**Competence in Compensating for Incompetence**

**Odo Marquard on Philosophy**

**Abstract**

This article is an introduction to the metaphilosophical thought of the contemporary German philosopher Odo Marquard. He understands the philosopher’s competence as a competence in compensating for incompetence or, with a German neologism, as *Inkompetenzkompensationskompetenz*. I offer two interpretations of Marquard’s most famous notion. Both interpretations have been developed in order to answer a central question: if philosophers are incompetent, how can they live with their incompetence? The first interpretation goes back to Marquard’s early work. It leaves no option for philosophers but to flee into dogmatism or skepticism. The second interpretation is inspired by Marquard’s pluralist later work. It advocates what I have called “philosophy with a human face”.

“At a Chinese executioners’ competition, the story goes, the second of two finalists found himself in an uncomfortable predicament. His opponent had just completed an exquisitely precise and unmatchable beheading, which he now had to outdo. The suspense was overwhelming. With his keen-edged sword, the second executioner performed his stroke. However, the head of the victim failed to drop, and the delinquent, to all appearances untouched, gave the executioner a surprised and questioning look. To which the executioner’s response was: ‘Just nod, please’” (Marquard 1989, 22). In his provocative article “Competence in Compensating for Incompetence?” (1973; reprinted in 1989, 22-37), the contemporary German philosopher Odo Marquard compares philosophy to a head that has been chopped off. But the head has not yet fallen.

Marquard sees the history of philosophy as a process in which its competence has been slowly decreasing. “At first, philosophy was competent in everything; then it was competent in some things; today, philosophy is competent for one thing only – namely, to acknowledge its own incompetence” (1989, 24). How did it come that far? According to Marquard, philosophy has lost its competence because it repeatedly failed to meet high hopes. “In the course of its laborious and vexed career, philosophy was faced with at least three critical challenges, which left it overextended and, ultimately, spent and exhausted” (1989, 24).[[1]](#endnote-1) The first challenge, the soteriological challenge, demanded of philosophy that it lead to salvation for humankind. Philosophy was not up to the challenge and lost its supposed salvational competence to Christianity. The second, technological challenge, demanded of philosophy that it lead to utility for humankind. But as the exact sciences outstripped philosophy, it again became apparent that philosophy was not up to the challenge. Finally, the political challenge demanded of philosophy that it lead to justice and happiness. Philosophy lost this challenge too, it was outstripped by political practice.

Salvation, utility, justice and happiness are no longer to be expected from philosophy. What is left to expect? Wisdom? Maybe, says Marquard, but philosophy never enjoyed a monopoly on competence in this domain. “For in giving voice to that wisdom, the poets, at least, were always the rivals of the philosophers. Thus even the special character is threatened that is granted to philosophy when it is defined as the ripe wisdom of those who are not yet old – as the simulation of experience of life for, and by, those who do not yet have any” (1989, 25). When it comes to wisdom, philosophy is replaceable. It seems to be left with no distinctive competence at all. It has lost the constant struggle for competence to more competent competitors. Philosophy is dead tired of fighting, its fate is nearly sealed. “And if that is the way things stand, then what is left for philosophy is: absolutely nothing – that is, pure, unadulterated, naked incompetence, as well as, to cite Socrates, only a single little trifling something, an admittedly very un-Socratic trifle that, rather than making philosophy somewhat less problematic, on the contrary makes it 100 percent problematic; and I should like to name this item, in view of the radical incompetence that philosophy has arrived at: it is philosophy’s competence in compensating for incompetence” (1989, 28).

In this article, I will develop an understanding of this “competence in compensating for incompetence” (*Inkompetenzkompensationskompetenz*). I will work out two interpretations of Marquard’s most famous term and use them as stepping stones to clarify and evaluate Marquard’s evolving metaphilosophical views. Both interpretations start from the assumption that philosophy has become incompetent, in the sense that it can no longer be expected to lead to salvation, utility, justice or happiness. The central question is: “*If* philosophy is incompetent, how then can it live with its incompetence?”

**1. Philosophy’s Flight Into Dogmatism or Skepticism**

1.1. Competence and Compensation

The neologism *Inkompetenzkompensationskompetenz* confronts us with a logical problem. If philosophy is incompetent, how can it compensate for this incompetence by competence? Is it not contradictory to be competent (x) and incompetent (not x) at the same time? Marquard does not mention this problem, but he implicitly solves it by giving different meanings to “competence”. Its meaning in the first part of the term *In*kompetenz*kompensationskompetenz* is closely connected to its regular meaning today: “Competence clearly has something to do with responsibility, capability, and readiness” (1989, 23). So to claim that philosophy is incompetent is to claim that it is no longer responsible, capable and ready to lead to salvation, utility, justice or happiness. Philosophy has to compensate for these shortcomings by a competence that has to be understood quite differently.

To explain the meaning of “competence” in the second part of *Inkompetenzkompensations*kompetenz, Marquard turns to Catholic clerical law. Clergymen enjoy the *beneficium competentiae*, “a kind of clerical alimentation that is a necessary, and therefore nonnegotiable, element in the conduct of a good clergyman’s existence. […] For ‘competence’ in this sense can be usefully extended to highlight either the conditions of the possibility of the priesthood (*potestas clavium*) or the minimal appanage of those who take no part in the active life. Such are in fact the two possibilities by which philosophy compensates for its incompetence […]: either by holding the absolute power of the keys, or by pursuing a *vita postuma*” (1989, 34).[[2]](#endnote-2) Philosophy’s competence is what allows it to flee from its incompetence (1989, 30). There are only two escape routes: a flight into a kind of philosophical priesthood, equated by Marquard with dogmatism, and a flight from active life, a withdrawal into total aloofness, equated with skepticism.

So far, the meaning of *Inkompetenzkompensationskompetenz* can be analyzed in four main points:

1) Philosophy is becoming ever more incompetent.

2) Its incompetence can be compensated for.

3) Compensation lies in philosophy’s capacity to flee from its incompetence.

4) There are two escape routes: dogmatism and skepticism.[[3]](#endnote-3)

I will refer to this analysis as the basic analysis of *Inkompetenzkompensationskompetenz*. This basic analysis clearly leaves us with a lot of questions that Marquard does not even try to answer in his polemical article. How precisely did philosophy become incompetent? How plausible is Marquard’s sketchy historical overview of the three challenges lost by philosophy? Can we date these challenges? Who decides on the competence of philosophy? Why does Marquard think that philosophy will inevitably lose the struggle for competence in the end? Maybe an investigation into the second constitutive part of *Inkompetenz*kompensations*kompetenz*, of the term “compensation”, can help to find some answers.

“Compensation” is a keyword in Marquard’s philosophy. After the publication of *Inkompetenzkompensationskompetenz*, Marquard must have realized that his use of the term “compensation” had remained unclear. He started to study the history of the term, which resulted in a number of publications.[[4]](#endnote-4) Marquard usually distinguishes between two main types of compensation. From early Christianity until the eighteenth century, compensation was associated with punishment. The world was seen as corrupted by human sin. By punishing human beings for their sins, God compensates for their wrongdoings (2000, 21). Here, compensation is retribution or even revenge. Something bad (sin) is made up for by something bad (punishment).

In late medieval thought, both theologians and philosophers started to stress God’s omnipotence and therefore to limit human freedom. But if human beings are not free, how can they be responsible for the evil in the world? Maybe they are not wholly responsible, maybe there is some kind of evil that is just there. It is not our fault, nor is it God’s. This conclusion leads to the question as to how the existence of an absolutely good and omnipotent God can be justified while there is evil in the world that we cannot be blamed for. Human beings ask for a justification of God’s existence. According to Leibniz in his *Theodicy* (1710), God has created the best possible world, in which evil is a *conditio sine qua non*. He does not punish human beings for the sins they commit, but he tries to compensate for the evil that befalls them. He eases their pain by giving them his love. Something bad (evil) is made up for by something good (love). Compensation is no longer a kind of retribution, it has become a kind of consolation. A strong version of this idea stresses that good comes into being *only* through evil. It originates in the eighteenth century and it soon became very popular, but it was severely criticized only a few decades later, for instance by Voltaire in *Candide* (1759).[[5]](#endnote-5) If this world, with all its undeniable evils, is the best possible one, then why did God not refrain from creating it? He is omnipotent to be sure, but his goodness can be doubted. Philosophers start to press charges against God, to accuse him. In the end, writes Marquard, “to rescue divine goodness, God’s nonexistence must be allowed or even insisted upon” (1989, 47). As from Kant’s and Fichte’s philosophy on, man is proclaimed as the creator, he becomes autonomous and inherits God’s functions.

Does Marquard’s reconstruction of the history of the term “compensation” throw light on our basic analysis of *Inkompetenzkompensationskompetenz*? There are some striking parallels between the evolution of philosophy towards incompetence and the development of the idea of compensation. In both cases, modernity (which for Marquard starts in the middle of the eighteenth century and is not over yet) seems to constitute a decisive break: man critically distances himself from what has been taken for granted for centuries. What changes are not so much God and philosophy themselves, but man’s attitude towards them. Instead of clinging to them, almost desperately hoping and begging for salvation, man discovers, thanks to (for example) the development of the exact sciences, that he might be able to save himself. Serious doubts about God and doubts about philosophy arise at the same time. They had both been overcharged, they had both disappointed, they were both confronted with questions of justification. Just like God was blamed for not being able to cope with evil, philosophy was blamed for not being able to cope with its challengers. If God and philosophy cannot do anything about the evil that we are confronted with, then why do we need them? Just like God’s existence could only be saved by denying that he is omnipotent, which is in fact to say that he is incompetent, philosophy has been saved by denying that it will bring salvation, utility, happiness or justice.

The parallels between God and philosophy help us to date the challenges that were lost by philosophy. According to Marquard, modern philosophy is marked by incompetence. If that is the case, all challenges must have been lost by the middle of the eighteenth century. By that time, the soteriological battle was already over for a long time: since the Middle Ages, man appealed to God in the first place, and not to philosophy, when it came to salvation. Philosophy was in second position as long as it saw itself as being the maidservant of theology (*ancilla theologiae*). In modern times, that is, according to Kant, no longer an option. The technological challenge was settled when, around the middle of the seventeenth century, the exact sciences went through a spectacular development. Concerning the political challenge, things are more complicated. Marquard only writes: “But as political praxis outstripped philosophy, whether through its activity, or through its appreciation of the possible, the practicable and the institutionalizable, it became apparent that philosophy was not up to the challenge” (1989, 24). Although this is vague, it seems at least plausible to claim that political praxis outstripped philosophy in the second half of the eighteenth century. First, a clear and new appreciation for the possible, the practicable and the institutionalizable permeates the constitutions of France and the United States (1789). Second, the parallel between God and philosophy can easily be extended in this regard. Politics does not need God anymore: the state is no longer governed by a sovereign, God’s substitute on earth, and freedom of religion is explicitly manifested.

Marquard’s research on compensation has contributed to a better historical understanding of philosophy’s evolution into incompetence, but a lot of questions remain unsolved. Let us therefore turn to the third and fourth element of the basic analysis: compensation for philosophical incompetence lies in philosophy’s capacity to flee from its incompetence, and dogmatism and skepticism are its escape routes.

1.2. Dogmatism and Skepticism

What does Marquard mean by “dogmatism”? We read: “Dogmatism today goes by the name of critique and is, as I said, the position that asserts philosophy’s total competence, by fleeing from the possession of a conscience into being the conscience” (1989, 31). “Critique” refers to the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School. In the context of Marquard’s other works, it becomes clear that Critical Theory is understood as an instance of the philosophy of history, a branch of philosophy that, in Marquard’s thought, pre-eminently represents dogmatism.[[6]](#endnote-6)

To see why the philosophy of history is often dogmatic, we have to return to Leibniz’s views on the best possible world. His answer to the need for a justification of God’s existence soon turns out to be too optimistic. In 1755, tens of thousands of people fall victim to the earthquake of Lisbon. The whole of Europe is shocked by the catastrophe, a prototypical example of how the experience of a radical and unintelligible evil undermines old certainties and allows us to ask questions that could not be asked before. Just like Adorno asked himself whether it is possible to write poetry after Auschwitz, people started to seriously doubt the future of both God and philosophy after the earthquake of Lisbon. How can this be the best possible world?

Marquard sees the development of the philosophy of history as an answer to this question, as a product of the Enlightenment. In increasingly dogmatic stages, the philosophy of history has modified the idea that our world is the best possible world. In an early stage, Rousseau, for example, places Leibniz’s best possible world in the past. This *is* not the best possible world, but it *was*. Originally, the world was good, but human culture has messed things up. History is marked by decline. This way of modifying Leibniz is rather harmless, but the opposite way is dangerous. That way, Marquard claims, is represented by Fichte, who, towards the end of the eighteenth century, has developed a theory of absolute progress (2007, 100-104). In his *Foundations of the Entire Science of Knowledge* (1794), Fichte gives a radical answer to the need for a justification of God’s existence: not God, but man has created the world. God is put aside in favor of man, his creation becomes ours. This world is made by us, we can make it into a better world, we can change everything we want to, our autonomy is unlimited. This may not yet be the best possible world, because God has failed. Man will take over and the best possible world will be the future world.

What is wrong with Fichte’s philosophy of history? Why is it dogmatic? According to Marquard, man cannot inherit God’s role as the creator without thereby inheriting his role as the accused. From now on, man will constantly be accused of having caused evil in the world (2007, 105). The philosophy of history is a tribunal that man can only escape by becoming it, by accusing other people: *they* are responsible for the situation the world is in, *they* have made mistakes. The whole of reality is seen as the result of human action. But this is, of course, an overestimation of man. Man becomes the victim of a constant need to justify himself, of what Marquard calls the “tribunalization” of the reality of modern life: “For today, everything seems to need justification: […] the way one’s hair grows, one’s mood, one’s life, education, bathing suits; only one thing – one wonders why – needs no justification, and that is the need to justify to one and all” (1991, 8).

Marquard’s scathing critique of the philosophy of history makes clear that philosophy has nothing to gain from a dogmatic turn. Dogmatists radicalize the modern attainment of human autonomy, and instead of freeing us from the omnipotence of God, they make our autonomy into an unbearable burden. Moreover, every kind of dogmatism will disappoint us in the end, as we will inevitably be confronted with our impotence to model the world and to change everything we want to. While stubbornly standing by their opinion that all problems can be satisfyingly solved, dogmatists tend to forget that some problems can only be more or less compensated for. They want too much, they look too far into the future, they do not see the little that they can get here and now.

So far for dogmatism. As Marquard understands it, dogmatism and skepticism are ways for philosophy to flee from itself. Skepticism is not a flight into dogmatic absolute importance, but into absolute nothingness (1978, 80). The dogmatist knows everything, the skeptic knows nothing.[[7]](#endnote-7) Skepticism relieves the philosopher of the burdens of constant justification. It is a flight into irresponsibility (1989, 33). Marquard prefers skepticism to dogmatism (1978, 81). Just like the philosophy of history exemplifies dogmatism, skepticism is represented by philosophical anthropology.[[8]](#endnote-8) Marquard claims that philosophical anthropology originates in the sixteenth century and that it became a full-blooded academic discipline around the middle of the eighteenth century (1995, 143), when the modern idea of compensation, the idea of something bad being made up for by something good, becomes popular. Philosophical anthropology tries to understand the nature of human beings. In general, it concludes that man is not to be held responsible for his own nature and for the shortcomings that are involved in it. He can only try to compensate for them. The modern idea of compensation is of crucial importance for philosophical anthropology, which Marquard calls the philosophy of the *homo compensator*.[[9]](#endnote-9) According to modern philosophical anthropology, humans are not in the first place beings that aim at certain goals and will triumph in the end, but they are beings that flee from their shortcomings and try to compensate for at least some of them. In that sense, philosophical anthropology is the opposite of the philosophy of history. The compensations it seeks are not absolute, they will not save us. A man cannot be understood by his successes and the actions that he willingly undertakes, he is much better characterized by his losses and the fortunes that befall him. He is more of a suffering than of an acting being. He has no absolute life, no absolute choice, no absolute autonomy. What he has is compensation, which is always something instead of either something absolute or nothing. Philosophical anthropology is a “philosophy of the instead” (2000, 48).

1.3. Problems

Let us turn back to the basic analysis of *Inkompetenzkompensationskompetenz*. Are dogmatism and skepticism, two “hostile brothers” that share the inheritance of Leibniz’s theodicy (Marquard 2000, 18), in their modern forms of philosophy of history and philosophical anthropology, able to compensate for philosophical incompetence? It is clear that Marquard loathes dogmatism, but his attitude towards the skeptical escape route is ambiguous. In *Inkompetenzkompensationskompetenz* and other articles of the same period, he suggests that the skeptical alternative is the only way out for philosophy. This is highly doubtful, as the most important objections against dogmatism, as described by Marquard, can also be directed against his version of skepticism.

First, denying a problem will not help to compensate for it. Suppose that I need glasses. Real compensation would consist in buying glasses. Being a dogmatist, I maintain that there is no problem and ultimately even get to believe it. This will not help to compensate for my problem. In the same way, the dogmatist’s refusal to recognize the incompetence of philosophy does not help to compensate for it. The case of skepticism is similar: I admit that I cannot see well without glasses, but I pretend (and maybe even get to believe) that that is not a problem. Skepticism does not deny the incompetence of philosophy, but it denies that its incompetence is a problem. Again, there is no real compensation. Dogmatism and skepticism, as described by Marquard, are nothing but forms of self-deceit.

Secondly, recognizing the problem is not enough for compensation. Suppose that I need glasses and recognize my problem. This is not enough to make me buy glasses. I could try to avoid any situation in which I am confronted with my problem. I could stop reading and start listening to the radio. But fleeing from the problem will also not help to compensate for it. The very idea that philosophy can compensate for its incompetence by fleeing from it, be it into dogmatism or skepticism, makes Marquard’s account of philosophy’s *Inkompetenzkompensationskompetenz*, and in particular the third element of the basic analysis, vulnerable.

Thirdly, modern compensation has to be something good that makes up for something bad. Can philosophy’s incompetence, obviously something bad, be compensated for by something good? If dogmatism and skepticism are compensations, they need to be good. Some of the considerations above give us reasons to doubt their goodness.

Fourthly, when a philosophical doctrine refuses to take responsibility, to stand for what it claims, rational discussion or critique is made impossible. In that sense, skepticism is not subject to evaluation: it cannot be right or wrong, because it claims nothing. If no rational discussion is possible, Marquard’s skepticism cannot be said to be philosophy at all. The same holds for dogmatism: it is always, *a priori*, right and excludes any kind of dialogue. Again no rational discussion is allowed. Thus dogmatism and skepticism are not philosophy. If they are the only ways for philosophy to go, Marquard is in fact advising philosophy to commit suicide. This brings us back to the introduction, where we compared philosophy to a chopped-off head. In *Inkompetenzkompensationskompetenz*, Marquard tries to save philosophy’s life by allowing its incompetence to be compensated for by a “single little trifling something”. But this something turns out not to be of any use for the compensation of philosophy’s incompetence. Do we have to conclude that philosophy cannot live with its incompetence, that Marquard has sentenced it to death? Not necessarily.

**2. Philosophy With a Human Face**

2.1. Skepsis: The Third Way?

Let us take a fresh start and see if we can give a more promising account of Marquard’s *Inkompetenzkompensationskompetenz*. We keep the first two elements of the basic analysis: philosophy is incompetent, its incompetence can be compensated for. The third and fourth element of the basic analysis cannot be defended and will be put aside. The central question remains: how can philosophy compensate for and live with its incompetence?

We want to avoid a situation in which the options for philosophy, even if it is not bringing us salvation, utility, happiness or justice, are reduced to a flight into dogmatism or skepticism. Marquard concluded that these are the only options as a result of his giving different meanings to the term “competence”. In doing that, he prevented the term *Inkompetenzkompensationskompetenz* from being internally contradictory. There is, however, another way of achieving that. If we read “competent” as a monadic predicate (as we did) something is competent or it is not. In that case, philosophy cannot be incompetent and competent at the same time if the term “competent” has the same meaning in both cases. But if we read “competent” as a dyadic predicate, we see that “philosophy is competent for x” can perfectly go together with “philosophy is incompetent for y”. We do not need to attribute different meanings to “competence”, we will just understand it as it is usually understood: a competence is the ability to do something well or effectively.

A dyadic interpretation of “competent” leads to what is, at first sight, nothing more than a sheer platitude: philosophy has certain incompetences, and it has certain competences. Nevertheless, the last claim is denied in Marquard’s article *Inkompetenzkompensationskompetenz*, which can be read as the chronicle of philosophy’s failures. But when we look at Marquard’s work as a whole, that image has to be adjusted. The almost cynical way in which he foretells the end of philosophy is replaced in his later works, starting from about 1980, by a much more positive attitude. Not so much towards philosophy, which is only rarely explicitly dealt with in his later writings, but towards life, the world and modern reality. Ever more clearly, Marquard, once a self-declared skeptic, tells us how things should be and what we can do to change them. Instead of skeptically distancing himself from everything and refusing any responsibility for what he claims, he starts to defend the things he stands for. Rather than to put forward a dogmatic or skeptical alternative for philosophy, Marquard seems to advocate a kind of philosophy in which philosophy’s incompetence to bring salvation, utility, happiness or justice is compensated for by certain competences. This kind of philosophy is called “skepsis”.

In his article “Skeptics” (1991, 3-7), Marquard refers to Sextus Empiricus, who divided philosophers “into those who thought that they had found (dogmatists), those who maintained that one cannot find (academic skeptics) and those who are still seeking (Pyrrhonian skeptics).”[[10]](#endnote-10) The last ones understand skepsis as a mean between two vices: the naïve belief in absolute responsibility of the dogmatists and the lethargic indifference of the academic skeptics. To be sure, Marquard still sees himself as a skeptic, but we can see an evolution: his attitude has changed from that of an academic skeptic, stressing that we do not know anything, to that of a Pyrrhonian skeptic, stressing that, even if we do not know anything yet, we should not stop seeking. We will use “skepsis” to refer to the positive philosophy of the later Marquard. Whether this philosophy is a genuine instance of Pyrrhonian skepticism, as understood by Sextus Empiricus, is a question that I leave open.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Why has Marquard changed his views? First, academic skepticism leads, as we have argued, to the death of philosophy. Marquard does not seem to have wanted philosophy to die. He saw himself as a philosopher, and to keep seeing himself as such, the possibility of doing philosophy must stay open. His own later work illustrates that philosophy does not have to end up in either dogmatism or skepticism. Etienne Gilson once wrote that philosophy always buries its undertakers. Marquard avoided his own burial by changing his views. Second, Marquard’s association of academic skepticism with philosophical anthropology and thereby with the modern idea of compensation is far from obvious. We have argued that denying a problem does not help to compensate for it. It seems to be much more appropriate to link philosophical anthropology and the modern idea of compensation, towards which Marquard still feels sympathetic, with Pyrrhonian skepticism, because it stresses the ongoing search for a solution. If I do not see well, the right reaction (and necessary condition for compensation) is to start seeking for a solution.

So Marquard has exchanged skepticism for skepsis. Before we focus on the consequences of this shift for his metaphilosophy, four important themes of Marquardian skepsis have to be briefly discussed.

1) *Pluralism, individuality, freedom.* Marquard often writes that skepsis is “an appreciation of the separation of powers” (1991, 4). A skeptic does not cling to one history, one tradition, one culture or one philosophy, he lets several of them collide with each other. This collision causes them to decline so much in power that “the individual gets free of them, gaining distance and his or her own distinct individuality” (1991, 4). The more convictions, questions, answers and realities he cultivates, the more free the skeptic becomes.[[12]](#endnote-12)

2) *Usualism.* Skepsis is “an appreciation of the usual, and of the unavoidability of usual practices. We do not live long enough to arrive at absolute orientations – at the absolutely correct management of the absolutely correct life, which depends on finding absolute truth. […] Our life is too short to escape as far as we might like to from what is usual – from the existing mores, customs, traditions – into the absolute” (1991, 5). Because man is not an absolute being, he cannot afford to scorn the imperfect (2004, 13).[[13]](#endnote-13)

3) *Hermeneutics.* Marquard defines hermeneutics as “the art of getting out of a text what is not in it.” Human beings are mortal, so they cannot change everything they want to. Hermeneutics is an answer to that problem, because “hermeneutics is a way of changing where no change is possible. Here one must do something else – namely, interpret” (1989, 117). Being the art of interpretation, hermeneutics compensates for the impossibility to change the world in the way we want to with the possibility to interpret it and to distance ourselves from it. Hermeneutics is not only a way of changing where no change is possible, it is also a way of “holding fast where one cannot hold fast. Here one must do something else – namely, interpret” (1989, 119). With every death of others, “some of the intelligibility of past things, for those who remain alive, dies.” Hermeneutics makes up for the loss of primary intelligibility by rendering things intelligible again. Whether hermeneutics is understood as a way to change things or to hold things fast, it is a response to the fact that we die.

4) *Curiosity and inclusive reason.* In the ancient Greek philosophical tradition, reason was, according to Marquard, exclusive: the variable, the finite, the coincidental, the individual and the affective were excluded in favor of the permanent, the infinite, the necessary, the universal and the argumentative (1995, 41).[[14]](#endnote-14) Evil was excluded in favor of the good. Until the late middle ages, reason was to be directed at the good and curiosity was close to sin. Everything changed in modern times. In modern science, curiosity has become a virtue and reason has become inclusive (1995, 39-61 and 75-91). One of the most important obligations of philosophers is to notice what is usually left unnoticed. As much subjects and questions as possible should be open to research. And, as we have seen, the more questions there are, the more free human beings become. We have to protect the modern achievement of seeing curiosity as something good. We can do that by minimizing the sanctions for error. In science, truth does not come without error (1995, 84). Science is “an institution for errors without consequences” and scientists are people “whose fate it is to make mistakes”.

2.2. Problems and Perspectives

Do the elements of Marquard’s skepsis learn us something about philosophy in general? For example: there have to be a lot of different philosophies, they should take human finitude into account, interpret reality in numerous ways, notice the unnoticed and always stay curious. If these are the later Marquard’s metaphilosophical views, they are barely worth writing an article about. First, they seem pretty obvious. Only fundamentalists will allow just one philosophy, nobody refuses philosophy the right to interpret. Who will deny that we all die and that we cannot change everything in the way we would want to? Secondly, Marquard’s views are vague in many respects. Are plurality and curiosity always good? Should not our freedom be limited? Do we have to accept all traditions? Can we interpret things just like we want to? Are there examples of “noticing the unnoticed”, of inclusive reason?

Some commentators have dwelled on these problems at length.[[15]](#endnote-15) Why did Marquard not treat them more carefully? In the first place, it is clear that Marquard does not want to impose rigid rules on philosophers. He does not build a system, he just wants to emphasize certain aspects. “Mind your mortality”, for example, is not a binding rule (what would it bind us to?). What Marquard offers are regulative ideas, points of interest, signposts. In this regard, philosophy can be compared to a map. Of course one can go through life without a map, but philosophy allows people to orientate themselves and to visit places they would probably never have discovered without a map. The map shows which roads can be taken. Some roads are more beautiful than others, some are winding and difficult, others go straight. Different philosophers will prefer different ways to go, the map does not and should not determine our destination.[[16]](#endnote-16) A philosopher and a non-philosopher will not necessarily take different paths, they can both take a road without knowing where they are going. But the difference is: the true philosopher constantly tries to orientate himself, to look where he is and where the other roads are, to notice what the non-philosopher does not notice, to find out where he is going. He keeps on seeking.

By not working out his ideas in too much detail, Marquard gives us the freedom to interpret them in our own way, because that is what philosophy is about. If Marquard wants to defend his pluralism as a non-absolute position, he has to allow for as much philosophies as possible, be they pluralistic or not. Every philosopher has the obligation to decide for himself which traditions have to be upheld, how other philosophers’ texts have to be interpreted and what consequences the brevity of his life has for his philosophical views. In that sense, Marquard invites us to introspection. But if he just wants us to think about ourselves and our ways to go, if he just wants us to pay attention to what we do, he could as well have stressed other things than pluralism, usualism, hermeneutics and curiosity. Why are they particularly important?

In an interview from 1992, Marquard says: “Philosophy has to stay human” (Dietzsch 1992, 956). This quote begins with “philosophy has to …”, and therefore it marks Marquard’s having turned away from unconcerned academic skepticism. Moreover, I claim that it contains the essence of what Marquard’s late metaphilosophy is about: the human. Philosophers are in the first place human beings. This is a truism, of course, and it states what everyone admits, but many philosophers have failed to see its consequences.[[17]](#endnote-17) Why does philosophy need pluralism? Because pluralism is a necessary condition for the freedom and individuality of human beings. Why usualism? Because human finitude forces us to accept usual practices. Hermeneutics is a way of recognizing the non-absoluteness of human life. Inclusive reason respects the variable, finite and affective aspects of human life. Curiosity is a human quality. Marquard’s points of interest are linked by an overarching concern: let us, philosophers, not forget that we are human beings.

What does this philosophy with a human face, this *scientia non divina sed humana* (Marquard 2003, 48), contribute to an interpretation of *Inkompetenzkompensationskompetenz*? Before answering that question, we have to ask ourselves whether philosophy is in a way more human than other sciences, whether its human face is a distinctive feature. Are not the physicist, the archeologist, the economist human beings as well? The specifically human aspect of philosophy is stressed, for example, by Karsten Harries: “[…] that commitment to objectivity that is a presupposition of the scientist’s pursuit of truth. That pursuit had to lead to a reduction of reality to a collection of mute facts, raw material that lacks meaning until appropriated and put to use by human subjects. Science so understood knows nothing of incarnations of meaning in matter, knows nothing of freedom, knows therefore nothing of persons as persons” (2001, 67). I think that philosophy, more than (other) sciences, allows its practitioners to show themselves, their shortcomings and their errors, their human nature, in their work. Philosophy is the result of the individual’s permanent resistance against the impersonal “it” or “one” (see, for example, Heidegger’s concept of *das Man* in *Being and Time*). The chapters of an introduction to philosophy are in most cases dedicated to disagreeing philosophers, to persons, as where the chapters of an introduction to mathematics, for example, rarely focus on individual mathematicians. Moreover, philosophers are allowed to make mistakes: the best philosophical work is not the one with the least number of mistakes.[[18]](#endnote-18) To err is typically human.

At the end of “Competence in Compensating for Incompetence?”, Marquard comes back to the executioners’ competition. He asks about the executed man: “When will he finally nod?” (1989, 36) This question can be interpreted negatively: when will the head, philosophy, fall and roll away, so that it can be buried? But there is also a positive interpretation: when will philosophy nod, tacitly say “yes” to affirm the only possibility it has: to become human, to keep its balance between the Scylla and Charybdis of dogmatism and skepticism? After all, who says that the executioner has succeeded and killed his victim?

Incompetence is a human quality. Not only is philosophy in the first place a science with a human face, Marquard also suggests that philosophy should be aware of its human nature. He evokes the image of a philosophy that is anthropomorphous, in the sense that it has to cope with itself, its shortcomings and its competences and that it reflects upon them: “I am interested in what this head thinks, before it makes its last move – because this must resemble the thought that philosophy entertains about itself” (1989, 22). In modern times, philosophy understands itself differently than before. Subsequent confrontations with radical evil have affected its self-assured attitude. Maybe philosophy has not so much become incompetent, maybe what is happening in modern times is that it is slowly becoming aware of its incompetences. Dogmatism and skepticism, then, are nothing but attempts to mask an ever growing, troubling feeling of uncertainty, attempts in which philosophy makes itself believe that it has the inhuman competence of being absolute.

Philosophy with a human face is an unpretentious philosophy that tries to stay aware of its fallibility and vulnerability at all times. Marquard warns us not to overestimate the capacities of philosophy (Boehm 1997, 120). In philosophy, there is no such thing as a giant leap for mankind, there are only little, hesitant steps of imperfect individuals. That does not mean, of course, that philosophy should retreat. Philosophers should not be cowards, they have to stand firm and refuse to flee from their own shortcomings. The French philosopher Charles Péguy once wrote that a great philosophy is not a philosophy without reproach, but a philosophy without fear. In the same vein, Marquard advises us to live carefully, but to think dangerously (1982, 70). Philosophers are stunt men (1989, 38). Philosophy is not so much the love for wisdom as it is the courage to be wise (2004, 100). If philosophers have the courage to acknowledge philosophy’s incompetences and do not turn away from its human face, a necessary condition for compensation has been fulfilled.

What consequences does the recognition of its humanity have for the way we think about philosophy? Most importantly, it can relieve philosophy from the excessive and constant pressure of justification. If philosophy is not a god anymore, one cannot reasonably expect it to do what is superhuman.[[19]](#endnote-19) Philosophy is a way of dealing with problems of which it would be antihuman not to have them and superhuman to solve them. “To have problems with which one does not get finished” is normal for humanity (Marquard 1991, 24). In that respect, Marquard mentions a “lion-loving lion-hunter who, when he was asked how many lions he had already brought down, could admit that the answer was none, and received the consoling response that with lions, that’s already a lot” (1991, 25). This is how philosophers should deal with philosophical problems: they have not solved one of them, but with philosophical problems, “that’s already a lot”. The value of philosophy lies in the way it deals with problems, not in its solutions. Deleuze, for example, often stresses that the value of a problem does not depend on the possibility to solve it. To formulate problems is valuable in itself, and it is the philosopher’s task to keep unsolved and unsolvable problems alive. Although it will not bring salvation, utility, happiness or justice, there is no reason why the incompetences of philosophy should lead to its absence, its death or the end of its activity. And it is precisely the activity, not the outcome, that is important.[[20]](#endnote-20)

The recognition of philosophy’s human character relieves it from the pressure of justification and allows it to be active in different ways, without determining the directions or absolute goal(s) of its activity. There is a third consequence. As human beings, philosophers do not have the time to change and question everything they would want to. Their life is just too short. Of course this does not mean that all traditions have to be slavishly followed, but it does mean that philosophers have to realize that they will always have to accept more than they can change. Again and again, philosophers have wanted to make *tabula rasa*, to start philosophy up from scratch. But that is not the way to go. Hinting at a famous dictum of Kant, Marquard writes: “Experience without philosophy is blind, philosophy without experience is empty” (1982, 17). This means, first, that philosophy should take human experience into account. Again, it affirms that philosophy has a human face. But “philosophy without experience is empty” also means that philosophy should not overlook its own experience of more than 2500 years. Like human beings, philosophy does not understand itself apart from its past and always acts against the background of its past. Whether its past experiences be a burden or a benefit, philosophy has to consciously live with them if it does not want to get lost in self-deception. This is why Marquard’s constant play with quotes and views from the philosophical tradition is more than an intellectual game.

Inspired by Marquard’s later work, we can now give an interpretation of the term *Inkompetenzkompensationskompetenz* that does not sentence philosophy to death. Just like our provisional interpretation in the beginning of this article, it consists of four main points.

1) Philosophy has certain incompetences. It will not lead to salvation, utility, justice or happiness, because it has to take its human character into account. As a consequence, it cannot leave its tradition behind, it is not absolute and it always has to accept more than it can change.

2) Philosophy has certain (distinctive) competences. The early Marquard would not have accepted it, but his later work speaks in favor of this claim. Philosophy’s competences are closely connected to its human character. First, good philosophy is courageous and notices the unnoticed. Second, faithful to its ancient slogan “Know thyself”, philosophy is a discipline that tries to understand itself. Its competence lies partly in the recognition of its incompetence.

3) Philosophical activity is a search for balance. “Compensation” is etymologically connected to the Latin *compensare*, meaning “to weigh”. Philosophy is the weighing of problems and arguments. In *Inkompetenzkompensationskompetenz*, incompetence and competence balance each other out. In its search for balance, philosophy takes into account what it can and cannot do, it is aware of the fact that the perfect balance is an ideal that it will never reach. The philosopher pays attention to the constant shifting of equilibria, he notices that every equilibrium is provisional and precarious. Again, philosophy’s search for balance has to do with its humanity. In the history of philosophy, man has often been understood as a being in the between, trying to find its balance between God and the animal world, between being and not being (Descartes), being and nothingness (Sartre), life and death (Heidegger), greatness and misery (Pascal).

4) Dogmatism and skepticism are to be avoided. Philosophy is moving on a spectrum between two extremes. The philosopher is like a tightrope walker, trying to find his balance between the crevices on each side of the rope. Concentration and experience are vital, falling into dogmatism or skepticism means death.

**3. Conclusion**

I have used the hermeneutic liberty that Marquard explicitly allows for to interpret his most famous term, *Inkompetenzkompensationskompetenz*, in two ways. Both interpretations have been elaborated in order to find an answer (not the answer) to the central question: if philosophy is incompetent, how can it live with its incompetence?

The first interpretation is based on Marquard’s article “Competence in Compensating for Incompetence?” and other texts from the same period. It relies on Marquard’s research into the history of the terms “competence” and “compensation”. The main problem with this “direct” interpretation is that it sees philosophy as totally incompetent. No competences are allowed for philosophy and a flight into dogmatism or skepticism, which amounts to suicide, is the only option left. It is, however, difficult to understand how the death of philosophy can compensate for its incompetence. Another approach is needed.

In order to develop a second interpretation, we have zoomed out in order to obtain an overview of the whole of Marquard’s work, in which a clear evolution has been discovered. I have tried to found the claim that, in his late work, Marquard implicitly advocates what I have called “philosophy with a human face”. Rather than on an analysis of the constitutive parts of *Inkompetenzkompensationskompetenz*, the interpretation rests on a synthesis of recurrent themes and motives. This synthetic method is supported by John Cottingham: “What is needed is not philosophical analysis but philosophical *synthesis* – not chopping things into parts, but linking them together. […] Humane philosophy, synthetic in its methods, synoptic in its scope, culturally and historically aware in its outlook, open to multiple resonances of meaning that come from the affective as well as the cognitive domains – such a grand enterprise need not occupy all our time as professional philosophers. But unless it occupies at least some of our time, there is a risk that what we do will cease to be of interest to anyone but a narrow circle of fellow-specialists” (2009, 245-255).

Although both interpretations recognize that philosophy is incompetent because it cannot lead to salvation, utility, happiness or justice, their answer to the central question is radically different. The first interpretation implies that philosophy cannot live with its incompetence. It flees from itself into dogmatism or skepticism and no philosophy is left. Although one might very well argue that the end of philosophy is inevitable, that it would not be a problem or even that we would be better off without philosophy, it is clear that this interpretation yields no answer to our central question. The second interpretation does give us some answers. Thanks to its human face, there are ways for philosophy to cope with its incompetences. Attentiveness and courage, for example, can be of great help. Moreover, philosophy is aware of its problems. It has become uncertain, but this uncertainty, which distinguishes philosophy from other sciences, is at the same time a capacity for doubt. Philosophical activity sharpens this valuable capacity, reminding us of who we are: doubting, curious beings who cannot stop their search for understanding and self-knowledge, although they realize that they might never find what they are looking for.

1. **Notes**

   A similar remark has been made by Marquard’s contemporary and compatriot Hermann Lübbe, who argues that the problem of philosophy is not its becoming ever more irrelevant, but its becoming ever more overcharged. We are expecting too much of it (1978, viii). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. On the philosophical history of the term “competence”, see Klingenberg 1976, 918-919. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In another article (1978), Marquard partially rejects his earlier views on the (in)competence of philosophy. He still believes that philosophy’s condition is critical, but he does not attribute its problems to a lack of competence. Research into the history of the term “competence” has made him realize that the problem of philosophy is not its incompetence, but its competence. Competence is here to be understood as “to want (to become) something”. In ancient Rome, “competitors” were candidates for consulship. Later, those who wanted to become pope were called “competentes”. So one is competent as long as one wants something. Philosophy wants wisdom but cannot get it and is therefore competent. It cannot but flee from its competence. Marquard again sees two escape routes: skepticism is understood as not wanting anything anymore, dogmatism as wanting everything. The heart of Marquard’s analysis, however, remains the same: philosophy has a fundamental problem (be it competence or incompetence) and can only compensate for it by fleeing from it into skepticism or dogmatism. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The results of Marquard’s research can be found in Marquard 1976, Marquard 1989, 38-63, Marquard 1991, 8-28, Marquard 1995, 11-38, Marquard 2000, 11-29 and Marquard 2003, 64-81. Marquard’s research has a lot in common with Svagelski 1981, a book Marquard knew and approved of. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Marquard gives numerous examples of instances of the idea in the works of Pope, Malthus, Mandeville, Herder, Kant and Schiller (1989, 44). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Marquard expounds his views on the philosophy of history in Marquard 1982, Marquard 1991, 50-70, Marquard 1995, 92-107 and Marquard 2007, 93-108. A similarly critical attitude towards the philosophy of history can be found in the works of Burckhardt, Nietzsche, Droysen, Dilthey, Croce, Heidegger, Benjamin, Adorno, Horkheimer, Popper, Danto, Lyotard and many others (see Halbmayr 2000, 263). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. “An ancient skeptic seems to have been expected to say ‘I know nothing!’ – rather in the manner of a certain waiter from Barcelona” (Coope 2009, 189). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Marquard sets out his views on skepticism and anthropology in Marquard 1971, Marquard 1978, 70-90, Marquard 1982, 122-144, Marquard 1989, 3-21, Marquard 1991, 3-7, Marquard 1995, 142-155, Marquard 2000, 11-29 and Marquard 2004, 13-22. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Marquard quotes various instances of the link between philosophical anthropology and the modern idea of compensation from the works of Plessner, Gehlen and Luhmann (see Marquard 2000, 12-13 and Marquard 2007, 108). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Marquard does not always clearly distinguish between “skepticism” and “skepsis”, he uses both terms interchangeably. I use “skepticism” to refer to academic skepticism and “skepsis” to refer to Pyrrhonian skepticism. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Some authors have argued that Marquard has never been a skeptic, be it an academic or a Pyrrhonian one (see Halbmayr 2000, 44). Craemer 1975 discusses the relation between ancient skepticism and Marquards early philosophy. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. The link between pluralism, individuality and freedom is discussed by Marquard in Marquard 1991, 50-70, Marquard 1994, 30-44, Marquard 1995, 115-122 and 142-155, Marquard 2004, 68-90 and 114-123 and Marquard 2007, 109-125. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Marquard stresses again and again that life is short (Marquard 1994, 42 and 47, Marquard 2000, 70, Marquard 2004, 55 and 78). Commentators have criticized his constant use of this *vita brevis* argument (see Halbmayr 2000, 23, 109 and 112). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Among others, Heidegger (in *What Is Metaphysics?*) and Foucault (in *The Order of Discourse*) have discussed what Marquard calls “procedures of exclusion” in antiquity. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See Kersting 1989, 173, 175 and 177, Tugendhat 1992, 457 and Halbmayr 2000, 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. “Philosophy, as I understand it, has its origin in a sense of homelessness […] Were philosophy to determine or decide on the right way, were it able to raise that house which allows for genuine dwelling, it would have done its work and come to an end” (Harries 2001, 61-62). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Wittgenstein writes: “Philosophy only states what everyone concedes to it” (2009, §599). Hacker does not explicitly refer to Wittgenstein, but he seems to agree with him: “That is why the characteristic reaction to an advance in scientific knowledge is ‘Goodness me, who would have thought of that!’, whereas the characteristic response to a philosophical insight is ‘*Of course*, I should have thought of that!’” (2009, 148) [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Marquard repeatedly emphasizes his own fallibility and that of the philosopher in general (see, for example, Marquard 1995, 10, 12, 13, 40, 62 and 79). Other authors also point at the fact that philosophers are allowed to err: “Philosophy is the only discipline where whole careers and reputations are made on the basis of failed research programs” (Capaldi 2009, 118). “Philosophy is the only subject where something can be tolerated and even praised under the description ‘nonsense’” (Coope 2009, 195). “A colleague in mathematics, during yet another bout of anxiety about university funding, was explaining to me, with a wink, just how little by way of resources a mathematician required: no expensive apparatus – simply a pad of paper, a pen and a waste paper basket – the suggestion of course being that philosophy was even more economical, only paper and pen being needed” (Coope 2009, 200). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. That does not mean that philosophers should not hope or strive to accomplish what is superhuman. Hoping to accomplish what is superhuman seems to be typically human. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Stroud writes: “It is regarded as more important that the activity should go on than that it should have this or that specified outcome. Results, in the form of conclusions reached, or propositions established, are not what matters. This is a good thing, as I see it, because I do not regard philosophy as a set of results or doctrines, in the sense of conclusions reached, or propositions established […] Philosophy as I see it is an activity, not a set of doctrines or truths at all. Nor is its point to discover philosophical theses or doctrines” (2001, 31-33).

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