Jo-Jo Koo
The Possibility of Philosophical Anthropology[1]

Can a conception of human nature still be possible in light of the "post-metaphysical sensibilities" of our time? Moreover, can philosophy make any contribution towards the articulation of a tenable philosophical anthropology given such sensibilities?[2] After taking into account (in section I) an understandable skepticism about the possibility or even desirability of any affirmative answer to these questions, I will argue that we can respect the motivations underlying this sort of skepticism without abandoning the enterprise of philosophical anthropology as such (in sections II and III). Doing so must involve, in my view, the reconception both of the *status* of what features or aspects of being human should belong to a philosophical anthropology and a better understanding of what it is we are *doing* when we articulate such an anthropology. Although many philosophers have had a lot to say about human nature, they have not been in my view as reflective as they should be about what *entitles* us to believe that we can acquire knowledge or understanding of human nature at all.[3] I shall argue, therefore, that we must get clearer about latter issue before we try to work out any philosophical anthropology.

Given the space constraints of this essay, I cannot obviously provide an a complete philosophical anthropology as I conceive it, but choose instead to

---

1   I wish to thank Julie Zahle, Endre Begby, Robin Celikates, Werner Kogge, John McDowell, James Peterman, and especially Georg W. Bertram, for helpful comments and suggestions on previous versions of this paper.

2   Note that I use the label "philosophical anthropology" in a *broad* sense as simply synonymous with the idea of a philosophical conception of human nature in general. Although there are no doubt some areas of common interest and overlap, I am not referring specifically in using this label to the line of thought that connects certain 20th century German thinkers such as Max Scheler, Helmut Plessner, Arnold Gehlen, and Ernst Cassirer, who are regarded as the central figures of the German tradition of philosophical anthropology. For an excellent and critical overview of this tradition, see Axel Honneth and Hans Joas, *Social Action and Human Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988), ch. 2. For a good discussion of what philosophical anthropology could be, see Richard Schacht, "Philosophical Anthropology: What, Why, and How", in: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50 (1990), Supplement, pp. 155-176.

3   Rousseau is one of the first to reflect seriously upon these issues; see esp. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1971).

focus on what I regard as at least one of its necessary aspects, namely, the *ability to use language*. Just as important, I choose this particular aspect because I believe that it illustrates perspicuously *what sort of argument* one should give in order to show that some feature or capacity is a necessary aspect of any philosophical anthropology. For I will suggest that working out such an anthropology cannot help but involve the use of "transcendental arguments". But when philosophers use such arguments, I shall urge that they should repudiate a common but damaging assumption that such arguments must be committed to a hyper-strong conception of the subject. My aim in this paper, then, is not only to do a little philosophical anthropology, but also to explain why philosophers must use transcendental arguments as the right way to articulate and justify a tenable philosophical anthropology.

I

How do our postmetaphysical sensibilities complicate the enterprise of doing philosophical anthropology? By "postmetaphysical sensibilities" I refer simply to our contemporary intellectual climate in which philosophy, at least since the advent of the Scientific Revolution in the seventeenth century, can no longer derive determinate knowledge about the fundamental nature of reality (including human nature) from putatively self-justifying *a priori* first principles.[4] Contemporary philosophy can no longer simply stand sovereign over the empirical-experimental natural and social sciences and assess "from its armchair" the legitimacy of their knowledge claims. Rather, one of its primary services has come to consist in making explicit and assessing the various ambiguities, presuppositions, implications, contradictions, etc., that inform the theories and practices of the empirical-experimental sciences. More ambitiously, it can also try its best to bring such assessments into connection with our need to understand and improve our individual and collective human flourishing. In any case, as far as contemporary philosophy is concerned, finding ourselves with postmetaphysical sensibilities means, at the very least, abandoning the dream of acquiring metaphysical knowledge as derived from supposedly self-justifying *a priori* first principles.

4 Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1988), pp. 35-60.

As a general tendency, postmetaphysical thinkers urge us to reject any commitment to *essentialism*, i.e., to static ways of understanding things that assume that the features or characteristics of our objects of understanding instantiate fixed atemporal essences. Furthermore, they also reject the demand that our understanding of things can ever 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-essentialists take the significance of postmetaphysical thinking to mean that we ought to accept and even to embrace the way in which reason is *radically contingent*: Reason 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 anti-essentialist reactions 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 to adequately understanding human nature. Two recent and controversial scientific research programs that investigate human nature in this vein are sociobiology and evolutionary psychology.[6] These research programs tend to envisage a *reductionist* conception of human nature, for they claim that most if not all basic aspects 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 evaluate the plausibility and explanatory power of this strong claim. What is relevant for our purposes here is that a common criticism of such programs is that they fail to take into account not only the capacity of human beings to be influenced by their sociocultural environ-

5   These are central themes in the work of Michel Foucault; see esp. *Les Mots et les Choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), esp. ch. 9-10 with regard to the topic of human nature and its investigation.
6   Cf. Edmund O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (Cambridge/MA: Harvard UP, 1978); Steven Scher/Frederick Rauscher (eds.), *Evolutionary Psychology* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2003).

ment, but also to act for reasons that cannot be reduced to explanations couched in terms of natural or sexual selection.[7] The charge is that the proponents of these programs fail to take seriously the extent to which human beings are *reflective* creatures who can deliberate about what they should think and do. This fact about human beings, at least *prima facie*, presents considerable obstacles for reductionistic scientific investigations of human nature. Even worse, however, a further criticism of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology emphasizes how they may unintentionally provide ideological ammunition to cultural and political conservatives who try to justify inequalities among human beings by appeal to differences in their biology. Fascism was only the most extreme and morally disastrous 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. Social constructionists and feminists have often made strong criticisms of naturalistic investigations of human nature along these lines.[8] Not only do such investigations 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 constructionists 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 biological, first nature. Although human beings are no doubt much influenced by their sociocultural environment, they are not so plastic as to be able to *totally transcend* their biology.

With regard to human nature, then, we are faced with a dilemma. One horn is the reductionistic spirit of full-blown biological investigations of human nature that fail, however, to account for the reflective character of human beings; the other horn is the tendency on the part of various postmodernists to overemphasize the plasticity of human nature without doing justice to its biological basis. Are we compelled therefore in the face of this

7   John Dupré, *Human Nature and the Limits of Science* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001).
8   Cf. Alison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1983); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990).

dilemma to abandon any attempt to work out a conception of human nature?

<div align="center">II</div>

I submit that the *ability to use language* should belong at the very least to a *tenable* philosophical anthropology, i.e., one that is self-conscious of the ideological pitfalls and dangers of conceptions of human nature. Put schematically, my line of reasoning for this claim is as follows:

(I) Being fully 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 that persons be *interpreted as mostly rational*. (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 distinctive sort of *self-consciousness* that is central to personhood.

(II) In order for (I) to be possible at all, a person must speak and understand a *language* (i.e., must be a *zoon logon echon*). Put more strongly, our existence as *linguistic animals* fundamentally transforms our dealings with our environment in such a way that we necessarily live and move in the *linguistic dimension*, and hence in a *world*, rather than in a merely natural environment.

(I) What is special about the 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 want to ascribe personhood, on the one hand, to creatures not sharing our biological makeup, e.g., to those possibly inhabiting distant planets and visiting us on earth one day; on the other hand, we have some hesitations about treating certain groups of human beings, e.g., infants or the mentally impaired, as full-fledged persons.[9] These thoughts bring out the way in which being a person involves the ac-

---

9   Note that it does *not* follow from this thought that we are therefore entitled to treat them as mere things either with which we may do as we wish. But it is beyond the scope of this paper to address this issue here.

quisition of a certain *moral-legal* and, less obviously, *ontological standing*, not the actualization 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 very important first to clarify the sort of rationality in question, for it is neither purely instrumental nor fully discursive, though both of these kinds of rationality are already in some sense in play. Rather, the sort of rationality in question only 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 Davidson and Dennett conceive it.[10] It concerns the nature and status of the constraints that hold of our attempts in intentional explanation to make sense of the behavior of something by ascribing beliefs and desires to it. Focusing on interpretive rationality in particular 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 uninformative and simply dogmatic, on the one hand, to stipulate that all and only biological humans are persons, which would be a "speciesist" prejudice;[11] on the other hand, there remains the need to specify just what it is that persons *are* – more precisely, what it is that they *can do* – such that we are entitled to claim that they are fundamentally different from non-persons. The suggestion is that the examination of the nature of interpretive rationality is a helpful step toward clarifying this issue.

What, then, does the exercise of interpretive rationality involve? In making sense of the behavior of something by means of giving intentional explanations or predictions, we *must* implicitly ascribe countless other relevant beliefs and desires that serve as the background against which the beliefs and

---

10   Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), Essays 9-11, 13-14; Daniel Dennett, "Intentional Systems", in: *Brainstorms: Philosophical Essays in Mind and Psychology* (Cambridge/MA: MIT Press, 1981) and "True Believers", in: *The Intentional Stance* (Cambridge/MA: MIT Press, 1987).

11   Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: New York Review Book/Random House, 1990), p. 6: "'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."

desires under examination are identified and individuated, i.e., given content.[12] For a necessary condition of identifying the content of a belief is that it be specified against a pattern of background collateral beliefs. But this pattern that we ascribe must be assumed to be mostly true by our lights, for otherwise the entire process of interpretation could not even get started. In order for the process of interpretation to be possible at all, then, we *must assume a working background of mostly common beliefs (and desires)*. 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.[13] This is the point of Davidson's and in effect Dennett's well-known, but also often misunderstood, "principle of charity". To put the thought in a more ontological vein, if something is going to *be* an object of interpretation at all, it must be *mostly rational*, i.e., a believer of mostly true and coherent beliefs.

Now, what is relevant for our purposes here is that the holistic constraint 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, i.e., an "intentional system" in Dennett's sense, let alone a full-fledged person, unless it is subject to the constraint of interpretive rationality as required by "the constitutive ideal of rationality"[14] or "the intentional stance".[15] Obviously, this does not imply at all that all persons are *in fact* rational on every particular occasion – 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 at all. Treating it as being mostly rational is a *conditio sine qua non* of treating it as a candidate person at all.

(2) What is required, then, for an intentional system to count as a full-fledged person? The answer is that it must also have the *capacity to evaluate*

12   For the sake of simplicity, only the case of belief will be discussed here.
13   Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, op. cit., p. 168: "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."
14   Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 223.
15   Dennett, "Intentional Systems", op. cit.

its first-order desires in terms of *higher-order* desires or considerations.[16] It is the exercise of this capacity for evaluation that really exhibits a candidate person as *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. But I may also have a third-order 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 resolve 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 a life of pleasure 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 take into account and have as their aims the desires 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 sometimes duplicitous and manipulative.[17]

What is significant in any case is that nothing can count as a full-fledged person unless it can *evaluate* its desires in this manner, and insofar as non-human animals, infants, or mentally impaired human beings are not able to engage in this sort of evaluation of their appetitive or affective propensities, they are not (yet) fully persons. 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 capac-

16 Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person", reprinted in: *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988); Charles Taylor, "What is Human Agency?", reprinted in: *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985).

17 This is another pervasive aspect of the human condition that Rousseau already vividly discerns; see n. 3 above.

ity, made the transformation from an intentional system to a full-fledged person, a self-consciously reflective and responsible agent.

(II) Now, if nothing counts as a full-fledged person unless (1) it can be interpreted as mostly rational and (2) capable of engaging in higher-order evaluations of her or his appetitive and affective propensities, it must be *able to speak and understand language*. The best way I know how to begin to make sense of this claim is with Sellars's conception of what he (rather 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.[18]

In other words, Sellars is making the strong claim that knowing how to use a language is a necessary condition of the distinctive sort of awareness, *viz. classificatory* or *conceptual* awareness, that we humans enjoy. To put the claim even more baldly: For us persons, *all* awareness of *anything*, even in "immediate experience", must be *linguistically mediated*.

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 dispositions to respond to the environment that systems like radars, elevators, or parrots can display are insufficient for counting as genuinely *conceptual* activities, because conceptual awareness involves more than just reacting in a regular, differential way to environmental stimuli.[19] What is necessary for conceptual awareness is the *recognition* of something *as instantiating a certain feature or property*. If something is to count as applying a concept, it must also have an implicit grasp 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

18 Wilfrid Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind", reprinted in: *Science, Perception and Reality* (Atascadero: Ridgeview, 1991), § 29, p. 160, emphases in the original.
19 Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit* (Cambridge/MA: Harvard UP, 1994), esp. ch. 4, pp. 213-229.

fruit of a certain sort. Notice that not just any set of contrastive concepts 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 at all, for it would have no determinate range of application.[20]

From another angle: Consider the case of chimpanzee behavior.[21] It has been well documented that chimpanzees can not only learn to respond reliably and discriminately to signs, but display signs on their own to express what they want. Here we seem to have *prima facie* 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 symbols; it cannot be reductively explained in terms of some non-linguistic phenomena.[22] 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.

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 irreducible forms of rightness in the [symbols] it deploys".[23]

---

20 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, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind", op. cit., § 19, p. 148.

21 I owe this example and its discussion to Charles Taylor, "The Importance of Herder", in: *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge/MA: Harvard UP, 1995), pp. 83-87; cf. idem., "Language and Human Nature" and "Theories of Meaning", in: *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1*, op. cit.

22 The program of behaviorism and its demise illustrate this point quite vividly.

23 Taylor, "The Importance of Herder", op. cit., p. 84.

Its linguistic, and hence conceptual, mode of intentionality realizes and expresses what Herder calls "reflective awareness" (*Besonnenheit*).[24] On this expressivist conception of language, one cannot properly learn and use a word, and hence make elicited or explicit judgments, unless one is *already situated within a medium 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.[25]

Speaking and understanding a language is thus the necessary condition of possibility of reflective awareness, which *discloses* the linguistic dimension 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.[26]

Moreover, using a language and hence availing ourselves of the articulacy that it provides enables us to experience the range of typically human ways of acting and feeling emotions, of establishing and sustaining the quality and character of the rapports 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 shapes, now in a more culturally specific way, how human beings make sense of the world and themselves.[27]

But one should not be misled into thinking that one is in this way "a prisoner of language", as some poststructuralists or postmoderns would have it. For using language is just as much "a form of activity in which, through

---

24 Johann Gottfried Herder, *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1986).
25 Taylor, "The Importance of Herder", op. cit., p. 88, emphases added.
26 Ibid., p. 96. Taylor appropriates this image of language as a web from Humboldt.
27 See esp. Taylor, "Theories of Meaning", op. cit.

expression, reflection is realized. Language, as Humboldt puts it, has to be seen as speech activity, not as work already done: as *energeia*, not *ergon*".[28] 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*, 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 the ongoing use and thereby actualization of language by their speakers. In so doing, users of language can alter and reshape the web of language. There is an *interdependent* relation between reflective awareness and the use of 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.[29]

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

---

28 Taylor, "The Importance of Herder", op. cit., p. 97.

29 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, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind", op. cit., § 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*" (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* [Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1990], p. 478).

there is no antinomy between being conditioned by our linguistic heritage (tradition) and being equipped to exercise one's freedom and creativity precisely in speaking a language.[30] *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, also expresses this line of thought by arguing that only linguistic animals can have a *world* (*Welt*), whereas non-linguistic animals can only have an *environment* (*Umwelt*).[31] 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 comportment both realizes and expresses their *second nature*, which at the same time is *interdependent* with *acquiring and sustaining a world.*[32] By learning and using a language, linguistic animals acquire reflective awareness: They come to live and move within a world within which all entities show up *as* what they are, i.e., manifest themselves under determinate aspects that can be considered (thematized) in many other respects. They thus exist within a new space of conditioned freedom within which to cope with entities and states of affairs in terms of *significance*, not only biological propensities.

III

Now, how does one demonstrate the *necessity* of using language for what it is to be fully human? I submit that showing this requires the use of *transcendental arguments.*[33] In what follows I will sketch their argumentative structure and then discuss their various distinctive features. In so doing, I suggest that

---

30 Robert Brandom, "Freedom and Constraint by Norms", in: *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979), pp. 187-196. The title of this paper expresses precisely the idea of conditioned freedom that is also expressed in the Taylor passage just cited.
31 John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge/MA: Harvard UP, 1996), pp. 115-119; cf. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, op. cit., pp. 442-460, esp. pp. 447-449.
32 McDowell, *Mind and World*, op. cit., Lecture IV. The expression 'free, distanced orientation' comes from Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, op. cit., p. 448.
33 Cf. Jeff Malpas (ed.), *From Kant to Davidson: Philosophy and the Idea of the Transcendental* (London: Routledge, 2003).

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 supposedly serve as the ultimate origin and source of the intelligibility of everything else.

What, then, is exactly a transcendental argument? How does it argue to its conclusion? As a first approximation, such an argument begins with the premise that some putatively undeniable mode of our intentionality (e.g., self-consciousness, thought, experience, knowledge, language, communication, rationality, 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 unsustainable, for he would be effectively denying what is undeniable; in this sense he would turn out to contradict himself.

Put schematically, transcendental arguments manifest the following interrelated features:

(1) They claim to reveal the necessary conditions of the 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.[34] As Kant, provocatively, claims: "die Bedingungen der *Möglichkeit der Erfahrung* überhaupt sind zugleich Bedingungen der *Möglichkeit* der *Gegenstände der Erfahrung*".[35] In short, the use of transcendental arguments (if sound) makes intelligible *a distinctive sort of philosophizing* that integrates *epistemo-*

---

34 Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1993): "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." (B 25, emphases in the original; cf. A 11-12 and B 117).
35 Ibid., A 158/B 197, emphases in the original.

logical 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.[36]

(3) The sort of *necessity* claimed by transcendental arguments has a delicate status. On the one hand, such arguments can show that a determinate structure is indispensable for the actualization of some supposedly undeniable phenomenon or state of affairs when those who deny this connection must actually presuppose the existence of that determinate structure. On the other hand, if there are radical skeptics who challenge the reality of this supposedly undeniable phenomenon or state of affairs in question (e.g., self-consciousness, thought, rationality, experience, knowledge, etc.), the proponents of transcendental arguments could do little to convince such skeptics to abandon their radical doubts. The point is that the sort of necessity that transcendental arguments establish is not *apodictic* (*unbedingt*), but *conditional* upon 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, etc.

(4) Lastly, although analytic philosophers tend to believe that transcendental arguments are best understood as directed against epistemological skepticism, this characterization is not really right. If the conception outlined above of what they show, and in particular how they show 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 wish to deny the *interdependence* between a certain phenomenon or state of affairs and its necessary connection to a determinate structure that supposedly makes that phenomenon or state of affairs possible at all. In epistemology, the classical

36 Ibid., Einleitung.

empiricists and their phenomenalist descendants exemplify the atomistic ("building-block") way of thinking. It is therefore not surprising that philosophers who reject epistemological atomism, e.g., Kant, Hegel, the later Wittgenstein, Heidegger, 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 force 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 putatively self-justifying *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 any necessary aspects of what makes us fully human can be established only by means of giving transcendental arguments. I just exemplified such an argument in section II: (I) If being fully human requires being a full-fledged person, the necessary conditions of personhood require that a person be (1) interpreted as mostly rational and (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. Now, if the propositions of (I) are undeniable, which I believe they are, (II) makes the claim that our ability to actualize (I) *necessarily presupposes* that human beings use language in the sense of living and moving in the linguistic dimension. But the right to infer from (I) to (II) depends precisely on showing how being at home in the linguistic dimension is the primary necessary condition of the possibility of exercising the capacities as specified in (I).[37] This condition is precisely satisfied by the acquisition and constant actualization of *reflective (conceptual) awareness*, which is what at once constrains and enables these capacities in general.

Several comments are in order about the commitments of this conception of the necessity of language use for a tenable philosophical anthropology. First, because transcendental arguments are construed above all as a distinctive mode of *argumentation*, they are not forced to be committed, e.g., to Kant's transcendental idealism in all its details, at least not in particular with respect to his distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves

---

37 Taylor, esp. in "Self-Interpreting Animals", in: *Human Agency and Language*, op. cit., provides just such a transcendental argument for his chain of conclusions there.

(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 the intelligibility of everything. As, e.g., Davidson's transcendental argument illustrates, though its conclusion does constrain in a synthetic *a priori* manner the relation between the subject and the world,[38] there is no commitment to a conception of a subject that can arbitrarily decide how it can 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., dogmatic idealism or radical social constructionism is. There is no appeal in using them to the superpowers of "the transcendental subject" or "the transcendental ego" as some readings of Husserl or Sartre would have it. Third and perhaps most importantly, 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 (i.e., full-fledged persons) must instantiate 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, so to speak, an "abilities- or capacities-essentialism" about human nature. But this should be seen as innocuous, for this sort of essentialism is of the *higher-order* kind, one that precisely *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 diagnostic thought that postmodernists and feminists have discerned and emphasized.[39] In other words, the philosophical anthropology suggestively envisaged above actually makes conceptual room for *Ideologiekritik* and various critical social theories.[40] 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 human beings.

---

38 Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, op. cit., Essay 11.
39 Of course, it is far from innocuous 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 use of 'innocuous' is caught up in quite a different language-game.
40 See the essays in Part III of this volume.