take into account the distinctively *bodily* mode of existence of human beings and what this involves; it must include an account of how human beings are *living* creatures, subject *also*, albeit in a distinctive way, to the biological constraints and propensities natural to their form of life.

The embodiment and animal nature of human beings is not easy to think about at all.[51] But it was not so for a long time in the Western philosophical tradition. Insofar as the human body was thematized philosophically at all, it was considered only in terms of its *temptation*, *interference*, and *hindrance* to the proper exercise of free will and the freedom of thought. This is evident from Plato's doctrine of the tripartite structure of the human soul via a christianized Platonism through to Kant as manifested in his ethics. In short, the *embodiment* of human rationality was regarded as something to be denigrated and overcome – at its extreme, something *alien* to what makes us truly human. Since Nietzsche, however, this purely negative stance toward our embodiment and our animal nature is no longer unchallenged, and an adequate conception of human nature can no longer ignore the significance of our embodiment and animal mode of being to what it is to be fully human.

What is required, then, is careful reflection upon the contribution that our embodiment makes to being rational animals. More precisely, the task is to show in what precise sense there can be a *constitutive* account of the *unity* of rationality and our embodied, animal mode of being. By a "constitutive account" I mean that it is incumbent on philosophy to describe and integrate the way in which our embodied nature not only *interacts with*, but *positively enables* human thought and agency to be actualized and expressed. I can only gesture here at some aspects of our embodiment that such a constitutive account must take into account. Specifically, in light of the way in which human rationality as been elaborated above in (I) and (II), there must be philosophical reflection upon the following:

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[51] Here I confess that my remarks that follow are exploratory and at best suggestive. I find this topic hard to think about, once we, rightly, jettison the traditional prejudices of philosophers with regard to the importance that our embodied and animal nature makes to what is involved in being properly human.

(1) How our embodiment provides the *locus* for the exercise of our rational capacities. For example, the process of interpretation as conceived by Davidson and Dennett requires that there be embodied creatures that can express their agency through bodily doings, including vocalizations, to which then there is something that can be objects of intentional explanations. Absent our embodied nature, it seems hard to conceive how the process of interpretation as they conceive it can begin.

(2) How the conditions of personhood, especially that of the capacity to engage in higher-order evaluations of lower-order appetitive and affective propensities, presuppose the existence of the latter as not just as objects of evaluation, but as ones sufficiently rich and complicated in content that they are amenable to the linguistic articulations that partly constitute them.

(3) How linguistic activities must not only be restricted to expression in words and prose, but also encompass the full range of symbolic activities in the broader sense as realized in our creation and experience of art, theater, music, dance, etc., i.e., symbolic activities whose expression necessarily involves a bodily aspect. On this enlarged view, the philosophy of language comes to be integrated within a broader philosophy of symbolic activities in general, ones in which their discursive articulation, while still certainly ineliminable and fundamental as a *conditio sine qua non*, becomes only one of its constitutive aspects.[52]

III

If it is correct that the three aspects of being fully human elaborated above are significant, how does one go about arguing for their indispensability for a tenable philosophical anthropology? I submit that showing this requires the use of *transcendental arguments*. In what follows I will first outline, alas only schematically, the features of such arguments, and then show just what it is about them that gives them their argumentative force.[53] In so doing, I will argue that we must reject or seriously qualify the widespread but mistaken assumption that transcendental arguments must be committed to a very strong conception of the *subject* that can be the ultimate origin and source of the intelligibility or reality of everything else.[54]

It is Kant, of course, who invented talk of "the transcendental" and first engaged in "transcendental argumentation", and those who employ transcendental arguments often invoke his various arguments in the first *Critique* as the paradigm for what a transcendental argument is and aims to show. But it is far from clear that Kant himself only uses *one single model* of transcendental argumentation. Thus, not only are there two versions of the Transcendental Deduction, neither of which appears *prima facie* to argue

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[52] Taylor 1985c, p. 235f., 1995a, p. 98. With regard to this topic, my sense is that the 20th century German tradition of philosophical anthropology can make a real contribution; see Honneth and Joas 1988, ch. 2.

[53] I examine the nature and status of transcendental arguments more extensively in "Davidson, Transcendental Arguments, and Verificationism".

[54] For a very recent and interesting essay collection on the significance of the idea of the transcendental in modern philosophy, see Malpas 2003.

for the same exact conclusion, but he also seems to use some sort of transcendental argument in the second Analogy of Experience and the Refutation of Idealism. Furthermore, it remains unclear whether 'transcendental' applies to (i) a distinctive type of argumentation, (ii) a method or methodology (cf. Kant's *Prolegomena*), or (iii) a substantive philosophical position, namely, transcendental idealism. It is thus only useful up to a certain point to invoke Kant's own arguments as the perspicuous paradigm of transcendental arguments. One must first work out a clear conception of a transcendental argument on one's own or reconstruct one in Kant's first *Critique*.

What, then, is exactly a transcendental argument? How does it argue to its conclusion?[55] As a first approximation, one characterization of such an argument begins with the premise that some putatively undeniable mode of our intentionality (e.g., self-consciousness, thought, experience, knowledge, language, communication, etc.) is indeed actualized, and then argues to the conclusion that this mode of intentionality must have certain features or a certain structure, for otherwise this mode of intentionality could not be actualized in the way that it is. If this line of argument is sound, someone who tried to deny that the mode of intentionality in question must have those determinate features or that determinate structure would be committed to denying the very existence, intelligibility, or possibility of that putatively undeniable mode of intentionality. Such a consequence would be unpalatable, for he would be effectively denying what is evidently undeniable; in this sense he would turn out to contradict himself.

There is an alternative, and perhaps more straightforward, characterization of what a transcendental argument is, at least as they are often used in analytic philosophy.[56] According to this understanding, transcendental arguments justify their conclusions by trying to show how the denial of their soundness must result in incoherence or inconsistency. For the *denial* of their soundness *must actually presuppose* that very soundness in order to be intelligible at all. In other words, by contesting the conclusions of transcendental arguments, their opponents must actually rely on the soundness and hence the force of these conclusions as suppressed premises in order to deny them in the first place. Once again, such an individual would in this way contradict herself.

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[55] Cf. Taylor 1995a.
[56] I think that these two characterizations of transcendental arguments make explicit the *same* argumentative structure. But I won't try to show this here.

To make this characterization of a transcendental argument more concrete, whose use in my view is quite pervasive in modern and especially contemporary philosophy, let me rehearse briefly what I see as two of their instances, one from the analytic and the other from the continental tradition. From the analytic side, I will sketch Davidson's influential argument against the intelligibility of conceptual relativism;[57] from the continental side, Heidegger's main argument that any understanding of entities (*Seienden*) must presuppose a prior understanding of being (*Sein*).[58]

A sketch of Davidson's argument against the possibility of conceptual relativism (so to speak, the mother of all global or radical relativisms) has already been provided cursorily above. Put in terms of the characterization of transcendental arguments just given, especially that of the second alternative, his argument has the following structure. Conceptual relativism is the view that our experience and knowledge of the world is inescapably relative to a conceptual scheme, a set of concepts that allegedly organizes or fits, respectively, the conceptually uncontaminated reality or what is purely given in experience.[59] According to Davidson, conceptual relativism presupposes a dualism between conceptual scheme and uninterpreted content (i.e., the Given in Sellars's sense). Because Davidson assumes that having a conceptual scheme is equivalent to speaking a specific language, the claim of conceptual relativism for him comes to the claim that there can be languages that are *not intertranslatable* because different languages organize reality or fit the uninterpreted content of experience in *incommensurable* ways. Thus, failure of intertranslatability would be evidence that our knowledge of the world is radically relative to our conceptual schemes.

Having so set up his target, Davidson demolishes it by showing how we can never be in the position to conclude intelligibly that two or more languages are not intertranslatable. The reason is that relativists, in order to make the argument that languages are not intertranslatable, *must first work out a common basis of agreement in*

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[57] Davidson 1984c. As I understand them, the later Wittgenstein, Dennett (as far as the synthetic *a priori* constraint of interpretive rationality in intentional explanations and predictions is concerned), Sellars, Brandom, McDowell, Haugeland, Pettit, and Taylor all employ in their own way transcendental arguments that justify their respective philosophical views. But Davidson's argument is a particularly lucid example.
[58] Heidegger 1993. As I understand them, Kant (in the first *Critique*), Hegel (in the opening sections of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*), and Gadamer all employ in their own way transcendental arguments that justify their respective philosophical views.
[59] Davidson 1984c, p. 191f.

beliefs and meanings between their own language and those putatively untranslatable languages. The thought is that unless we can first establish a working common basis in agreement that gives us confidence that we are at least talking about the same phenomena, we *cannot actually put ourselves in the position to judge* whether we are in agreement *or* disagreement at all with those who speak the foreign languages. The application of the principle of charity, i.e., counting those we interpret as rational in most matters, is not optional, but (methodologically) necessary if we want to make sense of people at all. If so, however, the very idea that using different languages (different conceptual schemes) is an insurmountable obstacle to mutual understanding collapses on account of incoherence. For relativists who want to insist that languages are not intertranslatable, that conceptual schemes are radically incommensurable, are able only to make this evaluation *once* they have succeeded in establishing a working common basis of agreement in beliefs and meanings with those who speak these allegedly untranslatable languages – i.e., *once* they have in effect largely translated what they claim to be in principle untranslatable! This is a transcendental argument in the second sense characterized above precisely because it shows how the relativists who try to deny its conclusion, namely, that nothing counts as a language unless it is translatable, *actually presuppose the truth of this very conclusion* in their attempt to make their argument. Thus, relativists, at least the global or radical ones, end up contradicting themselves in arguing for their thesis.

Looking now at the other side of the English Channel, we can discern another example of the use of transcendental arguments in Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*. This is obviously not the place to explicate in detail this difficult text. But we can at least discern Heidegger's main transcendental argument in it by clarifying how he argues that any understanding of *entities* (*Seienden*) necessarily presupposes an understanding of *being* (*Sein*).[60] In terms of the first characterization of the structure of a transcendental argument above, the putatively undeniable mode or aspect of our experience of the world is exhibited in Heidegger's description of *our average everyday ability to deal with entities*. From this premise, Heidegger argues that the necessary condition of its possibility at all is that we have a prior understanding of *being*. Being is that *in terms of*

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[60] Heidegger 1993, Erster Abschnitt.

which or on the basis of which (*woraufhin*) we are enabled to understand entities; it is *the most fundamental, holistic and normatively articulated complex* (*Verweisungszusammenhang der Bedeutsamkeit*) on the basis of which we are put in the position to deal with entities at all. In short, the understanding of being is the *indispensable background* against which all coping with entities, including us human beings (*Dasein*), is possible at all. This is not the place to defend this claim. What is relevant for our purposes is that we can discern how this line of argument is transcendental, especially in the first sense specified above. For it argues from a putatively undeniable mode or aspect of our experience, in this case, our ability to deal with entities, to the conclusion that this ability necessarily presupposes, in the order of its dependence and hence its explanation, the understanding of being as the basic structure that makes our ability to cope with entities possible at all.

Transcendental arguments, then, manifest the following interrelated features:

(1) Transcendental arguments claim to reveal the necessary conditions of possibility of various modes of intentionality, such that, absent the satisfaction of these conditions, these modes of intentionality are not intelligible or actualizable at all. What distinguishes transcendental arguments is that they attempt to show this by establishing an *interdependent* – and in this sense *constitutive* – relationship between various *modes of intentionality* (gloss: *Erkenntnisweisen*) and the *modes of being* (gloss: *Seinsweisen*) of that at which they are directed.[61] As Kant, provocatively, claims: "die Bedingungen der *Möglichkeit der Erfahrung* überhaupt sind zugleich Bedingungen der *Möglichkeit* der *Gegenstände der Erfahrung*".[62] In short, the use of transcendental arguments, assuming that they are sound, makes intelligible and possible *a distinctive sort of philosophizing* that integrates *epistemological and ontological considerations in an interdependent-constitutive manner*.

(2) The conclusions of such arguments are neither analytically nor empirically established, but synthetic propositions that are justified *a priori*. Such propositions are not analytic because their truth is not established in virtue of the analysis of the implicit meanings of the concepts in question; nor are they empirical because they cannot be inductively justified by recourse to our past and present experience of the world. Rather, synthetic *a priori* propositions are justified by way of reflection upon the necessary conditions that make some pervasive and undeniable mode of intentionality possible at all.[63]

(3) The sort of *indispensability* or *necessity* claimed by transcendental arguments has a delicate status. On the one hand, they can show that a determinate structure or set of features is indispensable for the actualization of some supposedly undeniable state of affairs when those who deny this connection must actually presuppose the legitimacy and efficacy of that determinate structure or set of features. On the other hand, if there are radical skeptics of various sorts who challenge in turn the supposedly undeniable state of affairs in question (e.g., self-consciousness, thought, experience, knowledge, language, normativity, etc.), i.e., hypothesize that the supposedly undeniable state of affairs in question is actually *illusory*, the proponents of transcendental arguments could do little to convince such skeptics to abandon their radical doubts. What could one say, for example, to someone who doubts the existence of language at all or thinks we are all under the illusion that we speak a language? If one tries to argue against him by pointing out

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[61] *Ibid.*, B25: "Ich nenne alle Erkenntnis transzendental, die sich nicht sowohl mit *Gegenständen*, sondern mit unserer *Erkenntnisart von Gegenständen*, insofern diese *a priori möglich sein soll*, überhaupt beschäftigt" (emphases added); cf. A11-2 and B117.

[62] *Ibid.*, A158/B197, emphases in the German original.

[63] See Kant 1993, Einleitung.

that, in making this very claim, he makes it in a language, he can still always retreat to the thought that we are under the illusion that we are communicating in a language. The point is that the sort of indispensability or necessity that transcendental arguments establish with respect to a determinate structure or set of features is not *apodictic* or *unconditional*. Rather, it is conditioned on the prior acceptance of the supposedly undeniable existence of some phenomenon or state of affairs. Transcendental arguments cannot get a grip on someone who has radical doubts about the very existence of phenomena like language, thought, communication, self-consciousness, or whatever. In short, the necessity that they establish is not apodictic or unconditional (*unbedingt*), or something with the status of being "true in all possible worlds". Rather, the necessity that they establish cannot but be relative to the contingent truth(s) as expressed in the initial premise of their arguments.

(4) Lastly, although analytic philosophers tend to believe that transcendental arguments are best understood as arguments in particular against epistemological skepticism, this characterization is not quite right. If the conception outlined above of what they show is correct, their real target is *atomism*, not in the first instance skepticism. For people inclined to think atomistically are precisely those who would wish to deny the *interdependence* or *constitutive relationship* between a certain state of affairs and its necessary connection to a determinate structure or set of features that supposedly make that state of affairs possible at all. In epistemology, the classical empiricists and their phenomenalist descendants exemplify the atomistic ("building-block" or "layer-cake") way of thinking. It is therefore not surprising that philosophers who reject epistemological atomism, e.g., Kant, Hegel, the later Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Quine, Sellars, or Davidson (among others), all invariably provide counterarguments, each in his own way, that seek to establish the *necessarily holistic* character of intentionality.

If the sketch above of the argumentative structure and nature of transcendental arguments is correct, what significance does it have for the project of working out a tenable philosophical anthropology? The option of deriving the essence of human nature from allegedly indubitable *a priori* first principles is dead given our postmetaphysical sensibilities. I submit instead that the best and only way to justify and defend in detail the three aspects of what makes us fully human can only be given by means of a transcendental argument. The major premises of this argument are specified by (I) in section II above: If being properly human requires being a person, the necessary conditions of personhood require that a person be (1) interpreted as being mostly rational; (2) self-conscious in the sense of being capable of engaging in higher-order evaluations of his or her lower-order appetitive and affective propensities; and (3) capable of undertaking strong evaluation. Now, if the propositions of (I) are evidently undeniable, which I believe they are, (II) makes the claim that the ability to realize (I) necessarily presupposes that human beings, once they have acquired their second nature, live and move in the linguistic dimension and hence have a world. But the right to infer from (I) to (II) depends precisely on showing how being at home in the linguistic dimension is the fundamental necessary condition of the possibility of exercising the capacities as

specified in (I) as the requirements of personhood.[64] For the prior acquisition and constant actualization of *reflective (conceptual) awareness* is what at once constrains and enables these capacities at all.[65] (Although the place and status of (III) is more difficult to ascertain in light of its sketchiness, it would seem that it has to figure in any case as an underlying background condition for at least (I), if not also (II).)

Several comments about the commitments of this conception of a tenable philosophical anthropology are in order here. First, because transcendental arguments are construed above all as a distinctive mode of *argumentation*, they are not forced to be committed, e.g., to the transcendental idealism of Kant in all its details, at least not with respect to his distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves (on an orthodox reading of this doctrine). Second, neither are transcendental arguments forced to be committed to a hyper-strong conception of the subject *qua* the origin and source of all things. As Davidson's transcendental argument illustrates, though its conclusion does constrain in a synthetic *a priori* manner the relation between the subject and the world,[66] there is no commitment to a conception of a subject that can arbitrarily decide how they wish to understand the world. In other words, the use of transcendental arguments, while certainly arguing for a distinctive constitutive relationship between the subject and the world, is not idealist in the way that, e.g., social constructivism is. There is no appeal in using them to the superpowers of "the transcendental subject" or "the transcendental ego" à la Husserl or Sartre. Third, if the philosophical anthropology outlined above is committed to some sort of essentialism about human nature, it is not an essentialism of the first-order kind: It does not argue that human beings in the relevant sense (i.e., persons) must be bearers of a set of first-order properties, biological or otherwise. Rather, the kind of essentialism to which it is committed concerns the exercise of certain abilities or capacities that are required of any and all persons: It is an "abilities- or capacities-essentialism" about human nature, so to speak. But this ought to be seen as innocuous, for this sort of essentialism is of the *higher-order* kind, one that precisely

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[64] Taylor, especially in his paper "Self-Interpreting Animals", provides just such a transcendental argument for his chain of conclusions there; see Taylor 1985b.

[65] For want of space, this transcendental claim may seem rather dogmatic here. Nevertheless, given what has been elaborated above, it should at least be apparent that it would not be difficult to provide more extensive arguments for this transcendental claim.

[66] See esp. Davidson 1984d.

makes possible the very sort of contingent, and by extension unequal and oppressive, differences among human beings that depend upon the presence of certain social or cultural circumstances, a line of thought that postmodernists and feminists have emphasized.[67] In other words, the philosophical anthropology envisaged above actually makes conceptual room for *Ideologiekritik* and various critical social theories. What it does reject is the charge that an "abilities- or capacities-essentialism" *as such* must be already committed to some tacit regime of ideology and oppression of certain groups of human beings.

In conclusion, I have tried to make plausible what are arguably three necessary aspects of what it is to be properly human in the face of our postmetaphysical sensibilities. Such a philosophical anthropology no doubt requires greater elaboration and more extensive defense, which has not been and could not be attempted here. Nevertheless, I submit that these aspects are necessarily involved in what it is to be a person, and hence are highly significant for the articulation of an adequate conception of human nature, for they are central to what lets us be properly human.

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[67] Of course, it is far from innocuous or harmless that a certain configuration of social and political relations tends to oppress certain groups of people living in societies that exhibit those relations. But this sense of 'innocuous' or 'harmless' is caught up in quite a different language-game.

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