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## Retrieving and recontextualising VET theory

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**Subject (de)construction and contingency –  
an autobiographically inspired contribution to the  
discourse on vocational education and training theory**

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## **Subject (de)construction and contingency – an autobiographically inspired contribution to the discourse on vocational education and training theory**

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### **Abstract**

The core of discourses on vocational education and training (VET) theory in the German-speaking world is the relationship between *Bildung* and *Beruf*. In the author's view, the reference to the subject presupposed in the concept of education is still decisively shaped by the idea of the autonomous subject as the guiding goal of pedagogical action. It goes back to the protagonists of the Enlightenment (namely Immanuel Kant) and their influence on modernity. Critical reservations about modernity and the associated idea of the autonomous subject have existed since its beginnings. It is profiled in the postmodern discourse using the key phrase of "death of the subject". However, this article does not aim to suggest a paradigm shift from the "modern subject" to the "postmodern subject" in VET theory. Rather, the author's concern is to raise issues with regard to the problem of the connection between biographical contingency and subjectivity, which has been neglected in the discourse on VET theory, and to put these issues up for discussion. The explanations from an educational-systematic point of view and with a view to the discourse of VET are preceded by autobiographical notes of the author. Their purpose is to illustrate ruptures and unpredictable biographical developments on the way from precarious living conditions to a statistically improbably privileged career and to point out the relevance of autoethnographic studies.

**Keywords:** *autobiography, autonomy, Bildung, contingency, contingent subjectivity, enlightenment, modernity, postmodernity, subject, theory of vocational education and training*

T. S. Eliot:

### **The Cocktail Party**

Act One, Scene One

Unidentified Guest:

"... When you've dressed for a party  
And are going downstairs, with everything about you  
Arranged to support you in the role you have chosen,  
Then sometimes, when you come to the bottom step  
There is one step more than your feet expected  
And you come down with a jolt. Just for a moment  
You have the experience of being an object  
At the mercy of a malevolent staircase ..."

## 1 Preliminary remarks<sup>1 2</sup>

It does not necessarily have to be the “malevolent” step at the bottom of the stairs that our feet are not attuned to as we descend and that causes us to jerkily stumble or fall. Again and again, we are confronted with incidents and adversities in which we can fall or catch ourselves in a stumble and which confront us with the question of whether it was necessary or could have turned out differently and how our lives could have turned out differently as a result of the non-impossible or non-necessary. The certainty about “ourselves” or about the “others” can get out of hand and end up in the muddle of emotional-cognitive states of mind: Who am “I” as the product of my experiences and perceptions, and who are “we” as the clash of “me” and “you” as the “others”? The quotation from T. S. Eliot’s “Cocktail Party” is about the separation of a married couple, i.e., the dissolution of a relationship hoped to last for life. Such a relationship is not impossible, but it also does not follow the strict necessity of mathematical laws. *Denn erstens kommt es anders, und zweitens als man denkt*: things don’t always turn out as planned.

This text deals with this commonly described topic and the corresponding problem of contingency from the perspective of educational science and vocational education and training (VET) theory. It is preceded by an excursus with selected autobiographical notes by the author (Section 2). Everything could have been different from what is recalled in these notes, including the author’s “own” perception of his biography. Perception in the process of perception cannot perceive itself (cf. Wiesing 2009), just as the eye cannot see itself when it sees.

Of course, my “memory splinters” are of a completely subjective nature, even if intersubjective relationships and structural relations are expressed in the “me” of the subjective perceptions. Marked as “excursus”, they can be skipped by readers with an inclination for strictly systematic claims. For myself, these memoirs are stimulating as a background to the discussion of subjectivity, including my professional interest in “subjectivity” in the implementation of VET. In a small “self-experiment” I have attempted to remember, i.e., to reconstruct my perceptions from childhood and youth and to write down these memories.<sup>3</sup> This is based on the quite controversial notion that anyone who, as an educationalist, is concerned with the subject of education would do well to embark on a search for his or her own “subject” or “self”. Without the help of Sigmund Freud, perhaps a futile labour of (self-)love. But from my point of view, it was enlightening. In the process, the question of who is the “subject” (the inaccessible “I”) of my memories, which looks at the “me” as the object of these memories and constructs itself

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<sup>1</sup> Johannes Karl Schmees, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, translated the original German paper to English. Additional work was done by Bill Esmond, University of Derby.

<sup>2</sup> It is a particular concern of mine to thank colleagues who are friends of mine for their benevolent, but always thought-provoking, feedback on the venture of autobiographical publication.

<sup>3</sup> The autobiographical notes contain short excerpts from these records. They concern contingent interfaces of my personal “subjectification” as I perceive it. For me, writing down my memories was a “struggle” against the language of science that I had trained and perpetuated in my profession as a scientist. From an autoethnographic point of view (cf. Chang 2022), this poses the following problem, among others: How can experiences from early childhood and adolescence be reliably reconstructed and non-linguistic events translated into adult language?

in them, became important to me. Keeping an eye on the difference between “I” and “me” can be inspiring and irritating (cf. Mead 1934).

Following the subjective contingency experiences thematised in the autobiographical notes (Section 2), the relationship between subjectivity and contingency is dealt with from a (meta)theoretical perspective in Section 3 of the paper. My reflections on the relationship between subject (de)construction and contingency from the perspective of educational science and VET theory are not “subjective” in the strict sense, but they are highly selective, which (inevitably) sets biographically motivated accents. This applies both to the emphasis on the concept of “contingent subjectivity” and the critical reference to VET theory under aspects of the problem of subjectification, which, in my view, has been neglected in the theoretical discourse in VET research. The theoretical explanations can be read as an interpretative framework for my own professional biography and as an impetus for the recommendation made in the conclusion to deepen the discourse of VET theory around the dimension of the connection between *Bildung*, subjectivity and contingency. This is not about presumptuously suggesting a “paradigm shift” from the “modern” to the “postmodern subject”, but about the concern to stimulate a discussion about the consideration of the contingency perspective in the sense of aspect diversity, and not least about stimulating the exchange between systematic pedagogy and VET science (Sections 4 and 5). I see a serious deficit in the fact that during the reorientation of VET towards the concept of competence at the expense of the concept of *Bildung*, the discourse on the “postmodern subject” was largely disregarded and not systematically included in the self-reflection of VET theory as a distinct approach to the subject concept of modernity.

## **2 Excursus: Autobiographical Notes on the Relationship between Subject (De)Construction and Contingency**

### **2.1 Post-war memories from early childhood – The stranger**

Winter 1946/47. It is bitterly cold. The situation is so present to me that I can only recount it in the present tense. After evacuation from the completely bombed-out Wilhelmshaven, Germany, our mother, a war widow, lives with her two sons, my brother (born 1941) and me (born 1943), in a two-room makeshift home on the edge of an East Frisian farming village. For me, it is not a temporary emergency shelter. It is my living environment for many years. Now, as I tell the story, the kitchen is heated during the day with home-made peat from the nearby moor. The winter evening has fallen. Remnants of peat still smoulder. Flickering candlelight sparsely illuminates the room. Mother sits, naked hands in an empty potato sack, freezing with my brother and me close to the cooker. The three of us are lonely. I feel fear in our mother and a sense of defenselessness in me. Children seek protection and comfort. Our mother is looking for it herself. I have no words for my trepidation. It is a feeling without words. It is a feeling that is difficult to express retrospectively in adult language.

Knocking at the door. Mother does not answer. Glances at the creaking door handle. The outline of a man enters the dark area of our room. Approaching, I recognise two rough dirty hands. Full of raw potatoes. The stranger places them on the table. Mother smiles at him. He looks back. I feel, anxiously fixed on his face, an approach to our mother that I cannot classify. There are no words for this either. Only diffuse echoes from the experienced but not understood world of my early childhood. Mother leaves our kitchen with the stranger. Closes the door behind her. Returns alone after what feels like an infinite amount of time. Puts the potatoes in the potato sack ... and remains silent.

## **2.2 Disruptive family relationships as a potential for development**

Who was my father? I got to know him as my mother's "fallen" husband in the picture frame on the kitchen wall of our makeshift home. A man with black hair cut short back and sides, fine features, large dark eyes and a narrow mouth. He looked different from the men in our neighbourhood. Father's ancestors lived in Poland. He himself was born in 1896 as the son of the miner Johann Kucza in Rudska Kuznica near Katowice. He grew up there, looked after his younger siblings after the death of his mother Sofie (Sofie got into a fatal gun battle during the German-Polish uprisings near Annaberg in May 1921) and moved with his father to Wuppertal-Elberfeld in the 1920s. There he married the daughter of an industrialist in whose company he worked as an unskilled fitter. His wife took her own life. He moved to Wilhelmshaven with my half-sister from this marriage, where he met my mother as a fitter in the navy and married her (1940).

My father never saw me. His last letter to our mother came from the "field" in Brittany. It is dated 29 July 1944. Ten days later, our father died a "heroic death in front of the enemy" in the fortress of Lorient "for Führer, people and fatherland", as the responsible chief of staff and sea captain informed my mother shortly before Christmas in "sincere sympathy" and with a "Heil Hitler" greeting (letter dated 20 December 1944). "The enclosed certificate", the letter said, "is to be an expression that your husband will never be forgotten in the ranks of the Kriegsmarine". Our father made it to an "administrative corporal" when he entered the Western Front at the age of 46. He was apparently quickly forgotten; no information could be given about the location of his grave.

The photo on our living room wall had been professionally framed, as our mother later related, in return for a fee in the form of one of our father's suits. There it hung. Until our stepfather tore it down in a rage and threw it on the floor without a word. The black lacquered frame broke, the glass shattered. Mother gently pulled the torn photograph out of the shards, whimpering. Then she cried out. I stood by in horror, then retreated to our peat shed. The terror gradually gave way to a dull feeling of hope and relief that the father phantom would be gone forever from our daily lives.

The "stranger" from early childhood had become our stepfather in the meantime. "Jonny", that's what our mother called him. Jonny was ten years younger than her, a trained bricklayer. For my mother, as a war widow with two children, apparently a "post-war investment". Jonny's

parents owned a small farm as a sideline near our home. From it we got vegetables and milk, sometimes meat.

The wedding of our mother and Jonny took place in the summer of 1947. In bright sunshine. The bride and groom had dressed up for the occasion. With a costume from mother's first marriage and a borrowed suit for her new husband. And so they stood there. At the fountain in front of our makeshift home. Ready to go to the little village church where the wedding was to take place. My brother had hidden himself. I watched the bride and groom. With a child's wheelbarrow in my hands. Full of beautiful coloured chalk. Mother's eldest sister had given me the wheelbarrow and chalk to calm my presumably hurt feelings. It was not planned what happened now. Nothing in the child's mind consciously guided my action. My legs just ran. With cart and chalk. Straight towards the groom's shin, clad in black, subtly striped but slightly baggy oversized trousers. Jonny jumped into the air. His face contorted in pain. Cursing. Heedless of mother, her sister and the few guests from the neighbourhood. Startled and frightened, I watched the man out of self-control. He pressed himself against the edge of the well. Breathing deeply. Mother stood beside him, reassuring him. Her sister was talking at me. I don't remember what she said, but carefully put the chalk back in the child's wheelbarrow and, for all my fright, had the proud feeling of having won.

I went through life with the "wheelbarrow" of my childhood. Against barriers caused by my origins, but without feelings of shame or a palpable sense of social disadvantage.<sup>4</sup> Resistant to expert attempts at psychoanalysis, I have my stepfather to thank for that. As my practical educator, my stepfather did nothing that pedagogy expects of an "educator". On the contrary, but with success for my further development. He encouraged my stubbornness and my sense of independence from social expectations. In the holidays, I was allowed to accompany him to building sites and smooth mortar joints. For hours. I achieved a high level of perfection. No mortar stuck to the brickwork when I had worked it with my own trowel and jointing tool. My stepfather proudly showed it to his colleagues. On his weekly payday he went to the village pub and got drunk. Mother sent me to fetch him. He allowed only me to. On my left hand I laboriously pushed his heavy bicycle with tool bag; he used my right shoulder to support himself now and then when walking home. On the way, he would periodically ask, "Boy, do you have the bike?". And I was proud to be able to answer his question with "yes". This was followed by praising remarks in broken language. Mother received us at the front door, separated us by telling me to leave, and began a terrible rant. I retreated to the aforementioned peat shed.

I found the separation of my post-war parents regrettable because contact with my stepfather was lost. I found the peace that returned to our makeshift home soothing. Mother soon moved

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<sup>4</sup> This would require further analysis. According to ChatGPT, there is scientific evidence that men tend to downplay or ignore their social background and the resulting disadvantages in order to boost their self-confidence. Sources are not named, but I tend to trust Artificial Intelligence in this case. Annie Ernaux provides an insightful gender-specific view into the emotional world of social exclusion of children and young people from underclass milieus in "The Shame" (2021).

with my brother and me to Emden, her home town. She was born there in 1915, the youngest of seven children. Her parents came from an East Frisian family of farm workers and fishermen.

### **2.3 Outbreaks and breakthroughs in adolescence**

Our mother had found a flat in a shantytown and new housing estate frequented by refugees and evacuees. It is a district that was built in the 1930s as a workers' settlement. As a teenager, I perceived this residential area rather as a settlement of striving new citizens with a tendency towards stuffiness. Most of the men worked in the port of Emden as (unskilled) labourers, planted their front gardens correctly and used their wages to buy a television as early as possible, with which they and their families shared the weekend together.

I went to secondary school in Emden. The negative image of our settlement related to direct and subliminal exclusion. This made contact with my classmates rather uneasy. When I was finally threatened with being kept down and even dismissal from school, I pulled the ripcord. In 1960, at the age of sixteen, I left the secondary school at the top of my class and received Issac Asimov's "Atomic World – Wonder World" as an award. I read the book several times and proudly kept it on my bedside table. Today it stands as a trophy on one of my oversized bookshelves.

The "dazzling" secondary school leaving certificate was initially a "breakthrough" for me. Then came the defeat. It was my decided career wish to become a shipbuilder at Rheinstahl-Nordseewerke and then to follow a technical college course (the technical college did not yet exist) for shipbuilding engineers. My school-leaving certificate at the Realschule gave me hope of being taken on as an apprentice at the Nordseewerke. But after health examination I received a written rejection because of severe short-sightedness and balance problems (which I neither knew about nor felt). The news with the end of my application activities arrived early in the morning. Devastating for me. That same day, in the absence of our mother, I packed some laundry, a sheath knife, some tinned food and my money box into my backpack, strapped a sleeping bag over it and left – without a front door key. For three days, I tried to sign on with an overseas cargo ship. In vain, because my age, lack of parental consent and non-existent passport did not allow it. At night I slept in the grounds of a shipyard where I had worked unloading timber during the school holidays, so that I could afford my scouting equipment, books and trips with the money from really hard child labour. On the third night, I was startled by the guards. I involuntarily left the compound, loitered in the harbour for the rest of the night and went home. It was shortly after six o'clock. I could already see light through the kitchen window. Mother unlocked the door and said with teary eyes, "There you are." Nothing more. We didn't talk about my escape attempt. But it was clear to me that I would not be able to get my life together in this way. By chance, I applied for a job at the local savings bank, where I was immediately accepted, and completed an apprenticeship in municipal savings and loans; with "good" success.

After just a few days, I wanted to quit the apprenticeship. Not because I was dissatisfied with the working environment or the training staff, but because I could not make sense of the job as

a savings bank clerk. What does “meaning” mean in the context of career choice or professional activity? Could a good career counselling have helped me? I don’t know. The decisive factor for me was to complete the apprenticeship. What drove me? I don’t know exactly either. However, training and work have changed me. In academic discourse, there is talk of the importance of VET and gainful employment for the subject, of “subjectification” (Kraus 2022). But who and what is the “subject”? Just a metaphor? But for what?

## **2.4 Social advancement – a statistically “unlikely” educational and professional trajectory**

The latter questions do not or rarely occur in the presentation of the curriculum vitae in professional application procedures. For such purposes, my *curriculum vitae* can be summarised succinctly as follows: Realschulabschluss with Mittlerer Reife (1960), VET in the municipal savings bank and credit system with a “good” degree as a bank clerk (1960 to 1962), attendance of a Business High School (“*Wirtschaftsgymnasium*”), awarded a higher education entrance qualification and a recommendation for a scholarship of German Academic Scholarship Foundation (1963 to 1966), studied economics, law, sociology and business education, graduating as a teacher for business education at the Goethe University Frankfurt (1966 to 1970), research assistant at the Institute of Education and postgraduate studies in Education, Sociology and Economics, awarded a PhD (*summa cum laude*) at the University of Münster (1970 to 1975), assistant in the scientific monitoring of the pilot project Kollegstufe in North Rhine-Westphalia under the direction of Herwig Blankertz (1974 to 1976), Professorships in Business Education at the Ruhr University Bochum (1976/77), in Economics and its Didactics at the newly founded Carl von Ossietzky University Oldenburg (1977 to 1981), in Education with a focus on VET Research at the University of Duisburg-Essen (1981 to retirement in 2008).

This list gives the impression of a rather embarrassing self-referential presentation of success. But it is not meant to be. The “rise” summarised in it against the background of my childhood and youth is only one of many examples of statistically improbable educational and professional careers. Upward mobility through educational processes is not a rare phenomenon; it is virtually described as the “prototype of modernity” (Alheit/Schömer 2009). Statistically, the disadvantage of children and young people from poor and educationally disadvantaged population groups is highly significant. However, as Albert Scherr (2014, 292) puts it, inequality-based educational research oriented towards the “laws of probability” goes hand in hand with a theoretically inadequate understanding of social subjectivity. In other words:

“The also obstinate confrontation of individuals, families and groups with the conditions and experiences imposed on them, their practices, designs and strategies that go beyond the mere acting out of internalised dispositions and the comprehension of social expectations are neglected” (Scherr 2014, 292).

In the case of my own biography, the interpretation is that I wanted to escape the oppressive world of life through educational efforts. That may be. In any case, I never let myself feel

“disadvantaged”. Why? Obviously, the genesis of individual subjectivity and the systematically indeterminable complexity and momentum of upward mobility processes cannot be dealt with by evaluating quantitative individual data. These are “(psycho)social processes that trigger and require a change in habitual dispositions” (Scherr 2014, 303). They can present themselves as burdens but can also become effective as “impetus for reflexive educational processes” (Scherr 2014, 303). The related questions and problems will not be worked through here for the case of one’s own biography, nor will they be explored in depth regarding sociological educational research. Rather, the following remarks concentrate on the pedagogical discourse to discuss the problem of subjectivity, which is virulent in connection with “improbable educational processes” (but not only there!), as announced in the preliminary remarks, from a tendentially pedagogical-systematic point of view and with a view to a “philosophy of occupation-oriented and employment-oriented education”. Here, the connection between subjectivity and contingency is in the foreground as a cognitive guiding interest, and as a possible, from my point of view worthwhile, observer perspective, also regarding my own biography.

### **3 Subjectivity and contingency aspects from an educational science perspective**

#### **3.1 “Chamaeleon” versus “Self”**

The “developmental tasks” mentioned in the biographical notes (cf. Havighurst 1974) concern problems of fragile relationships in primary socialisation, milieu-related conflicts in everyday school life and contingent career choice events. There may be connections between the experiences made consecutively, but not necessarily. Other developments in my biography would not have been impossible under the influence of existentially challenging “dramas” such as the first failed love relationships in adolescence or the death of close relatives.<sup>5</sup> The author’s professional career may look – from the outside – streamlined. However, it is not only based on resilience and his own merits but is indissolubly connected to contingent events in the environment, especially the influences of other people, and in the way that this contingency was experienced in “ecological developmental contexts” (cf. Bronfenbrenner 1981) by the author of the “memory splinters” shared here and produced by the respective (also contingent) “me of perception” (cf. Wiesing 2009). They do not allow insight into the context with which the idea (or ideology?) of subjective identity is connected.

Trying to establish identity through memories and subject constructions in order to ensure consistency in one’s own biography is a questionable, if not hopeless endeavour. It seems to be more productive, albeit more arduous, to learn to understand and accept oneself in “self-referential contingency”. This is how Hans Bokelmann put it. I owe him a great deal for my path from a makeshift home to an alma mater, from a student in precarious circumstances to a

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<sup>5</sup> We will not go into this in detail here. In this respect, these “memoir notes” are ultimately an autobiographical “construction”. This applies to any other self-description as well.

highly remunerated professorship in education.<sup>6</sup> In the summary of his final lecture on the occasion of his retirement, published under the title “The Human – a Chameleon”, it says:

“The sensual-concrete, corporeal human being is multi-partite: without a uniform or even one-sided hold; not an autonomous ‘subject’ ... This undetermined, conditionally free human being is highly vulnerable and touchable, in that he tries to determine himself in the process of delimiting and limiting himself with others.” (Bokelmann 2000, 660)<sup>7</sup>

That was “postmodern” thinking.

In academic literature, postmodern discourse is abstractly said to reflect the comprehensive cultural transformation process of modernity and its consequences for the subject. Jean-Francois Lyotard comes closer to the core of postmodernism with regard to the “postmodern subject”: “What is disconcerting for man is that his (alleged) identity as a ‘human being’ is slipping away from him ...” (Lyotard 1985, 79f).

Hans Bokelmann refrained from abstractly categorising people as “subjects”, even as “autonomous subjects”. And he thus distanced himself from the pedagogical-emphatic claim of “education” as “human’s liberation to themselves”, with which Herwig Blankertz concludes “The History of Pedagogy” (Blankertz 1982, 302).<sup>8</sup> What is “liberation”? And again, penetratingly asked: Who and what is the “self” of this “liberation”? Can one educate or be educated to become a “subject” or “self”? Wouldn't it be more purposeful in the educational process to support adolescents in dealing with the contingency of their world and their lives and to say goodbye to the idea that there is a “course of life” in which the “self”, which is autonomous according to pedagogical claims, directs in the background and underground?

The “self” that Herwig Blankertz speaks of is meant in an emphatic-emancipatory way and implies the ideas of “freedom” and “maturity” in the tradition of European educational thinking. As *Selbstkompetenz* (“self-competence”) it has meanwhile been functionally appropriated in the course of the normative subjectivisation of work (cf. Baethge 1991): transformed into a “self-mastery self”, “which behaves equivalent to the entrepreneurial self and acts under pressure to succeed” (Reichenbach 2004, 197). According to Michael Wimmer (2016), following Michel Foucault, the new forms of subjectivation turn out to be a configuration of power, knowledge and self-technology and are bound to the laws of market efficiency and system maintenance. Against the backdrop of these developments, tendencies are emerging within educational and social science discourses to dispose of the concept of *Bildung* and *Beruf*

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<sup>6</sup> For the academic biography of Hans Bokelmann, see Kutscha (2019a).

<sup>7</sup> Hans Bokelmann uses the chameleon metaphor to refer to Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola and his “Oration on the Dignity of Man” (1486). This is considered one of the most famous texts of the Renaissance. As a pamphlet, it bears witness to a fundamental process of social change and is of current relevance from this point of view. Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola sees the human being as “composed of many things (commixtio pluorum) ... not fixed, not fixable by others, possible and changeable in himself, free in his will. Herein lies its dignity” (Bokelmann 2000, 648).

<sup>8</sup> On Herwig Blankertz’s historiography of pedagogy, see Zumhof/Oberdorf 2022.

from the ballast of both traditional and critical subject references (cf. among others Elster 2007; Voß/Pongratz 1998).

### 3.2 Postmodern critique of the subject versus the autonomous subject of modernity

Looking back on the biography of my childhood and youth and on my professional career suggests the banality: things could have turned out differently. When deciding on studying at the Goethe University Frankfurt, it was not academic considerations but personal circumstances that were decisive. When I graduated as a teacher for business education (1970), I did not opt for the usual pre-service training in teaching at a vocational school, but followed Hans Bokelmann's move to the University of Münster (cf. Kutscha 2019a). Shortly before, Herwig Blankertz had accepted a professorship for education and philosophy at the very same university to follow his former position at the Free University of Berlin (1966 to 1970) (cf. Kutscha 2019b). A short time later, he took over the management of the academic monitoring of the Kollegstufe pilot project in North Rhine-Westphalia, where I then worked as a research assistant. From my point of view, this was a decisive step on the way to my career as a professor.

None of this was predictable or plannable for me. Norbert Ricken worked intensively on a research project on "contingency" following his own dissertation "Subjectivity and Contingency" (1999a).<sup>9</sup> The following remarks on the relationship between subjectivity and contingency focus on his work. Norbert Ricken's contingency studies were triggered by the dispute over self-understanding and justification within (systematic) educational science that had become visible in the pluralism of theories and the problem of the subject involved in it as a basic pedagogical category that is both disputed and (apparently) unresolvable. His approach and the conclusions drawn from it in the concept of "contingent subjectivity" deserve special interest in my view, because the connection between subject and contingency established in this way makes it possible to deconstruct the centrality of the concept of the subject without negating or fading out the inherent educational structure of education implicit in the *pedagogical* concept of the subject or self, especially in Blankertz's work.

First of all, what is it all about when we talk about "contingency"? Ricken takes up the Aristotelian concept of contingency. Accordingly, contingency is something that is neither necessary nor impossible. The given is perceived as non-necessity and with regard to possible otherness. At first glance, this seems banal and, as banality, taboo for the theory and practice of pedagogical action. In any case, dealing with and coping with contingency is rather rarely a topic of (vocational) pedagogy. "The subject of pedagogy is education" is succinctly stated by Herwig Blankertz (1982, 306) in "Geschichte der Pädagogik". In "education", the *subject of* education is also considered, and in Herwig Blankertz's case as an autonomous subject aiming at maturity. To confront his approach (of emancipatory pedagogy) with Norbert Ricken's concept of "contingent subjectivity" includes turning to the "discourse of human self-descriptions" (cf. Ricken 1999b, 211. Ricken chooses two entry points for this: Immanuel Kant's answer to the

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<sup>9</sup> For access to Norbert Ricken's study "Subjectivity and Contingency", I recommend the review of Röhr 2000.

question “What is Enlightenment?” as the “Magna Charta” of the Enlightenment and modernity, which was decisively influenced by it, as well as Michel Foucault as one of the protagonists of postmodern critique of the subject.

Immanuel Kant’s famous “motto” in answering the question “What is Enlightenment?” was: “*Sapere aude!* Have the courage to use your own (reasoning) mind!” (Kant 1783/1964, 53). The underlying understanding of the subject is based on rational self-determination and autonomy. For Immanuel Kant’s reflections, the autonomy of the human being constituted by reason is the legitimation for the dignity of the human being and the subject as an end “in itself”. The related difficulties for the theory of education arise from the fact that at birth humans are not yet capable of acting rationally. Consequently, it is said: “Man can only become a man (human being, G.K.) by education. He is merely what education makes of him” (Kant 1803/1964, 699). Pedagogy thus has a “paradoxical basic structure” (Wimmer 2016, 29); according to Immanuel Kant, it consists in the “greatest problem of education”, “how to combine submission to legal coercion with the ability to make use of one’s own freedom. For coercion is necessary! How do I cultivate freedom under coercion?” (Kant 1803/1964, 711). Education as a process of subjectivation can be characterised by Immanuel Kant as a “not yet, but then” structure. It is based on reason and the autonomy of the subject as a constitutive condition for the possibility of education, but education does not “yet” begin with the mature subject, but with “coercion”, so that “then” through education a person who uses his or her intellect comes into being.

From the broad spectrum of critical objections to Immanuel Kant’s concept of the autonomous subject, we should refer here to fundamental objections from the circle of post-structuralists, namely Michel Foucault’s position. They can be understood as a “plea against the pretentiousness, self-aggrandisement and self-exertion propagated by modernism” (Ricken 1999b, 213) and come to a head in the slogan of the “death of the subject”. Michel Foucault avoids such radicalisation, especially in the late phase of his work, but holds fast to his fundamental critique of “illusions of the autonomous subject” (Meyer-Drawe 2000). As far as Michel Foucault’s engagement with Immanuel Kant is concerned, it is worth mentioning here the small paper “*Qu’est-ce que les Lumières?*” (“What is Enlightenment?”).<sup>10</sup> It was published shortly before his death (1984) and goes back to a lecture given in 1983 at the *Collège de France* in Paris, where Michel Foucault held the chair of “History of Systems of Thought”.

Michel Foucault shares with Immanuel Kant the viewpoint that “enlightenment” is not only the process by which individuals claim their personal freedom of thought and this is guaranteed to them. Enlightenment would only exist if individual and collective free use as well as universal and public use (could) equally come into effect under the primacy of reason. This brings Michel Foucault to the question: How can the *public* use of reason and understanding be ensured? “Enlightenment” becomes a political problem and a question of power from Foucault’s point of view. Modernity under the claim of enlightenment is not a fact, but the desire to “heroise” the present. Heroisation as an “attitude of modernity” is connected with the determination not

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Foucault, M. (1984): *Qu’est-ce que les Lumières*. In: *Dits et Ecrits*, tome IV, 1984, 562–578. Citations in the text refer (without page references) to online: [https://foucault.info/documents/foucault\\_ohhttps://foucault.info/d.questcequeLesLumieres.fr/](https://foucault.info/documents/foucault_ohhttps://foucault.info/d.questcequeLesLumieres.fr/) (download 15.03.2023).

to imagine the present differently than it is; not to transform it by destroying it. Foucault argues for an “attitude” and an “ethos” in which the critique of what we are is both a historical analysis of the limits set for us and a test of their possible transgression.<sup>11</sup> Foucault characterises this philosophical ethos as a “borderline attitude” or “*attitude limite*”, a critique of limits and reflection on them. It is a rejection of what Foucault likes to call the “blackmail” or “*chantage*” of the Enlightenment: moral obligation on the mind of the supposedly autonomous subject with the claim to truth, a claim that cannot be redeemed under historical power relations. In relation to the subject, Michel Foucault poses follow-up questions such as these: How have we constituted ourselves as subjects of our knowledge? How have we constituted ourselves as subjects who exercise or suffer power? How have we constituted ourselves as moral subjects of our actions? Michel Foucault is sceptical about the possibility of answering these questions. “It is true that we must give up hope of ever gaining access to a standpoint that could give us access to complete and definitive knowledge of what might constitute our historical limits” (Foucault 1984).<sup>12</sup>

Against this background, autonomy proves to be, as Norbert Ricken (1999b, 217) notes in his review of Foucault’s approach, “not only a ‘presumed self-illusionment’, but a figure of a subtle exercise of power”. In relation to Immanuel Kant’s assertion of the subject, the dispute about the subject is read and interpreted as a “dispute about its contingency”. For educational science, this results in a fundamentally new way of looking at the problems that arise when the “subject” withdraws from the *direct* “grasp” of education or (more concretely) from the intended influences of the educational actors involved. Relating subjectivity and contingency to each other, as Norbert Ricken does, opens up perspectives not only for a new understanding of human self-interpretations, but also for the reformulation of pedagogical questions and interventions in relation to the different fields of action of pedagogy, such as VET.

### 3.3 “Contingent Subjectivity”

Norbert Ricken counters the modern or postmodern subject concept of Immanuel Kant and Michel Foucault with the concept of “contingent subjectivity”. In this perspective, contingency does not coincide with arbitrariness and caprice, nor is subjectivity configured as a closed self. According to Norbert Ricken, subjectivity must be understood as contingent because – and in this he shares Michel Foucault’s view – the historical reconstruction and the power structures revealed in the process make it clear that the emphatic hopes for practical, theoretical and moral-ethical emancipation associated with it have not (and cannot) ultimately come true. This underlines the ambivalence of the Enlightenment elaborated in Michel Foucault’s example of Immanuel Kant and the deconstruction of the “modern subject”.

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<sup>11</sup> Foucault treats the connection between enlightenment and critique as an “individual and at the same time collective attitude” and “the question of knowledge with regard to domination” in a theses-like manner in his posthumously published lecture “Qu’est-ce que critique?” (Foucault 1990).

<sup>12</sup> Original: “... Il est vrai qu'il faut renoncer à l'espoir d'accéder jamais à un point de vue qui pourrait nous donner accès à la connaissance complète et définitive de ce qui peut constituer nos limites historiques.”

But how can subjectivity and contingency be linked in the concept of “contingent subjectivity” without again running into contradictions? Norbert Ricken argues for keeping the understanding of the human being in its anthropological constitution and with regard to its subjectivity “open as a problem” (Ricken 1999b, 220). In this way

“Understanding from a contingency-theoretical perspective first as a ‘practical self-relationship’ of having to relate to oneself and thus to everyone and everything else, without being able to extend oneself or others like others to a fixed point” (Ricken 1999b, 221).

The “relationalisation” addressed here constitutes “subjectivity” as a modality of human development. Thus, the subject does not disappear, as postulated by the radical post-structuralists, but it is not directly accessible as an “I-subject”, neither by the subject itself nor by others. In other words, “the self cannot be understood as an original I, but only as a self that narrates itself in the I” (Ricken 1999b, 223).<sup>13</sup>

Norbert Ricken’s concept of contingent subjectivity is unmistakably influenced by the “humanism of the other person” in Emanuel Levinas (1989). In contrast to the solipsistic structure of a subject centred in itself and founding itself as autonomous, Emanuel Levinas attempts to gain a different orientation that is not grounded in the self. It is centred on the subject’s responsibility for the other. Even though Norbert Ricken critically examines the unconditional fixation of the subject on the “other” and distances himself from it, in his concept the reference to the “other” is constitutive as a prerequisite for the development of subjectivity. Since this applies not only to the “I” or “self” of the subject, but also to the “I” or “self” of the others, and since human beings understand themselves only in relation to other human beings, contingent subjectivity can be described neither as autonomy nor as heteronomy, but must be understood as the non-definite “in-between” of “I” and “other” (Ricken 1999b, 224) and must form the basis of pedagogical thinking and action (Ricken 1999b, 224).

The core thesis of Norbert Ricken’s remarks on the pedagogical implications of contingent subjectivity is: “becoming different instead of becoming self”. It is not only about “relationality” and “conditionality” of the human being, but about the possibility and enabling of becoming different, it is about “self-transformation through experience of the world” (Ricken 1999b, 231). Referring back to Hans Bokelmann (2000), whose final lecture is referred to once again at this point, the question follows:

“How can children and young people learn themselves, that is: discover what they want to be and ask who they are; and in one with this: how they can experience, judge and help shape ‘realities’ that they are not - other people, man-made and political orders as well as non-human nature? Learning about the world and learning about oneself are what make pedagogical action possible.” (Bokelmann 2000, 652)

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<sup>13</sup> The attempt of my autobiographical notes is to be understood in this sense.

The discussion is therefore about contingent subjectivation as a learning process. Learning essentially touches on the dependence on others, who make learning as becoming different possible in the first place. According to Norbert Ricken, one's own constitution in the learning process cannot be observed from the outside and "objectified", so to speak; it can only be told as a life story and is thus constantly related to self-understanding (Ricken 1999b, 231).

#### **4 Contingent subjectivity as a challenge for the discourse on VET theory**

My studies of VET at the Goethe University Frankfurt (1966 to 1970) took place during the turning point from the "classical" theory of VET, based on Eduard Spranger's theory of cultural education, to the "reorientation of the scientific theory of VET" (cf. Lipsmeier 1975)<sup>14</sup>. This process was superimposed on the social science paradigm dispute between representatives of critical theory (cf. Adorno *et al.* 1969) and the critical rationalism advocated by Karl Popper (1966). The cardinal question of VET theory was the challenge of *Bildung* through *Beruf*. Spranger had regarded it as solved by conceiving of "*Beruf*" in its wholeness as a "cultural task" and justifying it in this sense in educational theory as a "means to personal self-fulfilment" (Spranger 1920/1975, 47). Eduard Spranger's cultural-philosophical understanding of *Beruf* and the associated approach to vocational *Bildung* had already met with determined criticism in the 1920s, for example in Anna Siemsen's (1926, 163) criticism of the idealisation of *Beruf* and the harmony assumed between "inner *Beruf*" and "outer *Beruf*" with complete neglect of advancing industrial employment. Nevertheless, the cultural-philosophical theory of VET was able to maintain its legitimacy until after the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany (cf. Kutscha 2017).

In view of the automation of industrial work processes in the 1950s, the question intensified as to whether and in what forms *Beruf* could still be a viable reference point for theory and research in the field of VET. According to Schwarzlose (1954), the belief in the educational power of the vocational mindset was pure illusion in the industrial world of work. And apart from *Beruf*, *Bildung* was not a "magic word" for "saving people" either, said Heinrich Abel (1963, 196), professor of VET at the Institute of Vocational Education in Frankfurt and later Darmstadt. Heinrich Abel was one of the initiators of empirical VET research in Germany and one of the fiercest opponents of both cultural-philosophical VET theory on the one hand and its critics such as Herwig Blankertz on the other hand.

In connection with the scientific-theoretical definition of the position of VET, the dispute between Heinrich Abel (1965) and Herwig Blankertz (1965) should be highlighted with Antonius Lipsmeier (1975, 246ff). Heinrich Abel, in his habilitation thesis on the "Occupational problem in in-company training and VET schools in Germany"<sup>15</sup> (1963), was guided by the following thesis: "Pedagogical thinking and action have their field of activity in the middle space between normative demands and historically as well as empirically

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<sup>14</sup> The following remarks refer to the discourse spectrum of VET theory in the Federal Republic of Germany; on the theory and practice of VET in the German Democratic Republic see Pott (2021).

<sup>15</sup> Original: "Berufsproblem im gewerblichen Ausbildungs- und Schulwesen Deutschlands"

established facts” (Abel 1963, 3). This was a rejection of the attempt to legitimise vocational pedagogy and vocational *Bildung* with the possibilities of VET theory. Abel placed approaches based on Eduard Spranger under “suspicion of ideology”; he attributed only “academic significance” to Blankertz’s position on educational theory. Herwig Blankertz, on the other hand, did not base his criticism on Abel’s historical and empirical findings, but on what he saw as his unreflected processing of these findings in terms of educational theory. In his later evaluation of the Abel-Blankertz controversy, Hermann Lange questioned Herwig Blankertz’s “transcendental claim to the supra-temporal validity of his subject-theoretical position” and the accompanying “deficit in social theory” (Lange 1999, 14). From a policy perspective, Jürgen Zabeck, University of Mannheim, accused Herwig Blankertz of a “neo-Marxist perspective” with – quoting Herwig Blankertz from Theodor W. Adorno’s “Theory of Half-education” – “humanity without status and overprivilege” (Adorno 1962, 172). Jürgen Zabeck countered the “mere mind game” of emancipatory pedagogy (Zabeck 2009, 133) with the guiding principle of the “system-theoretical VET” he advocated: “Absolute priority is given to the integration of people into the employment system” (Zabeck 1975, p. 158).

Herwig Blankertz and Jürgen Zabeck largely agreed in their criticism of the idealised concept of *Beruf* in cultural-philosophical VET theory (cf. Kutscha 2020). The core of the controversy between the critical-emancipatory and the system-theoretical-functionalist paradigm was the fixation on the postulate of subjective maturity (oriented towards Immanuel Kant) by Herwig Blankertz on the one hand and the primacy of system-adequate functionality by Jürgen Zabeck on the other. Such a polarisation proved to be of no further use for the development of VET theory. On the one hand, critical-emancipatory VET theory cannot ignore the fact that “*Bildung*” (as “equipment for behaviour in the world”, according to Saul B. Robinsohn 1975/1967) presupposes connectivity in relation to societal, and especially also company performance expectations and must take into account the inherent dynamics of the corresponding environmental systems such as the employment system. On the other hand, it must be considered that the functioning of the company’s social system and the development of the economy and technology are more than ever tied back to subjects who must be *able* to act independently as well as being *willing* to act independently and take responsibility for the consequences of their actions. To paraphrase Helmut Heid (2018, 63): “In principle, the development of every production technology and every employment organisation must be oriented ‘towards people’ ...”

In a much-noted essay on “Paradigm Pluralism as a Scientific Programme”<sup>15</sup>, Jürgen Zabeck (1978) attempted to point out a constructive perspective for overcoming the paradigm dispute in VET research. This attempt was not aimed at “settling” the methodological disputes about paradigmatic differences in VET but was directed at “giving new impetus to the process of knowledge with a principled recognition of the intra-disciplinary differentiation that had occurred in the meantime ...” (Zabeck 2009, 123). To Jürgen Zabeck’s regret, this failed. Not because there continued to be fundamental differences in the research methodological approaches of VET research, but because – as Jürgen Zabeck (2009, 121) assesses it in retrospect – “an [apparently previously lively] interest in scientific theory had died out”, the

“basis for methodological disputes” also crumbled. The shift towards competence research and the (tendential) replacement of the concept of *Bildung* by the concept of competence have reinforced this development since the 1980s. However, this has meant that the reference to the subject implicit in the educational concept and the theoretical questions that are indispensable from a pedagogical point of view have lost attention and VET theory has lost relevance within VET. Cum grano salis: an inflated concept of Bildung was disseminated but no further theoretical development took place. Apodictically, the memorandum of the German Research Foundation “VET research at the universities of the Federal Republic of Germany”<sup>16</sup> (1990) stated: “VET research stands under the claim of the Bildung principle” (Zabeck 2009, 63). This postulate still stands. But without reference to education theory and thus subject theory. Whether “*Bildung*” or “competence”, in both cases the question arises as to which anthropology underlies the influence on the VET process and which consequences in VET research are to be drawn from this.

Ingrid Lisop took aim at the deficient state of VET theory more sharply and less “diplomatically” than this in retrospect:

“In my opinion, VET has not made any discipline-specific overall contribution to the theory of Bildung ... If one disregards the so-called classics – all of whom are not VET educators – VET theory can at best be summarised as a conglomerate of claim formulations on so-called *Beruflichkeit* (vocationality) ...” (Lisop 2009, 80f)

In a nutshell: “fetishism instead of theory” (Lisop 2009, 80). Ingrid Lisop’s accusation of fetishism is understood as a critique of ideology. The *categorical* connection between *Bildung*, *Beruf* and subject prevents access to the “object field” of VET. In contrast, the “dynamic concept of the subject” in the sense of “subjectivation” as a process of coping with and processing contingent life and (especially) occupational experiences could (in my view) contribute to looking at the practical-existential problems of adolescents in relationships with other people in primary and secondary socialisation or with themselves. Fundamental to this in the case of VET would be neither to negate the immanent “contradiction in the concept of vocational Bildung” (Schapfel-Kaiser 2003) nor to philosophise it “up” or “away” as a dialectical synthesis, but to relate and process it in “learning on and learning with biography in vocational Bildung” to concrete experiences in the life course and specifically in the work process. Franz Schapfel-Kaiser uses practical approaches in the field of tension between “functional conditioning of the individual and their subject development” to show *Bildung* potentials that avoid the “danger of an exaggerated concept of the subject” and try to critically connect everyday social relations as well as social structures and demands with the biographical learning process.

If *Bildung*, and thus also *Bildung* in the medium of the vocation, represents a “moment of subject constitution” in the area of overlap between individual development and social reproduction (cf. Schäfer 2019, 16f), then “contingent subjectivity” refers to precisely this context. It is not a counter-concept to the *Bildung* concept of emancipatory VET theory, but a critical extension by the dimension of “becoming different instead of becoming self”. The

interaction of self and world in the educational process, to which Wilhelm von Humboldt referred, has been received in critical VET theory – especially by Herwig Blankertz – preferably in the perspective of self-determination or maturity and the critical distance to social conditions. This is a step forward compared to approaches of VET theory based on cultural philosophy and functionalism. However, the emancipatory VET theory tends to focus individual maturity on the autonomy of the rational subject.

In the concept of contingent subjectivity, “biographical learning” (cf. Schapfel-Kaiser 2003) is constituted by the dialectical relationship between the individual and society but is also confronted with contradictions that result from “becoming different” as an anthropological difference of human genesis. One could thus describe the connection between relationality and conditionality underlying the concept of “contingent subjectivity” as a “double dialectic”: as a dialectic of the relationship between society and the individual on the one hand and its “dialectical” constitution as contingent subjectivity on the other. Contingency is not only to be understood as an increase in “freedom”, as Herwig Blankertz assumes in his “definition of Bildung as the freedom to judge and criticise” (Blankertz 1974, 68), but also as a “compulsion” to face the non-identical in dealing with oneself as well as with others and the Other.

The relevance of the contingency pedagogical approach in the theory and practice of VET is obvious in many areas and at different levels. The different preconditions of career choice that cannot be influenced by adolescents, the confrontation of trainees and employed people with the dynamic changes in the world of work, the inclusion of people with a migration background in the national system of initial and continuing VET, the breaks in educational and employment biographies caused by unforeseeable structural crises (e.g., dropped out of training, unemployment) and, last but not least, the challenges of the climate crisis, especially with regard to the unforeseeable burdens on the younger generation, should be emphasised. All these cases involve unforeseeable changes in the environment of individuals, and in all environmental changes, the people involved in and affected by them are confronted with having to cope with contingency and, in the process, face the challenges of changing themselves. Paradoxically formulated: Contingency means having to live and learn with the non-necessary as well as the non-impossible.

## **5 Concluding remarks, perspectives and open questions**

### **5.1 Contingency and moral responsibility**

The present text, for all its imperfections and need for criticism, is an attempt to argue for the necessity of having to ask the question of the subjectivity of growing people in upbringing and educational processes. However, in the search for theoretically viable and practically suitable answers, VET theory should withdraw the concept of the “subject” as a “definitional assertion of substance” (Ricken 1999b, 209) and turn to theoretical and practice-related questions that are directed towards overcoming contingency and making it possible to be and become different. Becoming “different” here means the ability of the individual to develop, even

change, in social interaction with others and to deal *responsibly* with the contingent environment and one's own contingency. The postulate of "maturity" will also have to be examined from the perspective of contingency education. This includes questions about reasonable forms of being unreasonable and the insight that maturity cannot be had as "such", but – if at all – can only be acquired and made possible in *graduated form* as lifelong self-enlightenment in interaction with others. The central problem that arises in the subjectification and contingency theory orientation of educational science as a whole and especially in the case of VET research is the question of how subjectivity and contingency are to be related to each other under the claim of *moral responsibility*. Talking about "contingency" without agreeing on moral obligations in the context of human coexistence is leading nowhere. According to my plea, VET must not avoid this problematic if it does not want to swim in the wake of a "society of singularities" with the approach of contingent subjectivity (cf. Reckwitz 2017) and face the social challenges in the "age of resilience" in the production of a world worth living in (Rifkin 2022).<sup>16</sup>

## 5.2 Contingent subjectivity and empirical VET research

There are not many fields of research in the humanities in which so many productive and closely linked interdisciplinary studies (which have not been referenced in VET research, though) have been presented in recent years as in the field of subject research (cf. Kreknin/Marquardt 2016). This also applies specifically to questions about the "digitalised subject" in the border area between fiction and the everyday world and the diverse practices of new *subject construction that are developing in it* – also and not least in the process of work. The orientation of VET theory towards the concept of "contingent subjectivity" would, however, only advance VET if it were made accessible to *empirical* VET research, examined by it in a multi-faceted interdisciplinary network (or at least exchange) and translated into practical recommendations and suggestions. Biographical research plays an important role here in the sense of specifying and differentiating empirical data (cf. Chang 2022; Krüger/Marotzki 2006). It should be emphasised that research into "contingent subjectivity" in the process of VET and work cannot be adequately dealt with according to the rules of positivist empiricism. Behind the positivist rule that the subjects must be released from the research situation in the same condition as they came in lies a statistical and static model of interaction in the research context (cf. Fuchs 1971; Kutscha 1974). A one-sided normative commitment to positivist research standards cannot do justice to the scientific perception and processing of problems of contingent subjectivity.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The subtitle of Rifkin's book (2022) is "Reimagining Existence on a Rewilding Earth". Rifkin uses "Rewilding Earth" to express the restoration of an ecologically compatible environment and the concern to rethink every aspect of our existence in order to revitalise life on earth in a humane sense or to make it worth living. It is in this sense that I understand the reference to Jeremy Rifkin and the challenge to link the concept of "contingent subjectivity" with the indispensable question of the "meaning" of a common but "contingent world". Vocational and work-oriented pedagogy should not dispense with this discourse.

<sup>17</sup> This is not meant to be a principled objection to the paradigm of critical rationalism (cf. Popper 1966; Beck 2010), but rather a reservation about the associated methodological claim to exclusivity (cf. Kutscha 2010).

### 5.3 Contingent subjectivity from an employment-oriented perspective

As already indicated with reference to research on biographical learning in VET (cf. Schapfel-Kaiser 2003), subjectification and subject-oriented VET have been attracting attention in various areas of VET research (in the broadest sense) for some time. However, the predominant reference to *vocationally* organised occupation for the German-speaking area clearly limits the spectrum of questions relevant to subjectification. This applies, for example, to the segment of informal or to the internationally different forms of non-vocationally standardised occupation. With the approach of “employment-oriented Bildung” (cf. Kraus 2006), problems of subjectification are no longer exclusively related to the concept of vocationally organised (initial and continuing) education and work but are expanded and deepened in the “perspective of the subject on employment” (Kraus 2022, 515)<sup>18</sup>. This perspective includes all forms of employment-related forms of qualification and therefore enhances the international comparative discourses. Furthermore, it is enriching for cross-disciplinary connections, for example in fields of sociological research on the subjectification of work (cf. e.g., Böhle 2017; Bosančić et. al. 2022; Geimer/Amling/Bosančić 2018).

### 5.4 Responsible and solidary action versus pseudo-sovereignty of “autonomous subjects of action”

Katrin Kraus (2022, 516) emphasises an “ambivalent concept of the subject”, which is based on an image of man that is not characterised by the self-referentiality of the subject, but by “sociality” (cf. following Foucault: Bosančić et. al. 2022, quoted after Kraus 2022, 517). Points of contact with the topic of “contingent subjectivity” are obvious. This would have to be examined and investigated in more detail for different occupational and activity areas. For example, the cross-occupational subjectification issue presents itself specifically differently for sales staff in retail (cf. Thole 2021) than in care work (cf. Friese 2018). Moreover, it should be clarified which aspects of the contingency problem correspond to existing theoretical and research approaches under other names. As an example, the concept of transformational learning (Mezirow 1997) should be mentioned. It is received, among other things, in connection with professional action in geriatric nursing education and refers to the “ability to shape problem solutions cooperatively and to change oneself progressively” (Weber-Frieg 2018, 82). This approach is also related to the “non-necessary-not-impossible” component of work situations and subjectification requirements, but is strongly oriented towards identity and subject orientation in the sense of enabling the professionalism of autonomous subjects of action and thus fails to recognise prerequisites of responsible action in contingent situations of action. Biographical (breakdowns) or cumulative resignation in everyday work under the influence of unmastered contingency experiences are largely excluded.

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<sup>18</sup> Practical aspects and consequences cannot be discussed in detail here. Katrin Kraus rightly points to the challenges of “integrating different areas of life” as starting points for employment-oriented Bildung (Kraus 2022, 524f).

## 5.5 VET theory as discourse instead of “grand narrative”

How subjectification and contingency can be responsibly implemented in practical training, further education and work processes and systematically related to each other on a theoretical level and methodologically reflexively processed should be a challenge for VET research in conjunction with other disciplines. In this context, reflection as a philosophical discourse on fundamental questions of vocational and employment-oriented *Bildung* is indispensable (cf. Ketschau 2018). “The difficulty of the situation is to continue to preserve subjectivity as a critical category of understanding co-human practice without succumbing to the seduction of fantasies of omnipotence” (Meyer-Drawe 2000, 152). This is one side of the complexity of subjectivity and contingency; the other concerns the appropriation and corruption of subjectivity and its sense of self (Bolder/Dobischat 2009) for the wear and tear of human potential through the prioritisation of economic efficiency and power.<sup>19</sup> The relationship between these disparate and variously interconnected “sides” of *Bildung*, work and subjectivity requires permanent observation and discursive clarification, not a final VET theory “superstructure”. Despite all reservations about the speculative aberrations of the postmodern movement, VET theory is, in my view, well advised (cf. Geißler/Kutscha 1992) to follow Jean-Francois Lyotard’s report on “postmodern knowledge” in the insight:

“In contemporary society and culture, that is, post-modern society, post-industrial culture, the question of the legitimacy of knowledge arises in a different way. The grand narrative has lost its credibility ...” (Lyotard 1986, 112)

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<sup>19</sup> On the political-economic dimension neglected in VET theory as a counterpart to the contingency theory approach see Kutscha (2019c).

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