FREE WILL, CONSCIOUSNESS AND SELF

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Anthropological Perspectives on Psychology

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Preface

This book has grown out of the fertile ground that is the basis of general psychological research in Denmark, especially at the Department of Psychology, University of Aarhus and the Department of Psychology, University of Copenhagen. The work published in the research network *Forum for Antropologisk Psykologi* (Forum of Anthropological Psychology) with amongst others: Shyam Cawasjee, Lars Hem, Henrik Høgh Olesen, Jette Fog, Boje Katzenelson, Jens Kvorning, Jens Mammen, Henrik Poulsen, Jan Tønnesvang and myself, as well as the ongoing general psychological discussion in the Danish periodical *Bulletin fra Forum for Antropologisk Psykologi* been inspiring.

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Preben Bertelsen,
Summer 2000 and Summer 2003

Introduction

General Anthropology

What is it to be human?

Human existence means human co-existence; this is an inevitable part of the human condition. As human beings we co-exist; not merely in the shallow sense that we like being together, have friends, or live our lives with a partner and in groups – but in the deep and crucial sense that a condition for existing as human beings, is to be dependent on and contributing to a shared human world. As human beings we share a common existential basis. A weak (and less significant) definition of co-existence states that each of us gain certain advantages from the facts of human co-existence; we help each other to survive, and prosper in ways we could not achieve individually. In principle, one could do without this type of co-existence, and some people do in fact move away from the company of others. A stronger (and genuine) notion of co-existence states that we cannot exist as human beings without living in co-existence – whether we live in active social interaction or bring a mind formed by the facts of co-existence with us into our own self-chosen or inflicted loneliness.

Without fundamental co-existence, human beings could not preserve what gives life a genuine form of human meaning: the attachment to loved ones, social interaction, and cultural products of technological, artistic-aesthetical and intellectual kinds. As human beings we cannot exist independently of what is meaningful, without being directed toward human culture, and toward other people and their particular ways of living their lives. To be directed toward the cultural and societal forms of life that make co-existence meaningful is the fundamental human condition. This will be further elaborated in Chapters 3 and 7.

The central questions, then, are: how are we as humans able to participate in moral and societal life built on co-existence? What should a theoretical model look like that identifies and explains those core aspects of human

competencies and qualities which enable us to participate in moral and societal life? How, that is, by which methodologies, on what kind of scientific foundation, and with the aid of which explanatory styles, can such theoretical models of the human condition be constructed? These are the questions which will be investigated throughout the chapters in this book.

The anthropological domain and general anthropology

I propose that humanity and human phenomena belong to the anthropological domain of the world. Human beings, their forms of existence and actions, constitute this domain. In general, the sciences that examine this domain could be termed the anthropological sciences (or at least one could speak of the parts of these sciences that deal with what is particular to humans as anthropological). The analysis of the anthropological domain is the task of general anthropology.

In this book the anthropological domain is approached primarily from the psychological perspective, and in particular from the part of psychology, which, in this book (and in Danish psychology more generally), is called Anthropological Psychology. It is a psychological discipline that spans what could be called in a more international terminology, evolutionary psychology, cultural-historical psychology and general, theoretical psychology. A central idea in this book is that this kind of psychology is reciprocally related to general anthropology. On the one hand, Anthropological Psychology contributes to our knowledge of the anthropological domain, and thereby sheds light on what it is to be human – seen from a psychological point of view. On the other hand, general anthropology, with its accumulated empirical results and theoretical models from different scientific disciplines, will offer the psychological disciplines – or at least the anthropological parts of these disciplines – a viewpoint toward the basic human condition. This will be further elaborated in Chapters 1, 2 and 8.

The basic anthropological model

Hence the project in this book is to put forward a general psychological model as a contribution to the study of the anthropological domain. This model will emerge in the following chapters as a basic anthropological model.

It will be shown that one of the basic building blocks for theories in the anthropological domain, and therefore a basic concept in the anthropological model, is *intentional connectedness*.

Proposing *intentional connectedness* as one of the core concepts of what it is to be human does not mean that the project of this book is a traditional phenomenological project, although phenomenology certainly plays a central role in later chapters, which deal with consciousness and the self. The

project in this book, however, is first and foremost a cultural-historical project, conceptualising the human condition in terms of intentional connectedness, realised through human activity in its historical emergence.

The basic anthropological model proposes that human connectedness to the world has a horizontal and a vertical dimension.

The horizontal dimension of human connectedness can be explained as follows: we interpret the world, our lives, the situations we are in, and other people according to our own projects. We experience the world, and initiate and conduct our acts in terms of what we desire, strive for, what we find meaningful, good and right. We behave and act in ways that shape and produce our surroundings so that they answer to our needs and projects. However, at the same time our interpretation of the world, our experiences and our behaviours and acts are highly influenced and formed by our surroundings. People are influenced by their social surroundings; they conform to the discourses of their culture and in particular to the groups to which they belong. People comply with authorities, and strive to attune to friends, family and loved ones. In general we are influenced by the world: our mental processing, our knowledge, our opinions and attitudes are about the world and shaped by the properties of the world.

Our connectedness to the world, therefore, has two sides. On the one hand (I call this 'inside-out') we express our selves, and thereby shape and produce the world. On the other hand (I call this 'outside-in') we are shaped by the world (both as it is in itself and as it has been formed by our actions). On the one hand (inside-out) we are directed at the world, at our social surroundings and other people. On the other hand (outside-in) we are directed *by* the world. In short, the concept of being directed at/by something is proposed as a central concept in the formation of theories about the human condition. This will be further elaborated in Chapter 4 (and in Chapters 5 through 7 as well).

The vertical dimension of human connectedness. Experts on cognitive psychology and consciousness, as well as clinical psychologists and psychotherapists, tell us that a great deal of our mental processing happens automatically outside our conscious awareness. It is both mentally cost-effective and often necessary for survival that we make interpretations and act without any further considerations on the basis of rather minimal information. Fortunately a few clues ('traffic situation! Large object moving at high speed in my direction!') are often enough to make us act immediately. In terms of horizontal connectedness we are outside-in directed by those few clues about the surroundings, and simultaneously we are inside-out directed at exactly those same few clues by means of our categorical processing.

However, social psychologists also tell us that there is a flipside to the coin. Indeed the fact that we can act on the basis of automatic categorisation

and social stereotyping makes complex social life possible. On entering a room with other people, it only takes a few glimpses and quick automatic processing of which we are seldom aware, for us to know a lot about the type of situation we are in, what would be appropriate behaviour and what would be out of line. However, such automatic stereotyping can degenerate into negative prejudices – e.g., unjustified negative attitudes towards individuals based solely on their membership of a certain group, which is, in itself, judged in a negative, unjust, even racist way. How do we overcome such automatic prejudiced horizontal connectedness, which not only harms the targeted people and our humanity, but harms social life and the social conditions and possibilities of humanity? One – passive – way is to hope for a reformation of our automatic horizontal connectedness, that is, passively wait for a reformation brought about by the development of cultures, societies and communities. Fortunately there is another – active – way as well. Our stereotypical ways of being directed at/by the world exist as automatic connections beyond our reach only as long as we let them exist outside awareness and thereby outside conscious control. Sometimes, and at least to a certain degree, we can overcome a negative prejudice by focusing on which sort of connectedness it represents and how we are directed at and by the victim of our prejudice. To some extent, we can overrule the automatic horizontal connectedness with more realistic, morally superior, socially more just and humane principles for our connectedness and directedness at/by our surroundings.

On the one hand (bottom-up) it is a fact that we – one way or another – are always connected to the social surroundings through our horizontal connectedness and ways of being directed at/by these surroundings. Our horizontal connectedness constitutes our being in the world and thereby constitutes us as human beings. On the other hand (top-down), we can sometimes, and to a certain degree, organise the way we are directed at and directed by the world in general, our social surroundings and other people in particular. From the top-down perspective one can say that we have some level of freedom to organize our own horizontal connectedness by giving it the directedness we want, or which we find it morally ought to have or legally must have.

In other words: our connectedness has a vertical dimension given the fact that we in a self-organizing manner can be directed at our own horizontal directedness (top-down) while at the same time being directed by our own horizontal directedness (bottom-up) (in so far as the human condition always involves us in some sort of connectivity).

This brings us to the second important conceptual element in the basic anthropological model. The first one was the concept of the horizontal dimension of our connectedness, formed as directedness at/by something. This second element is the concept of vertical connectedness formed as our

directedness at/by our own directedness. In later chapters we shall see how we as social beings are often preoccupied with other people's minds and their ways of experiencing the world, their surroundings, us, themselves. We are highly preoccupied and aware of other peoples' directedness. That is, we are directed at/by others' directedness. In short: an essential conceptualization of the human condition and human possibilities is directedness at/by directedness (our own as well as others').

In itself, the basic anthropological model must, by its very nature, be abstract. Nevertheless, as shown in the examples above, the model should be useful in conceptualizing rather complex social psychological phenomena with its general concepts of horizontal social directedness at/by the social surroundings and vertical directedness at/by horizontal social directedness. Correspondingly, the basic anthropological model should also be useful in other disciplines.

Consider, for example, the phenomena dealt with in clinical psychology and psychotherapy; especially the sort of life problems that would not be seen as stemming from insanity or serious damage to fundamental psychological functionality. In dealing with such phenomena, many psychotherapeutic traditions address the client's (missing) capacity to gain insight into, and control of, his/her life one way or another. The cognitive psychotherapist will train the client's capacity to focus on and disable automatic thoughts; the Freudian psychoanalyst will try to help strengthen the client's ego; self-psychological therapists (at least the ones inspired by Kohut) will help the client to enter some sort of pastoral growth relationship in which the self can develop into a state in which it can choose its own mature relationships; the existential therapist will address the client's capacity to take responsibility for his/her life conditions and life projects, etc. In any case, what is dealt with in these seemingly very different traditions can, on the basis of the general concepts of the basic anthropological model, be conceptualized as concerned with how the client with varying degrees of freedom (vertically) can organise his/her way of being connected to life (horizontally), to the social surroundings, to others, and – in a reflective manner – to him/herself. How this should be understood is considered in more detail in Chapters 5 and 7. Obviously, these therapies are rather different in terms of their own theoretical traditions. The point, however, is that the basic anthropological model offers us some of the building blocks with which to conceptualize the human condition as approached by a variety of methods, represented by the different therapies.

These considerations, obviously, address such central questions as: how do we organize our lives? How do we make choices about the way to live and the kinds of person we want to be? Can we indeed make our own choices at all? In other words, do we have a free will so that we are able, to

some extent, to make decisions about our lives and ourselves, and thereby to form our own lives and ourselves as persons? Or is everything that happens to us, or within us, determined by psychological, social and biological forces over which we have no control, and of which, indeed, we may not even be consciously aware?

What does it actually mean to be consciously aware of oneself and one's life? How do we come to be capable, as conscious beings, of taking a comprehensive look at ourselves, our lives and each other? And how, on the basis of this conscious insight, are we able to make choices that are meaningful to us and make sense in relation to our lives? What does it actually mean to be conscious of oneself as a person, as a someone or a self that can engage in freely chosen projects?

The proposal of this book is that *free will, consciousness* and *self* are central human attributes that allow us to participate in human life, and in the moral and societal network of the surrounding world. They are the core human forms of intentional connectivity, and will be elaborated in Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

Critical realistic universalism

The basic anthropological model, which will be presented in this book, is proposed as a general theoretical model of human beings and the human condition as such. Therefore this model will necessarily be proposed as a universal model. This raises the problems of universalism. Furthermore, the model proposes that human co-existent life has to be realized in a certain way, namely as a two dimensional intentional connectivity in the form of the human capabilities of free will, consciousness and self. Therefore the basic anthropological model must, one way or the other, be a critical model. Critical, firstly, in the sense that the model shows how human beings on the basis of intentional connectivity are capable of participating in a *critical* way in moral and societal life. That is, human beings do not only have the capacity to contribute to establishing and maintaining their human world, but they also have the capacity to change and improve those parts of their world that violate the fundamental principles of co-existence, and thereby the very foundations of their own existence as humans. Critical, secondly, in the sense that this scientific model of the human condition can identify societal and cultural forms of life conditions, under which human beings may be forced to live, but which obstruct their ability to flourish. Let us therefore turn first to universalism and next to critical science.

Universalism

Universalism claims that it is possible to abstract shared features from superficial differences between people, societies and cultures. A universalistic view of humans simply states that human beings belong to the same species. According to universalism, what is good is fundamentally the same everywhere, to all people, at all times. Basically, races, ethniticities and nationalities are only superficial differences that are irrelevant to the fundamental questions of what it means to be human.

Universalism can be defended in various ways. Either in a super naturalistic and dualistic manner, claiming that the world and world order is given by a miraculous or divine force, which is external in relation to the forces that rule the world. Or in a naturalistic and monistic manner, claiming that the natural order of the world can be conceptualised scientifically, and that we can identify facts about the anthropological domain as a natural part of the world. It is this naturalistic and monistic version of universalism that is proposed in this book.

Universalism can degenerate

However, it is important to keep in mind that universalism can degenerate. Universalism can degenerate into moralistic tyranny and political dictatorship, or into cultural ethnocentrism and suppression. Let us therefore take a closer look at the central objections to universalism.

Moral relativism cannot be genuinely critical

One of the problems of exporting a moral and legal system, such as one that proposes talk of human rights as a universally valid discourse, is that for those who live with another moral-philosophical or religious mind-set will regard it as utterly unfounded, tyrannical and intolerant, if they are forced to acknowledge this new system. This critique of universalism can be seen to call for *moral relativism*. Moral relativism claims that a moral system is always relative to a society or an historical epoch with its own framework for the good life. Any view of what it means to be a good and fair person, and what it means to live a good and fair life, is only valid in the very context in which it was created. Often, relativists claim, moral perception cannot even be understood outside the life contexts in which it has developed.

Individualistic relativism is even more radical: Moral perception is ultimately only valid to the individual who has acquired this perception and who has made it his/her own. Consequently, in the case of moral conflict between two people, there can be no universal moral system to solve

the conflict. In the name of relativist tolerance, one is therefore left with 'you do your things and I will do mine – if you have a different view than I do, that is your choice'. In such an individualistic, relativist perspective, universalism will be considered an encroachment, exercised by one individual on another individual who has a different view. In this perspective, universalism looks like one individual's intolerant, moralistic tyranny over another.

Social relativism is a critique of individualistic relativism, but is still critical of universalism. People live in societies and depend on getting along and working together and their co-existence is organised by common rights, values and legal principles. But still, what is good and fair is relative to the given society. There are no universal values independent of the society in which the values and moral guidelines are formulated. In this perspective it will similarly be a case of intolerance and encroachment when one social system and one culture tries to elevate its own value system and moral world into a 'universal' system, applicable to other social systems and cultures.

Finally, there is *historical relativism*, which involves the notion that society is under constant historical change. There are no universal values and no universally true moral perceptions of what is good and fair outside the cultural-historical epoch, in which these are formulated.

Relativism would therefore seem to be a critical defence against encroachment of people who live their lives with cognitions, emotions and conations of their own, and universalism would seem to be a slide towards such encroachments.

On the other hand: can relativism with its self-declared tolerance be critical? Yes, at least according to social and moral relativism itself. A way of living, it is claimed, is only good and fair if it is in accordance with the way in which members of society think and feel about life, and if it accords with the developmental paths pursued by the participants. One must therefore be critical of a moral system that is contrary to, or undermines, the possibilities of realizing what the community perceives as the good and fair life. Good and fair, according to social relativists, are found through dialogue and debate amongst society's members, who are actually themselves going to live their lives directed by morality and justice. Precisely these debates create the valid social and moral constructions to the participating constructors.

However, it should be obvious that moral relativism can never present deep or convincing criticism. Consistent and meaningful consensus about 'good' and 'fair' could easily take place amongst the developers of the Nazi exterminations camps, amongst the brothers in charge of the Inquisitions' torture chambers, amongst people joining paedophile groups on the Internet, in the upper classes that own the child slaves in the Far East factories, etc. Moral relativism can never be anything but a quite uncritical argumentation for what could be called 'moral self-oscillation' – a self-

confirmation that strengthens and closes rather than criticizes and opens up a given moral and legal system. If good and fair, right and just, are only a matter of consensus and consistent and meaningful discourse, then any horrendous narrative can pass uncritically in the name of tolerance and relativism. Actually, one could argue that relativism promotes itself on a Western kind of mediocre self-centeredness and individualism: 'Leave everybody alone, avoid interference, and mind your own business'.

The alternative to non-critical relativism is realistic and critical universalism. Realistic in the sense that on the basis of facts, one can argue rationally about the good and fair life. The basic facts originate from the inevitable realities in the anthropological domain. What is *critical* science? Critical science does two things: firstly, it produces scientific knowledge about what a given phenomenon is and how it can be handled, treated, changed, developed, etc. Similarly, the soundness of argumentations and claims regarding this phenomenon and the handling of it are tested. Secondly, it gives scientifically founded professionals the opportunity to develop a confident, professional autonomy to become independent, involved and significant participants in the public debate.

Critical science is, on the one hand, not unsubstantiated rationalism. Such rationalism can only be about its own inner consistency or its own narrative aesthetics and meaning. As an unsubstantiated construction, it cannot be about the real world, and cannot make a real difference to the real world's people and their life problems. On the other hand, a critical science cannot be blind empiricism, studying the phenomena without an effort to develop general scientific knowledge. Critical science must necessarily be universal because it can only be critical on the basis of scientific theories that are independent of a specific culture's discursive self-understanding. Critical science must necessarily also be realistic because it can only make a difference to the world if it is about something other than its own consistency and aesthetics. Anthropological sciences can only be critical if they are based on realism about people, human existence and existential problems.

Critical universalism can be said to be critical in its devotion to *mild paternalism*. Contrary to mild paternalism, intolerance can, in a moral sense, be defined as the rejection of other people's different ways of living, different values and different perceptions of the good life. Intolerance is the effort of forcing on them another set of values and another way of living. Such intolerance must not be confused with mild paternalism. Mild paternalism is the view that one should critically try to make a difference to other people, that one should try to influence them critically to achieve insight and self insight if it is obvious that they live according to a set of values and perceptions of the good and fair life that are clearly damaging to, and clearly have the opposite effect of, what these people intend with their values and life perceptions. Mild paternalism is a critical effort to influence another

person to gain insight into his/her own good. What does 'own good' mean? It is part of a person's own good to have optimum information about the foundation of human existence as a starting point for choosing one's own existence. Mild paternalism means making a difference by being influential in creating an insight into the specific and current situation they are in, as well as, this situation's contents of real and realistic possibilities of change and choice. Mild paternalism means to take part in creating liberating, critical self-knowledge in the cultural-historical and life-historical development that has led to the present situation, and to one's current set of values and perceptions of the good and fair life. Mild paternalism is the critical and confrontational effort of giving another human being (or another society/culture) the basis for qualified, informed and self-chosen influence and autonomy.

One can – especially if one enjoys a secure life and an advantageous socio-economic position – object that such paternalism, mild or not, nevertheless is violating and oppressive, because it is the individual's right to have his/her own life projects, whatever they may be. One can – especially when one lives in (Western) surplus societies – claim that it is the individual's personal right to possess diminished self-knowledge, to make a fool of oneself, to act on the basis of misunderstandings, idiosyncrasies, slight 'madness' and personal quirks, etc. Simply because none of us are perfect, and because these small 'deviations' from the optimum human condition are part of our personal make-up, which nobody has the right to take away from us. Incidentally, it is, among other things, these small deviations and quirks that give life such a colourful diversity that makes it worth living. The reply to this claim about a right to 'quirks' must be crystal clear: Certainly! *If* these 'small quirks', 'shortcomings' and 'sillinesses' are part of the self-knowledge and informed choice one has, and part of the tolerance one has of oneself and one's own reality. Mild paternalism must certainly be tolerant (and self-tolerant) in this way. Mild paternalism is, however, critical in situations where the opportunity of gaining insight into life possibilities is not present, where people are kept in ignorance, and where external social forces or inner mental force keep people ignorant to the extent that their values and perceptions have an effect contrary to what was intended.

The central question in this book is: how are we, from a psychological point of view, able to connect to the human surroundings and how are we able to participate in a co-existing moral and societal life? The critical proposal of this book is that on the basis of the fundamental anthropological model of the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the intentional connectivities of free will, consciousness and self, we are in a position to be able to criticise forms of life that are unjust to human life conditions and possibilities.

Cultural relativism cannot be genuinely critical

Universalism and paternalism can be a slippery slope – not least when one moves into the inter-cultural field. Universalism tries to develop general theories about human existence and about the human condition. Mild paternalism is in this context a culture-critical universalism that relates critically to any culture that is destructive of the possibilities people aim towards in their own culture.

One objection to general culture theories is that they are often too abstract about actual cultural differences, or at least postpone the work on the differences until later, when the general aspects have been sufficiently worked out. The objection is that one will never get to address the actual differences, and therefore significant insights into the individual culture – and also the general aspects of a culture – are lost. Naturally, universalism must face this criticism. Obviously, the general theory must always be in contact with the concrete phenomena and the particular theories regarding these phenomena. A general theory must also be a theory about specific differences in human types of expression; it must always be a theory about specific and local problems, as well as about those actual and local problems that occur in cultural meetings and clashes. Otherwise such a theory can hardly be said to have covered general phenomena or be universally applicable.

Another important critical objection is that Western psychology (claiming universal validity) has participated in oppressive practices because of ethnocentric Western concepts. Ethnocentric Western clinical psychology has diagnosed as mentally ill what were in fact just non-Western expressions of cultures, and even legitimate resistance against Western oppression. In the name of universalism and paternalism, developmental psychology, cognitive and learning psychology and pedagogical psychology with ethnocentric Western models of development and learning, have remained ignorant about the developmental and learning paths in other cultures, with catastrophic consequences for the children and young people in the targeted cultures. Ethnocentric Western organisational psychology has been exported along with Western economic interests with equivalently catastrophic consequences for the adults, who, out of necessity, have had to work under those types of organisation.

Cultural relativism, then, reappears in an attempt to explain and critically oppose such Western encroachment and suppression. What goes wrong, cultural relativists tell us, is that Western psychologists approach other cultures with theories and concepts, which can only be valid in the culture (usually Western) that has developed these theories and concepts as part of their own self-understanding. To cultural relativists, the problem is that cultures are basically created, maintained and developed by the very efforts

to formulate them, talk about them, develop artistic expressions for them, as well as produce scientific models about them. According to relativism, any culture is in that sense a self-organizing and self-constructing system. Therefore, it also follows that the self-evident concepts that help create and maintain one culture cannot be used in another culture that is created and developed on the basis of its own constructions. The concepts needed to understand cultures, including the scientific psychological theories, are always relative in relation to the culture in which they are developed.

What is commendable about cultural relativism is naturally its persistent rebellion against narrow-mindedness and tyranny including a rebellion against science – including psychology – in so far as science itself contains such narrow-mindedness and prejudice that cause encroachment and suppression. Obviously, we must remain critical of science itself. Critical science is also self-critical. It includes criticism of its own axioms, prejudices, choice of method, empiricism, conceptualisations, operations and normative aims.

However, the solution to the problem of suppression is not the cultural relativist one, which is to lock science up in its own cultural glass case and deem it invalid in relation to all cultures other than the one it originates from. Such relativist strategies remain impotent concerning criticism, because relativism must, in order to avoid self-contradiction, renounce on pointing out what is suppressive, stupid and life-limiting in another culture, and what sets the inhumane conditions for that culture's people, contrary to the life possibilities they could either have or would strive for. Cultural relativism must settle for quite uncritically and ignorantly terming another culture's own types of expression, stupidities, ideological distortions, etc. a 'different type of existence', which we have neither the prerequisites nor the right to be judgemental of, or intervene critically with.

Consequently, a claim of this book is: the road away from a prejudicial, culture-ignorant and suppressive anthropological science (including psychology) does not go from ethnocentrism to cultural relativism, but from ethnocentrism to critical, realistic universalism. We have to understand the general human condition, the possibilities and life projects in the anthropological domain, morally, culturally and psychologically, in order to be genuinely critical of life conditions that suppress, distort or limit human existence. Only a general anthropology, formulated critically and universally can help us in this regard and reveal to the culture's own members the cultural-historical and social developmental paths that have led to the suppressed life conditions and limited possibilities, and which can create the informed foundation that makes genuinely conscious and free life choices possible.

Racism is wrong! Imperialism is wrong! Ethnocentrism is wrong! Tyranny and dictatorship are wrong! Can such positions be defended only

from some sort of relativist position? And must universalism necessarily lead to those evils? No. In fact, we cannot build a real defence against these evils from any relativist position, and in fact we must look for a certain kind of critical universalism to find the real defence! The point is that we are in need of the sort of critical universalist anthropological model to be constructed in this book.

Universalism: generality vs. particularity and essentialism vs. historicity

The world – including its anthropological domain – is infinitely diverse, and no general theory can include it all. Is that not a strong argument against any form of universalism? No! An argument that it is not will be spelled out in what follows.

General theories and specific theories

In a way the plurality and diversity in the field of the anthropological sciences is good because it is an effective vaccination against narrow-mindedness, and intolerable simplification that would block creativity and development of an understanding of the world and the human condition. In another sense it is bad because the very same diversity could seem to block effective progression based on knowledge accumulation. Especially, if the diversity leads to individual research enclaves, institutes, faculties and universities becoming ignorant about what is happening 'on the other side of the corridor', and failing to see the necessity of putting their research results and explanatory models into perspective, then the result is a patchwork of incompatible and non-accumulative detail studies – maybe of some interest in themselves, but rarely able to contribute to our overall understanding of human life.

Naturally, one can choose to be pleased with the diversity of theories and claim that since the world itself is (ontologically) incoherent and characterised by diversity, such scientific patchwork reflects reality quite well.

An alternative proposition is that the world is ontologically coherent (in a colourful and beautifully diversified way) and thereby, so to speak, deserves that science strives for an increasingly coherent theoretical overview. That is my view. The view is usually expressed in two versions. The first is the endeavour towards a Grand Unified Theory. The second variation states that it is not possible to develop such a Grand Unified Theory. Such a theory presupposes that science could reach a stage of definitely concluded theories, which could not, and would not, need to be further developed. In that case, the final work of formulating the ultimate Grand Unified Theory

would merely consist of finally combining the finished partial theories. However, all indications point towards the idea that because the world is infinitely diversified and complex, scientific development can consist only of making our partial theories clearer and simpler. Partial theories are never final and the developmental work will never come to an end. The development of theories must take place, and does actually happen in a decentralized and distributed manner in the different evolutionary growth areas in the disciplines and research projects.

The task is, on the one hand, to look for and create the best possible conditions for this decentralized diversity of growth areas in the sciences. On the other hand, to make sure that they do not fall apart and degenerate into isolated enclaves that fail to create a shared growth of knowledge in the end.

Scientific work must be carried out from two sides simultaneously. On the one hand, science has to be empirically founded in the world. It should be anchored in myriads of specific research projects. A scientific process, which is not anchored in reality via empirical research and detailed theoretical explanations of individual phenomena within the domain of the given science, degenerates into speculative rationalism, or even worse: into unconstructive ideological warfare. On the other hand, science must also strive for unity. It has to create extensive, general, theoretical and explanatory frameworks for the more specific projects. For example, it is not at all unconstructive within physics that we see quite an extensive amount of work carried out in developing cosmologies that combine what is known about the world. Such work within cosmology and theoretical physics has decidedly important returns. For instance, new mathematical understanding is being developed, which can be part of the further development of the partial theories, and more unifying and basic explanations about the world's physical organization are being developed.

The following three scientific efforts should in principle always go together:

- The general theoretical effort to combine the general theoretical explanations of the domain of the world involved,
- Efforts to develop knowledge about real problems within a limited aspect of the domain, and
- The applied disciplines' attempts to develop applicable science, which increases our ability in practice to handle these aspects.

None of these are dispensable. Science without empirical anchoring (easily) becomes rationalist constructions without realistic obligations. Science without general theoretical efforts (easily) becomes empiricist blind fumbling in myriads of incoherent, empirical projects without drive or obligation towards collective scientific accumulation.

General and particular universalism

It was asked above whether universalism loses its grip on the world's infinite diversity – including that of the anthropological domain. Not according to the model outlined above, to which we will return in Chapter 1.

A potential problem could be a universalism in the shape of one-sided generality. The generalist effort is to try to find the most general principles and thereby strive to abstract the most general features from the plurality and diversity of concrete phenomena. A one-sided general universalism will try to formulate general concepts about moral facts in those situations in which people generally find themselves. Against this, for example, situational ethics would object that we can only understand how a person should act and why a person actually acts morally, when we understand the actual situation the person is in, and when we understand how the person is capable of perceiving this situation and how it makes a difference in the choices he/she makes.

Again relativism will certainly emerge as an attempt to solve this problem of universalism. Human activities are always relative to the specific situations in which they take place. However, what is criticized here is not universalism as such. Only a purely generalist universalism should be the target of such a criticism. The problem of general universalism cannot be solved by a total rejection of universalism's efforts to develop general knowledge about the world. The solution must be based on the mutuality outlined above between the general model's efforts towards universality with regards to knowledge about a domain on the one hand, and on the other hand the specific theories' empirical anchoring in very concrete – and particular – phenomena.

Essentialism vs. historicity

Anthropological Psychology identifies and explains its phenomena as historical and emerging entities, which means that they change over time as a product of culturally specific ways of encountering the world. In the course of cultural history, humans produce and develop (at least some of) their own conditions and possibilities, and thereby the human phenomena that constitute the anthropological domain. This means that general anthropological phenomena should always be understood as part of 'local history', existing only in a certain natural-historical and cultural-historical epoch. We always exist in a certain local historical epoch – and this local epoch may be defined as spanning millions of years, thousands of years or hundreds of years, depending on how fine-grained our models are set to be and how nuanced the forms of human phenomena and possibilities we want to identify and conceptualise.