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Aspects of Contemporary German Philosophy*

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An attempt to give a general survey of contemporary German philosophy would be doomed to failure not only on account of the limitation of the space available but, above all, owing to the nature of the task itself. Such a general survey presupposes a spatial or "temporal distance from which the separate trends would converge in a composite whole. This is impossible, therefore, for anyone who is placed in the midst of it. It is true that he can see individual trends but he cannot see how they combine in a whole. That is why I am confining myself to a description of some aspects, for the word "aspects", especially when used in the plural, is less pretentious; it merely implies certain glimpses, in the course of which the matter, seen from a fixed viewpoint, is revealed in a certain perspective. Moreover, the aspect entails a principle of orderliness; for in the aspect, too, the individual trends enter into relationship with one another and conform to a general pattern. But it is always an inherent condition of the aspect that it is one among other equally valid aspects. It contains a moment of need for supplementation. It refers to these other aspects. This also involves something that is tentatively assumed, something hypothetical. One tests it out from one point of view, with the idea of subsequently testing it from other points of view. Each of them is one-sided. In each of them certain things stand out in sharper relief than in others, certain associations become clear and certain vistas open up.

That is inherent in the nature of the aspect. None of them lays claim to completeness. Indeed, it remains a matter of conjecture how the individual aspects become united in an overlapping whole and even if they do in fact become united at all. [p. 257/p. 258]

It is this sense that I want to attempt to enlarge upon some aspects of contemporary German philosophy. I am not aiming at completeness. I know that there are other equally valid aspects that I am not taking into account. I would like to single out just three such aspects which seem to me to be indicative of the current situation and between which, moreover, I believe that I can recognize a close connection: philosophical anthropology, the philosophy of language and epistemology. I am concerned here with the conjunctive development of these three aspects. I am not concerned with philosophical trends or schools nor with the assessment of leading personalities. The scholastic connections are to be left out of consideration. I am attempting, rather, to give a purely pertinent account and it is from this standpoint that I am including what appears in various respects to make a material contribution to the examination of these aspects. That is why comparatively little reference will be made to names, except where it is a question at times of a specific contribution to the relevant problem.

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I. Philosophical Anthropology

If I mention philosophical anthropology in the first instance I lay myself open to the objection that I am talking of things that belong to the distant past and are no longer relevant today. For it was already several decades ago that, in 1928, philosophical anthropology was founded by Max Scheler in his now famous little work "Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos" ("Man's Position in the Cosmos"), which at that time initiated a lively philosophical movement, as though a long-awaited cue had been given. Philosophical anthropology appeared at the time to be nothing less than the determinant factor, on account of which the whole of philosophy would have to be broached anew. But it was not long before Jaspers and Heidegger raised such sharply formulated objections to these new contemporary aspirations that their basic concepts and even their intrinsic potentiality appeared to have been shaken. They were widely relegated to the background without the controversy having been really fought out. The conditions of the times were also too unfavourable. Today we seem to attach less weight to these objections. At any rate one observes the extent to which the anthropological method of inquiry has acquired a new impetus not only in philosophy but also in the neighbouring sciences of psychology and psychopathology, medicine and pedagogics. New works in this field are turning up everywhere. In spite of this, so it seems to me, [258/259] the controversy over the objections of Heidegger and Jaspers has merely been shelved and has not really been brought to a conclusion. The nature and potentiality of a philosophical anthropology, as well as its place in philosophy as a whole, still remain unclarified. And insofar as this is the case philosophical anthropology seems to me today — and today more than ever — to be a burning, topical problem.

In the light of this point of view attention is now being turned back once again to its original starting-point with Scheler. Scheler himself, with a naive indifference, does not seem to have been properly clear about the nature of the discipline which he had founded. This gives all the more pertinence to the question: Why did this new branch of philosophy have to come into being at precisely that time in the late twenties of our century? The reason given by Scheler is that the profusion of heterogeneous results produced by the individual sciences concerned with man during the preceding decades had destroyed the traditional image of man. No period, he wrote, had known so much about man and, conversely, none had known so little what he really was in his entity. Heidegger subsequently adopted these ideas.

But is this explanation convincing? It is indeed true that Darwinism and Kohler's experiments with apes have seriously jeopardized man's exceptional position in relation to the animal world and that Freud's discoveries have fundamentally shattered the independence of consciousness. This in itself and much else that supervened upon it were decisive events. But can one say on this account that people had previously lived in a state of awareness of their own nature? Already in the Psalms we hear the question arising from out of the depths: "What is man, that thou art mindful of him?" And it does not merely refer, like a rhetorical exclamation, to his nothingness but asks at the same time, as the continuation reveals, about his preferential position in the Creation. And so the question persists throughout the centuries down to Pestalozzi's "Abendstunde" ("Evening Hour of a Hermit"): "Man, alike as he is on the throne and in the shadow of a shelter of leaves, man in his entity, what is he?" And on down to Kant's then already theoretically thematized assertion that the fundamental questions of philosophy can be reduced to the single question: "What is man?" Thus we can say that this is how it has always been and that it is inherent in man's nature to ask, prompted by an innermost need, about his entity. And yet no philosophical anthropology has developed out of that. Indeed, it seems that precisely the existential force of this [259/260] question has held back the elaboration of a philosophical discipline. Scheler's explanation is therefore inadequate and

we are again faced with the question of why a philosophical anthropology not only could be evolved but had to be evolved at that particular time.

It seems to me that the reasons for this were not imposed upon philosophy from outside but arose out of its own development as a matter of inner necessity and that they are most closely connected with the collapse of the traditional epistemology. At the beginning of this century epistemology still seemed to be the beginning and virtual basis of all philosophy. Basically, in fact, the whole development of modern philosophy since Descartes and the English empiricists has been directed towards the laying of such an epistemological foundation. Before there could be any evolution in detail one had to prepare the foundations of a sure knowledge and everything depended upon finding an Archimedean point from which it would then be possible for further evolution to be undertaken in progressive stages. In the meantime, however, this attempt broke down completely under the pressure of new discoveries and new scientific findings. It was these that had, to some extent, already drawn Scheler into initiating the anthropological question.

If one sought - by the so-called rationalistic process - for reliable bases in propositions that were evident to the intellect, then one was confounded by the fact that even in the strictest of all the sciences, mathematics, reference to the evidence has proved to be of doubtful value. There is no criterion that can draw a clear line of differentiation between firm evidence and mere plausibility; one can only reason a posteriori from the consequences as regards the value of the latest assumptions. There is nothing more dangerous than that which appears to us to be self-evident, even if it be the Cartesian pre-eminence of consciousness. One can only free oneself from the spell of what appears to be cogent by examining the consequences or by accepting the evidence of other possibilities.

If, however, one starts out - in the so-called empirical way - from the simplest physical sensations, one must then recognize that they are primarily a supplementary product of abstraction and that every perception is in fact always entirely a matter of nature, which is invariably governed by fixed conceptions of reality. What was first worked out by Husserl's phenomenological analysis has found confirmation in the rich results of Gestalt-psychology. But, over and above this, the perception is ultimately conditioned by the totality of our understanding of the world as transmitted in [260/261] language. Basically, there is therefore no Archimedean point from which one can set about evolving knowledge without being preconditioned. Consequently, the evolution of a theory of knowledge, at least in the traditional sense, breaks down irreversibly.

That is further substantiated by other views which have made their impact upon the theory of knowledge from the most varied quarters. One of them is the view that the theoretical attitude is not self-sufficient but is a by-product of active life. Practice is more primal than theory. Our conceptions are fashioned in the moulds of our activity, as Bergson had already formulated it and it was for this reason that he described man as homo faber. Heidegger then elaborated very impressively the way in which things are presented to us in the first instance in their obvious availability (Zuhandensein) and how it is only on this account that the mere existence (Vorhandensein) stands out in relief as, in Heidegger's conception, a deficient means of practical aquaintance with things. But this rules out the possibility of evolving at the theoretical level a knowledge that is self-sufficient.

Then there is a second view: that rational knowledge is not separable from the underground of volitional impulses, feelings and moods, that these are not to be regarded as obstructions which one should try to eliminate as far as possible but that they enter into the ground of knowledge as inseparable postulates. When Heidegger states that we must leave the primary discovery of the world to "mere mood", he is reiterating a state of affairs which makes the unconditioned evolution of knowledge impossible.

The discovery of the subconscious spiritual life, which goes back to Freud, has an even deeper significance. If our consciousness is only a narrow segment of the wide kingdom of the subconscious spiritual life, is supported by it and is in many ways conditioned by it, then knowledge can no longer be founded on a self-sufficient, autonomous consciousness. This at the same time means that the forms of a pre-rational and extra-rational way of thinking among children or the so-called primitive peoples, as also in general in magical and mythical thought, acquire a new significance and destroy the belief in the exclusive correctness of this modern scientifically trained rational thinking.

I cannot go on piling up these examples. They all lead to the invalidation of a self-sufficing and self-evolving knowledge. They all refer back to the more comprehensive general coalescence of human life. Thus, the questioning of the theory of knowledge is [261/262] relegated to a philosophical anthropology and, at the same time, the point is thus indicated at which philosophical anthropology must as a matter of inner necessity emerge from the philosophical development of the past decades.

In the light of this we can understand why philosophical anthropology - I am speaking all the while only of us in Germany - forced its way with such determination into the centre of activity of contemporary philosophizing and claimed a key position here. It is not a question of one branch of philosophy governed by a specific range of objects as against other branches, however uniquely distinguished it may be in having man as its object, but it is a question of the resumption of transcendental-philosophical questioning, but now however at a deeper level, that is to say the anthropological level. Man is not only object, he has always been included in the consideration as subject, as well: man as the creative point from which his world has been fashioned and from which alone it can also be understood. Thus it is significant how Cassirer found the way here by stages from the neo-Kantian theory of knowledge to a comprehensive anthropology. Nevertheless, we ought not to stop at his particular way and at the neo-Kantian bias which it may perhaps have still retained. What mattered was that it, too, should be brought in this connection.

In this sense philosophical anthropology becomes in fact the basic discipline of philosophy; for all the other branches must be referred back to anthropology, to its foundation in man. We talk of an anthropological reduction. This reduction does not mean subjectivizing (Subjektivierung) or psychologizing (Psychologisierung), for it should be understood exclusively in the transcendental-philosophical sense. It is no contraction, in the sense of debilitation of the reality that is external to man, but it is, in the strict sense of the word, an act of founding that leads back to the starting-point. Perhaps even the (inevitable) conception of man as the "productive stage" of the emergence of his culture, as Plessner elaborated it so convincingly, is likewise misleading once again, because it could be interpreted in a one-sidedly subjective way, and Landmann rightly supplemented it with his approach to man as a creation of his own culture. The reality and inner laws of the contemplative spheres of culture are in no way called into question. It is much more a question of the original unity of man's Being-in-the-World to which everything else must be relegated.

It is only in this connection that the idea of a philosophical [262/263] anthropology can be properly comprehended. Only from this standpoint can we understand where it wants to emerge and why it could come forward with such a high claim. But we must realize equally clearly how little that which has hitherto appeared under this name, actuated only by an obscure pressure, corresponds to this idea, and also that, quite independently of this ultimate claim, a philosophical view of man as a special and superior object in relation to other objects makes good sense. But its ultimate claim has been a lost cause for so long. Even now we are still at the stage of development. This is one aspect that I have tried to describe.

II. The Philosophy of Language

As the second of these aspects, I refer to the philosophy of language, in doing which I take as my starting-point the remarkable way in which this has been forcing its way into the forefront in recent times. The growing interest in questions relating to the philosophy of language is all the more astonishing as, for centuries on end, language failed to attract the attention of the philosophers. In none of the great philosophical systems does language play any noteworthy role. Indeed, ever since Bacon's doctrine of Idols, we find a widespread overt or covert hostility towards language. And where a particular philosophy of language has developed during the past decades it has been owing to the fact that the philologists themselves, such as Paul or Jespersen, de Saussure or Sapir, were driven to philosophical speculation as a result of their own problems. It was, so to speak, the house philosophy of the philologists, but they received little attention and still less help from the professional philosophers.

This seems to have been changing completely in recent times. I refer, to mention only a few examples, to Cassirer's very first volume of his "Philosophie der symbolischen Formen" ("Philosophy of Symbolic Forms"), Hans Lipps's pioneering works on the binding force of language down to the growing importance that language has acquired in Heidegger's thinking and onwards to Gadamer's "Hermeneutik" ("Hermeneutics"), in which language occupies the third and concluding part. Liebrucks has just brought out the first volume of a comprehensive philosophy of language. I confine myself to these examples and would only draw attention in passing to the decisive role that questions relating to the philosophy of language play in the Anglo-Saxon countries today. We can almost say that the philosophy of language is entering into the centre of contemporary [263/264] philosophical endeavours and in its own way is becoming a basic discipline there.

Thus, we have a similar impetus to that which we previously ascertained in the field of philosophical anthropology. The philosophy of language appears to be supplanting philosophical anthropology. How the two stand in relation to each other or whether they are even contradictory can for the time being be ignored here, where we are concerned with "aspects" of contemporary German philosophy. Perhaps they are, in fact, merely different aspects of the same movement. I shall return to that later.

I therefore ask: What is it that arouses such a great amount of interest in language at present? At this point I would like to single out five viewpoints.

1. One is, fundamentally, already old. It is Humboldt's idea that man is so enveloped in his language that he can only conceive things as language presents them to him. As has been said, this idea is already old, but hitherto nobody seems to have taken it really seriously in philosophy. And, taken seriously, it means that there is not a single simple conception that is not governed from the outset by language's comprehension of the world. As Cassirer put it so convincingly in the first volume of the "Philosophie der symbolischen Formen", we never arrive at reality in its pure natural state because everything that we touch upon has always been already formed and expounded by language's comprehension of the world. We are inevitably enclosed in the language that encircles us and can never escape from it. Language is, as Heidegger expressed it, the "house of existence" in which man lives.

2. What this bond with language means becomes even clearer if one considers that a language is always one particular language amidst others, each of which, to quote Humboldt, embodies a particular outlook on the world. We never arrive at a universally valid human knowledge because we always remain enclosed within the horizon of a specific language. This conclusion arises compulsorily out of the nature of language.

I have often hesitated over this and asked myself whether this does not have its basis in some

kind of hidden German romanticism. For this reason it seems to me to be all the more important that these results have found an unexpected confirmation from an entirely different quarter, namely, the American philologist Whorf and what he has advanced as a linguistic principle of relativity in direct parallel lo Einstein's principle of relativity. This confirmation seems [264/265] to me to be all the more significant in view of the fact that it derives from a trained natural scientist in the completely different context of sober American thinking. I cannot go into the details relating to this interesting thinker but I am convinced that there is no alternative to the basic acceptance of this relativism. We thus encounter in the most elementary category of knowledge the thing that, as historical relativism, has disturbed the liberal arts ever since their inception.

In spite of all this the problem of a comprehensive validity of knowledge still remains. The very fact that it is possible for us to understand one another beyond the boundaries of languages and to translate from one language into another shows that, despite all linguistic relativism, there is a universality, even if, as a general principle, it no longer allows itself to be manifested in a language-free manner.

3. But what applies to language in general, with its vocabulary and its syntax and its whole "inner form", is repeated at a higher level in the case of the images that are created with the help of language and which, in contradistinction to the individual words as terms, we can describe as linguistic coinings, ranging from proverbs and catchwords, maxims and expressions to the highest forms of poetry, as well as to works of art in general. All of them intensify the potentialities of our life, we think and perceive in their forms, to a certain extent they provide the hollow mould into which our, as yet unshaped, life is poured. Consequently, it is no exaggeration if we say: We think, feel and perceive, we shape our life in accordance with the way the prevailing and pre-established linguistic forms present it to us, which is naturally not only in the noble forms of great poetry but also and to an equally great extent through the baser literature and the bad film, through catchwords and stupid expressions and all the influences which impinge upon us daily - partly by design, partly by chance — in this modern world. It seems to me that this is where the point of approach to a deeper and really anthropological aestheticism lies.

4. But what thus applies to the existing and available language also applies to an even greater extent if we turn to the concrete process of speech and to the way that, in this process, man invents the spoken word which we can describe in a general sense as an utterance. Hans Lipps, who has studied these matters more deeply than anybody else hitherto, speaks of the potentiality of a word in order to express the fact that a word does not simply describe a pre- [265/266] existing reality, that it is also inadequate to say that it signifies this reality, but that, for its part, it transforms and shapes this reality and that, for its part, it thus exercises a power over the reality. What the curse (or the blessing) is for the magic consciousness — the power exercised over the future happening through the word, which then becomes fulfilled, thus where the word comes first and is then followed by the reality - that also applies in a modified form to our language. The clarifying and, occasionally, even redeeming sentence uttered in a hitherto unclear and ambiguous situation — the simple declaration "I love you" that is obtained after a long period of hesitation but equally, also, the insult that is directed to another person - alters the world and creates a new reality. Every word is an act of decision that has a vital and formative effect upon the world. That is a valid generalization. Every word that is used to describe a hitherto diffuse situation alters the reality insofar as that situation is "converted into language". Every word is, in a true sense, creative. It has a power similar to that of magic. That is what Lipps meant by "the potency of the word". Although it may be difficult to reconcile these circumstances with our traditional conceptions, we are nevertheless concerned here with facts, and indeed with facts that are of fundamental significance in our life. To bring these facts to light and to make them intelligible is one of the most urgent current tasks of the

philosophy of language. Moreover if is a task that is intimately connected with general anthropological problems. 5. This power of language, particularly of concrete words spoken in a specific situation and by a responsible speaker, is relevant not only to the external reality but also to the self-realization of the human being. A person commits himself by the words he speaks and is "taken at his word" by other people. He cannot capriciously say one thing today and another thing tomorrow. The best illustration of this general contention is the promise, the word that a person gives to other people and by which he is then bound, so that he must then keep it; for in this case a person uses language to project himself into the future and anticipates in words what he must then catch up with and fulfil in reality. In this case the word gains power over the person, because he cannot go back on it without losing "face" in his social circle. But he gains his reputation for resoluteness and reliability by keeping his word. Hans Lipps and Gabriel Marcel have, each in his own way, splendidly elaborated this function of the promise and thereby brought to light a fundamental phenomenon of human existence that has long gone unrecognized. I cannot pur- [266/267] sue this matter further, for this particularly striking example is only intended to serve here as an indication of how, generally speaking, the human being raises himself, by means of words spoken with responsibility, above the changing current of time and in a true sense becomes himself. For the word, when spoken with the intention that it shall be binding, possesses eternity. And so, once again, we see how the philosophy of language penetrates into the centre of anthropology, insofar as the realization of man's nature is linked with language.

III. Epistemology

The most difficult problem is still that of epistemology (Erkenntnislehre). After the destructive criticism to which the hitherto existing theory of cognition (Erkenntnistheorie) has been subjected it might seem doubtful whether an examination of the theory of cognition is in any way justified and whether the theory of cognition can ever be resuscitated. The very fact that I have included the theory of cognition among the aspects of German philosophy here might therefore cause astonishment. At a superficial glance it would appear that the theory of cognition creates little interest in Germany and such interest as there is in it seems to be merely a barren relic of a bygone and hopelessly declining movement. If one reopens this examination one might appear to be one of those laggards who cling to what is past and have still not understood the signs of the times.

Nevertheless, the task of the theory of cognition, the task of establishing an assured knowledge through critical examination of the fundamentals, is so urgent and so irredeemably bound up with the situation of man in his world that in no circumstances can it be abandoned if knowledge, particularly philosophical knowledge, is not to become an uncontrollable phantom. Where the objections advanced against the previous theory of cognition are unassailable, the attempt at a new structure (Aufbau) can only have any prospect of success if a fundamental fault can be found in the previous structure and a completely new start is made in which this fault is avoided. In order to avoid confusion I refer to this new endeavour as an epistemology in order to retain the term theory of cognition for the earlier forms.

Now, I believe that such a fault can in fact be demonstrated in the original approach to the theory of cognition. The previous - let us just call it the classic — theory of cognition, dating back as it [267/268] does basically to the beginning of modern philosophy with Descartes, was characterized by the quest for an "Archimedean point" on the basis of which, after the exclusion of all ambiguities, it could construct a system of assured knowledge by a process of advancing a step at a time. This conformed with the rationalistic and the empirical approach. Neither the evidence of primary propositions nor the results of simple perceptions could pro-

vide such a basis. But if that is the case, if we must accept this conclusion (as having been established at the beginning of our observations), then there remains no other choice than to renounce altogether the quest for such an Archimedean point and, with it, the attempt to acquire knowledge by this constructively progressive procedure. That is, indeed, a bitter renunciation and one may ask oneself in what sense one can still speak of knowledge at all. But it seems to me that no other possibility exists if one considers the situation honestly and impartially, that in spite of this the position is not, however, quite as hopeless as it looks at first sight and that, instead, a way is nevertheless opened here which corresponds to the real situation of mankind and one along which research has in reality always gone.

If we take a look at the objections that have already been mentioned, then it will be found that, in fact, it is only a knowledge that is self-dependent that has become impossible and that every cognitive achievement originates, rather, in a close connection with human life and is supported by it. So far as epistemology is concerned, this means that it cannot start off unconditionally and completely independently as a basic philosophical discipline, but that it must return to this general connection with life in order to derive therefrom a new basis of knowledge. That was, in its vague form, the old practical philosophical approach which inquired into the function of knowledge in the totality of human life. In a more precise form, that is the anthropologcial approach. It is necessary to understand the nature and possibility of knowledge in terms of its anthropological prerequisites.

This provides the link between philosophical anthropology and epistemology: epistemology must be based anew on an anthropological foundation. At the same time, however, the anthropological inquiry acquires a new and strong impulse from the tasks of an epistomology. The way in which that is connected at the same time with the inquiry into the philosophy of language will become clear later on.

I am trying to deal with these problems positively at the point [268/269] where they previously provided grounds for criticism of the classical theory of cognition. We saw that even simple perception cannot be attributed to elementary sensations but rather that it depends from the outset upon an anticipative understanding of the thing perceived and ultimately upon the universal understanding of language, together with which it is subjected to "linguistic relativism". Fundamentally, it cannot discard the association with the conception that language has provided in advance. Even perception is always an interpretation, moreover an interpretation which, in its essentials, has already been pre-imposed upon the perceiver. But we must reverse the method of approach and ask: is that so ominous? or should it not also be possible to establish a reasonable epistemology on this foundation? Admittedly, it could no longer be one functioning on one-dimensional lines but it would have to be one which would adapt itself to this anticipative understanding and which would incorporate the circle - to use this word right away — involved therein as one of its own components. Thus we are already in the realm of hermeneutics with all its methodical difficulties that have been elaborated in the theory of the arts.

But before we pursue this inquiry further we must first broaden the bases and also consider the other difficulties with which the previous theory of cognition was confronted. We should not use perception alone as our starting-point, for perception is not independent, and only an abstract, isolating process of reasoning could attempt to elaborate a pure, i. e. a purely theoretical, perception. In reality the perceptions relating to our life are linked with the emotional determinants, with plans and expectations, in fact they are associated with and encroach upon the whole of our active life. Their function in it is to act as signals that control our behaviour. It is this comprehensive association that determines the significance of what we perceive and the way in which we perceive it.

For this reason we ought not to take mere perceptions as the starting-point for the foundation

of our knowledge but we must go further back to the reaction of our active life to the circumstances of the world surrounding us. And that is the second method of approach in an epistemology that is based on anthropology: the reversion of theoretical knowledge to the original grounds of practice. In this sense we must adopt Bergson's approach to man as the homo faber and we shall find that Heidegger's reduction of what exists to what is available (Zurückführung des Vorhandenen auf das Zuhandene) and its origination in active intercourse with the [269/270] world already provides us with an important piece of a concretely implemented anthropological epistemology. The so-called pragmatic concept of truth, the testing of an assumption by its success, becomes here a principle of knowledge.

Nevertheless it would be applying this principle too summarily if one were to confine knowledge merely to practical intercourse with the world (and that would also represent a fundamental misunderstanding of Heidegger). For one thing, practical activity that has been rationally devised, such as that which is entailed in the technique of the craftsman, is only a comparatively late product of mankind's development. The thinking of children, like that of the so-called primitive peoples, is still based upon quite different and more primal thought-forms and a deeper anthropological reasoning must also include them.

On the other hand, however, it is only a certain zone of our life that is confined to practical intercourse with the world. And it is only in this zone that we have the direct test of success or failure. Consequently, it is only to this zone, too, that a pragmatic concept of truth is applicable. If we take the entire realm of moral and political views, the entire realm of the so-called intellectual world, the task of establishing a reliable knowledge becomes all the more difficult here, too. Accordingly, we must broaden the approach once again.

Our best course is to start out from Dilthey's approach, according to which the human being, as soon as he finds himself in the world, already always understands his world. That means: wherever we find man, even at the earliest stage of his development, it is impossible to go back beyond his understanding to a state where he does not yet understand and from which he can begin to build up his understanding. This understanding may be small to begin with and it may then increase in the course of the experience of life, but basically it has always existed.

Understanding and availability (in the world) are equally primal, as Heidegger formulates it. And, because we can never go back beyond understanding, we must start out from it. This understanding is already adequate as a starting-point insofar as it is still indifferent towards the later separation between theoretical and practical behaviour.

To tackle the problem at its simplest level let us return once again to man as a creature of action. Here understanding is revealed in practical behaviour. It was in this sense that Dewey took habits [270/271] as his starting-point and it seems to me that this approach was very discerning and that its far-reaching, systematic significance has by no means been adequately recognized (at any rate by us in Germany). To our accustomed way of thinking this approach seems astonishing; for habits seem in this instance to be somewhat misleading and it seems necessary to reach back beyond the habits to the antecedent in which they develop. But this is precisely what it is impossible to do, and it is equally impossible where understanding is concerned. It would also contradict the principle of the impossibility of an Archimedean point. Wherever we find man we also find that he is already a creature of habits.

These habits are in no way fixed but they change in the course of life, and it is precisely in this process that the real interest lies. When a person, with his habits, encounters resistance and when he makes no progress with them, then he is compelled to give the matter consideration. It is in these moments of interruption of his habits that consciousness develops in man. Thus, consciousness is not a self-evident fact from the start, as the traditional theory of cognition assumed, but it only begins to develop in certain situations and is thus founded in a comprehensive life-context. This is where the human being objectifies the difficulties and the

whole context in which they exist, and an objective knowledge develops in this process. This knowledge which develops in the act of consciousness then helps the human being to alter his behaviour significantly, to overcome difficulties and to form new habits that are better suited to the circumstances. They then become engrained habits once again and the consciousness withdraws. But the human being is also able to retain the deduction he has made for use on a later occasion and to expand it, through further such deductions, into a coherent knowledge.

This discerning approach - for the German parallel to which (also concerned with the conception of experience although conducted in a more thorough manner) one would point to Gehlen - should, however, now be extended beyond practical behaviour and applied, in the process, not only to the psychophysically neutral description of behaviour but also to its "inner aspect". At this point it seems to me that the concept of opinion (Meinung) acquires a fundamental importance; for it corresponds in this inner aspect to a great extent to what habit represents in the outer aspect. By opinion I mean the preliminary form of a knowledge that appears to be self-evident but has not yet been tested. Just as a person has many habits in his [271/272] behaviour, he likewise has many opinions in his thinking. He does not need to have always originated them himself and, as a rule, he has not in fact originated them himself but has taken them over from his milieu. They have winged their way towards him.

Now, opinions determine human behaviour in a similar manner to habits. There is, however, a certain difference in this connection which may well be significant for the further development: where behaviour becomes a matter of routine, where it more or less takes its own course, one can, indeed, already speak of a certain understanding of life, but this still does not require any opinions. It is only when it comes to making a choice, such as whether to buy this or that article, whether to go this or that way, that there is need for an opinion on what is preferable (which is why the public opinion research institutes have their busiest times just before the general elections). An opinion always involves a judgment on some matter. I understand a context, such as a sentence, if know what it means. But I only have an opinion if I assess it in one way or another and if I take up a position on it. Thus, I may be able to understand a thing, such as a political view, and yet consider it to be wrong.

Opinions change into outlooks or else into mere beliefs, such as that strangers are all bad people or that the earth is a flat disc etc.

Opinions have had a poor standing in the history of philosophy ever since the Greek beginnings. Opinions ranked as unfounded knowledge. Efforts were therefore made to dissociate oneself from mere opinions and to establish a genuine, i. e. a reliably founded, knowledge that was independent of them. It is only when one has realized the impossibility of an Archimedean point that one recognizes that this approach made a false start from the very beginning. It is absolutely impossible to break out of the circle of opinions in order to acquire a sound knowledge independently of them. One can only seek to use opinions, as one comes across them, as a basis and, by critically testing such difficulties as one has encountered with them, to convert them by steps into firm knowledge. But this can never be completely successful, for the most that one can do is merely to raise a part that has become important to one for some reason or other to the level of certainty. And even this certainty is never final for it is always subjected to renewed verification and correction; consequently, one can never draw a final boundary between knowing and holding an opinion and thus there is never any knowledge that is ever finally guaranteed but only degrees of certainty. [272/273]

Thus, the function of an adequate epistemology must be to carry on this founding of knowledge on the basis of opinions and to reason out clearly the methodical questions that have arisen out of them.

The decisive point of approach thus consists in recognition of the fact that we always find ourselves in a world that has already been understood and explained, that we can never break

out of it and that knowledge must therefore move along a necessarily circular course within the framework of this world which has already been previously interpreted. That means that the methods of procedure developed in the so-called arts, which one has hitherto been inclined to regard as a less reliable kind of knowledge, must be transferred from this special sphere of study to that of knowledge as a whole. The world as a whole will thus become a text to be read and construed, and then to be interpreted. The methods of acquiring knowledge that are used in the natural sciences, particularly the explanatory process which Dilthey had in mind, will not become less valuable on this account, but instead of continuing to stand on their own they must be embodied in this comprehensive complex and consolidated in it.

If the procedure developed in the arts had been described in general as hermeneutics, we would now be faced with the situation in which hermeneutics would simply be a principle of knowledge. This development had already been begun with Nietzsche when he transferred the concepts of the text and the exposition of the text from philology to the knowledge of reality as a whole. Dilthey then evolved a comprehensive theory of understanding which extended far beyond the realm of the arts, in which it had its immediate basis, to embrace human life in its entirety. What in Dilthey's case had still been left indeterminate to a certain extent was then resolutely released by Heidegger from its attachment to a special field of study and applied, as an interpretation of human existence, to human life as a whole. When Gadamer recently called his great book "Wahrheit und Methode" ("Truth and Method"), at any rate in its subtitle, "characteristics of a philosophical hermeneutic" he did not mean by this just one particular philosophical discipline among others, but he adopted the term hermeneutics as a description of philosophy in its entirety or at any rate of that branch of it that is directed towards knowledge; hermeneutics is simply philosophical method.

This at the same time throws a further light on the general ap- [273/274] proach of anthropology; for the anthropological question — which, as I have formulated it, seeks to comprehend every single phenomenon in the totality of human life - is preciseley the hermeneutic question.

The basic situation of hermeneutics rests on the fact that, fundamentally, knowledge has no beginning. From the start man has always been placed in a world that has always been understood. Every attempt to acquire greater certainty of knowledge can always function only within this prevailing knowledge in that it seeks to verify and correct this knowledge a step at a time and by operating in circles. Humboldt summarized this in the classic formula: In order to understand I must have always already understood.

Heidegger has spoken in connection with this of a preconception in order to denote the fundamental fact that no knowledge begins "unconditionally" from below but that it always starts off with an existing understanding, even though that may still be diffuse to begin with. One must nevertheless ask to what extent this is a felicitous description; for one wonders how this preconception stands in relation to the real understanding. Many of the twists and terms made by Heidegger, and especially the way in which he regards what is extant as a deficient form of what is available (das Vorhandene als defizienten Modus des Zuhandenen), suggest the view that it is merely a question of making explicit something that is already inexplicitly complete. In particular, the way that Lipps asserts, in his "Hermeneutische Logik", that man is "restricted" in his linguistic conceptions can scarcely be understood to have any other meaning than that, in substance, everything is already envisaged in this apperception (Vorverständnis) and that all that man has to do then is to appropriate it, i. e. consciously convert it to his own use. When one has become clear about this consequence one then realizes that this way (which is conditioned by "existential philosophy") cannot lead any further; for, if that were the case, then the way to the "newness" of a real experience would be cut off. One can only talk of a real experience where there is this unforeseeable "newness".

What is required, therefore, is to determine in a comprehensive manner the way in which, on the basis of the given apperception, something new can be experienced in the encounter with reality, i. e. a way in which the apperception can not only be made known but can also have its content expanded and corrected. This, then, is the decisive line of approach for the development of a satisfactory [274/275] epistemology: to trace the process by which a deeper understanding can be acquired as a result of the contact of the inherited understanding with what is unfamiliar and, at first, unintelligible. And, because this way can only be taken by studying the whole of human life, it thus became a question of an anthropological foundation of knowledge. Hitherto only haphazard preparations have been made for such a task. The final aim of my observations has been to make clear the problem that is involved in this task.

Conclusion

I will now sumarize. We singled out three aspects of contemporary German philosophy: anthropology, the philosophy of language and epistemology. We now note the inner linkage and at the same time we realize that, basically, there was only a single, uniform connection which was reflected in a threefold way.

1. We realized that the evolution of philosophical anthropology and the decline of the classic theory of cognition were not independent events which occurred at the same time purely by chance but, rather, that the one determined the other and that philosophical anthropology must be regarded as the deepening and widening of the original issue (Fragestellung) relating to the theory of knowledge.

2. With the extension of the transcendental-philosophical issue to man, as the productive stage of the evolution of his culture, the problem of knowledge became subsidiary to the anthropological — and particularly the cultural-anthropological - issue. What is required is to re-establish the essential issue of the theory of cognition within this expanded framework.

3. In the process of positive development by a step at a time the arguments which were originally levelled against a self-evolved knowledge must be dealt with. I describe this development as the anthropological foundation of epistemology.

4. An anthropological foundation of this nature must at all costs avoid seeking an Archimedean point from which it could begin the development along a one-dimensionally progressive course. The process of ensuring the reliability of knowledge must necessarily operate in circles (muß notwendig zirkelhaft sein).

5. The primary form in which the world is interpreted is through language. We can never succeed in understanding a "naked" reality preceding the use of language but can only understand a reality that is conveyed to us through language. Our world has from the start always been fashioned by our language. Thus, language becomes [275/276] the centre of interest. Just as language itself can only be comprehended through an appropriate anthropological approach, this also applies to the point within the general anthropological framework at which an advance in knowledge can be effected.

6. Since, however, every linguistic comprehension of reality is in itself always a matter of exposition and interpretation, every advance in knowledge acquires the character of a critical revision of the interpretation. Thus, the methods of procedure that have been evolved in the arts provide the basis for the whole of knowledge, i. e. an anthropological epistemology acquires a hermeneutic form.

The three aspects are thus intrinsically, and necessarily, interrelated.