

Chapter Two

Critique of Vitalism

Das, was lebt, ist etwas anderes als das, was denkt.
Gottfried Benn¹

*Irrationalism and intellectualism rejected*²

Rickert publishes in 1920 a small volume which provides a concise exposition as well as a fierce critique of what he calls in the subtitle 'the fashionable philosophical currents of our time'. It is a curious treatise in which he carefully and at times ironically analyses the various currents of philosophical thought which are usually lumped together in the concept of *Lebensphilosophie*, that is 'philosophy of life' or *vitalism*.³ Different thinkers like Nietzsche, Bergson, Simmel, Dilthey, James and Scheler pass Rickert's revue, yet it is not so much these individual, often quite different thinkers he is interested in, but rather the convergence of their ideas as they pertain to their common irrationalist attack on the alleged intellectualism of German *Idealism*.⁴ It was, in particular, Dilthey who set the tone for the vitalism which Rickert rejects. For instance, when he wrote: 'Life then is the fundamental fact, which must form the starting point of philosophy. It is what is known from the inside, it is that behind which one cannot retreat. Life cannot be brought before the tribunal of reason.'⁵

¹ 'That which lives differs from that which thinks.' Gottfried Benn, 'Pallas', in: *Provoziertes Leben. Ein Auswahl aus den Prosaschriften*, ('Provoked Life. A Selection from the Essays'), (Berlin: Ullstein Bücher, nr. 54, 1961), p. 165. Benn calls this 'die progressive Zerebralisation' ('the progressive cerebralisation').

² This dilemma refers exclusively to the world of sciences, including Rickert's brand of scientific philosophy. In an essay on science and Christianity he defends the thesis that Christian faith is essentially irrational as it consists in essence of the intimate relationship of the single soul with a personal, loving God which is, in my view, a typically Lutheran-pietistic conception of faith. Science, on the other hand, is, according to Rickert, due to the impact on European thought of Greek philosophy intellectualistic and of Roman law rationalistic. Cf. Heinrich Rickert, 'Christentum und Wissenschaft unter geschichtsphilosophischen Gesichtspunkten', ('Christianity and Science from the Points of View of the Philosophy of History'), in: *Christentum und Wissenschaft*, 6, 1930, (edited by R. Winkler, H. Sasse), pp. 361-376. The essay is mainly adopted from the seventh chapter of his book *Kant als Philosoph der modernen Kultur*, ('Kant as Philosopher of Modern Culture'), (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1924), pp. 76-93: 'Griechentum, Römertum, Christentum'.

³ Like so many German concepts *Lebensphilosophie* is difficult to translate into English. It means literally 'philosophy of life' but that is quite awkward. Although I realize this is not optimal, I shall use the concept *vitalism* as the English variant of *Lebensphilosophie*.

⁴ Heinrich Rickert, *Die Philosophie des Lebens. Darstellung und Kritik der philosophischen Modeströmungen unserer Zeit*, ('The Philosophy of Life. Exposition and Critique of the Fashionable Currents of Contemporary Philosophy'), 1920, (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1922).

⁵ 'Leben ist nun die Grundtatsache, die den Ausgangspunkt der Philosophie bilden muss. Es ist das von innen Bekannte, es ist dasjenige, hinter welches nicht zurückgegangen werden kann. Leben kann nicht vor den Richterstuhl der Vernunft gebracht werden.' Wilhelm Dilthey, *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen*

However, Rickert's book on the Philosophy of Life is not just a simple and simplistic defense of rationalism. In a sense he sympathizes with the basic idea of vitalism, namely that ideas, thoughts and concepts do not emerge from an abstract world but from experiences, or, if one wants to phrase it that way, from life. Knowledge, after all, originates in sense impressions which are as such not rational by nature. They emerge, so to say, in the *mêlée* of everyday life. These impressions, however, according to Kant are put into a rational order by the a priori forms of time and space and by the likewise a priori categories of thought (*Verstand*). Human reason constructs, as it were, reality epistemologically, including everything that stands for the concept of 'life'. Rickert follows, as we shall see in the following chapters, the epistemological path systematically in what he calls his 'transcendental philosophy'.

The book on vitalism presents a helpful introduction to his philosophical thoughts and convictions. He writes it for a broad audience, which has the advantage that it lacks the labyrinthine sentences and thought constructions which were customary for most of his contemporary philosophical colleagues - and, I should add in all honesty, for Rickert himself at times as well. Its light touch, larded with witty, at times ironical humor, adds to the accessibility of his ideas. His expositions of the vitalistic theories and ideas he emphatically disagrees with, are always clear-cut and fair. His critique is, though at times quite sharp, at all times to the point. The most important thing is, that this critical analysis of vitalism's irrationalism provides a first introduction to Rickert's philosophy of values which will be discussed in greater details in Chapter Four.

Rickert makes it quite clear that he too - like Nietzsche whom he admired passionately as a young man and still read in his later years⁶, or like Bergson, Dilthey, and Simmel - dislikes 'rationalism' or 'intellectualism' as the stale remnants of the Enlightenment, locked up in a fossilized academic dogmatism. Philosophy he believes, in concordance with the representatives of vitalism, should not evaporate in abstract clouds of concepts and theories which are separated from reality as it is lived and experienced by human beings. As much as he still believes in the power and relevance of German *Idealism*, he agrees with its vitalistic critics that it has often degenerated into a dry, 'dead' academism and stale dogmatism. However, philosophy, Rickert maintains, ought to remain scientific. That means, in his view it ought to be rational. In this respect he departs from the vitalists quite radically.

Systematic and surrealist philosophy

Today, after the onslaught of logical positivism, the wide acceptance of linguistic philosophy, the ontological revolution brought about by Heidegger, and the irrational *mêlée* of so-called post-modernism, it sounds rather old-fashioned, if not outdated, to learn that Rickert maintains, even against the odds of his own days, that philosophy is *systematic* by nature, or is nothing. However, on closer scrutiny, this idea of Rickert may be less outdated than one is inclined to believe at first sight.

Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften, ('The Construction of the Historical World in the Humanities'), 1926, B. Groethuysen ed., *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. VII, ('Collected Publications', vol. VII), (Stuttgart: Teubner Verlagsgesellschaft; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973), p. 261.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 179f, footnote 1. As a young student in the summer of 1886, Rickert confesses, he read 'Zarathustra' with glowing enthusiasm ('mit glühender Begeisterung'), in a time when Nietzsche was still unknown. He was then often warned not to overestimate Nietzsche, but 'even today I return time and again to his works' ('und noch jetzt greife ich immer wieder nach seinen Werken'). Yet, he is not able to range Nietzsche among the 'great philosophers', as he has failed to address the 'timeless problems of philosophy' ('die zeitlosen Probleme der Philosophie'). For other reasons as well, we shall see presently.

To begin with, he is in search of a scientific philosophy. If philosophy is a scientific enterprise, as Rickert emphatically believes, the question arises what its own object of investigation is and how it relates to the specialized, empirical sciences. Empirical reality, i.e. the reality we experience through our sense-organs, is carefully analyzed by various scientific disciplines - by the so-called natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) first and foremost, and subsequently, where these sciences run up against their limits, as in the case of the non-empirical values, by the cultural sciences (*Kulturwissenschaften*). According to Rickert, these two groups of sciences, as we shall see in Chapter Five, must be seen on a continuum rather than in mutual opposition or even exclusion. These empirical scientific disciplines necessarily compartmentalize reality, since they focus on reality in terms of their own, specific methods of research and logic of concept formation. Philosophy then is an additional and autonomous *Wissenschaft* which tries to approach reality not in a compartmentalized but in a total, systematic manner. Various scientific disciplines – physics, chemistry, astronomy, psychology, sociology, economics, history, etc. – dissect, as it were, reality into distinct parts or components. That is logically legitimate, Rickert argues, but reality as a whole is more than and different from the sum of these parts. 'Each of them (distinct disciplines, ACZ) covers, according to its conception, only a part of the world. The whole is something else than a mere stringing together of its parts.'⁷ Rickert warns against the devastating effect, if philosophy followed this compartmentalization and cut itself up into specialized philosophies, such as philosophy of biology, of physics, of psychology, of sociology, of history, etc.

The consequence of such a fragmentation, Rickert adds, would in the end of the day be an unsatisfactory kind of relativism, since these fragmented, empirical disciplines and their philosophies would have no access to shared and guiding values and norms. Or, in other words, scientific disciplines and their specialized philosophies are inherently unable to forge and formulate guiding values and norms. In the colloquial terms of today, a scientifically and philosophically compartmentalized world would yield a culture ruled by the dictum 'anything goes'. In such a fragmented world theories could not possibly be more than sets of aphorisms.⁸ Naturally, Nietzsche, the great master of aphorisms, is then the leading and inspiring philosopher. In such a world, it does not make any sense whatsoever to ask what reality-*in-toto* is and how it could be conceptualized, how it could be 'brought under' rational concepts.⁹ In opposition to this relativism, Rickert launches the formal and absolute values, such as Truth, Justice, the morally Good, etc., which however become 'real' and then also 'historically relative' in judgments. Judgments of historical facts, events and objects render the formal and absolute values 'empirical', 'real', 'concrete'. This is discussed in more details in the next two chapters. At this point it suffices to mention the fact that Rickert actually combines an 'idealist' view

⁷ 'Jede von ihnen behandelt ihrem Begriff nach nur einen Teil der Welt, und das Ganze ist etwas anderes als die blosse Aneinanderreihung seiner Teile.' *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁸ Heinrich Rickert, *Allgemeine Grundlegung der Philosophie*, (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1921), p. 2. The first section of the first chapter deals with Rickert's ideas about the systematic nature of philosophy. He indicates clearly that he is aware of the fact that also in his days the anti-systematic animus was rather fashionable. He refers to Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Bergson, but also to romantic artists like Oscar Wilde, who in different words and tones attacked the alleged rationalism and 'lifeless' intellectualism of each system.

⁹ 'Unter einem Begriff bringen', literally 'bringing under a concept', is a typically neo-Kantian formula which gives expression to the idea that reality as it objectively is - *das Ding-an-sich* - cannot be grasped cognitively without concepts. In the acquisition of knowledge concepts are imposed on reality.

of absolute, formal and non-relative values with a 'realist' view of the 'realization' of these forms in historical, empirical facts, events and objects. This realization takes place, as we shall see later, through judgments and their connected acts.¹⁰ In any case, the vitalistic relativism is in his view too facile, too superficial, too unphilosophical.

In opposition to this philosophical compartmentalization, Rickert coins and applies the concept of *Weltall*, reality-*in-toto*, the encompassing reality. It is the proper object of truly philosophical knowledge. The *Weltall*, reality-*in-toto*, not cut up by scientific specialisms, is in a sense a super-reality, a sur-reality which can of course not be experienced as such, i.e. *in toto*. It is rather posited as an analytic postulate, as a kind of conceptual and analytic, non-empirical canopy which overarches the multiple realities of the various, specialized, scientific disciplines. Reality-*in-toto* represents conceptually the core of the undivided and indivisible reality which must be assumed, because without it there could not be any specialization or compartmentalization to speak of. It cannot be experienced by the sense-organs, it can not be investigated empirically by the sciences, it is in this sense metaphysical. Yet, it must be there as a postulate. Rickert goes one step further and comes very close to vitalism, when he adds that in the routines of daily existence we do experience life in an integrated manner, not divided according to the different natural and cultural sciences. Philosophy formalizes and systematizes this daily experience. In this sense, Rickert's vision of a systematic philosophy resembles the artistic current of surrealism.¹¹ The difference is, of course, that philosophy is theoretical (scientific), whereas surrealism as an art form is atheoretical (aesthetic).

It should be kept in mind that vitalism which originated in the second half of the 19th century but came to intellectual prosperity around the First World War originated sociologically in the political turmoils of Europe. The rational ideals of the Enlightenment, inspired by such values as freedom, autonomy, tolerance, and solidarity were shattered by the political realities of class strife, war and revolution. The First World War was in a sense the complete demise of rationality. This war and the ensuing economic crisis at the end of the 1920's shattered the previously relatively sheltered lives of Rickert's compatriots. The Weimar Republic stands out as an example of a society characterized by political, societal and cultural compartmentalization. It collapsed eventually under the fragmented politics of various parties and movements, while its culture exploded, as it were, in a dazzling plethora of artistic and intellectual expressions. They all had one thing in common: they lacked each form of system, coherence, order, and tradition.¹² It stands to reason that such a fragmented polity, society and culture was vulnerable. It proved to be defenseless against the onslaught of fascism and Nazi totalitarianism. Even Rickert, philosophically rooted in neo-Kantian rationalism, fell prey to it.¹³

¹⁰ This point was missed by Maurice Mandelbaum who accused Rickert of relativism in his otherwise insightful study *The Problem of Historical Knowledge. An Answer to Relativism*, 1938, (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1967), pp. 119-147.

¹¹ The concept of *surrealism* and its synonym *supernaturalism* were for the first time used in literature by Apollinaire in the introduction to his play *Les mamelles de Tirésias*, ('The Breasts of Tiresias'), 1919. It refers to a super-reality which is not bound by the limits of the experienced, empirical reality. This fits Rickert's ideas well. Yet, in the arts surrealism then began to refer to the willful exclusion of the mind and of logical reasoning in favor of explorations of the unconscious, of dreams, and of black humor. André Breton's *Manifeste du surréalisme* (1924) gives expression to this kind of subjectivism which erupted vehemently in the manifestations of Dadaism. Breton's subjectivism was also strongly influenced by psychology and psychoanalysis. Psychologism and thus Breton's brand of surrealism was alien to Rickert's unemotional rationalism, although his brand of neo-Kantian transcendentalism seems to come close to it again. In any case, Breton and his fellow surrealists were more influenced by Freud's psychoanalysis than by neo-Kantian transcendentalism as was the case with Rickert.

¹² Cf. Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture. The Outsider as Insider*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968), in particular chapter IV: 'The Hunger for Wholeness: Trials of Modernity', pp. 70-101. Also: Otto Friedrich, *Before the Deluge*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1972).

¹³ See Hans Sluga, *Heidegger's Crisis. Philosophy and Politics in Nazi Germany*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 93, 98-100. He joined the right-wing German Philosophical

Rickert, trained in the Kantian tradition, rejects the so-called *Abbildungslogik*, that is the representational logic which views words, concepts, or theories as pictures of reality. In this 'logic' truth is measured by the realistic quality of the concepts and theories. Most vitalists hold on to this view, since they long for concepts and theories which are 'true to life'. Indeed, in this view theoretical truth is not dependent on the rules of formal logic and the results of empirical research. It rather depends on the correspondence of concepts and theories with life - life which is experienced. Rickert rejects this type of 'logic' vehemently. Empirical reality is not just grasped by sense impressions. In daily life, for instance, we filter and order our experiences and sense impressions through language - through concepts and names that we attribute to things, events and beings. Language, according to Rickert, is in essence a reduction of the complexity of the world. In fact, there are two types of such complexity reducing words, names and concepts. For practical reasons we always reduce the complexity of reality by the use of *generalizing* concepts, that is, by means of generic species names (*Gattungsnamen*) which order individual objects (things, persons, events, etc.) according to their shared qualities, as specimens of general types. Or we order them in terms of *individualizing* proper names (*Eigennamen*) which rather focus on their unique and indivisible, that is individual qualities. This is still a pre-scientific kind of conceptualization, in which we, as speaking human beings, engage pre-reflectively and arbitrarily. In the natural and cultural sciences this conceptual ordering and reduction of complexity is realized in a systematic and logically cogent manner.¹⁴

But Rickert still adds another dimension to this. The world is not just the object of philosophy as the co-coordinating science of sciences, one also expects philosophy to elucidate man's position in it. What the scientific disciplines cannot offer, general philosophy should offer. That is, systematic philosophy is also a philosophical anthropology, as it ought to demonstrate what man's position in the world is, and what the meaning of his life is or could be. That, however, is only possible, if we know what the *values* are that provide meaning to what we do and are in the world. Moreover, the specialized scientific disciplines are by definition limited in time. They either neutralize time, as in the case of the natural sciences which in actual fact are ahistorical, or they pin down time to the past, as in history, or the here-and-now, as in the social sciences. Philosophy with its focus on values transcends such limits of time, introduces eternity as a philosophical problem. After all, human evaluations are historical and thus time-bound, but the values to which these evaluations refer - truth, beauty, justice, the good, etc.- are timeless, ahistorical and in this sense eternal.¹⁵

If we lived without language, without names and concepts, we would experience reality as a chaos, as an irrational *mêlée* of sense impressions, as a congeries of meaningless fragments. But when we are able to order these bits and pieces into a meaningful whole linguistically, we will be able in principle to experience and understand reality as a meaningful cosmos. That is, in other words, its heuristic function. Philosophy should follow this heuristic path of everyday language.

Society, and contributed to its journal, erected and led by his former student Bruno Bauch who was a devoted Nazi until his death in 1942. Sluga, pp. 82-85, 92-95, 164-167, 210-214.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7. The dynamics of generalization and individualization in everyday life human cognition is broadened by Rickert into a basic categorization and logic of the sciences and humanities. We shall discuss all this in more details in Chapter Five.

¹⁵ Rickert, *Die Philosophie des Lebens*, p. 13.

If it is systematic and general, philosophy will be able to contribute to such a sense of meaning and order: 'Reality is not at all a "world" yet, as it first meets us before we understand it systematically. It is rather a congeries of fragments or a chaos. It is only after we have ordered its components that something emerges which we call the cosmos. Only the system makes it possible that for us the world-chaos develops into a world-cosmos. In this respect one could say that each philosophy should have the form of a system.'¹⁶ Philosophy should not want to accomplish more, but as a universal approach its intentions should not be less. How much it is really able to accomplish, Rickert adds wisely, is a different question.

Despite their widely different approaches and conceptualizations, vitalists share one basic insight - that of Life as the overarching concept which is viewed and treated as an encompassing principle (*Weltallprinzip*). With the help of this principle not only the various sciences and the various philosophical traditions are usually criticized as being 'lifeless', if not 'dead', but it is also claimed that all value problems can be solved through it. In this double sense the claims of the vitalists are quite universal and systematic. Yet - and this is their paradox - vitalists fiercely reject the idea of a philosophical system! In fact, vitalism is anti-systematic by definition. Systems are, vitalists claim repeatedly, stiff, inflexible, rigid, 'lifeless' things. Life is always on the move, is an ever changing, thoroughly flexible process. Rickert summarizes this almost 'post-modernist' vision of the vitalists as follows:

'Just one thing must be missing (in vitalism, ACZ) which seemed to belong to each true philosophy: the form of the *system*. The system is in all conditions something stiff, something established, something curdled. It therefore stands in hostile opposition to permanently floating and streaming life. Thus, the vitalist is not allowed to think systematically in the traditional sense of the word. (...) His thinking has to cling to the rhythm and dynamics of a never resting life. (...) Like the distinction of form and content, that of chaos and cosmos disappears for vitalists. Life is both at once. The ongoing stream of life itself is the organizing and organized world, because its structure consists of flowing and streaming, and in this respect the world does at the same time not "exist".'¹⁷

Intuitionism and biologism

As Rickert realizes, *Lebensphilosophie* is, as we say today, a black box concept containing many often quite different and even contradictory ideas. For the sake of clarity he reduces this complexity by the introduction of two main types of vitalism: *intuitionism* and *biologism*.¹⁸ The first one is broad, encompassing and in many respects rather vague, the second is restricted and more or less clear, if only

¹⁶ 'So wie die Wirklichkeit uns zuerst gegenübertritt, bevor wir sie systematisch begreifen, ist sie überhaupt noch keine "Welt", sondern eine Anhäufung von Bruchstücken oder ein Chaos. Erst indem wir ihre Teile ordnen, entsteht das, was wir den Kosmos nennen. Das System allein ermöglicht es also, dass aus dem Weltchaos für uns der Weltkosmos wird, und insofern kann man sagen, muss jede Philosophie die Form des Systems haben.' Rickert, *o.c.*, p. 14.

¹⁷ 'Nur eines muss ihr fehlen, was bisher zu jeder echten Philosophie zu gehören schien: die Form des *Systems*. Das System ist nämlich unter allen Umständen etwas Starres, Festgewordenes, Geronnenes und steht daher dem stets fließenden und strömenden Leben fremd, ja feindlich gegenüber. Im alten Sinn systematisch darf also der Lebensphilosoph nicht denken. (...) Sein Denken hat sich der Rhythmik und Dynamik des nie ruhenden Lebens anzuschmiegen. (...) Wie der Unterschied von Form und Inhalt, so fällt auch der von Kosmos und Chaos für sie fort. Das Leben ist beides zugleich. Der flutende Lebensstrom selbst ist die gestaltende und die gestaltete Welt, denn ihre Gestalt besteht im Fließen und Strömen, und sie "besteht" insofern zugleich auch nicht.' *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁸ Rickert uses the concepts 'vitalism' and 'biologism', but since I use 'vitalism' as a translation of *Lebensphilosophie* I rather speak of 'intuitionism' and 'biologism'. These are, of course, but names which is not problematic as long as one applies them consistently.

because it stems from biology as a science. Yet, many vitalists managed to come up with a combination of intuitionism and biologism.

Intuitionism then defines the notion of life primarily in terms of an immediate, non-reflective, intuitive way of experiencing reality. It is emphasized by intuitionism that cognitive concepts (*Begriffe*) by which one grasps reality, do not really yield true knowledge of reality. Such concepts, it is claimed, stand in opposition to the ever streaming and thus changing process of life which human beings are inherently part of. Cognitive concepts are 'frozen', 'dead', 'lifeless' pictures of reality which is conceived of as a 'frozen', 'dead', 'lifeless' objectivity separated from human subjectivity. They resemble, as Bergson once remarked, ready-made, off-the-peg clothes. However, if one focuses primarily and constantly on life, one will need to think, speak and argue in terms of a unity of subjectivity and objectivity, of thinking and living, of reflection and action. Vitalist concepts resemble clothes made to measure.

One is inclined to view the influence of Arthur Schopenhauer on this point. Schopenhauer reformulated Kant's distinction between the *noumenon* as the thing-in-itself and the *phaenomenon* as the imagination of the thing-in-itself: the *noumenon* is, according to Schopenhauer, the metaphysical will which we experience directly in our drives and desires but which is at work in all of reality, the inorganic world included; the *phaenomenon* is the imagination of the *noumenon*. Schopenhauer then argues that the will is a will to live, but it is a cosmic and 'blind' will without values and norms. Since it can never be gratified, it is a source of suffering. This will differs from and is independent of human knowledge, or intellect, or cognition. Moreover, the will is the primary, knowledge the secondary force: 'the will is not determined by knowledge, but knowledge by the will.'¹⁹ Knowledge is thus, as it were, driven by this 'blind', non-rational, cosmic force which is not alien to us, because we are voluntary, mentally and physically acting beings. The act of the will is the act of the body. In fact, the body is nothing else than the objectified will.²⁰

Simmel argues in a perceptive book on both philosophers that Nietzsche's view of life was an optimistic one, based on a sense of the festive and permanent evolution of life, whereas Schopenhauer's view was rather gloomy since the will to life could never reach its fulfillment, resulting in suffering and a deep sense of boredom.²¹ Nietzsche's view of life's evolution was not teleological, i.e. there was not a final apotheosis, no final end. Life's aim was its very own enrichment, its Dionysian intensification. Its ethos was immoralistic. In contrast, Schopenhauer's will to live was rather amoralistic, as it was valueless, normless and aimless – a 'blind' force. The best man can hope for is the discontinuance of the will, either in radical asceticism or mysticism, or in the nothingness of *nirvana* or death.

Rickert discusses Schopenhauer briefly as one of the intellectual predecessors of the *Philosophie des Lebens* and entrusts his legacy with a penetrating influence on many vitalists. Yet, strictly speaking Schopenhauer's philosophy was more a philosophy of anti-life (of boredom, stagnation, nothingness, death) than a philosophy of life (of creativeness, evolution, completion, anti-death). Nietzsche's Dionysian enjoyment of life, therefore, had a much greater impact on the *Philosophie des Lebens*.

According to Rickert, intuitionist vitalism declares *das Leben*, life, as 'the authentic "essence" of the world-*in-toto* and declares it simultaneously as the proper organ of its comprehension. Life itself should philosophize from life without the help

¹⁹ 'also nicht [...] Wille durch Erkenntnis bedingt sei; wiewohl Erkenntnis durch Wille.' Arthur Schopenhauer, *Über den Willen in der Natur*, ('On the Will in Nature'), Zürcher Ausgabe. Werke in zehn Bänden, Kleinere Schriften I, (Zürich: Diogenes, 1977), p. 203.

²⁰ Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, ('The World as Will and Imagination'), *ibid.*, Vol. I:1, 1 para 18, p. 143: 'ja, dass der ganze Leib nichts Anderes, als der objektivirte, d.h. zur Vorstellung gewordene Wille ist.'

²¹ Georg Simmel, *Schopenhauer und Nietzsche. Ein Vortragszyklus*, ('Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. A Cycle of Lectures'), (München, Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1920), the first lecture, pp. 1-19.

of other concepts. Such a philosophy should then be experienced immediately.²² This is a seemingly awkward rather redundant formulation: life is the essence of reality and can only be understood by life which is philosophically to be experienced immediately, i.e. intuitively and lively. Rickert phrases it that way on purpose. Vitalism, he means to say, is monistic and logically redundant, as it starts from the autonomy of life which does not acknowledge something else outside or beyond life. Life is measured by life, and can only be grasped intuitively by immersing oneself in life.

One of the attractions of vitalism, Rickert adds ironically, is the emotionally appealing variety of the word *Leben* as it occurs in various emotionally gratifying verbs: *sich ausleben* (to live it up), *erleben* (to experience), *sich einleben* (to immerse oneself), *mitleben* (to sympathize with). In particular, life's opposite - death - gives weight to the notion of life in the vitalist's view of the world: 'Only what is alive dies, and what has died has died out and is actually dead.'²³ Note again, Rickert's ironic use of a blatantly redundant formulation! In particular the cliché expression *Erlebnis* – “experience” - invites his derision. It is, he says, so hackneyed 'that it is not sufficient enough anymore. Therefore, one believes it essential to advance into the notion of a primordial experience, which apparently is an even livelier experience than the ordinary one.'²⁴ In any case, the word 'experience', Rickert continues, can actually not be used anymore, and is therefore often written between inverted commas. It lacks by now any sensible meaning: 'Not rarely does it mean an empty phrase and serves as a cover up for thoughtlessness.'²⁵

Vitalism has deeply penetrated into the arts, as is apparent, Rickert adds, in expressionism, but also in the religious life of his (and, one could add, also our) day. In expressionism the artist searches for authentic expressions which focus on individual originality rather than remaining faithful to the alleged coercion of artistic schools and forms. In religion mystic or emotional experiences are sought for, and opposed to doctrines and 'lifeless' religious language and 'dead' dogmatisms. But - and this has Rickert's special interest - vitalism has in particular penetrated into the specialized sciences. The concept of 'nature', often tied to that of 'the organic', is revitalized and contrasted to a materialist and mechanistic notion of it. It is hard to fathom, Rickert asserts, how the natural sciences could be conceptualized in terms of these vitalist notions. What is one to understand by 'lively physics'? Up till now, Rickert mocks, a 'lively mathematics' has not yet been introduced by the vitalists, but mathematics is anyhow not cherished by most proponents of 'lively' sciences.²⁶

Not surprisingly, vitalism also penetrated into ethics: *Lebensethik* (life ethic) it is called. It bases ethical ideals on life. We should, according to this ethic, experience as much as possible, and we should lead our lives as lively as possible in all directions: live and let live. Or, as Rickert phrases it: 'Live! That is the new categorical imperative. Life acquires ethical significance only, if it is led to the apex

²² 'Man erklärt das Leben für das eigentliche "Wesen" des Weltalls und macht es zugleich zu Organon seiner Erfassung. Das Leben selber soll aus dem Leben heraus ohne Hilfe anderer Begriffe philosophieren, und eine solche Philosophie muss sich dann unmittelbar erleben lassen.' *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²³ 'Nur das Lebendige stirbt, und das Gestorbene allein ist abgestorben und im eigentlichen Sinne tot.' *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁴ '...zumal der Ausdruck 'Erlebnis' ist allerdings bereits so abgegriffen, dass er nicht mehr genügt und man daher zum 'Urerlebnis' glaubt vordringen zu müssen, das wohl ein noch lebendigeres Erlebnis als das gewöhnliche sein soll.' *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁵ 'Nicht selten bedeutet es eine leere Phrase und dient zum Deckmantel für Gedankenlosigkeit.' *Idem.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9. See also p. 37, where he calls the idea of a 'lively mathematics' absurd.

of liveliness and if it is run through by life in all its extensions.²⁷ Weber's concept of a rather emotional *Gesinnungsethik* - ethic of ultimate ends - as opposed to the much more rational *Verantwortungsethik* - ethic of responsibility - is not mentioned by Rickert, but comes to mind immediately.²⁸

The main problem of vitalism is the fact that it applies the concept of life to everything and everybody in which case it runs completely empty and indifferent. It is next contrasted to the allegedly 'dead' concepts of the specialized sciences and general, rational, non-vitalist philosophy. A lively organism, Rickert counters, is admittedly not a mechanism, yet there is nothing wrong with attempts to construct physical or chemical concepts in order to know empirically how an organism functions. All that is needed is the basic awareness that (organic, inorganic or socio-cultural) reality is logically different from the conceptualizations of that reality. Rickert, in other words, rejects vitalism's monism and defends cognitive dualism. What lives is not just different from what thinks, there is also a logically fundamental gap between what is and what thinks! Or in other words, there is no direct correspondence between subjective and objective reality, nor is there a direct connection between thinking and being. In daily life as well as in science and philosophy we think, speak and experience in terms of words, names and concepts, and these are not 'dead' things but the very coordinates of our experiences, emotions and thoughts. Life too can not be experienced directly and intuitively, but is as it were mediated by language, i.e. by words, names and concepts. 'Life' to begin with is such a concept. Vitalists would not be able to experience life without the concept of life!

Moreover, by means of words, names and concepts we order the complexity, (which in and of itself is chaotic), of reality, i.e. nature, culture, history, and thus create conceptually a cosmos in which we are able to experience life in a meaningful manner. After all, Rickert asserts, 'it is in the form of a concept (*Begriff*) that perception (*Anschauung*) stops being theoretically "blind". It becomes expressible, transmittable, theoretically distinct or true. Absolute formlessness therefore can never render science "lively", but must "kill" it.²⁹

Although Martin Heidegger was once Rickert's student and remained a friend of the Rickert family throughout his life³⁰, he is not mentioned in his book on

²⁷ 'Lebe! so lautet der neue kategorische Imperativ. Ethische Bedeutung gewinnt das Leben nur, wenn es zum Gipfel der Lebendigkeit geführt und in seiner ganzen Breite vom Leben durchströmt wird.' *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁸ Max Weber, 'Politik als Beruf', ('Politics as a Vocation'), 1919, in: *Gesammelte Politische Schriften*, (München: Mohr-Siebeck, 1971), pp. 551-560.

²⁹ '...denn erst in der Form des Begriffs hört die Anschauung auf, theoretisch "blind" zu sein, wird sagbar, übertragbar, theoretisch different oder wahr. Absolute Formlosigkeit kann daher die Wissenschaft nie "lebendig" machen, sondern muss sie "töten".' Rickert, *o.c.*, p. 43. This is not the place to compare this neo-Kantian conception of the Concept (*Begriff*) with that of Hegel. See Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 297-350: 'The Concept'. Taylor summarizes the difference as such: 'The issue between Kant and Hegel is this: Hegel takes up Kant's idea that reality or objectivity is only where the stuff of sensible intuition is structured by thought. But whereas for Kant this principle was valid only for our knowledge of the world, i.e., for phenomena, and not for things in themselves; for Hegel this is valid ontologically. For the inner truth of things is that they flow from thought, that they are structured by rational necessity. What for Kant just happens to be true of our faculty of knowledge is for Hegel an ontological fact which finds its reflection in our faculty of knowledge.' *Ibid.*, p. 297f.

³⁰ This information was given to me by Mrs. Marianne Rickert-Verburg, granddaughter of the philosopher, quoted in the Introduction. She told me in the quoted interview that Heidegger came to visit Rickert's widow directly after the war, exchanging memories and war experiences. See the exchange of letters by the two philosophers: Martin Heidegger, Heinrich Rickert, *Briefe 1912 bis 1933*, edited by Alfred Denker, (Frankfurt a.M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 2002). Despite fundamental

vitalism. Yet, it is as if Rickert refers to Heidegger's idea of *(Un)eigentlichkeit* - *(in)authenticity* - when he introduces an additional connotation of the vitalist notion of *Erlebnis* (experience) or *Ereignis* (event). In particular when applied with emphasis, Rickert argues, the notion of experience or event means 'that what we have "experienced" in an actual sense, has not remained strange ('fremd'), but became our possession, became part of our Self. It has settled down in the depth of our being and become anchored there.'³¹ The experience has then become the essential, the crucial, the authentic, and stands in opposition to everything indifferent, meaningless, value-free, alien, inauthentic and dead. Experience means in that case not just what is ('*was ist*'), but what actually ought to be ('*was sein soll*') because it has value. We desire experiences in order to enrich our lives and to make life worthwhile. Experience becomes an overarching value.³² At this point Rickert could have quoted Christian Morgenstern who in one of his quite surrealistic Palmström-poems exclaims: 'And he comes to the result: "the experience was just a dream. Because", he concludes razor-sharp, "what *can* not be, *may* not be."³³

Rickert discusses two vitalist philosophers who are also sociologists: Max Scheler and Georg Simmel. Like Max Weber he is critical of Scheler, whose brand of phenomenological intuitionism he hardly takes seriously, but he is also like Weber sympathetic to Georg Simmel. In fact, he devotes a whole chapter in his book to Simmel's philosophy. Simmel published at the end of his life, when he was dying of liver cancer, a book called *Lebensanschauung*.³⁴ Rickert is fascinated by the ideas in this book, particularly since Simmel demonstrates that he does not belong to what Rickert calls, with a hardly concealed disdain, 'the prophets of vitalism'. Unlike them, Simmel realizes that life is not just a constant stream of change and evolution, but also needs forms in order to exist. This then places him before a dilemma: as a vitalist Simmel views life as a Bergsonian *durée*, a permanent process of change and development, but as a neo-Kantian sociologist who has developed an elaborate sociology of socio-cultural forms, he realizes that life is limited by forms which are rather rigid, solid, inflexible.³⁵ Take for example the sociological phenomenon of conflict. In terms of substance there are many different kinds and types of conflict (between groups, nations, individuals), yet it is possible to determine what the common characteristics of these conflicts are, reducing them to a single form which is timeless and ahistorical.³⁶

differences between them, Rickert remained loyal to his former student who already in 1917 implicitly criticized his teacher. In a letter dated January 27, 1917 Heidegger wrote that he had reread Rickert's book on transcendental (pure) logic. He then said indicatively: 'Pure logic is an extreme, a concealed rape of the lively mind' ('Die reine Logik ist ein Extrem, eine verkappte Vergewaltigung des lebendigen Geistes'). *O.c.*, p. 38.

³¹ 'dass das, was wir im eigentlichen Sinne "erlebt" haben, uns nicht *fremd* (italics by HR) geblieben, sondern zu unserm Eigentum oder zu einem Stück unseres Selbst geworden ist, sich in die Tiefe unseres Wesens gesenkt und dort verankert hat.' Rickert, *o.c.*, p. 43.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 43f.

³³ 'Und er kommt zu dem Ergebnis: "Nur ein Traum war das Erlebnis. Weil", so schliesst er messerscharf, "nicht sein *kann*, was nicht sein *darf*.'" Christian Morgenstern, *Palmström*, 1910, in: *Palmström, Palma Kunkel*, (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1961), p. 68.

³⁴ Georg Simmel, *Lebensanschauung. Vier Metaphysische Kapitel*, ('View of Life. Four Metaphysical Chapters'), (München-Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1922).

³⁵ Cf. Anton M. Bevers, *Dynamik der Formen bei Georg Simmel*, ('The Dynamics of Forms in Georg Simmel'), (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1985).

³⁶ Georg Simmel, 'Der Streit', in: *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*, ('Sociology. Investigations of the Forms of Sociation'), (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1958, 4th ed.), pp. 186-255. See also Lewis Coser's elaboration of this essay in his *The Functions of Social Conflict*, 1956, (New York: The Free Press, 1964).

This dualism of substance and life forms presents a formidable problem which Simmel tries to solve metaphysically. Briefly summarized, Simmel claims that we are fully aware of the fact that we are limited, that in our life we run into limits all the time. But by this realization we manage to transcend ourselves, and yet at the same time set our own limits. We are thus our own masters over life, over its substance and also over its restrictive and rigid forms. Therefore, 'life is always more-than-life' is Simmel's rather enigmatic formula. Life always pushes beyond the restricting forms, replacing old forms by new ones. Rickert who observes two rather disjunct concepts of life here (one immanent, the other transcendent), maintains against Simmel that the forms of life are not and cannot be lively forms. They are by definition rigid, inflexible, lifeless, like the concepts we construct in order to grasp reality rationally. After all – and here Rickert argues heterologically again – movement and change are relational concepts which presuppose something that does not move and remains stable. 'That one should certainly in the era of the "relativity theory" not forget.'³⁷ To Rickert, not just the forms of life but also the concepts of science and philosophy resemble the rigid reference bodies, or co-ordinate systems of Einstein's theory of relativity. The co-ordinate systems set the frame of reference for the velocity and the path of moving bodies.³⁸ At this point he could also have mentioned mathematics and formal logic as co-ordinate systems which in relation to reality or life, are frames of reference which in vitalistic terms are definitely 'unreal' and 'lifeless'.

Darwin, facts and values

We should now turn to Rickert's second type of vitalism which he dubbed *biologism*. At its cradle stood, of course, Darwin's evolution theory. Rickert though is more interested in the philosophers who used and misused Darwin's theories, than in the great natural scientist himself, who despite his theological training did not extrapolate his scientific ideas into an encompassing, metaphysical philosophy.³⁹ It was rather the philosopher and sociologist Herbert Spencer, who developed an encompassing evolutionist worldview. Rickert fails to notice the fact that Spencer (whose name, incidentally, he spells consistently wrong as Spenser) became the founder and grand old man of *Social Darwinism* which developed into a forceful socio-political ideology, legitimating liberalism and, in particular, American laissez-faire capitalism.⁴⁰ This ideology fits Rickert's descriptions of biologism perfectly well.

Although Darwin himself, as Rickert observes astutely, was not a philosophical vitalist, his biology and evolutionary views did give rise to metaphysical extrapolations. Rickert's discussion of this point is quite interesting.⁴¹ The crucial component in Darwin's biology, he claims, was the connection with Malthus's demographical theory. It led to concepts which from the outset referred to human culture and social life, thus enabling followers to apply the evolution theory to areas outside nature. Malthus, as is well known, claimed that populations grow

³⁷ 'Das sollte man gerade im Zeitalter der "Relativitätstheorie" nicht vergessen.' Rickert, *o. c.*, p. 72.

³⁸ Albert Einstein, *Relativity. The Special and General Theory*, 1916, (New York: Crown Publishers, 1961). Einstein: 'Of course we must refer the process of the propagation of light (and indeed every other process) to a rigid reference-body (co-ordinate system).' *O. c.*, p. 18.

³⁹ Rickert calls Darwin 'this great researcher of nature'. *O. c.*, p. 87.

⁴⁰ Cf. Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, 1944, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967, 14th ed.).

⁴¹ Rickert, *o.c.*, pp. 86-90.

disproportionately faster than the supply of food. This then would eventually engender severe (global) inequalities and conflicts. Darwin applied this idea to his theory of the origins of species in which he attributed a central place to the struggle for food. In fact, this struggle was then generalized to all of organic nature. It is but a small step to then speak of a general (if not metaphysical) Struggle for Life.

Before *Lebensphilosophie* became fashionable in Germany, Rickert adds ironically and maybe with a wink at Heidegger, it was usually called the struggle for *Dasein*. In any case, within the strictly scientific context of Darwin's theory of evolution it is the struggle for food and for life which causes a natural selection and the concomitant emergence, survival and decline of the various species of organic nature. It is then but a small, yet scientifically false step to biologism as a metaphysical worldview and socio-political ideology. In this biologicistic worldview the principle of natural selection as a mechanistic (non-voluntaristic, non-teleological) process and the closely related processes of adjustment are essential. Not just organic nature, but culture and society as well, are now seen as being driven by the 'blind' and mechanistic forces of selection and adaptation. In each component of reality testifying to rational aims and plans, to mind and rationality, we ought to see the impact of natural selection.⁴²

In the biologicistic worldview even the values man believes in, and the aims he sets for his life and actions, are paradoxically viewed in terms of this non-voluntaristic and non-teleological approach. Before Darwin, values seemed to be suspended in the air. They were, of course, viewed and interpreted in theological rather than in biological terms. And if one tried to determine what the meaning of life actually was or could be, one rejected nature and natural life in favor of a metaphysically perceived and religiously redeemed life. In fact, nature was an evil principle. 'Under this qualification', Rickert says, 'man stands in his surrounding world as a sad stranger.'⁴³ The Darwinian biologists radically abolished such ideas. There is, to begin with, in biology no space for values. But, Rickert adds once again, natural selection and adaptation were broadened and extended in post-Darwinian biologism. They became normative, moral concepts which were related to values and value-judgments. Natural selection and adaptation, it was claimed, did not just produce evolution, but also *progress*, that is evolution towards the good life and the moral betterment of mankind! If we let natural selection do its work, it was believed and professed, we will automatically witness a better world – a desirable world which ought to come about. This, in other words, was a transition from *Sein* to *Sollen*, from being to ought-to-be. In logic this is called an inadmissible *metabasis eis allo genos*, i.e. a transition to a different logical species. Throughout his philosophy Rickert has been allergic to this primordial logical sin.

The biologicistic worldview has no use any longer for the traditional values. After all, adjustment and selection lead almost automatically to harmony and balance. Life is a self-regulatory mechanism which should be left alone: *laissez faire*! Life is effective because it resembles quite mechanistically a big machine. Yet, biologicistic vitalists will not simply withdraw into quietism, into a passive resignation which lets

⁴² The contemporary reader is reminded of similar extrapolations of scientific genetics in the direction of a rather metaphysical and mechanistic worldview. See, for example, Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 1976, (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) and Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine*, (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Needless to add that Schopenhauer's metaphysical conception of the 'blind' will comes to mind also. The will, after all, is seen as a strong developing force, yet this development (evolution) is aimless, non-teleological, 'blind'.

⁴³ 'Der Mensch steht unter dieser Voraussetzung als trauriger Fremdling in der ihn umgebenden Welt.' Rickert, *o. c.*, p. 89.

the big machine do its work. Nature, it is believed, works everywhere according to the economic principle of parsimony. In order to survive in the struggle for life, people should be parsimonious in the application of their mental and physical energies. Parsimony improves one's chances in the ongoing struggle for survival. American Pragmatism, Rickert adds, is a telling example. It established the economy of thinking as the basic principle of research. Only those ideas are true which enable us to contemplate the world and act upon it effectively and efficiently. Reality should then be covered by the simplest system of concepts possible. In Europe a similar application of biologism occurred in so-called 'energetic cultural philosophy' which believed that the height of civilization depended upon the energetic parsimony of its people. 'Don't waste energy, put it to good use' seems to be the categorical imperative here.⁴⁴ It all ends up, Rickert sneers, in triviality and philistine utilitarianism.

Biology, Rickert reminds us once more, is a specialized, empirical science which focuses on the structures and processes of living organisms. It deals with a specific, limited part of reality. Although 'life' is in a sense its proper object of research and analysis, its concepts and theories are very specialized and certainly not 'lively'. Moreover, the scientific concepts and theories of biology are, as is the case with the other sciences, 'objective' and 'value-free', and are thus not directly applicable to social life and social policy. Naturally, biologicistic vitalists reject these methodological and logical points of view. They rather see biology as the scientific foundation of their brand of vitalism which is not specialized but very general, and not 'objective' or 'value-free', but 'subjective' and 'normative'. In fact, this type of vitalism pretends to be a practical philosophy which is socio-politically applicable and useful. Previously mentioned Social Darwinism is a perfect example of this school of thought.

Biologicistic vitalists usually reduce Darwin's biological theories to some basic tenets such as 'natural selection', 'adaptation', 'survival of the fittest', etc. This reduced theory is then extended into a rather encompassing *Welt-* and *Lebensanschauung*, in which the notions of rise and decline, flowering and fading, function as emotionally and intuitively appealing metaphors. Only what rises and flowers represents life truly, and is thus positively evaluated, while declining, fading, sinking is valued negatively. It is the road towards death. Rickert then argues that these two forms of life (rise and fall) with their allegedly biological value opposition is extended into a biological founded ideal, namely *health*.⁴⁵ The scientifically sounding concepts of health and sickness are then elaborated into basic norms according to which all other norms ought to be measured and evaluated. 'Life form', Rickert says, becomes 'life norm'.⁴⁶ This is first applied to the single individual. His main philosophically grounded goal in life is - or rather, ought to be - health. He must aspire to health. If he does not

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 93. "'Vergeude keine Energie, verwerte sie.'" Das soll an die Stelle von Kants kategorischem Imperativ treten!' Rickert also mentions Max Weber's critique in his essay "'Energetische" Kulturtheorien', 1909, in: *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1968, 3rd ed.), pp. 400-426. Weber focussed his critique on Wilhelm Ostwald, *Energetische Grundlagen der Kulturwissenschaft*, ('Energetic Foundations of Cultural Science'), (Leipzig: Klinkhardt, 1909) and takes him severely to task for mixing value judgments with objective, scientific facts. See also Wilhelm Ostwald, 'Naturphilosophie' (Philosophy of Nature), in: Paul Hinneberg (ed.), *Die Kultur der Gegenwart. Ihre Entwicklung und ihre Ziele*, ('Contemporary Culture. Its Development and Aims'), (Berlin, Leipzig: Teubner Verlag, 1908), pp.138-172.

⁴⁵ 'Rise and fall' is, as is well known, a very strong trope in history. A recent example is Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers. Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, 1988, (London: Fontana Press, 1989). He published previously *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, (London, 1976).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 77f.

aspire to health, he is not worthy of life. In this way, Rickert says, the philosopher turns into a physician.⁴⁷

All this, the biologicistic vitalist believes, is applicable also to the human species in general. Society, the nation, eventually humanity as a whole should live healthy lives! There is, in other words, a health of the species, as there ought to be a species hygiene. In fact these are, in the view of the biologicistic vitalists, the ultimate aims of humanity. Natural selection, Rickert continues, occupies a crucial position in this type of vitalism. A society or a nation must necessarily degenerate, if it declines in vitality. Rickert could have mentioned here the romantic and fascist idea of a *gesundes Volksempfinden* (healthy feeling of the population). In any case, biologicistic vitalists always emphasize the alleged fact that the law of natural selection, which is seen as a law of progress, reigns (*Sein*), and even should (*Sollen*) reign supremely in the body politic.

But our individual thinking, feeling and acting too have to comply with the demands of these 'biological' norms. Ethical demands can allegedly be derived solely from these notions of rising life, progress, and health. Love, marriage, family, education - they ought to be lived in terms of these 'biologically' based life-norms. The arts and even the sciences too should serve Life. Religion can only be justified existentially, if it fortifies the health of individuals and helps to strengthen nations in their struggle for life.⁴⁸

Within biologicistic vitalism, however, this type of post-Darwinian philosophy has been rejected, Rickert argues, by a new direction in biologism. In this new direction three fateful tendencies were avoided: the emphasis upon the Malthusian component in Darwin's theory, the mechanistic view of culture and society, and the utilitarian ideal of parsimony. Rickert thinks that Henri Bergson in particular played the leading role in this new direction of anti-Darwinist vitalism. However, before we turn to this new direction in general and Bergson in particular, we should first discuss Rickert's typology of biologicistic theories which is, I believe, still heuristically useful.

Four types of biologism

By now the picture of biologicistic vitalism is quite complex and thus confusing. Rickert tries to clarify it by the introduction of four types which represent four fundamentally different dimensions of biologism. They do share a common foundation, yet stand in opposition to each other. In a rare exercise of social philosophy, Rickert constructs a quadrant alongside two social-political dilemma's: 'socialism' (or 'collectivism') versus 'individualism' on the one hand, and 'democracy' versus 'aristocracy' on the other. It yields four types of tendencies: (a) *liberalism* (individualism plus democracy); (b) *social democracy* (socialism plus democracy); (c) *individual aristocracy* (individualism plus aristocracy); (d) *social aristocracy* (socialism plus aristocracy). Rickert provides examples of these tendencies which he discusses in broad outlines.⁴⁹

- (a) Democratic-individualistic convictions based on evolutionary biologism were formulated more or less systematically by Herbert Spencer. His philosophy and sociology functioned as legitimations of Manchester capitalism and liberalism. He could have added also, as we saw before,

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 78. Needless to add that this vitalistic preoccupation with health is still very prominent in present day society, not in the least as an economically profitable segment of the market.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 82-86.

American Social Darwinism as an example of this type of biologism. Spencer emphasized the inherent conflict between individual interests and species interests, but for the sake of harmony and progress the natural selection will bring about a situation in which self-supporting acts will coincide with species-supporting acts. It will be the highest stage in the ongoing process of progressive evolution. Yet, survival of the fittest may lead to an undemocratic rule of the strongest and most powerful. It is a mistaken (socialist) view to imbue the state in this regard with regulatory powers. Social laws and state succor of the poor, etc. disturb the natural selection processes. What cannot thrive in its own strength and power, should, according to the laws of nature, succumb.

- (b) According to the social democrats natural selection and competition (conflict) are the basic biological principles that bring about progress, yet they should not be identified with the existing societal order where a small minority possessing the means of capitalist production oppresses the mass of workers without capital. The law of natural selection is rendered inoperative by the allegedly anti-natural brutality of inheritance capitalism. In this way the weak and vulnerable within the class of capitalists are artificially supported. It is a decadent situation which will not be cured in an evolutionary way, but needs a revolutionary change of the existing societal order.
- (c) There has not been a more radical enemy of democracy than Nietzsche. His idea of a radically aristocratic and individualistic ideal of the *Übermensch* was founded upon biological notions. In 'Zarathustra' we find the idea of a being that develops beyond man, as if the advent of a super-vertebrate is to be expected. Moreover, in line with the principle of natural selection the strong shall rule over the weak, natural inequality shall be the vehicle of progress. All *Sklavenmoral* - slave morality - which dares to question the right of the *Herrenmoral* - the morality of the lords - entails decline and depravity. Nietzsche calls for a 'return to nature' but not, of course, the idyllic and harmonious nature of Rousseau but the nature of competitive fights and conflicts of modern biology.
- (d) The social-aristocrats often refer to Nietzsche as far as anti-democratic aristocracy is concerned, but they reject Nietzsche's individualism. They rather return to the ideal of the horde which is interpreted in terms of groups, nations and races. There is a social element in this aristocracy in that the members of the same group, nation, race, or species should help each other. This is not the idea of Christian neighborly love, since that is after all more democratic than aristocratic. It is rather the support of the best and the strongest so that the group, nation, race or species can survive in the biological struggle for life. Therefore, not the individual but rather society and the state ought to be the ultimate aim of our socio-political actions. Although Rickert does not use such concepts, it is not difficult to fill in fascism and even National Socialism as examples of this type of biologism. Rickert does mention the fact that this type of biologism is the direct opposite of the Spencerean type of individual democracy, and he does warn against the attempt to set up the Germans as the proper *Aristokratenvolk von Lebewesen* ('aristocratic people of life-beings')

against the French nation which due to its anti-natural Malthusianism is allegedly destined to decline.⁵⁰

This typology is in view of Rickert's rather abstract transcendentalism remarkable, because it actually covers two specialized disciplines, sociology and political science the basic dynamics of which he apparently understood quite well. This was probably due to his close intellectual relationship with Max Weber. In any case, the typology presents a conceptual grid which, I think, is still quite heuristic and useful in modern political science and sociology.

Biologism beyond Nietzsche

Once again, Rickert distinguishes between an 'old' and a 'new' biologism. 'Old' biologism applies the basic tenets of Darwin's evolutionary principles, whereas 'new' biologism, to which we must turn now, stands more in line with Nietzsche's vitalism and was initiated in particular by Bergson.

In the Nietzschean approach the mechanistic conception of life, as well as the principle of parsimony are rejected. Real life is not a mere existence (*blosses Dasein*) which maintains itself harmoniously, nor is adjustment in situations of crisis and danger a basic principle of vitality. It is also erroneous to view parsimony as life's essential feature. Real life is, on the contrary, extravagant, if not wasteful. It does not set out to maintain itself but it wants to grow, to become richer, stronger, livelier! Vital life's basic principles are activity and the expansive impulse, both of which are excluded by post-Darwinist biologism, in which, after all, development and change are being neutralized in harmony and stability. Life is not static, it is dynamic. It bears vital zest, it wants steady increments of power. Indeed, the world is not driven by Schopenhauer's 'will to existence' (*Wille zum Dasein*), but by the 'will to power' (*Wille zur Macht*). As Nietzsche has observed correctly, the continuous struggle for power is the real meaning of truly vital life. The parsimony principle is for that reason contemptible and vulgar. It testifies to decline and general decadence. This, of course, is the 'aristocratic' principle of biologism which comes to the defence of the strong and powerful. It is 'individual aristocracy', because life as the continuous increase of power depends on vital and outshining individuals - super-men, *Übermenschen*.

Needless to add that truly vital life entails an ongoing struggle against 'slave morality' which is always in search for adjustment of the masses and for equality and leveling. Vital life needs an 'immoralistic' *Herrenmoral*, the morality of powerful 'lords' which rejects each kind of equality and leveling, any harmonization of interests, and any kind of pacifism. Man should not aspire to adjust and to come to a harmonious standstill. That would in the end lead to the emergence of 'the last human being' (*der letzte Mensch*) who has found happiness but is also exposed to the final low tide of the ocean of life. Man should want to transcend himself and ought to orient himself to something which is 'beyond' (*über*) him. He needs the *Übermensch* as model for the true meaning of his life and of the world.⁵¹

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 86. Rickert could have mentioned Thomas Mann, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, ('Reflections of an Unpolitical One'), 1918, (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Verlag, 1983) as an example of such an anti-French, social-aristocratic type of vitalism.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 98. Rickert's summary of Nietzsche's vitalism strongly resembles Simmel's perceptive discussion of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, in which Simmel underlined Nietzsche's *Lebensfreudigkeit*, i.e. his zest for life. Simmel, *o.c.*

Like Nietzsche's, Bergson's vitalism was also in its essence biologicistic, albeit anti-Darwinist. Unlike Nietzsche, however, who scorned metaphysics as an enterprise for philosophical *Hinterweltler*, i.e. people who live in an alleged world behind reality, Bergson viewed, more like Schopenhauer, 'life' metaphysically as the very essence of the world. In particular in his later writings he demonstrated that he was not just an intuitionist but a biologicistic vitalist as well. It suffices to refer to the typically Bergsonian concept of *évolution créatrice* in which organic life is presented as an intrinsic part of the world in contrast to inorganic, 'dead' nature.⁵² He too rejects the post-Darwinian, mechanistic view of the world, the highest aim of which is harmony, balance, equilibrium, equality. The metaphysical essence of the world is the steady increase of life and vitality. The natural sciences with their inherent principles of mechanicity and parsimony are not suitable to acquire knowledge of this eternally changing and evolving, lively world. *Intuition* as the pre-reflective immersion of the mind into the ongoing stream of life (*durée*) is the proper epistemological vehicle.

Like Nietzsche, Rickert hastens to add, Bergson is an important thinker and theorist.⁵³ Their ideas became popular and entered into the fashionable current of vitalism in popularized versions distributed by minor minds. There is no need, Rickert argues, to discuss these minor philosophers but he makes one exception: Max Scheler. The few pages devoted to him are very critical, though, and do not add much to the picture of post-Nietzschean vitalism which the previous pages had offered.⁵⁴

Rickert's critique of biologism

The present chapter began with a brief exposition of Rickert's view of the systematic nature of philosophy and its crucial difference with the specialized (natural and cultural) sciences and their respective, mainly methodologically oriented philosophies. It stands to reason then that he fiercely criticizes biologicistic vitalism for its attempt to base its metaphysical view of life and the world on biology which after all is a natural-scientific, specialized discipline. Biology as a specialism is part of a larger whole (science in general), but also its specialized object of research is part of a larger totality, reality-*in-toto*. Now, as a generalized philosophy biologism transforms a part of reality into a whole around which it constructs its worldview. Its seemingly encompassing philosophy is just fake, as is its claim of an exact scientific foundation.

Intuition, *Einleben*, i.e. the romantic longing for emotionally experienced and immediate knowledge, and the rejection of the alleged mechanistic of the (specialized natural) sciences, is crucial to the biologicistic epistemology. It is believed that of all the sciences biology comes closest to vitality and life, and thus should offer the basic concepts and premises of vitalism. But this is, of course, a rather false

⁵² Cf. Henri Bergson, *L'Évolution Créatrice*, ('Creative Evolution'), 1907, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1966, 118th ed.).

⁵³ When I interviewed her in Hamburg, Mrs. Marianne Rickert Verburg showed me a letter by Bergson addressed to Heinrich Rickert, dated June 24th 1909. Bergson thanked his 'très honoré Collègue' for sending him two of his publications, 'Geschichtsphilosophie' and 'Zwei Wege der Erkenntnistheorie'. He writes that he will take these books on vacation upon the end of the teaching semester, and adds that he had for a long time already the plan to enter into direct contact with Rickert's philosophy: 'Je crois qu'il y a plus d'un point commun entre nous, et que, malgré la différence des sujets traités et des méthodes suivies, nous arrivons à des conclusions assez voisines ou tout au moins conciliables entre elles.' ('I believe that we have more than one point in common, and that, despite the difference of subjects dealt with and methods followed, we arrive at conclusions which are rather close to or at least reconcilable with each other.') This conclusion was, I think, more courteous than correct.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-104.

conception of biology as a scientific discipline. As such biology is as little 'lively' and 'vital' as mathematics or formal logic are, in which evidently not a trace of vitality and 'real' life can be discovered. Of course, sciences like physics and chemistry are somewhat 'closer' to real life experiences than mathematics and logic, as in the case of, for instance, gravity, or of H₂O. This may be even more so in the case of biology, since we are living organisms. Yet, natural sciences remain removed from immediately and emotionally experienced realities, if alone because they employ *general* concepts which are at all times far removed from the always *individual* experiences of everyday life.⁵⁵ In fact, all natural sciences lead one into a larger or smaller distance from reality and life. Biologicistic vitalists always lament that the scientific 'concepts of reason' (*Verstandesbegriffe*) fail to reach real-life experiences in their alleged fullness and wealth, and thus are unable to catch reality, let alone truth. But then, are not the concepts employed by these vitalists also rationalized concepts derived from biology as a scientific discipline? Are not these biological concepts, so eagerly adopted by the vitalists, removed from real life as it is directly lived and emotionally experienced?

As the science which it is, biology must 'kill' life, to apply for once the language of intuitionist vitalism. Or, to use an expression of Bergson, like the other sciences biology indeed creates ready-made clothes which do not fit each individual in particular, since they must fit all individuals in general. In short, if one wants to experience life directly, one should not engage in scientific research, even if its object of research is life, as in the case of biology. Rickert draws a radical conclusion which is the very essence of his epistemology and general philosophy: 'Lifelessness and unreality is inherent to the products of not only the generalizing natural sciences, but of *each* scientific enterprise. (...) There is no science without *conceptual thinking*, and that is precisely the "sense" of *each* concept, namely that it puts objects at a distance from directly real life. Even the most lively object, to which any kind of understanding turns, stops living really, the moment it is understood. The dualism of reality and concept can never be abolished.'⁵⁶

Then comes the final, typically neo-Kantian verdict of all vitalism: 'What is directly experienced as reality, cannot be known. Thus, there is no metaphysics of life. (...) As direct reality life can only be experienced. As immediate life it mocks any attempt to get to know it.'⁵⁷ In fact, the mere experience of real life lacks a proper language. There are no appropriate words for it. It is, Rickert, says, born mute. The so-called essence of the real world must remain anonymous, lest it loses its directness and its reality.⁵⁸

Rickert realizes that his critique is rather disenchanting, but adds that this is only so for those who want to know and understand reality theoretically and cognitively. Outside the theoretical, cognitive attitude towards the world, in everyday

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 107. In a footnote Rickert refers to his book on the limits of natural-scientific conceptualization which will be discussed extensively in Chapter Five.

⁵⁶ 'Unlebendigkeit und Unwirklichkeit ist mit den Produkten nicht allein der generalisierenden Naturwissenschaften, sondern mit denen *jeder* Wissenschaft verknüpft. (...) Es gibt keine Wissenschaft ohne *begriffliches Denken*, und das gerade ist der "Sinn" *jedes* Begriffes, dass er die Dinge in einen Abstand vom unmittelbar wirklichen Leben bringt. Das lebendigste Objekt, worauf irgend ein Erkennen sich richtet, hört auf, real zu leben, so weit es begriffen ist. Der Dualismus von Wirklichkeit und Begriff ist niemals aufzuheben.' *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁵⁷ '(...) was als Realität unmittelbar erlebt wird, kann nicht erkannt werden. Also gibt es keine Metaphysik des Lebens. (...) Das Leben als das unmittelbar Reale lässt sich nur erleben. Es spottet als unmittelbares Leben jedem Erkenntnisversuch.' *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

life for instance, life and reality are experienced directly and intuitively. There is nothing wrong with that. If it pleases someone to constantly live and experience life intuitively, Rickert quips, we should not take that pleasure away from him. Only if he wants to acquire a theoretical understanding of life and grasp the world cognitively, should he realize that there is an unbridgeable gap between abstract concepts and experienced reality, between knowing and living. Indeed, as Gottfried Benn said, that what lives is different from that which thinks.

There are no biologicistic values

As we shall see in the fourth chapter, Rickert's general philosophy is a philosophy of values. They represent the *unsinnliche Wirklichkeit*, that is the reality which cannot be experienced by the senses. Values are in this sense non-empirical, yet they are real in the sense of being *valid* or *invalid*. Now, according to Rickert there is much to criticize in the way vitalists deal with values. It is this critique which, as it were *e contrario*, gives insight into his own philosophical position. Most vitalists, in particular those of the biologicistic persuasion, believe that the natural sciences, and especially biology as the science of life, enable us to arrive at a theoretical understanding of values. Is this correct? Can the natural sciences contribute to our understanding of values, and then help us in evaluating whatever is and happens in reality?

As is his custom, Rickert begins with some basic conceptual distinctions. It is quite feasible, he says,⁵⁹ that physics provides the technician with norms for his work. If he wants to build a bridge, he ought to know what weight it can bear. For that he has to turn to the laws of physics. The involved norms - what the technician should do - are purely causal and value-free. Physics tells him that such and such interventions yield such and such results. It is a causal 'must' (*Müssen*), not a moral 'must' (*Sollen*). Physics argues in terms of results and asks what conditions are needed to reap these results. The causal relationship is always conditional. A new component is introduced, however, when the will of the technician enters the relationship. He posits a certain effect as his desired aim or objective. That is, he connects the aim with *values* and transforms thereby the conditions into the means by which he can obtain his cherished aim. The causality of physics is then altered into a *teleological* relationship. Consequently, the means of realizing the aim acquire a normative meaning. After all, it is the human, evaluating *will* that alters causal effects into meaningful purposes, and causal conditions into teleological means which contain norms. However, physics itself does not contain such purposes, and is unable to provide moral norms. It tells the technician what to do, when he wants to arrive at certain effects, but this 'telling what to do' is a matter of amoral '*müssen*' not of moral '*sollen*'. Likewise, the value of an allegedly perfect machine depends solely on the human evaluation of its performance and achievements.

Biologicistic vitalists, however, claim that biology occupies in this respect a special place in the realm of the natural sciences. Usually the physician is taken as an example. He derives the norms of his profession from biology directly, that is without first adding normative purposes to its concepts. Biology teaches him what the conditions are for a healthy life, and these are then the means which he must apply in order to do his job properly. Moreover, biology works with concepts such as 'organism' and 'development' which physics lacks. The notion of an organism as a

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 117-142.

whole to which all parts and components contribute to the advancement of its 'lively' and 'healthy' state is obviously teleological. Likewise, the biologicistic vitalist argues, the notion of development is much more than just a series of merely causal transformations. The changes refer to a final stage which is developed teleologically. In short, the biologicistic vitalist claims, purposes and means, values and norms are not brought into the biological world of organisms and developments from the outside by the human will and its normative evaluations. They are inherent to biology. They are the 'natural' values and norms.

This, Rickert counters, is a grave and fundamental, logical mistake. As is often the case, he argues, the basic lack of clarity is caused by the ambiguity of a word. In this case it is the word *teleology* that is ambiguous. It is derived from the Greek *telos* which has a double meaning. Its meaning is not only *purpose* which is a value concept to be used in order to set norms. It also means *result* which is a value-free concept and therefore useless for the imposition of norms. Now, the parts and components of a biological organism co-operate to the development and advancement of the organism as a whole, but this 'co-operation' and this 'development' are sheer causal processes towards a value-free *result*, not towards an evaluative and normative *purpose*! As in the other natural sciences, *telos* in biology is a value-free *result* and the value-free *effect* of non-normative means. But *telos* as a value concept, as purpose, is a voluntaristic concept and cannot possibly occupy a valid and legitimate position within biology as a natural-scientific discipline. In this natural-scientific sense of *telos* as value-free *result* and not as normative *purpose*, organisms are, like technological machines, 'dead' things. Vitalists can put 'life' (values and norms) into them, but that then is their imputation. It is a primitive sort of anthropomorphism and irrational magic to think otherwise. This magic, he believes, needs to be disenchanting.⁶⁰

As to the physician, his purpose is to treat sick patients and if possible to heal them. This purpose can, of course, not be found in biology as a science, but belongs to our historically grown culture in which life and health have become very dominant values. Are we not constantly under pressure 'to render life healthy, natural, fresh, original?'⁶¹ Rickert mocks the different health movements which were also in his day rather fashionable in Germany. One should bear in mind here that his mental and physical condition was dismal. Due to his agoraphobia he preferred to lock himself up in his library, abhorring nature, freshness and originality. He refers to the *Jugendbewegung*, the youth movement of his days, as a telling example of this fashionable, romantic health ideology. It propagates health, freshness, youth, strength, originality, and, of course, nature. It is adverse, he continues, to the alleged intellectualism of the universities and aestheticism of the art institutions which are usually located in cities. Roaming through 'free' nature (*das Wandern*), the rejection of alcohol and nicotine, and, he could have added, nudism (*Freikörperkultur*), are the main components of the vitalist ideology of the youth movement of Rickert's days. All these irrational celebrations of life and living, Rickert admits, are understandable after the horrible destructions of the First World War⁶², yet as the foundations of a true philosophy of life they are useless and scientifically counterproductive.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 116. Here he speaks of *Entzauberung* and *gründlich entzaubern*.

⁶¹ '(...) ist es etwa kein allgemein gültiges Lebensziel, das Leben gesund, natürlich, frisch, ursprünglich zu machen?' *Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 134f.

Life and culture

Values and norms are incorporated in culture, in objective cultural goods (*objektive Güter*), i.e. in the state, the sciences, the arts and music, religion, etc. Vitalists generally believe that these cultural goods too are subjected to the vitalistic dynamics of rising and declining, flourishing and fading. To them the highest purpose is, or rather should be, to be alive, vital, strong and healthy. Rickert again comes up with a sobering disenchantment: there is an unavoidably negative relationship between culture, or cultural goods, and life, or vitality.⁶³

The sciences present, according to Rickert, a good example. They are an established, institutionalized cultural good in modern society, subjecting both 'dead' (inorganic) and 'alive' (organic) reality to rigid research and rational theory. It all began in Ancient Greece, where for the first time some individuals no longer investigated reality in order to live, but the other way around, lived in order to be able to investigate. Truth was sought for its own sake, not just for the sake of living. Thinking about reality, which is different from living it, acquired its own, autonomous value (*Eigenwert*) and distanced itself from life and living. It opened the road towards the sciences and the scientific attitude which is based upon the fundamental dualism of thinking and living. However, Rickert concedes, there are different degrees of estrangement between life and science. The radically generalizing mathematician thinks and theorizes far removed from 'real' life and life experiences, while the individualizing historian, on the contrary, often identifies with the lives of his objects. Between these opposites there is, as we shall see in chapter four, a whole range of scientific disciplines, of which some are closer to 'life' than others. Yet, in all these cases there still remains a gap between living and thinking.

It is often claimed by vitalists that the arts, another example of cultural goods, cannot be separated from life and its direct, vital experiences. Many artists, it is claimed, detest the abstractions of scientific theories. They work allegedly from their direct experiences and intuitions. Their main source of creativity and originality is life itself. Rickert, whose wife and one of their sons were accomplished sculptors, spends some time criticizing the vitalist conception of art. Most naturalistic art that claims to stay close to life and reality, is esthetically unattractive. He gives wax museums and panorama's as examples, but could also have mentioned kitsch as a prime example of naturalistic art. In any case, he argues that works of art usually carry their aesthetic value by distancing themselves from reality and 'real' life. In fact, the most valuable works of art construct their own aesthetic world which is not a mere copy of the 'real', experienced world. 'The aesthetic meaning of a work of art', he claims, 'which we understand and which alone is relevant to the aesthetic human being, is as unreal and non-alive, as the logical meaning of a true statement is.'⁶⁴ One will search in vein, he adds, for a work of art which contains exclusively vital life.⁶⁵ This is true *a fortiori* for music which among the arts is what mathematics is among the sciences. Here the removal from life is in fact the most radical. Music is essentially Apollinic. One should realize, Rickert adds, that in the aesthetic sphere in general Dionysus, the god of vital and irrational impulses, cannot find a suitable place.⁶⁶

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 156-195.

⁶⁴ 'Genau wie der logische Sinn eines wahren Satzes ist auch der ästhetische Sinn eines Kunstwerkes, den wir verstehen, und auf den es allein dem ästhetischen Menschen ankommt, ebenso unwirklich, wie es unlebendig ist.' *Ibid.*, p. 160f.

⁶⁵ 'Ein Kunstwerk, das nur lebendiges Leben enthält, wird man vergeblich suchen.' *Ibid.*, p. 161.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 162. This was obviously meant as a critique of Nietzsche's aesthetic theories. As to music, Rickert is quite ill informed. It suffices to just mention the 'naturalistic' tone poems of Richard Strauss, or Jean Sibelius, and the evocations of nature and celebration of life in Gustav Mahler's *Das Lied von*

It stands to reason that the erotic impulses are in particular prone to biologicistic-vitalistic interpretations and ethical value imputations. Rickert points out that it does not make sense to speak of ethical values or unvalues (*ethische Werte oder Unwerte*) in the realm of sexual life. The sexual impulses are as such neutral, amoral, i.e. indifferent to values (*wertindifferent*). It is the will of human beings that assign ethical values (moralism) or unvalues (immoralism) to them. There are, of course, areas of culture, Rickert adds, in which elementary impulses play such a preponderant role that an extensive and intensive reflection about their functions would have a disturbing effect on their vitality. This is, for example, the case in institutions such as marriage and the family. Rickert would, in all probability, not be a proponent of marriage counseling, as he was hesitant towards psychotherapy. If done well, i.e. scientifically sound, it would deaden the vitality of our primary, vital impulses. Yet, in and of themselves such impulses and their vitality are and remain neutral, i.e. indifferent to values. Values are imputed voluntaristically by people. The alleged 'right' to erotic vitality and to the liberty to live it up erotically, as if this were a moral imperative, is naïve and has in the final analysis nothing to do with culture.⁶⁷

Religion is a special case. It stands to reason, Rickert claims, that religious values are not an intrinsic part of biological life.⁶⁸ They usually transcend all other values, and for the true believer they are 'absolute' values. Religious man ought to reject attempts to underpin his values by other values. In a sense, religious man comes closest to life and its direct experiences, since religion, certainly in its non-institutional form, is devoid of specializations and compartmentalizations. In order to exist, religion needs to penetrate into existence deeply and totally. But its values cannot possibly be derived from biological life. As there is a dualism of thought and concepts on the one hand and life and experiences on the other, there is this dualism between a god people believe in and the life people live. To sum up, here too Rickert rejects vitalistic monism which boils everything down into a single, vague and multi-interpretable concept of life. In religion too that which lives differs from that which thinks (believes).⁶⁹

Vitalism's credit side

Meanwhile, the impression may have arisen that Rickert could not discover anything positive and worthwhile in vitalism. The concluding chapter of his book on vitalism negates this impression.⁷⁰ He argues that this school of thought has a certain right of existence. According to Rickert, philosophy is, as we saw before, a non-specialized, systematic science, based upon and ruled by formal logic. It is in a sense an empirical science, since its 'sense-data' (Russell) stem from reality, or, if you want, from life, as it is experienced through the senses. It is systematic in that it

der Erde, or the *verismo* in Italian opera (Giacomo Puccini). Naturalism is also prominent in the arts. Rickert discusses briefly the sculptures of Gustave Rodin, and tries unsuccessfully to deny their naturalistic animus.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁶⁸ One could counter this thesis of Rickert by claiming that there may well be religious genes, as there are perhaps erotic, artistic and scientific genes. Rickert would answer though that these are still the biological impulses, not the values imputed to them by men.

⁶⁹ Rickert fails to observe that there is such a thing as 'natural religion' as opposed to religion based on a believed revelation. Proponents of natural religion could well argue in terms of biologicistic and/or intuitionist vitalism. Moreover, in mysticism the dualism of God and life is dissolved in a monism of irrational religiosity, the so-called *unio mystica*.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 171-195: 'Das Recht der Lebensphilosophie' ('The Right of Vitalism').

transcends the fragmented views of reality by the specialized scientific disciplines, arriving at a rational comprehension of the world-*in-toto*. As we will see in the following chapters, this totalizing comprehension comes about by means of abstract concepts (the transcendental categories) and through the relating of values to facts in acts of judgment. As a scientific enterprise philosophy, like the specialized sciences, works with concepts and theories which are detached from life and direct existential experiences. Yet, Rickert is well aware of the fact that the history of philosophy has demonstrated time and again, how great and 'classic' philosophers have been followed slavishly by multitudes of admirers, smaller minds which swear by the words of the masters, even when these words have become obsolete and have been surpassed by the ongoing development of thinking and research. The result is a stale dogmatism which correctly can be called rigid. It is a kind of deadening *scholasticism* which severely impairs the progress of philosophy.

It stands to reason that people will emerge who rebel against this rigid dogmatism and scholasticism, dealing summarily with it. Understandably, yet falsely, these people will revolt subsequently against each and any system, seeing them as the seedbeds of dry and lifeless rationalism. It is a kind of reaction which emphasizes what is conceived of as being original, elementary, natural. Allegedly, the 'original', the 'elementary', the 'natural' cannot be grasped by reason but must be 'experienced' in an irrational, intuitive manner. Such a 'naturalistic reaction' was exemplified by German romanticism (particularly in *Sturm und Drang*), but its basic tenets occur also in various currents of vitalism. Rickert then views vitalism as a basically false, yet fully understandable 'naturalistic reaction' against a rationalism which had become petrified into a dogmatic and indeed lifeless kind of intellectualism.

Bergson's complaint about the ready-made clothing and reach-me-downs of rationalistic concepts comes to mind immediately. And in all fairness, Rickert says, his intuitionist vitalism has its advantages. Those who rigidly stick to obsolete systems of thought and certainly those who believe that a mix of natural-scientific concepts can be employed in order to understand and grasp the world-*in-toto* - basing their ideas and concepts, for instance, on the physics of Newton, the biology of Darwin, or the mathematics and astronomy of Einstein⁷¹ - should be advised to read Bergson. The world is not so small and poor that it can be understood completely and exclusively by statistical calculations. Bergson, Rickert comments, has seen the other side of reality which is impervious to calculation. As no one in his day he saw the limits of natural-scientific conceptualizations.

Before him, Nietzsche exerted the same effect on his readers. With an overwhelming linguistic force (*Sprachgewalt*) he managed to communicate 'the atheoretical importance of what cannot be forged into concepts. One *feels* it directly while reading Nietzsche, without understanding it logically.'⁷² Nietzsche's enticing, Dionysian celebration of life is not philosophy yet, but it reminds us, Rickert claims, of the fact that philosophy is not a mere game of abstract concepts and theories. Indeed, although philosophical concepts and theories are necessarily estranged from life, they yet focus at the end of the day on life and try to grasp it theoretically. If this is forgotten, one ends up in a fruitless and abstract intellectualism and rationalism.

Rickert then formulates the dilemma somewhat enigmatically as follows: 'We are unable to think about what we do not somehow "live", and in philosophy we must

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

⁷² '(...) die ungeheure atheoretische Wichtigkeit dessen, was sich in keinen Begriff bringen lässt. Man *fühlt* sie bei Nietzsche unmittelbar, auch ohne dass man sie logisch versteht. *Ibid.*, p. 179.

think about all of life.’⁷³ He claims then that he too wants to develop a *Lebensphilosophie*, but he is not prepared to let it drift off into irrationalism. He wants to remain loyal to the tradition of German Idealism, in particular as it was explored by Kant.⁷⁴ He was, however, not a slavish follower of the great man from Königsberg, and forged his own brand of philosophy.

Rickert sees still another advantage in vitalism. It not only placed the concept of life but also that of value in the center of philosophical attention. Vital life, vitalists emphasized time and again, is *wertendes Leben*, evaluating life.⁷⁵ The problems of life are problems of values, as for example Nietzsche claimed when he called for an *Umwertung aller Werte*, a re-evaluation of all values. Evaluating life and re-evaluating values - these are enchanting ideas and notions. Rickert is fully aware of the attractiveness of such conceptual celebrations of life and values, but then engages immediately in a thorough and sobering disenchantment. Apart from the question whether values can be re-evaluated as values, which Rickert denies, such an exercise can never be the task of science and scientific philosophy. Human evaluations (*Wertungen*) and their adoption of positions vis-à-vis values in practical life (*Stellungnahmen*) should not be confused with values. One can influence the evaluations of people. One can, for instance, exert such an influence by substituting one value for the other. But the values themselves – truth, beauty, justice, etc. – cannot be influenced, transformed, or re-evaluated. They remain what they are: ‘Values as values cannot alter themselves. Only our taking position towards them is subjected to change.’⁷⁶ That is, beauty as general value remains unalterable, yet our artistic and aesthetic evaluations in terms of beauty (or its opposite) will be subjected to change in the course of history. Moreover, philosophy as a *Wissenschaft* is not interested in a practical evaluation of values. It only wants to grasp values *theoretically*. Therefore, a Nietzschean re-evaluation of values, if one wants to maintain that idea at all, cannot fall within its competence.

Values belong to our world as much as the value-free reality of the natural sciences does. But values are ‘real’ in quite a different sense than the objects of the natural sciences are. Rickert’s philosophy of values presents the idea of a realm made up of non-empirical, formal values, whose main characteristic is that they do not ‘exist’ in the sense of ‘being’. Values are not ‘real’, they rather are ‘valid’ or ‘invalid’.

How can these ‘unreal’ but ‘valid’ values be known theoretically? One resorts often, Rickert says, to *Verstehen* (‘understanding’) which is then opposed to description (*Beschreiben*) and explanation (*Erklären*). The concept of *Verstehen* is often blurred. To Rickert it maintains its pregnant meaning only, if it stands in relation to the sense (*Sinn*) or significance (*Bedeutung*) of objects. But an object without a connection to values, value-free reality in and of itself, is senseless and without significance, and thus inaccessible for *Verstehen*: ‘When one wants to “understand”, one may not ignore the values. Otherwise one would not know, *what* it is that one understands.’⁷⁷ We return to Rickert’s ideas about values and understanding in later chapters. At this point, we should rather focus upon his notion of the validity of

⁷³ ‘Was wir nicht irgendwie “leben”, darüber können wir auch nicht denken, und über alles Leben haben wir in der Philosophie zu denken.’ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁷⁴ For Rickert’s philosophical affinity with Kant see his *Kant als Philosoph der modernen Kultur*, (‘Kant as Philosopher of Modern Culture’), *o.c.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

⁷⁶ ‘Werte als Werte können sich nicht ändern. Nur unsere Stellungnahme zu ihnen ist dem Wandel unterworfen.’ *Ibid.*, p. 185f.

⁷⁷ ‘Wo man (daher) ‘verstehen’ will, darf man die Werte nicht ignorieren. Sonst weiss man nicht, *was* man versteht.’ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

values; that is, values are not 'real' or 'unreal', but 'valid' (*gültig*) or 'invalid' (*ungültig*).

Rickert then states rather bluntly that what merely is (*das bloss Seiende*), is neither valid, nor can it be understood.⁷⁸ Yet, we often say that a fact is valid. But that is an imprecise expression. Not the fact, but the sentence (*Satz*) that something is a fact, is valid. And the statement is only valid, if it carries a *true* meaning. Truth is, of course, a value. Thus, theoretical validity - the validity of statements about facts - is not value-free. Stronger still, truth is a value which is directed towards our interests. We adopt an evaluating stance towards truth, as will be demonstrated in more detail in the next chapter. This point was made also by the epistemology of American Pragmatism, although it went astray, when it defined a theoretical value (truth) in utilitarian terms of usefulness which, of course, is an atheoretical (practical) good. All of this shows that philosophy in general should be a philosophy that focuses its main attention upon the realm of valid or invalid values to which people in practical life refer all the time in their evaluations.

Philosophical anthropology

Rickert's book on vitalism was published in the early 1920's. It would be interesting to know, how he would have reacted to a current in German philosophy which went beyond intuitionist and biologicistic vitalism, yet ignored his critique of vitalism and by-passed his philosophy of values: the philosophical anthropology of Helmuth Plessner and Arnold Gehlen.

In one of his early essays Arnold Gehlen (1904-1976) discussed Rickert's transcendental philosophy. In another essay, published the same year (1933), he engaged in a fierce polemic against the existential philosophies of Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Jaspers in defense of traditional Idealism. But his *opus magnum* in philosophical anthropology, *Der Mensch* (1940), departed from that tradition and was based on biology.⁷⁹ He then left the German idealist tradition and claimed to profess an empirical philosophy, called philosophical anthropology.

Biology as a specialized natural science in particular was of great importance to the philosophical anthropology of Helmuth Plessner (1892-1985) and Gehlen. Each in his own way tried to design a scientific (empirical) philosophy that avoided the fatal trap of biologism as well as the equally fatal trap of metaphysics. Both were students of the biologist Hans Driesch at the University of Leipzig in the early 1920's, both became professional philosophers and sociologists during and after World War II. Max Scheler who was less averse to metaphysics, phrased the basic problem of philosophical anthropology as 'man's position in the cosmos'.⁸⁰ Plessner and Gehlen then developed their respective anthropologies in two influential books which testified to their systematic and scientific mindset. Rickert would, of course, have appreciated

⁷⁸ 'Das bloss Seiende gilt nie, ebenso wie es unverstandlich ist.' *Ibid.*, p. 187.

⁷⁹ Arnold Gehlen, 'Idealismus und Existentialphilosophie', 1933, in: Arnold Gehlen, *Philosophische Schriften I (1925-1933)*, ('Philosophical Essays, vol. I, 1925-1933'), Gesamtausgabe Band I, ('Collected Works, vol. I'), (Frankfurt a.M.: Vittorio Klostermann, pp. 383-403). See also his paper 'Heinrich Rickert und die Transzendentalphilosophie', 1933, *ibid.*, pp. 403-417. His anthropology was systematically treated in *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt*, ('Man. His Nature and Position in the World'), K.-S. Rehberg, ed., two volumes, Collected Works, vol. 3.1 and 3.2, (Frankfurt a.M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 1993).

⁸⁰ Max Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*, 1928, (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1962).

this.⁸¹ But he would not have accepted their claim that a philosophy of man would and should coincide with the sociology and psychology of human behavior and socio-cultural institutions. It meant, of course, a departure from Idealism in general and Rickert's brand of transcendental philosophy in particular. Naturally Rickert would point out that sociology and psychology as specialized scientific disciplines could never be generalized validly into a systemic philosophy that covers reality-*in-toto*, or as Scheler phrased it, the cosmos. A biologically and sociologically based philosophical anthropology, he would argue, must remain stuck in a fragmented view of the world, and cannot fulfill its promise to forge an encompassing theory about 'man's position in the world'. What kind of world and how is it to be conceptualized adequately? Rickert would ask. However, this is not the place to discuss such questions regarding philosophical anthropology in further detail, since it would need a rather detailed exposition of its theories and concepts. That would transcend the boundaries of this book.⁸²

Rickert would in all probability feel at home philosophically with Ludwig Wittgenstein's thesis 6.41 of the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, where it is stated that everything in the world is as it is, and happens as it happens, that there is *in* it no value - and if there were a value in it, it would not have value. In Wittgenstein's view of the world everything that happens, and also being-as-it-is by itself, is accidental. That which makes it non-accidental, lies outside the world. Rickert viewed the world likewise as being chaotic and in that sense accidental and irrational. Meaningful and valuable characteristics, rendering the world into a cosmos, are imputed by men from the outside through practical evaluations which necessarily draw upon the transcendent 'non-reality' of eternal values. That is admittedly a position Wittgenstein in his turn would not accept, since he thought, unlike Rickert, that nothing sensible can be said about such a transcendent reality. Practical evaluations are after all ethical statements, and these are in Wittgenstein's view senseless. 'It is clear', Wittgenstein declares in thesis 6.421, 'that ethics cannot be expressed verbally. Ethics is transcendental.'⁸³ Note the concept 'transcendental'!

Rickert would immediately want to know what Wittgenstein means by the concept 'transcendental'. He had some ideas about that. What are his ideas about transcendental philosophy, its peculiar logic and its related epistemology? This is the main subject of the next chapter.

⁸¹ Helmuth Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, ('The Stages of the Organic and Man'), 1926, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1965). Arnold Gehlen, *Der Mensch, o.c.* For an introduction to biologically founded anthropology see Marjorie Grene, *Approaches to a Philosophical Biology*, 1965, (New York-London: Basic Books, 1968). She does, however, not discuss Arnold Gehlen which is a serious omission.

⁸² I discussed Plessner and Gehlen in my *The Institutional Imperative. The Interface of Institutions and Networks*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2000). See in particular chapter 2, 'Institutions and the Transcendence of Biology', pp. 43-76. On Plessner, pp. 45-51; on Gehlen, pp. 51-63.

⁸³ 'Es ist klar, dass sich die Ethik nicht aussprechen lässt. Die Ethik ist transcendental.' Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, 1921, (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1964), p. 112.