Introduktion

What is a human being? One answer could be to say that man is a conscious, thinking, intentionally acting, reasoning moral agent. But what if the answer would be put in another way instead? For instance like this: To be a human being is to quarrel with one’s sibling over a toy, to be afraid of the dark, to be born with a mental handicap, loving to be tickled, to play with your friend, to tease, to need help with tying one’s shoes, to loose one’s temper on the kids in the mornings and to apologize later on, to get annoyed by your neighbor who sends you irritated text messages in the mornings because the kids wake him up, to sit and drink coffee with a friend, to read the newspaper, to see a movie, to worry about your parent’s health problems.

The thought that we are thinking beings is connected with several patterns. One such pattern is that human life is portrayed as if a single individual being was the best model for human life. That is, consciousness is thought of in a manner where a single human being is conscious of the outer world of objects. The human being’s awareness of objects is thus considered as more primary than her being with other people. This again easily makes us think that if we are to reflect on the character of human understanding we ought to think of it from an individualistic first person perspective. Another pattern is that understanding and knowledge are considered as basically epistemological concepts concerning my ability to reflect on the world and my ability to gain information about the world in a sense where my taking part in a life with others is not considered as important for what this understanding and knowledge means. But the image of human understanding as a matter of reflection is also mixed with an old philosophical tradition of considering mathematical reasoning as an example of an ideal form of understanding. Thus thinking as a matter of logical reasoning according to absolute principles is easily thought of as a good picture of true understanding. And also here this ability to reason is considered as an individual capacity to reflect on “the world”, it is not
considered as gaining meaning through our relation with others. These are, I think, some central patterns in how the thought that human beings are thinking beings forms philosophical perspectives. Surely there are also other patterns, but these three are central in my papers.

One central aim in this dissertation is to try to bring forth the importance of reflecting on human life as a shared life. The reason I think this is important is because I believe that by doing so one is able to see how the above picture of man as a thinking being contains many flaws. Perhaps the basic point could be described by saying that there is a deep tendency in philosophy to intellectualize human life which is connected with another deep tendency of ignoring how our lives are entwined in each other and how the concept of understanding gets its meaning through the various forms our shared life takes.

Let us once again take a look at some of the examples in the beginning. One thing that the examples ought to show is how understanding takes various interpersonal forms. For instance, there is an ease by which siblings quarrel that is expressive of them standing so close to each other. What it means for them to understand and misunderstand each other, to explain and give excuses, cannot be separated from their manner of sharing a daily life for years. The other example with being afraid of the dark is again something very ordinary while it also could be described as “irrational”. But we do not generally say to a child simply that he is being irrational when he is afraid of the dark. On the contrary most people would try to comfort the child in various ways; by reading a story, by leaving the light on, by letting him sleep in the parent’s bed etc. But from a perspective where there is rational and not rational reasoning no such room of considerateness gets any place as being an expression of understanding. If it would be a grown up we would perhaps say he is being irrational but it is also important then that this is a way of telling him not to be a coward. The example of getting irritated by one’s neighbour’s text messages is connected with another feature; the reason the text messages are so irritating is that the neighbor could talk instead of sending text messages. Facing another when talking is connected with honesty and respect. In this sense our talking with each other or refraining from talking is central when it comes to what we mean by a person understanding or not understanding something. But from the epistemological perspective understanding is something that takes place in my mind, and something where talking has simply the role of information exchange. I will not now discuss the rest of the
examples I mentioned in the beginning, but they are all in some sense a contrast to the classical picture of man as an individual thinking being.

However, there is also another trend that is problematic, namely how philosophy has been formed by the strong influence of medical science in the Western world, and this resulting in a dualistic perspective on human beings. This has on the one hand affected how the human body is discussed in philosophy. The body has since the renaissance period and the birth of modern medical science largely been thought of as an anatomical body with certain functions; an impression that René Descartes was strongly influenced by. The human body has become a body we cut into small pieces and study bit by bit. The human being as the thinking being has instead then become the “mind”, an invisible function in our heads. And in a somewhat resembling manner as the body can be studied in pieces laid on a white sheet on a clean table, the mind has come to be considered as something we can study in a piecemeal fashion; a perspective that in many modern philosophical and psychological theories has become more and more outspoken and that shows both in the use of scientistic vocabulary as well as in a predilection for making psychological experiments.

My aim is, however, not only to criticize the on the one hand intellectualistic-individualistic and on the other hand scientistic-dualistic approach to human life, but also to try to show how these patterns of thinking gain their credibility through there being parts of human life that seem to work as proof for certain theories. That is, there are sometimes traits in human life that can tempt us to think in certain philosophical directions. Our inclinations to see certain patterns in human life and our tendency not to see other patterns are then often expressive of our being appealed by some pattern of thinking. Our being entangled in certain old philosophical patterns of thinking makes us consider some sides in human life as especially intriguing fields of research. But at the same time there are also in philosophy sides that are usually not given any attention. For instance, philosophers generally lack an interest in questions concerning child development. This implies something about what is considered as “serious” “philosophical” questions. Every once in a while philosophers refer shortly to children, generally in order to point out that they are not rational, not self conscious and not persons, or to point out that they are born into a solipsistic state of unawareness. But more thorough reflections on child development belongs usually to the field of psychology and pedagogy. However, even if there is a much greater interest for questions regarding child
development in psychology, also psychology is influenced by similar patterns of thinking as philosophy is. One such pattern is to consider children as examples of the individualistic first person perspective being the ontological starting point for all consciousness. This picture of the new born child’s life is not difficult to feel an attraction towards. Another strong tendency is to think that children are born with a dualistic mind-body conception of others. However, there are of course also philosophers and psychologists who do not follow the intellectualistic-individualistic-scientistic trends when reflecting on children, such as for instance Lev Vygotsky, David Hamlyn but also others, including my colleague Birgit Schaffar.

While child development is considered as not being an important philosophical field, there are however certain “favorite” psychological disorders that philosophers like to reflect on. Autism is one such favorite case and Schizophrenia is another. Autism is often taken as an example of what it means not to be aware of other minds. Schizophrenia is again an attractive field among philosophers who are interested in logics or solipsism. I only discuss autism in this dissertation since Tove Österman has written an excellent critical paper on philosophical discussions of Schizophrenia. One might wonder why philosophers like to refer to autism and schizophrenia but one reason is, I think, that these disorders are so distant to most of us that they become good contrasts in theories about human understanding. They appear also more exotically strange and thus more attractive philosophically than for instance children do. Another reason, which is an outcome of the first, is that these disorders are thought of as highly intellectual disorders and therefore appealing to philosophers, which again children do not appear. There is the impression of Schizophrenia as the disease of those who think too much. And autism is portrayed as the inability to be aware of others while being extremely intelligent. However, at the same time I do also think there are features in autism that makes philosophers take autism as being a clear example of an inability to understand other minds, and thus the tendency to find autism interesting is not only expressive of a distanced attraction to exotic disorders.

Another aim in these papers is to try to show that the basically same kind of philosophical confusion takes different forms in different contexts. This also means that when we try to sort out one specific philosophical entanglement we also come to say something about this specific side in human life. But it can still be as difficult to try to understand why the resembling philosophical confusion arises in another context. I think that in order to understand the nature
of a philosophical entanglement you must try to look at how the form of problems and temptations to think in certain directions arise in the specific context that the philosophical theories are concerned with. Philosophers are often caught in confusions that are not originally philosophical confusions but that can be expressive of there being something difficult to grasp in certain sides of human life. But the confusions can also be expressive of how we can be entangled in certain popularized attitudes. A central aspect I try to point at is then the blurry relation between philosophy and empirical research.

Here follows summaries of the chapters:

1st chapter
In this chapter called “The original state and the first person perspective” I describe a tendency among philosophers and psychologists to take an individualistic first-person point of view as the basic ontological starting point for all consciousness, and how this is connected with describing the young child from such a point of view. I argue that this is a problematic portrayal.

There are certain patterns in these descriptions. One pattern is the thought that consciousness primarily is a first person concept. Another pattern is the thought that we are originally born into a chaotic world of sense perceptions. A third pattern is the thought that sensations of a world of objects are more primary for the child than contact with other people. A fourth pattern is the thought that a child becomes aware of other people through her on the one hand needing to fulfill her own desires and realizing that other people can be an obstacle to this wish or a means to obtain her wish. That is, other people only have meaning in a self centered sense as fullfillers of my desire or as a threat to my desires. The thought also seems here to be that children cannot have a genuinely interpersonal relation to others. A fifth pattern is that language is considered as originally having no role in a young child’s life.

One trait that goes through all the above described perspectives on child development is the idea that an individual first person perspective is the ontological basis for human life and human understanding. Psychological concepts are thus thought of as primarily having a meaning from a lonely first person point of view. “Consciousness” is thus also seen as a first person concept. My aim here is to show that this tendency forms several philosophical trends
of thinking about human understanding; both logically oriented as well as empirically oriented 
theories. I also try to show how the life of a young child comes to appear as a proof of this 
philosophical conception of consciousness.

Instead of thinking that a child would be born into a chaotic world where the child would be 
completely on her own with a lot of individual chaotic sense perceptions, I think it is a central 
aspect of a child’s life that others right away give her senses a certain direction. There is not in 
some basic ontological sense chaos that the child must solve by herself; there are other people 
around taking her along, welcoming her, comforting her, screaming at her, talking to her, 
parents quarreling with each other or talking quietly. By bringing in contrasting pictures of a 
young child’s life I try to show the importance of considering the concept of consciousness 
from a second person perspective. I also try to show that there is a problematic tendency to 
think of the human body and our senses as if they primarily had meaning individually. I argue 
that our ways of sensing and feeling things with our body cannot be understood without 
seeing how we come to sense things through our relation to others. The way a child grows up 
to have a bodily sensitivity for the world around her is inseparable from the way others 
acknowledge her.

2\textsuperscript{nd} chapter

The second chapter called “Theory of Mind and facial recognition and imitation in young 
children” deals with certain psychological experiments that have been made with young 
children. There has been made a large amount of research where psychologists have shown 
that young babies recognize schematic pictures of a face. There has also been made several 
studies where infants of a very young age are shown to have a capacity to imitate other 
people’s facial expressions. These findings are thought to show that children have an innate 
theory of mind function by which they learn to decipher other people’s expressions. Even if I 
do not want to deny that children can have a tendency to imitate other people’s expressions, I 
point at certain problematic traits in the tests. I try to show that the tests are built on the 
assumption of the body as something we primarily observe as a kind of anatomical surface. 
This forms how the tests are built up, and also how the results are described. This idea of the 
child primarily observing the body as an outer physical surface is connected with another 
tendency to consider human beings as essentially being minds hidden within these physical
bodies. The child’s relation to others is also seen as primarily a passively observing relation and thus it is not acknowledged how other people engage the child. My aim is to show how a certain way of talking about the human body in an anatomical fashion is connected with a problematic perspective on human beings as minds. This is again connected with a classical epistemological conception of human understanding where we primarily observe each other from a distance in order to gain information about each other. These conceptions form how the experiments are built up and how the results are understood.

In the paper I bring forth David Cockburn’s reflections on interpersonal understanding and our embodied being. My aim in the paper is partly to question the results of the test. What appears as clear results are actually only the outcome of a very restricted focus on one single behavior a child can express. What is ignored is the whole daily shared life that child and parent share, where all sorts of various responsiveness take place. The strict focus on imitation is reflective of the sort of intellectualistic theory it is based on where the thought is that the child must learn to use a technique in order to understand other minds. A central aim in this part of the paper is also to show how a bodily presence and personal closeness for the child is important. In the strict focus on imitation neither close personal relations nor our ability to be present to each other in a bodily sense, are considered as important. True interpersonal understanding is thought to concern only the mind.

3rd chapter

In the third chapter called “Logical reasoning or mutual engagement” I discuss Jean Piaget’s logical approach to the child’s development of understanding. Piaget did not consider understanding as a psychological concept depending on our capacity for making analogical comparisons. What it means to understand something is, according to him, dependent on our being able to see certain logical connections in the world.

Piaget argued that the child, through engaging in handling physical objects, eventually gains a logical perception of the world as consisting of space, form and movement. An important aspect here is that for Piaget the logical form of understanding shows in that a child learns to go on doing things in new ways by following certain abstract principles. Even if I think Piaget’s logical conception of understanding is more advanced than the empirical conception expressed in theory of mind, there are several problems in his approach. First, Piaget’s
conception of understanding starts from an awareness of an outer reality of objects, not from a shared reality with other people. Piaget’s logical conception of the development of understanding follows in this sense the old individualistic trend of thinking that our primary relation to the world is a lonely relation to a world of outer objects. Despite his careful observations of children, there is a consistent problem in his manner of ignoring the various forms of personal closeness that takes place between parent and child. He thereby, in his descriptions of these situations, distorts social and emotional situations into mere individual practical activities with “objects”.

This tendency to ignore the social dimensions of children’s life is expressive of him having a certain abstract mathematically oriented conception of logical reasoning. Piaget considers a child’s practical engagement in daily life as merely a preliminary stage of understanding which eventually will lead to an abstract higher logical apprehension of the world. To really understand reality is to see it according to a general logical background pattern resembling geometry or physics. This conception of human understanding as ultimately a capacity to see certain abstract patterns, I question.

Piaget’s abstract logical conception of understanding also leads him to have a too individualistic and also too rigid conception of understanding. He is on the one hand unable to acknowledge the fact that we learn things by the help of others and that the concept of learning is thus more central for what we mean by the concept understanding than simply the concept of development. On the other hand he is also unable to see that the fact that we can learn to consider things according to a pattern, does not mean that this is a contextless ability and an ability that has no limitations. He is unable to see that for very many things we do it is essentially the specific practice in itself that is the understanding. To have a skill, to know how to go on with something, does not mean that this capacity to go should be limitless in order to be expressive of true understanding.

4th chapter
In the fourth chapter “Language, reasoning and mathematics” I continue to discuss Piaget. This time I focus on his conception of communication and its relation to mathematics. According to Piaget our capacity to learn things, to be social and communicate cannot be
understood merely as expressive of psychological abilities to use an analogical form of reasoning. For him learning and understanding centrally take the form of developing a capacity to reason logically. And this is also how he sees our capacity to be social as well as the meaning of language. Language consists, according to him, essentially in the ability to reason according to certain logical rules. Because of this logical picture of language Piaget had a much stricter definition of what it means to be able to communicate than empiricist philosophers have. According to the logical conception our understanding each other’s words is inseparable from our being able to explain and criticize each other. This was also Piaget’s perspective on language, and it was also a thought that led him to conclude that children until the age of eight are unable to communicate since they, according to him, are unable to follow logical arguments.

Piaget has an absolute conception of communication where the meaning of a person’s words can be understood by considering them in the light of deductive logics. He considers communication as something that can only have certain specific right or wrong answers. The ability to see whether an answer is correct or not, lies in the ability to see the sentence according to the abstract pattern of formal logic. This picture of understanding also makes Piaget think that we can make psychological tests with children to see whether they have learned to communicate or not.

Piaget conducted some logical tests with children in order to prove that children at a certain age are yet unable to reason logically and also that children are unaware of other people. Some school children were shown a number of sentences and were then asked to combine these in a way that would show that the sentences mean the same thing or have something in common in a “logical” sense. Children who were not able to combine the sentences in the manner that Piaget wanted them to, were defined as not able to communicate and as asocial. Piaget has in this sense a very rigid conception of both understanding and communication. In this paper I, once again, criticize Piaget for having a rigid conception of understanding that does not correspond with our normal ways of teaching. This rigidness is internal to his abstractly logical and also individualistic conception of understanding. Teaching differs essentially from such rigidness in that we try to adapt our explanation depending on whether the child understands or does not understand.
In the fifth chapter called “Autism and theory of mind” I turn to discuss a philosophical theory that is directed towards clinical psychology. According to proponents for theory of mind it is thought that we have a mental function that enables us to interpret other people’s behavior and thus eventually to see them as minded, as having intentions and beliefs. Autism is considered as a case where people lack this capacity to truly be aware of other people as mental beings. From the perspective of theory of mind then autism consists basically of a mindreading deficit.

This mindreading deficit is thought to be connected with three central features; 1st autistic children not being good at pretend play, 2nd them not being good at predicting other people’s beliefs, and 3rd them also not understanding irony and metaphorical speech.

I begin the paper by describing a so called “false belief test” that has been made with autistic children as well as with non autistic children. This is a well known test that is considered as showing that autistic persons lack a capacity to realize that people’s mental states can differ from outer observable facts about a situation. By comparing this test with various examples of how we are confronted by each other being mistaken in real life, I try to show that the false belief test is built on problematic philosophical assumption about human understanding.

After this I take a closer look at the thought that children learn to understand other people through engaging in pretend play. One problem with how pretend play is thought to be important for a child’s understanding of others is the emphasis on the use of an analogical form of imagination. The focus on pretend play is connected with a tendency to completely ignore the fact that children play with others. I argue that playing is a central way of growing into social relationships and involves in that sense a social and moral growth.

After having pointed at the artificial and very restricted images of beliefs as well as of playing that theory of mind proponents put forward, I move on to discuss certain features in autism.

There are traits in autism that easily appear to support the theory about autistic persons lacking a theory of mind function since autism appears so much to be a social disorder. However, one central reason why autism appears to fit so well into the theory of mind picture
has to do with a tendency among researchers to isolate certain descriptions of autistic persons’ manners of behaving. By isolating descriptions and also by describing certain very dramatic imagined cases of autism, it is made to look specifically like a mindreading inability. By bringing forth the biography *The Siege* by Clara Claiborne Park I try to show how autism is a much more varied phenomenon. I also try to show that when parents work with their autistic child they do not teach the child to use a theory of mind. On the contrary parents centrally try to build up a responsiveness through various forms of closeness, where playing is one such central form of closeness. I also point out that contrary to the false belief tests we ordinarily do not have a rigid sense of understanding. This open attitude towards understanding is a central feature in any sound form of teaching. Here I address an issue that also shows in Piaget’s logical approach to child development, namely the tendency in philosophical and psychological theories to take a too rigid perspective on understanding.

In the last part of the paper I discuss the thought that autistic persons are not good at understanding irony and that this would prove that they lack a mindreading capacity. I question the conception of irony that is put forward by Francesca Happé. According to Happé it is an important feature of language that we can mean different things even though we use the same expression. She sees this as requiring that we must be able to see others as minded, as having inner intentions with our words, in order to understand how the meaning of words can vary even if the outer situation appears unaltered. I agree with Happé that we can mean different things with the same words. But I do not think this can be understood by saying that we have to learn to see others as minded in order to see how words get their meaning through our inner intentions. As I try to show earlier when I discuss how children grow into understanding that other people can be mistaken, our use of “mental” words do not refer to one single thing, nor do they refer to something hidden inside us. I argue that our learning to understand irony is entwined with our growing into various forms of interpersonal relations.

6th chapter
In the sixth chapter called “How to understand suffering?” I discuss the thought that we use a method of analogical imagination in order to understand other people’s suffering. I begin the paper by discussing two psychological experiments that have been made in order to study the function of empathy. I question these experiments and try to show how the researchers form
the experiment in a manner that also leads them to achieve results that fit with their theory. I argue that there is a problematic tendency to ignore how an experimental situation, in its non realistic character, can distort our responses to each other. This means that the conclusions about human moral psychology that are drawn on the basis of psychological experiments do not necessarily show anything about our moral responsiveness in real life though they do show something about how we can be formed to respond in restricted experimental situations.

In the second part of this paper I discuss Martha Nussbaum’s thought that empathy can be used both by a cruel person in order to hurt the other as well as by a compassionate person in order to help the other. I question this way of portraying our understanding of others as being a neutral method we can use for various purposes. I argue that this is a problematic idea that partly is connected with philosophers being entangled in certain kinds of seductive images of cruelty as expressive of high intelligence. By the help of Lars Hertzberg I also argue that the difficulty to understand cruelty cannot be understood as an epistemological difficulty but is in itself an expression of a moral attitude.

Thus the aim in this paper is to show two forms of seduction. On the one hand I show how we can be seduced to become cruel through the lack of reality in a psychological experiment. And I argue that there is a temptation in the researchers wanting to find the true nature of morality that is expressed in the experiments. On the other hand I also argue that the way cruelty is described in real life is often distorted in a sense that also is seductive. Certain philosophical theories about empathy are expressive of how these images seduce also philosophers. Our tendency to become seduced by images of violence is, as Coetzee shows, both expressive of who we are and forms who we are. One point I am trying to make here is on the one hand that the seductiveness does not have to do with lying about facts or with getting the wrong information about violence. The seductiveness has largely to do with the tone in which the violence is described.

In the 7th and final chapter called “Reflections on empathy, separate perspectives and conversations” I discuss a perspective on empathy that is put forward by Peter Goldie. Goldie is critical of the idea that we would use an analogical form of imagination when we try to understand others. He considers this as a too simplified picture. Instead he argues that in order
for me to understand another person it is necessary that I see the other person as different from myself. The other person is another perspective. If I merely try to imagine how I would react in your situation, I do not take into account that you can be very different from me, and that you might think and react in ways that I perhaps would not.

Even though I think Goldie has an important point in emphasizing the importance of seeing that others are separate perspectives, I also think he is partly stuck in the same problem as the ones who argue that our understanding of each other is based on a method of analogical imagination. He is unable to see that it is in our being engaged in each other’s life, and in our standing in various forms of personal relations to each other that questions about understanding have their role and meaning. This also means that how we speak with each other is of central importance for what it means to understand the other. The way knowledge comes into our understanding of each other’s emotions is centrally connected with the way we talk and engage with each other rather than our finding out things about each other by guessing. This has to do with how understanding another person is a social and moral matter. Only by seeing that our understanding and knowledge of each other has meaning in the ways we share our lives, can one see the character of our difficulties to understand each other. It is also only by this that the thought of other people as separate or not separate has a meaning.