

# The (social) construction of the world – at the crossroads of Christianity and Humanism

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## Abstract

In early modern philosophy the motive of *logical creation* emerged in reaction to the Greek-Medieval legacy of a *realistic metaphysics*. The dominant *nominalistic* trends of thought since Thomas Hobbes and Immanuel Kant explored its *rationalistic* implications. The latter drew the radical (humanistic) conclusion that the laws of nature are present in human thought *a priori* (i.e. before all experience). The irrationalistic side of nominalism emphasized the uniqueness and individuality of events – thus leading to the historicism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the subsequent linguistic turn. Kant influenced Husserl who, in turn, provided the point of departure for the ideas of Schutz, Berger and Luckmann – compare the joint work of Berger and Luckmann: *Social construction of reality* (1967). The contemporary “postmodern” idea that we create the world in which we live (either through thought, through language or through social practices) merely continues core elements of (*early*) modern philosophy.

The underlying idea of autonomy highlights the difference between modern Humanism and a Christian view of reality, for in the latter human subjectivity is appreciated as being correlated with universal and constant principles that can only assume a positive shape through human activities of positivization (form-giving). The autonomy ideal of modern Humanism reifies the typical human freedom to positivize underlying principles. At the same time this reification on the one hand collapses the distinction between conditions and being conditioned and on the other it does not provide a basis for supra-individual standards of behaviour.

## The Greek-Medieval background

Greek philosophy already had contemplated the idea of a cosmic world-order. Heraclitus in fact (dialectically) opposed *logos* (meant as *nomos*) and *phusis* and identified them. Heraclitus advances such a dialectical view when he holds that the dynamic (fluid) fire is responsible for the world order.<sup>1</sup> This dialectical identification of *logos* (*nomos*) and *phusis* was later adopted by the Stoa, and via this route it also influenced the *logos* speculation of Christian thinkers into the fourth century. Amongst the Stoa it was Zeno from Cyprus (336-264 B.C.) who transformed this legacy into the idea of

<sup>1</sup> Cf. B Fr.64: that “fire, endowed with reason, is the cause of the entire ordering of the world.”

*natural law*. For Cicero positive law was understood in terms of fixed legal principles derived from an ethical world-order, where the latter also received the designation *lex naturale*.

Of course Plato also wrestled with the problem of the changing nature of the world of the senses, precluding any positive knowledge. To secure such knowledge he postulated something *lasting* and referred to it as the *essential being* of things, but elevated it to his supra-sensory domain of eternal, static *eidè* (ontic forms). While Plato understood these forms as an order for sensory things, Aristotle rejected their transcendence and saw them as immanent in things, as their universal substantial forms – thus switching from the *order for* to the *orderliness of* things.

Medieval realistic metaphysics subsequently accepted a threefold existence of *universals*: *universalia ante rem* in God's mind (Plato's ideas), *universalia in re* in things (Aristotle's universal substantial forms) and *universalia post rem* as universal concepts (within the human mind). The late-medieval nominalistic movement (John the Scott and William of Ockham) rejected universality *outside* the human mind.

#### **The transition to modern philosophy – the tension between science ideal and personality ideal<sup>2</sup>**

Particularly Ockham opened up an avenue for an arbitrary creativity, by means of which the human intellect can acquire *control* over the surrounding world. Beck correctly points out that modernity caused a transformation in the understanding of human rationality. Human reason no longer accepts, but rather logically controls nature as an object in service of the human spirit with its self-determination and self-understanding as pure subject, directed at the own experience of its power and freedom (Beck, 1999:3). Instead of looking at the world from the perspective of a pre-ordained hierarchical order of being, with God as the highest being, the nominalistic attitude stripped reality (outside the human mind) of any and all forms of order-determination and of its entire orderliness. Ockham postulated a *potestas Dei absoluta*, a *despotic divine arbitrariness* that led to a process of secularization in which the human personality was enthroned. In order to establish what is arbitrary a yardstick (norm) is required, on the one hand showing that arbitrariness is antinormative subjectivity which is opposed to norm-conforming subjectivity and on the other that subjection to law is a feature of *creatureliness*.<sup>3</sup> It opened up a new domain of exploration that manifested itself in the Renaissance urge towards the rational control and mastery of the world – which soon found a powerful ally in the rise of modern *natural science* (the mathematics and physics of Descartes, Galileo and Newton).

Hobbes, who was acquainted with the thought of Galileo, formulated a thought-experiment in which a new motive surfaced, namely that of *logical creation*. In his hypo-

2 An encompassing and penetrating analysis of the roots of Western culture is found in Dooyeweerd 2003. In our argumentation we take Christianity in the broad reformational sense of an all-encompassing world and life view and not merely as some or other theological position. The history of theology demonstrates something confirmed by the history of all the other academic disciplines, namely that every special science proceeds from a philosophical view of reality. Therefore, in this article, we are considering the implications of a Christian world view and a Humanistic world view for a philosophical account of reality.

3 It entails that nominalism secularized the idea of God as Law-giver for the divine is now found in autonomous humanity. Later on Bodin's understanding of sovereign power as "summa ... legibusque soluta potestas" reminds us of the view of Occam regarding the supposed absolute, despotic arbitrariness of God (*potestas Dei absoluta*). Mayer-Tasch characterizes this position of Bodin as a choice for the "classical formula of juridical-political absolutism" (Bodin, 1981:35)

thetical break-down of reality into chaos Hobbes employed the concept “moving body” in order to reconstruct a new (rational) world-order. This rational construction proceeded from the assumed simplest elements or atoms – further explored by (hypothetical) social contract theories, directed at individuals as the atoms of society.

The new modern motive was to proclaim the *autonomous freedom* of the human person. The mathematical natural sciences provided the instrument required to enthrone this new personality ideal.<sup>4</sup> However, it at once harboured a threat to its master, for if reality is fully determined by natural laws there is no room left for human freedom and autonomy.<sup>5</sup> Rousseau was the first thinker who critically returned to the true root of the modern natural science ideal by pointing out that human freedom cannot be explained in a mechanical way:

Nature commands every animal, and the brute obeys. The human being experiences the same impulse, but recognizes the freedom to acquiesce or to resist; and particularly in the awareness of this freedom the spirituality of humankind manifests itself. ... but in the capacity to will, or much rather to choose, and the experience of this power, one encounters nothing but purely spiritual acts which are totally inexplicable through mechanical laws (Rousseau, 1975:47).

After Rousseau the personality ideal summoned the genius of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) to safe-guard human freedom. He did that by restricting the scope of the natural science ideal to the domain of sensory phenomena (the categories of thought are only applicable to these phenomena), in order to leave open the domain of practical ethical freedom. The epistemological distinction used to accomplish this is that between *appearances* and *thing-in-itself* – where the former is subjected to natural necessity and the latter (such as the free will of the soul) is not subjected to it.<sup>6</sup>

The distinction between appearances and things in themselves runs parallel with that between what is *unknowable* but still *thinkable*. Kant explains that although we can “*think* the same objects as things in themselves” we still “cannot know them” (Kant, 1787-B:xxvi). Everything that we can theoretically *know* is restricted (*eingeschränkt*) to mere phenomena (Kant, 1787-B:xxix).

### **The rationalistic-constructive element present in modern nominalism**

The fact that Immanuel Kant explored the rationalistic implications of modern nominalism is best seen from his peculiar account of human understanding.<sup>7</sup> Even before him early modern philosophy started to elevate human reason to become the law-giver of the world – just recall what has been said about the motive of logical creation above (in connection with Hobbes). Kant was particularly impressed by Galileo’s ability to

4 Georg Simmel (1858-1918), who viewed himself primarily as a philosopher but in fact, alongside Weber (1864-1920) and Durkheim (1858-1917), is seen as one of the founders of the discipline of sociology, already spoke of (a person’s own) *personality ideal* (see Lotter, 2000:188).

5 Keep in mind that nominalism, as a *theoretical stance* in respect of our understanding of reality, ought to be distinguished from the direction-giving ground motive of nature and freedom (science ideal and personality ideal).

6 Kant holds that “there is no contradiction in supposing that one and the same will is, in the appearance, that is, in its visible acts, [as] necessarily subject to the laws of nature, and so far *not free*, while yet, as belonging to a thing in itself, it is not subject to that law, and is therefore *free*” (Kant, 1787-B: xxvii-xxviii).

7 To our mind rationalism is an over-estimation of *universal conceptual knowledge*, whereas irrationalism emphasizes what is unique and individual. (Concepts are always dependent upon the identification of universal features or traits – they are therefore ‘blind’ the what is unique and individual.)

derive the law of inertia from a thought-experiment – concerning a body in motion that will continue its motion endlessly if the path is extended into infinity. He drew the radical conclusion: if, from the spontaneous subjectivity of human thought, one can derive the law of inertia and apply it to the moving ‘objects’ in nature, then the laws of nature must be present in human thought *a priori* (i.e. before all experience). Therefore Kant explicitly states: “Understanding creates its laws (a priori) not out of nature, but prescribes them to nature” (Kant, 1783, II:320; § 36). At this point, however, a serious problem emerged, namely how to connect individual subjectivity to universal validity:

There arises therefore here a difficulty, which we did not meet with in the field of sensibility, namely, how subjective conditions of thought can have objective validity, that is, become conditions of the possibility of the knowledge of objects (Kant, 1787:122).<sup>8</sup>

Since the idea of the autonomous construction of reality initially blossomed within an atomistic (or: individualistic) view we pause for a moment by highlighting the transition from a rationalistic atomism to an irrationalistic holism, for in the latter social entities are seen as the *collective* source of an autonomous construction of reality.

#### **From Enlightenment individualism to post-Kantian idealism**

The modern idea of human autonomy combines two elements: *autos* and *nomos* (the *subject* or *self* and the *law*). The transition from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mediated by early Romanticism, revealed this ambiguity in a striking way. The Enlightenment was both atomistic (individualistic) and rationalistic. Early Romanticism switched to an emphasis on the self (*autos*) entailing that law loses its universal scope and merely reflects the unique individuality of an autonomous person.<sup>9</sup> Initially this *irrationalism* continued to be atomistic. It was only after the anarchistic consequences of the individualistic irrationalism was contemplated that post-Kantian freedom idealism (Schelling, Hegel and Fichte) attempted to bind all individuals by absorbing them within a larger, encompassing *societal whole*. This move from atomism to holism did not change the irrationalistic orientation, for according to this new irrationalistic holism each supra-individual “folk” community, with its own *national spirit* (*Volksgeist*), remains strictly its own law – in a typical irrationalist fashion.<sup>10</sup> According to the irrationalistic conception of Romanticism every people contains within itself its own model (original example). In his *Fragments on German Literature* Herder writes: “The peoples of Germany who did not corrupt their noble character through mixing with other peoples are unique, true and original nations which are their own original images” (Kluckhohn, 1934:21).<sup>11</sup>

8 Clouser aptly captures the impasse of this subjectivist stance: “Unless there were already laws governing the mind that were not its creations, what would explain the uniformity of the ways the mind imposes laws on experience” (Clouser, 2005:368).

9 It advanced the idea that a genius like Napoleon cannot be judged by universal standards for his own unique individuality ought to be the sole yardstick (see Dooyeweerd, 2003:178 ff.).

10 This orientation is reflected in an Afrikaans song in which it is claimed that each “volk” is its own law.

11 This new emphasis accomplished the additional switch from atomism to holism – as it was anticipated by Rousseau in his view of the *general will*: “Every one of us places collectively his/her person and all his/her power under the final guidance of the general will (*volonté générale*), and we receive each member as an inseparable part of the whole” (Rousseau, 1975:244).

The above-mentioned transition from an individualistic rationalism to a holistic irrationalism was accompanied by the rise of modern *historicism*.<sup>12</sup> Historicism considers reality to be inherently changeful and irrepeatable. Meinecke reacted against the spirit of the time (prevailing during the second half of the nineteenth century) – which was dominated by the view that the “universe was caught up in the firm connection of a mechanical causality” (see Hinrichs, 1965:x). In his work on the “reason/necessity of state” (‘Staatsräson’) his indebtedness to the dialectical ground motive of *nature* and *freedom* is explicit.<sup>13</sup>

### The contribution of Edmund Husserl to the idea of construction

The intellectual development of Husserl went through a development imitating the preceding history of Western philosophy.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, under the influence of Kant, Husserl contributed to the modern idea of the (social) construction of reality. In his work on the philosophy of arithmetic (1891) Husserl struggled with the nature of the infinite. He envisaged the ideal to develop a *finite* arithmetic and even contemplated a second Volume of his *Philosophy of Arithmetic*. However, the effect of his earlier move to Halle in 1886 is clearly seen in his Platonistic orientation embodied in his Work: *Logische Untersuchungen* (1900-1901 – two Volumes) [LU – Logical Investigations].

In LU he accepts a world-in-itself with “ideal objects” which is independent of human consciousness. Whereas he oftentimes uses the word “Idea” in LU, he later on preferably employs the terms Form (*Eidos*) and Essence (*Wesen*). In LU the universally valid *essences* are independent of the flowing psychical acts which, through an inner evidence, acquire a direct grip on them (LU, I:190). *Evidence* here constitutes for Husserl the experience of truth (LU, I:230). Truth in itself is the correlate of being in itself (LU, I:229). In general one can therefore say that the all-pervasive presupposition of LU is given in the acceptance of a world-in-itself with “ideal objects” which is independent of human consciousness. In his authoritative work on the development of Husserl we find that De Boer characterizes this position as *realistic* (De Boer, 1966:315). Picker relates it directly to Husserl’s mathematical studies (Picker, 1961: 289).

During the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Husserl went through a crises causing him to study Kant in depth. The outcome of the crisis through which Husserl struggled during this period appeared in his first article in the newly established philosophical journal *Logos* (1910), under the title: *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft (Philosophy as an exact Science)*. Although Husserl did not support the classical modern ideal of a *mathesis universalis* (i.e. a *mathematical science-ideal*), he did remark later on (at his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday anniversary) that he wanted to do for philosophy what Weierstrass achieved for mathematics.

12 The name of Friedrich Meinecke is closely connected to an understanding of the rise of historicism, since he dedicated an encompassing work to this theme (see Meinecke, 1965).

13 “Nature and spirit, law-conformative causality and creative spontaneity are these poles, which as such are sharply and apparently irreconcilably opposed. But historical life, situated between them, is always simultaneously determined by both, even though not with an equal force” (Meinecke, 1957:10).

14 In 1887 Husserl started his academic career as “private lecturer” in Halle. He was professor in Göttingen from 1901 until 1916 and he taught from 1916 until 1928 in Freiburg (Breisgau), where he died on April 27 1938.

The so-called *transcendental idealism* of Husserl introduced both an *eidetic reduction* and a *philosophical reduction*.<sup>15</sup> The natural attitude, that considers consciousness as a layer of reality, is bracketed through the transcendental reduction – which is a matter of our “complete freedom” (Husserl, 1913-I:65). The philosophical *epochè* is also constituted by the maxim that we withhold ourselves from all judgments regarding the contents of all given philosophies (Husserl, 1913-I:40-41).

When Husserl explains that in “the change of the epochè nothing is lost” (Husserl, 1954:179) he simply intends to say that the transcendental reduction does not eliminate the existing world but simply sets aside a specific *natural interpretation* of it. In opposition to *LU* – which still accepts the world in a platonistic sense as presupposition – the transcendental reduction reveals that *consciousness itself is the sole true ground of the world*: the reality of the entire world merely exists as the correlate of the *intentional consciousness*. In other words, matter does not serve as the foundation for consciousness because the reverse is the case: “Reality, both the reality of things taken separately and the reality of the universe essentially lack independence. It is not something absolute which in a secondary sense is connected to something else, for in an absolute sense it is precisely nothing, it does not have an *absolute essence*. It displays the nature of something that in principle *merely* (emphasis from Husserl!) exists intentionally, merely conscious, that is to say, it can only be represented and realized in possible appearances” (Husserl, 1913-I:118).

In all of this Husserl now closely approximates the *transcendental constituting (constructive) motive* of Kant (understanding as formal law-giver of nature). Husserl accounts for the *transcendental motive* in his thought as follows:

It is the motive of investigating the final source of all knowledge acquisition, the reflection of the knowing person upon itself and its knowing life ... Worked out radically, it is the motive of a philosophy based purely in this source. Therefore it is a universal philosophy with an ultimate foundation.<sup>16</sup>

Although the term *transcendental* highlights an element of similarity with Kant, the difference flows from their respective views of what *idealism* means. As a “systematic unveiling of the constituting intentionality”, philosophy as transcendental idealism does not leave open, in the Kantian sense of a limiting concept (*Grenzbegriff*), a world of “things-in-themselves” (Husserl, 1913-I:118-119).

The final justification of knowledge reveals that Husserl ultimately took refuge to an extreme epistemic *intuitionism*. The guiding norm for phenomenology is: “Accept nothing but that which we can master with insight as it is essentially presented within pure consciousness” (Husserl, 1913-I:142). The transcendental phenomenology of Husserl is therefore explicitly *intuitionistic*: what is directly given in our intuition is the final source of all knowledge and within those limits no theory can dethrone it (see Husserl, 1913-I:52)!

The crisis which Husserl discerns in respect of Europe and the disciplines is merely rooted in what he calls a *misguided rationalism* (an “*verirrrenden Rationalismus*”) (Husserl, 1954:337). In opposition to such a misguided rationalism Husserl posits the unlimited possibilities of the *intuitionistic, phenomenological reason*. However his

<sup>15</sup> This transcendental reduction is also designated as the phenomenological reduction (*epochè*) (see Husserl, 1954:153).

<sup>16</sup> Husserl, 1954:10; see Husserl, 1962:298 where he characterizes complete phenomenology as “universal philosophy.”

trust in the latter is fundamentally threatened by the increasing influence of naturalism and objectivism as well as the irrationalism of Husserl's own student, Heidegger (*Sein und Zeit / Being and Time*). Husserl experiences it with a sense of hopelessness – as the crisis of Europe and the academic disciplines. He realized that his intuitionistic, phenomenological science ideal was overruled by an irrationalistic freedom ideal. He writes:

In order to comprehend what is wrong in the present crisis the concept Europe once again has to be viewed by means of the historical directedness towards the infinite aims of reason; it must be demonstrated how the European world was borne from reason-ideas, that is, out of the spirit of philosophy. The crisis will then clearly emerge as the apparent failure of rationalism. The basis of this failure of a rational culture, however, ... is not inherent to rationalism, since it is only found in its externalization, in its decay into *naturalism* and *objectivism*. The crisis of European existence provides only two options: the decline of Europe in the alienation from its own rational existential meaning, the decay into an animosity towards the spiritual and a lapse into barbarism, *or* the rebirth of European existence through the spirit of philosophy, particularly through a heroism of reason that will consistently triumph over naturalism (Husserl, 1954:347-348).

Yet, he did not succeed in containing the growing crisis which he experienced. For that matter, his phenomenology – in the hands of Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty – was turned into its opposite governed by an irrationalistic and existentialistic *freedom motive*, which derives its motivating power not from an intuitionistic *science-ideal* but from the ideal of an *autonomously free personality*.<sup>17</sup> This development ruined his dream of philosophy as an irrefutable, apodictically certain science:

Philosophy as science, a serious, exact, yes apodictic exact science – *der Traum ist ausgeträumt* (Krisis, 1954:508 – “the dream has been dreamt” / “the dream failed”).

From the perspective of our theme it is clear that the idea of the *construction* of reality is equally at home within a rationalistic and within an irrationalistic context – because its ultimate theoretical basis is found in nominalism and we have argued that nominalism has a hybrid nature – being rationalistic and irrationalistic at once!

### **Applying underlying principles or obeying the law that we have prescribed to ourselves?<sup>18</sup>**

Notwithstanding the differences between Kant and Husserl they shared a belief in the *constructive powers* of human consciousness. The motive of *logical creation* (with its

<sup>17</sup> Jaspers articulates the dialectic between nature and freedom as follows: “Because freedom is only through and against nature, it must fail as freedom or being there. Freedom is only when nature is” [“Da Freiheit nur durch und gegen Natur ist, muß sie als Freiheit oder als Dasein scheitern. Freiheit ist nur, wenn Natur ist”] (Jaspers, 1948:871).] Wittgenstein states in his Notebooks that that upon which we are dependent can be called God – and then he adds: “There are two god-heads: the world and my independent I” Es gibt zwei Gottheiten: die Welt und mein unabhängiges Ich” (Wittgenstein, 1979, 74,15). These two god-heads represent the two poles of the basic motive of *nature* and *freedom*.

<sup>18</sup> In his *Contrat Social* Rousseau articulates the modern autonomy ideal as follows: “freedom is obedience to a law which we prescribe to ourselves” (Rousseau, 1975:247). In view of his trans-individual idea of the *general will* we discern already in his thought a supra-individual conception of social construction (autonomy).

jump from the individual to universal-validity) paved the way for the subsequent idea of the *social construction of reality*. Within modern sociology, the irrationalistic side of nominalism is mainly continued within the sociology of knowledge.<sup>19</sup> Clearly, both the *rationalistic* and *irrationalistic* sides of nominalism contributed to this idea of the “social construction of reality.”

We have seen that the atomistic rationalism of the Enlightenment developed into the irrationalistic holism of post-Kantian freedom idealism. This switch already embodied the shift from *individual autonomy* to *collective autonomy*. Although the constructive element in the thought of Husserl is closely connected to the former (individual autonomy), the influence of Husserl’s thought upon Heinrich Schutz, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann embodies the latter. These thinkers explored the idea of the *social construction of reality* – a supra-individual endeavour.<sup>20</sup>

Just consider the title of the significant work of Luckmann and Berger in this regard: *The social construction of reality; a treatise in the sociology of knowledge* (Luckmann & Berger, 1967). The seminal ideas providing the starting-point for this development are found in the work of a student of Husserl, Heinrich Schutz. See in particular his book: *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt (The meaningful construction of the social world* – Schutz, 1974).<sup>21</sup>

The distinction between the individual social subject (the function of an individual person within the social aspect of reality)<sup>22</sup> and a collective social subject (social collectivities according to their function within the social aspect)<sup>23</sup> is related to another distinction that is closely related to this one. What I have in mind is the distinction between modal (aspectual) principles and typical principles (*modal laws* and *type laws*). However, before we can explain this distinction we first have to investigate the difference between a view in which underlying principles is accepted and a view in which human society is considered to be the product of human construction.

The latter position presents social reality as being *constructed* or *constituted* through the *acts of meaning-giving social subjects*. However, in all such theoretical designs the problem already clearly formulated by Kant constantly surfaces: are there universal principles underlying the “construction” of the (social) world or do we have to make the jump from individual or collective subjectivity to the universality of societal principles? It is particularly the irrationalistic side of nominalism that elevates subjectivity to the level of autonomous normativity.

Most modern sociological trends in some or other way are related to this irrationalistic side of nominalism. In this legacy the biblical creation motive that acquired

19 Of course the ultimate consequences of historicism in this regard are found in the thought of Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge and the extreme position taken by the more recent Edinburgh school – Bloor and others.

20 In passing we have to note that *existential phenomenology* transformed Husserl’s rationalism into an *irrationalistic* perspective.

21 Consequently, the contemporary “postmodern” idea that we create the world we live in (either through thought or through language) merely continues core elements of (*early*) modern philosophy!

22 Human beings cannot be fully characterized merely in terms of one aspect of reality. Such an idea is found in claims that the human being is a *rational-moral* being, a *social* being, an economic being (*homo economicus*), a symbolic being (*homo symbolicus*), and so on. Human beings function in all these aspects without being fully absorbed by any one of them. Moreover, every individual human being can assume a multiplicity of social roles within a differentiated society without ever being exhausted by any one of these social roles.

23 Such a social subject has a *social subject function* within the social aspect (such as the social aspect of a state, a business enterprise, a social club, schools, universities, families and church denominations).

within the reformational tradition an appreciation, regarding the foundational God-given *order for (law for)* created reality, is consistently disregarded. Even when certain regularities (irregularities) are acknowledged, they are connected with the ‘creative power’ of human thought or with the social power to construct a meaningful reality.

By contrast a Christian idea of God’s law (creational order) proceeds from a view on the correlation between (modal and typical) principles and individuals and social collectivities subject to these principles. However, principles are not valid *per se* for they depend on the shaping and form-giving activities of human subjects through which they are *applied, positivized*. The modern idea of *autonomy* as well as the idea of the *social construction of the world* ultimately reify the human freedom to *positivize*, while at the same time denying the existence of universal and constant principles underlying every human act of shaping and form-giving (positivization).

In spite of the fact that Giddens injects, with “structuration in its radical sense,” a “profoundly non-positive, or, if one prefers, ‘transcendental’ dimension,” into social theory, he still continues key elements of nominalism in his thought, for example when he says that there can no longer be a theory of the ‘state’, but only a theory of ‘states’ (Giddens, 1982:224). He wrestled with these issues in his own way when he introduced his theory of *structuration* in order to emphasize the *actuality* of temporal societal processes through which societal structures are produced and reproduced. According to him a “double hermeneutic” is implied in all forms of sociological theorizing because the scholar is participant and analyst at once (see Calhoun *et.al.*, 2002:222). The acknowledgement of the “subject-dependency” of societal structures<sup>24</sup> explains why Giddens prefers to speak of ‘structuration’ in stead of merely speaking of ‘structure’.

The idea of ontic normativity, i.e., the acknowledgement of underlying principles that are not the *result* or *product* of human action but its *very condition*, entails the above-mentioned distinction between a *principle* and its *application* (giving it a positive form, positivizing it). Also Habermas explicitly uses this term, for example where he speaks about “the positivization of law” (Habermas, 1996:71).<sup>25</sup> Within all the normative aspects of reality, such as the logical-analytical (logic), the cultural-historical, the sign mode, the economic function, and so on, we find guiding principles. In addition we have to acknowledge the typical structural principles for the various kinds of societal entities. A more detailed analysis of these typical principles of societal entities, such as the state, marriage, the nuclear family, organized faith communities and coordinational relation) is found in Dooyeweerd 1997 (III:157-693).

Although this distinction between a principle and its application is well-known it is very important. Consider the social principle of *showing respect*. This principle is *universal* in the sense that there is no single human society in which one does not encounter some or other form of *showing respect*. At the same time it is also *constant*.<sup>26</sup> But principles are not valid *per se* (in force), for they need the intervention of human be-

<sup>24</sup> This idea implicitly refers to what below will be highlighted as the mediating role of human activity in giving shape to principles, in positivizing them.

<sup>25</sup> Compare Habermas, 1998:101 where he discusses “die Positivierung des Rechts” [“the positivization of law”].

<sup>26</sup> Hart gives a lucid explanation: “In certain cultures men may express respect by taking off their hat to each other. Let’s say that after some time people no longer actually raised the hat all the way, but just lifted it slightly. Still later we see people just touching the hat. In the end all that remains is raising the

ings to make them valid, to enforce them (see also Derrida, 2002:233 ff.). Therefore, one may describe a principle as a

*universal, constant, starting-point for human action that can only be made valid (en-forced) by a competent organ with an accountable (free) will, capable of giving a positive shape to such a starting-point in varying historical circumstances, in the light of an appropriate interpretation of the relevant circumstances and resulting in a norm-conformative or antinormative positivization of the underlying principle.*

The reification of the human freedom to *positivize* at the cost of acknowledging the existence of universal and constant principles underlying every human act of shaping and form-giving (positivization) hinges on the ambivalent nature of modern nominalism. Outside the human mind it rejects all universality – universality is only immanent to the human consciousness, either as universal concepts or as universal words. What is found outside the human mind are things and events in their unique contingency and individuality.

In all of this we merely discern the ultimate consequences of the way in which early modern nominalism uprooted the Christian view on God's Law-Word as an *order for* creatures subject to it, as well as the *orderliness of* creatures, i.e. the way in which they show through their law-conformity that they conform to the universal law for their existence. The conditions for (law for) whatever is subjected to them do not coincide with these subjects. The latter, in their lawfulness, in a universal way, show that they conform to these conditions.<sup>27</sup>

Within the domain of typically human endeavours the issue at stake is the status of those universal and constant starting-points for human action, principles, that in the first place make possible all human acts of shaping, form-giving and construction. Traditional conceptions of natural law believed that, founded in human reason, there exists a system of law that has an a priori validity for all times and places. By the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the historical school of law, founded by Von Savigny, radically rejected this idea of (an a-historical) system of universally valid law by claiming that all law emerged as the product of *historical* development (see Von Savigny, 1948).

Alternatively a Christian perspective does acknowledge universal constant principles, but points out that these principles can only be made valid (enforced) through human intervention, i.e., through typical human (free and accountable) acts of positivization. This entails that one does not have to concede that the "social world" is solely the product of (collective) *human construction*. Whatever human beings *construct* is always a response to given (modal and typical) principles. The theme of "social construction" actually elevates the human ability to give positive form to underlying principles to the level of being the constructing origin of social reality. Ultimately reifying the human freedom to positivize on the one hand collapses the distinction between conditions and being conditioned and on the other it does not provide a basis for

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hand. We can distinguish between a principle (i.e. expressing respect) and actual patterns of behaviour (i.e. various actions with the arm relating to headgear). ... In spite of all that varies, something 'in principle' remains invariant through all this historical development" (Hart, 1984:59). Three pages further he explicitly rejects the extremes of *conservatism* and *chaos*: "Either only lifting one's hat all the way counts as greeting, or anything I choose is greeting. The recognition of 'greeting in principle' makes it possible to avoid both conservatism and chaos."

27 The conditions for *being green* are not green themselves.

supra-individual standards of behaviour.<sup>28</sup>

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28 Am I merely “norming” my own (strictly individual) activities? If individuals produce their own unique norms will they ever be able to agree or to reach consensus? Are we not, by contrast, all bound by supra-individual and non-arbitrary standards for human behaviour in the first place (of course we may differ in our understanding of such principles? Yet, as soon as this is conceded, the initial idea of autonomy is seriously threatened, for now we have implicitly accepted given norms to which human beings are subjected in their endeavours.

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