The Psychological Roots of Political Failure

Why do our political debates inevitably hit dead ends? Why do we dismiss opposing views as madness? I suspect the issue isn't just about facts, but about the subconscious blueprints we hold of human nature itself. To help me decode these hidden psychological frameworks, I'm joined by Dr. Bernhard Hommel, a full professor of psychology at the Shandong Normal University in China. Until 2022, Professor Hommel held the chair of "General Psychology" at Leiden University and he is a member and senator of the German National Academy of Sciences (Leopoldina). He is the author of many academic and popular books, the most recent one in German language being „The power of the imagined human: why we talk passed each other and sound politics fails." Links: Hommel's Website: https://www.bernhard-hommel.eu/ Hommel's books (German):https://westendverlag.de /author/detail/018d2216f51f724985a7f1b3d5421182 Neutrality Studies substack: https://pascallottaz. substack.com (Opt in for Academic Section from your profile settings: https://pascallottaz.substack. com/s/academic) Goods Store: https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com Timestamps: 00:00:00 The Power of the Imagined Human 00:03:49 Societal Polarization & "Naïve Theories" 00:09:06 Human Image vs. Worldview & Genetic Influence 00:15:42 Ideomotor Theory: Intentions, Means, & Outcomes 00:24:16 Conflicting Values: Safety vs. Freedom 00:32:33 The Reflexive View & Bias in Sociology 00:37:16 Policy Dangers & Reduced Emotional Resilience 00:45:29 Objective Reality, Truth, & The Humanities 00:53:11 Conclusion & Works

#Pascal

Hello everybody, Pascal here from Neutrality Studies, and today I'm joined by Dr. Bernhard Hommel, a full professor of psychology at Shandong Normal University in China. Until 2022, Professor Hommel held the chair of general psychology at Leiden University, and he's a member and senator of the German National Academy of Sciences. He is the author of many academic and popular books, the most recent one in German being—if I translate the title—*The Power of the Imagined Human: Why We Talk Past Each Other and Sound Politics Fails.* Professor Hommel, welcome. Thank you for having me. Well, thank you very much for writing this book. I mean, it's a short book, but a very insightful one, because you're using a concept we use regularly. I mean, it's a common concept in German—*Menschenbilder*—or how we imagine that humans function. And then you extrapolate this into the political realm. Can you tell us what the main argument is, and why this imaginative human is so important?

#Bernhard Hommel

Well, it may help if I explain how I came to write this book, but we can talk about that later if you're interested. The basic idea is that before we start thinking and talking about our arguments—like in a political discussion, say we have an argument about, I don't know, abortion—and you have a

different opinion than I do, typically what we see when people start discussing is that they end up nowhere. We hardly find any conclusions, any agreement, any shared interests. So we are no longer, or perhaps we never were, able to translate disagreement into interesting new perspectives. And I want to know why that is.

And that's not just—it cannot be just—the arguments, because in science we also have arguments, and we commonly disagree but still come to better conclusions. But not in real life, let's say, outside of the ivory tower. And I think one of the reasons, perhaps *the* reason, is that our arguments are typically based on something we're not very conscious of—namely, the way we think humans work, how they are, how they operate—the *Menschenbild*, the image of a human being. And we typically don't discuss this. It's not like I say, "Oh, I think humans operate like this," and then you say, "No, you forgot this aspect; you should consider that."

But I may not even know. I may not even—so this is what the psychologist Fritz Heider called the naive theory. We all have our naive theories that assume things as a given, as an axiom that we don' t defend and perhaps don't even know we hold. But it's these underlying assumptions that no longer, or perhaps never, allow us to find reasonable agreement. And then I try to explain: where might that come from? What might it look like? How could it operate in real life? How could it prevent us from finding agreement? And what can we do about it? So that's the basic structure of the book.

#Pascal

I find this highly fascinating because we see it all the time. And in your book, too, you discuss the societal disagreements during the corona pandemic—how people saw or perceived each other. You can trace that back to almost any kind of disagreement, when two or more groups have a fundamental clash in how they interpret reality, and how we then try to ascribe something to the other side—how we see them, how we interpret those who don't share our basic assumptions, our axioms. Right? Can you elaborate on that a bit?

#Bernhard Hommel

I mean, there are consequences to this. One is that basic assumption, and that already leads you in very different directions. For instance, let's take the pandemic as a case example. That was obviously very different in different countries, so it's hard to generalize. I don't know whether our listeners will share my experience, but I was mainly in Germany during that time, in the East—and the East of Germany is, let's say, the newer part of unified Germany. And people there were very different from the people I know. I grew up in the West, but during that time, we just lived there.

So, for instance, people had enormous difficulties wearing a mask—a paper mask. And I thought, how difficult is it, in such a threatening situation, to wear a paper mask? Let's say you go on the tram or take a train or whatever—how hard is that? I mean, yes, your freedom is limited, but not

much. It's not a dramatic restriction of your daily life. And yet people had enormous difficulties. So I wondered—somehow this triggers different things in their minds than in mine. Or, for instance, my wife is Italian, so we were also exposed to the Italian press and the reports in the newspapers about the pandemic.

And there, when we saw those many dead bodies in Bergamo—40,000 people—and the military was actually busy transporting the corpses to other places because they couldn't handle the sheer number anymore, I thought, that should give everyone an idea that something serious is happening. And yet many people said, "Oh, this is just the flu, don't worry about it," and so on. I just couldn't understand people anymore. And that often happens. Also, if you think about voting behavior in the United States, it basically broke the common ground within many families.

#Pascal

Just to interject, we see it right now with the war in Ukraine, where there are two very different interpretations of reality—and that breaks friendships.

#Bernhard Hommel

Israel–Gaza. Yes, yes—sometimes even worse. And then the standard thing: if you talk to people and ask, "How do you explain this, that we can no longer talk to each other?" they start with the typical tricks. They say, "Oh, the other side"—and of course it's always the other side—"is ill-informed. They read the wrong papers, or visit the wrong internet forums, or, I don't know, believe the wrong politicians," or things like that. Or they're just stupid, or they're mentally ill. And yes, there are mentally ill people, but 50% of the population—that's logically impossible, because mental illness is defined by deviation from the norm.

But if 50% are, then they're the norm. And that means no one is actually mentally ill, logically. It's an impossible statement to make. So it's not a solution—it's just a helpless attempt to explain something people don't have a good explanation for. So we need another one. And that was one of the driving forces for writing this book. I was interested in another explanation that doesn't, let's say, discredit or undermine other people's mental health, but rather offers a more, let's say, respectful way to deal with each other.

#Pascal

I find it fascinating, but why is it that you're focusing on the mentioned "Bild," the image of the human—or the imagination of how we imagine humans? Why not on the other word you could use, which is the *Weltbild*, the way we imagine the world? Because at the end of the day, we've got this problem that some people believe things about how the world works that are fundamentally different from ours. Let's take Corona. One group says it's just the flu; the other group says it's a humanity-threatening pandemic. And these two ways of looking at the world are as different as

saying the sky is blue or the sky is red. You can point to it and say, "Look, it's obviously one or the other." And once the other side denies that, you get angry—you get mad at them—because they reject reality. Why is it that you focus on the human and not on the interpretation of the world?

#Bernhard Hommel

Well, there are at least two reasons. Everyone has a perspective and is bound to it somehow—limited, you might say. One of the driving forces is that I'm a psychologist, so I'm interested in individuals, the differences between them, and how those differences account for behavior. That doesn't mean other perspectives are less interesting, but this is mine. And I'm not, let's say, a natural popular book writer. I'm more of an academic—an ivory-tower person. I do basic science.

And only because of this puzzlement—because of my exposure to things in the real world—I was trying to translate my knowledge from basic science into popular issues, into, let's say, political ones, or things that we negotiate in real life every day. So that's social behavior. And this is my limitation, you might say. If you're a sociologist, you may find that totally uninteresting, and that's fine. But this is my bit—let's say, my five pence to contribute. The other motive for writing the book was my puzzlement about a finding I read in another book.

Namely, that there is research—which I didn't know before—that shows you can predict voting behavior in political elections from genes. And then I thought, what? I'm not one of those people who ignore genes or think that genes shouldn't matter, because, I mean, many—especially in the woke community—see even talking about genes as an absolute no-go. Because we're all the same, we're blank slates. And, I mean, I know that we're not. And I'm not disgusted by this; I take it as a fact. The rest is, let's say, the empirical science—about how, in which sense, how much, and what's left, and things like that.

And I'm happy to talk about all these things as well. But I'm not an idiot. Let's say I know that there are genes, and I know that they do something with respect to creating differences. And being a good Darwinist, this is absolutely logical and necessary, because what is survival based on? It's based on random diversity. The idea is to take, let's say, random diversity so that we all have diversity. We get some of our genes from our parents, but there's also some unpredictability in the way they are distributed, and so forth and so on. This is why even brothers are not the same. And why is that? Well, let's say there is no "why" in true Darwinian evolution. Don't take me wrong, but the idea is that this allows us, as humanity, to deal with circumstances. Because let's assume we are still picking fruit from the tree.

And then we had all these very tall guys who would bump into the tree, into all these fruits all the time. And we thought, why do we have them? Well, at some point, perhaps the trees get higher, and only the tall people can help us get the fruit. So now, overnight as it were, those people became a useful contribution to, or members of, society. This is why we should stay open to diversity—because we never know what things will happen to us. And then, at some point, these people

become super important, even though now they seem crazy. But then the question is, of course, what can a gene logically do to make you, let's say, vote for party X? And of course, we have to be realistic: when our genes developed, hundreds of thousands of years ago, there were no parties.

Even if there had been a party, it would have a different program nowadays, because we know that parties change quite a bit over the years. And, of course, if you look very closely, what they mean with this research is the difference between, let's say, Republicans and Democrats in the U.S., which doesn't match many other countries. So it's certainly not that genes are smart enough to predict, let's say, voting behavior in Switzerland, Germany, or France, where you have many more options. But that was the general idea. Then the question is, how could we differ in a way that later, one way or another, makes us vote differently and make political decisions differently? That was the basic idea.

#Pascal

I find this fascinating. On the one hand, I want to ask whether you think epigenetics is real—whether our environment actually impacts our genetics. But on the other hand, I'm now more interested in this "mention builder" idea and how you explain it. And don't get me wrong, my previous question was more about clarifying which approach you take. You're not looking inside people, but rather at how people imagine each other, right? Yes? So how do these imagined human images explain—or how can they account for—our inability to talk to each other anymore?

#Bernhard Hommel

I'll give you a constructed example because, well, I don't know—I can't give you data on this—but it's one possible way this could emerge. And that's related to what I'm interested in, let's say, in my basic science work. I'm interested in action control. So the question is: how can we, for example, if I ask you to raise your thumb, you can do it right away—no problem. You don't even think about it. And that's fantastic, and that's why we never think about it. But if you consider the mechanisms as a psychologist, you think, hmm, it's pretty complicated. Because in order to get this done, many things have to happen: your brain has to send signals to your hand, and so on and so forth. And where does that come from?

Why are you so flexible, and why can you do that on the spot? These are the basic science questions that most people find boring. OK, fine—I can live with that. But we did studies, obviously, with infants and young kids, among other things. We also do brain studies and brain scans and so forth in adults. But we also investigated very young kids. And then there's a very old-fashioned theory—the ideomotor theory. The idea is that, let's say we're talking about the 1850s or so. People already had this idea without knowing how to study it experimentally, but they had the general concept already. Namely, let's assume you're an infant—you have no clue, let's say.

What's interesting about infants is that they have many reflexes. For example, they have a grasping reflex—so whenever you touch my hand, I grab it. Me being the infant, of course. Fortunately, these

things go away later; otherwise, we'd have a very strange situation, because I'd grab everyone and never let them go. That would be pretty awkward in social life. But there's a phase where kids have these reflexes—also the walking reflex—so they start using their legs as part of learning how to walk. In other words, there's a stage where we're very sensitive to stimuli. And the question is, why? I mean, functionally speaking—not because there's a little homunculus telling us interesting stuff—but why did that survive? What purpose does it serve?

And the point is that we learn—that's the ideomotor hypothesis—we learn what we can do in this world, and how. So, for instance, let's assume my parents give me a rattle, me still being the infant. I may not be interested, and then sometimes I happen to touch the rattle, and I think, oh, it makes a sound. Okay, I make a sound. And you know how infants are—then they go rattle, rattle, rattle for half an hour. They're very excited. And that's how they learn to connect, to associate the motor patterns with a sound, right? That's it. And they store all these things. They store, oh, if I move my legs like this, I go from A to B, and so forth. So they learn how to use their body in particular ways in order to achieve particular effects.

So you have an action, let's say, which is first a movement—not yet an action, because an action is intended. And in the beginning, you don't have intentions, because you don't know what to achieve. But then you learn, oh, if I do this, I hear this sound. So you create the association, and later on you may think of the sound and think—not consciously, necessarily—but you may think, oh, that was nice, I'd like to have that again. But now you know, oh, then I need to do this. Right. So, in other words, the association works both ways: it goes from the movement to the effect, to the action effect, to the outcome of the action, and vice versa. So I can use the idea of the action outcome in order to make my body move the way I've learned to produce these outcomes.

So that is the basic, let's say, ingredient of the ideomotor theory. Now, let's assume there are small differences among us. Later on, we have the intention, we have the means or the movement, and we have the outcome. So every action, every decision, everything follows this logic. We have the intention—the intention is nothing but an imagination of the outcome—and that triggers the associated motor pattern, which then produces the outcome I previously imagined. That's how we realize ideas and make them real in this world. Now, let's assume there are small differences in intention: some people are more interested in, let's say, the connection between the intention and the means, while others are more interested in the connection between the intention and the outcome.

And that may be—I'm just speculating—just to give you an idea of how that could emerge in a real human experience. Let's assume these people keep their biases, and then some are more interested in outcomes, while others are more focused on how they affect or realize those outcomes. That might give you an idea that some people learn to experience themselves as doers, as makers, as people who are causally producing things—and also perhaps responsible for having produced them. Whereas other people are more interested in how their interests are related to the effects in this world, irrespective of, or less sensitive to, who was doing it.

#Pascal

Okay, okay. I think now a picture is forming in my mind—that you're proposing a theory where we have people who are interested in how they affect things, and others who are more interested in having something at the end. It could be a small difference, just a bias, just a little bit. So, let's say, with the example of the war in Ukraine, the ideal outcome that we all want is peace. Then there's one group of people who are more interested in having peace, and another group who are more interested in creating peace through action. Would that be an adequate way of putting it?

#Bernhard Hommel

Yes, that's a bit far-fetched because it's such a big issue. I think it may be easier to grasp with the corona example, because that was more—let's say—my impact on the Ukraine war is very minimal, whereas my impact on the corona pandemic, every day, was bigger. That's why. So, for instance...

#Pascal

Sorry, I just want to interject, because what you explained really rings a bell for me. There's a group of people who say we need to create peace by sending weapons to Ukraine—we need to affect the outcome of the war. And then there's another group, which I belong to, who says, no, sending weapons creates more war. So what we need to do is not do that, in order to create a situation where the weapons are silent.

#Bernhard Hommel

I certainly agree. These are interesting, and I think they may also be related. I'm just afraid the jump is a bit big at this point. So let me come up with a different example, maybe from Corona. Let's assume—well, people typically talk about values. And what is that? Values are just weightings, I would suggest—weightings of things. Let me give, perhaps, one strange example that I have in the book, about my first, let's say, forum in the absence of any internet. So we're talking 1980, and there was an election in Germany. I was a new student at Bielefeld University.

And the typical forums were actually the walls of the toilets. That's where people would spend some time once in a while and leave a message. One of the messages said there were three main parties in Germany: the Christian Democrats, the Social Democrats, and the Free Democrats—the Liberals. And they were saying, roughly speaking, the Christians stood for security, freedom, and sociality; the Social Democrats for sociality, security, and freedom; and the Free Democrats for freedom, security, and sociality.

So what does the writer—the author—what might he or she... no, it was a he, I think; it was the men's toilet. Back then there was separation, yes. So what might the message be? The message is that they all have the same things in mind. They think these three concepts are important, and two

of them overlap with those of the French Revolution. So that's not a bad guess. But the order is different, and that's what characterizes our values. So think back to the two basic opinions on how to deal with the corona epidemic. Some people were just in the "team safety," and they said, "We must, by all means, avoid people dying."

#Pascal

Yep.

#Bernhard Hommel

Now, they didn't care so much about freedom or the restrictions of freedom, whereas others were exploding, saying, "Oh, come on! I want to take a walk at night. How can you prevent me from doing this? This is the most important thing I do every day!" Okay, whatever. But then, of course, they would never accept, let's say, restrictions on freedom. And the basic question is this—and that's what I call the apples-and-oranges question. These are typical for politics.

How many dead people are we willing to accept if we want to integrate these two considerations? So, there's one guy from this camp and another from the other camp. Then the question is: in order to have rational decision-making, we need a formula that quantifies freedom and the restrictions of freedom, and relates that to the number of dead people—let's say, deaths caused by corona, right? So the question is, what's the formula? How many dead people should we accept for taking a walk at night?

#Pascal

Okay. It becomes a very utilitarian kind of assessment of how society would run. But you can't solve it. No.

#Bernhard Hommel

That's the problem. And that's why, basically, our models of how humans function—well, take another example: the gender pay gap. Some people are mainly interested in outcomes, in effects, in action effects. And the action effect is that there are differences—okay, that women on average, depending on the country, have, let's say, a lower average income than men. Okay, that's a fact. It's easy to calculate. And then the question is, what's the implication? Some people say, "We can't accept this; it's impossible." And others say, "Well, people make different choices."

So if you're interested in the agency side—if you see humans as making their own decisions, and those decisions have effects, whatever the decisions were—then you might say that women have a stronger preference for jobs that are less well-paid. Or, if you don't like that, you need to increase the pay. Easy. Okay, so we need to pay more for, I don't know, typically female jobs. But no one

wants to do that. So they say, "Oh, we must have everyone wanting to have the same job," which, for an agency-oriented person—someone interested in how to achieve these effects—would be a limitation of freedom. Like, "What? I can't be a hairdresser if I want to?"

I need to be the boss of a company only because you think the outcome must be the same. Why? Why would that be the case? Whereas other people say, "But look, the outcome is different, and this is impossible to accept." So if you focus only on the outcome, and you don't understand or care about how individual action and decision-making produced that outcome, then you'll come up with very different ideas than people who believe outcomes are, let's say, the product of individual choices. And then you may criticize those choices, but if you allow freedom to happen, then it's just not your fucking business, you might argue. And that leads to totally different ideas—and those ideas will never match. So we cannot solve this problem.

#Pascal

And where does the way we view people come into play then? If we accept that this is how it works—I mean, we have different weightings of what kinds of social goods we value—and those give us different interpretations of what's currently going on. If we accept this as a premise, then where does the mental model, the imagined human, come in?

#Bernhard Hommel

So there was an interesting post in—let me think—I have to look it up. I think it was on an American forum, something that starts with an S. Anyway, it was referring to a study looking into the relationship between Republicans and Democrats—registered ones in the U.S.—across the scientific disciplines. And everywhere, you have more Democrats than Republicans at universities. It's always been like that, and it's never really been a problem. If there's a slight bias, then so be it, as long as you have representation across, let's say, the whole spectrum of political attitudes. You don't necessarily need to count—oh, but there are more of these people than those.

But in sociology, which is particularly influential on these issues, you don't find a single registered Republican in the whole United States. So much for representation and equality and so forth. What the author of that post was criticizing was his belief that this is related to the fact—or the observation—that individual differences don't feature in any sociological theory. Basically, it assumes a blank-slate logic, meaning that society is the only agent that can create differences or unequal distributions. And that means the logic goes: whenever you see unequal distributions, the only option you have is, "Oh, then we need to take societal action."

We need to change the policy. Whereas if you, let's say, assume that there are a few people—and why that is somehow correlated with being Republican—I have some ideas about that, but it's an interesting question in itself. Bringing in the agency view would say, of course, it could also be an outcome of choices that people make. Why would that not be the case? So there's hardly any

agency in this whole discipline anymore. And this is different in other disciplines and so forth. In chemistry, I think there's much more agency, which makes sense because it's, let's say, interested in real causality in the world and not just in assumed or interpreted causalities.

But yeah, so this is how I think directly about this idea: do I see humans as individual agents who are engaged in and responsible for the outcomes of their actions? And do I see the situation as it is—as the outcome and result of this individual agency? Or do I see people as reflections? That's why I call it the reflexive view of people. Do I see them as 100% shaped by their social environment? So that's basically, in its extreme form, the Marxian assumption, but it's also reflected in many other areas, even in the whole discipline of sociology. And that is how the individual dimension is at least entering into the conclusions that you draw from observations.

#Pascal

This is extremely important because we can see right now how some policies being implemented by the European Union are focused on shaping people within society. The whole idea of misinformation or propaganda—that this can distort people and make them believe the wrong thing—is one of the views you just introduced to us. The other view would, of course, be: no, no, no, every person is able, by and for themselves, to reflect on information. Whatever you expose them to, whether it's objective information or propaganda, they'll think it through, make up their minds, and form a proper opinion. Where do your conclusions lead you regarding the dangers of both of these Menschenbilder?

#Bernhard Hommel

Well, there are several layers of issues. Please pick whatever you'd like to focus on. But you might say, "Oh, why not? Politicians and political parties that are ruling the countries are changing." And you might say, "Well, sometimes one party is, let's say, promoting one of these models of humans, and then another one takes over, and then you have another. So what's the problem?" If you just wait for it—like people say in Great Britain, "You don't like the weather? Just wait a minute"—because it changes so often. So you just wait a few years, and then your Menschenbild might be, let's say, much more compatible with the policies.

The problem—well, one problem—is that the policies create those models. For instance, let's take empowerment. If you realize that social communication or social behavior between two or more genders isn't working very well, then the agency point of view would lead to empowerment programs. It would suggest, "OK, women should learn to speak up, to defend their intentions, and to let other people know what they want—more, louder, harder, more often, and so on."

Whereas the reflexive model would suggest, "No, no, you need to teach men not to take up so much space on the tram, as it's often criticized, or not to speak so frequently, so loudly, and so on." So you'd need to teach people—let's say, the dominant group, or those considered dominant—to reduce

their impact on others. The conclusions would be very different. But then you could say, "Okay, after four years, the other party takes over, and one program is replaced by the other."

The problem is—well, for instance, take the Vulcanist program, which has been much more influential in the U.S. than in mid-Europe, though there's also some impact here. If you take, for example—well, it's not really a metaphor; it's actually quite similar in causality—let's take hygiene. We wash our hands much more often than we did years ago. Decades ago, we hardly did that. There were no water supplies in many areas, and so on, so you just couldn't. Soap wasn't as common or as cheap as it is now. So we teach our children to wash their hands all the time. Now, that hasn't reduced infections but has increased, let's say, our vulnerability to becoming ill, because it reduces resilience.

And the same goes for, for instance, another book of mine where I deal with the dramatic increase in depression and other neurotic behavior. You can see that our ability to handle emotional stimuli has dropped dramatically. We're much more affected because our resilience—let's say, the Marlboro Man—is no longer there. The Marlboro Man or Clint Eastwood, for example, were role models, at least for men, but there were similar ones for women that taught you to become tough, less empathetic, less sensitive, and so on. In the last twenty years or so, we've been taught the exact opposite: we should be much more sensitive, much more empathetic, and so forth, which has opened up all our vulnerability to these dramatically increased emotional stimuli.

Take your favorite example, the Ukraine war. If you go to Austria and watch the daily news on TV, they just concretely report what happened—there was a negotiation, these were the outcomes, and so forth. In Germany, this is what they say, and then immediately what follows is the report in the ten-minute news broadcast—the very precious ten-minute news per day. They report how it feels for a mother in Ukraine to celebrate Christmas during wartime, how sad that is, and so on. So you get boom, boom—one more, and one more, and one more emotional stimulus for people who are systematically trained to become more and more emotional and more sensitive to other people's emotions.

And then we're surprised that we're no longer resilient and that we go mad. I mean, one plus one, right? We need to understand better what we're doing—and we don't. That's because we don't understand our own biases, our own restrictions. And that's why we also can't allow other people to say, "Okay, I'm interested in not letting many people die during the pandemic. You're interested in your freedom. Let's talk." I mean, let's try to find at least an individual way to negotiate between these two interests and find common ground where everyone kind of says, "Okay, okay, okay, I can deal with that." But people aren't talking or negotiating anymore because they've already given up.

#Pascal

Yeah.

#Bernhard Hommel

And so all you do is insult the other side. You think they're crazy, ill-informed, and so forth. So yeah, that's one of the main issues.

#Pascal

It brings us back to, or it brings me back to, this question I had at the beginning. I mean, do you have to assume—or, I mean, you look into humans and what happens—but do you assume an observer-independent reality to exist or not? Because if yes, then somebody must be right about how it is. If there's none, then things are socially constructed, or constructed in one way or another. And I keep saying that physicists have had to deal with this issue for the last hundred years when it comes to quantum physics—that reality might, at one time, be two things at the goddamn same time. Yes. Do you also think that this plays a role? Although I'm sure this takes us outside of what you researched. No, that's fine. That's fine.

#Bernhard Hommel

I think there are two different—again, two different—layers that have different implications. One is the old philosophical question: what is the truth, and can we really ever see it? In the beginning, the idea was that only God can know, and so forth. I don't think this makes sense. I think we can get to the truth, as we humans—with our limitations, our sensory systems, and our motor capabilities—can deal with it. The implications for a bat might be different, but we don't care, because we're basically playing out our lives for ourselves, not for bats.

So the philosophical issue is not very fruitful, not very reasonable, and not really relevant for this discussion. But what you actually mean, I think, is something slightly different. There are people who say there is one reality, and others who say, no, no, there are many different ones. But this is not an arbitrary example. Let's assume you step into an airplane to fly, say, from Japan to Switzerland, and the captain tells you, "We constructed this airplane according to principles that some scientists find plausible, whereas quite a number of others are very skeptical that they have anything to do with reality."

Would you want to take that plane? Probably not. But fortunately, you don't have to make that choice. Fortunately, this is not how we argue about these things. We only argue in a particular area of our lives, and that's the humanities. Nowhere in the natural sciences—there are disagreements, of course—but this is science, right? These are rational disagreements based on facts, data, and experimentation. So whenever we have a disagreement, we don't need to argue. You make your prediction, I make mine, then we run the test and see who's right.

#Pascal

Yes. Although when we come to quantum physics, that's where it breaks down and doesn't work anymore. But again, the levels—it depends on what level we're talking about. Still, we have cars that function.

#Bernhard Hommel

We have airplanes that have very few accidents. So whatever we believe, we must be very close to the truth—at least when it comes to travel, machinery, and so on. Within our level of experience, yes, of the physical world. Does that capture the world of the bat? No, it doesn't, but it doesn't need to either. So we're good enough, let's say. Whereas in the humanities, this is where you get all these arguments. And why is that? I'm planning a book to write about that—the working title would be *Power and Truth*—and it tries to compare politics with science. So here, I think the argument is that, well, first, the observation is that only in the humanities people come up with these arguments.

Oh, there are many realities and so forth and so on. But in the things that really matter for our daily lives, I do believe the humanities don't cover much of that part. That's a bias of mine. And I have studied the humanities—not all of them—but I'm a student of the humanities, let's say, across quite a number of disciplines. So I think I have a rough idea of what I'm talking about. They can afford to speak about different realities without consequences. They don't have to pay the price—the price you'd have to pay if you were constructing an airplane. And as long as it has no consequences, go ahead. I mean, the thing is, what evidence do you have? What data do you have to support your story? They have no data.

They don't care about data. If you talk about the whole, let's say, constructivist approaches that have driven wokeness in recent years, there are lots of theories but no data. So no one makes predictions, no one exposes themselves to the risk of being disproved by reality. That's what makes it extremely easy to have a big mouth and pay no price. Well, my discipline is different. I pay a high price if I make the wrong predictions—people will no longer believe in my theory, and they'll stop reading my papers. So in that sense, there's no real problem. The problem is that part of our science isn't very scientific; it doesn't expose itself to a reality check. And that allows people in this bubble to have a big mouth and never pay the price.

#Pascal

And that's not fair. We need to discuss this again, because I actually only have about three minutes left. But the question is very important, and it touches on something very fundamental. The difference between the Gaza genocide and Israel's war of self-defense against terrorism—that difference is huge, and it's very, very important. It destroys hundreds of thousands of people's lives. But these are interpretations of reality, and I think it's very important, actually, what you're hinting at with your idea of the *Menschenbild*—how we interpret what's going on and how we interpret the other. Is there one more thing you'd like to add at this point? And secondly, where can people find your work? Is there a place where you regularly publish updates on your papers and your books?

#Bernhard Hommel

Well, first, unfortunately for your international audience, these books are only written in German—sorry about that. But it's a culturally bound way for me to express myself. All my other papers are, of course, in English, but that's the more scientific part. I have a website, bernhard-hommel.eu, where you can find all my books listed in bold print. You can't download them, because that would be illegal, but you can go to Westend. I always publish with Westend Publishers in Frankfurt, and you can check their website for some explanations. Currently, I have three books, all on political issues of that sort, or from a scientific point of view—with all its limitations.

#Pascal

I'll put the links to your homepage and the books we just discussed in the video description below. Professor Bernhard Hommel, thank you very much for your time today. Thank you.