CHAPTER THREE

THE NOTION OF CAUSALITY IN ARISTOTLE AND THE MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY OF NATURE: A DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH

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Contemporary theories of man stress the fact that human beings are characterized both by their dependency on cultural life-forms and their ability to develop new forms of culture and society. Human beings are situated in history. As biology and philosophical anthropology have told us, humans are not adapted to their natural environment as plants and animals are, and hence humans are forced to develop their behavioural and epistemological competences. The world we live in is not our natural environment but a product of our constructive capabilities. In this sense culture is a unique trait of mankind. The relevance of a theory of culture is easily consented within most contemporary social theories, but there are a vast number of different accounts explaining the concept of culture and cultural history.

In cultural anthropology, culture generally is defined as behaviour, knowledge, belief, custom, etc., insofar as it is acquired by the individual as a member of society. Culture is mainly seen as a force by which society acts upon the individual. Accordingly it is stressed that ideas, values, habits, etc. are passed on from one generation to the next. This traditional concept of culture has undergone some changes recently. Anthropologists like Clifford Geertz nowadays stress the fact that all those acquired capabilities are part of a symbolic universe that needs interpretative skills and may differ from culture to culture. But nevertheless, a remarkable number of cultural anthropologists and cultural theorists in general preserve the abovementioned—and questionable—idea of culture as a force that shapes man. Since the theoretical focus within cultural anthropology and social theory has mainly shifted from content to form, i.e., from knowledge, custom, etc. to the symbolic systems in which the former are communicated and practised, a central aspect of contemporary cultural theory is the type of explanation that is given for the acquisition and use of symbolic forms. First, there is an increasingly popular type of explanation that reveals the preservation of the traditional idea of culture: this explanation is based on an understanding of language as a self-contained system that precedes the individual, generates (unstable) meaning on its own, and is totally unsuitable

1 Cf. Uexküll and Kriszat, Streifzüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren und Menschen; Plessner, Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch.
2 Cf., e.g., Tylor, Primitive Culture; Harris, Kulturanthropologie.
3 Cf. Geertz, Dichte Beschreibung.
for the purpose of referencing the non-symbolic world. To put it concisely, in these accounts language took over the role society had in former theories as in Durkheim’s: It acts as a nearly almighty force upon the individual. At first, some aspects of this type of cultural theory seem to be convincing, e.g., the fact that newborn infants face an existing language and culture. But there is a second type of explanation, that insists on the fact that the picture remains incomplete as long as the capability of structural learning is not taken into consideration in a proper way.

The term ‘structural learning’ denotes the capability of human beings to overcome their given range of knowledge and behaviour. This is a crucial aspect of life not only for the individual, but also for societies, since before cultural patterns can be taught to the youngsters they have to be invented. By stressing the importance of learning, I do not intend to maintain that society in any sense is less important than the individual. This misunderstanding could arise if one falsely understands learning as a solipsistic process. In fact learning is always embedded in social interactions, but nevertheless processes of structural development take place nowhere else than in the individual. Basically the difference between culture-centred, respecting language-centred theories on the one hand, and theories of structural learning on the other hand, is that only the latter take into account that neither culture nor language is self-contained. Rather both result from a developmental process that may be reconstructed for one single reason: Universal prerequisites and conditions, e.g., the sensorical and motorical apparatus of human beings or the constraints of acting upon a material world, influence the course of cultural development. As for language, theories of structural learning are apt to show that symbolic systems first of all are a practical means for communication within a material world, hence the importance of referencing. Only based on the reference mechanism, the secondary function of language arises, i.e., the possibility of symbolic self-reference.

Now the decisive question is whether the course of human cultural development is random or not, and—if not—whether it can be explained systematically. With reference to cognitive development, it can be shown that certain universal circumstances of the learning process in early childhood lead to a universal sequence of developmental steps, at least in the beginning. It is important to stress that, from this universal sequence, one cannot deduce the course of the cognitive development that follows in later stages, but—since one knows the state of departure—those later stages become more intelligible. The thesis to be outlined in this paper is that a systematic theory of development supplies historical research with important means to reconstruct the history of

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4 As a few examples cf. Derrida, Die Schrift und die Differenz; Lyotard, Der Widerstreit; Haverkamp, Die Sprache der Anderen; Bachmann-Medick, Kultur als Text.

5 Cf. e.g., Mead, Mind, Self and Society; Piaget, Nachahmung, Spiel und Traum; Schütz, “Symbol, Wirklichkeit und Gesellschaft”; Dux, Historisch-genetische Theorie der Kultur. Though there are huge differences between these theories, all of them describe language as resulting from referential actions within a material world.