Let us assume for now that we at least sometimes interpret, explain and predict one another’s behaviour by employing something like FP. We do not attribute beliefs and desires to other people in a vacuum. When we do so, we take for granted not only that the other person is already in a world but that we are both in the same world. Furthermore, it is not simply a matter of assuming the same shared context in every instance. Aspects of an interpreter’s situation will be shared with that of the interpreted to varying degrees and interpersonal understanding may be aided considerably by an appreciation of what both parties have in common. This need not take the form of an analogy between self and other, which starts with ‘I take the world to have a certain character’ and moves from this to ‘he takes the world to have the same character’. Instead, as I will show, it can take the form ‘the world has this character’ and ‘we are both in it’. In other words, an understanding that at least some aspects of a situation are shared is not assigned to others in the form of a belief system but presupposed. For example, when trying to pass a person in a busy shop, one might think ‘he wants to get to the checkout’ but one would not ordinarily think ‘he believes he is in a shop’. That we are in a shop is not a belief that each party attributes to the other. It is an appreciation of how things are that both assume each other to share in advance of attributing any mental states. In considering the scope of FP, it is important to ascertain how much, if anything, of the burden of social understanding, interaction and coordination can be taken up by an understanding of shared situations.

The aim of this chapter is to offer preliminary descriptions of (a) the manner in which we take the world for granted when interpreting others, (b) how we understand more specific situations in which people are encountered, prior to our deploying anything like FP, and (c) some of
the different ways in which people are experienced and understood in the context of various situations. To do so, I will focus on phenomenological descriptions offered by Heidegger, Gurwitsch and Schutz. It is these descriptions that originally kindled my reservations about FP. I will begin with a discussion of Heidegger’s account of our ‘Being-in-the-world’, from which I will extract some key features of (a). I will then consider Gurwitsch’s account of situations and roles, thus addressing (b). Finally, I will turn to (c) and outline some distinctions that Schutz makes between different ways of understanding and relating to other people. The points I draw from these three phenomenologists will be further developed in Chapters 4 to 6, where I will also appeal to complementary scientific findings.

The commonsense world

It might seem that the world, as ordinarily understood, is trivially easy to describe. It is a realm of objects located in space and time, most of which are inanimate. In this world, there is a sub-class of entities that have propositional attitudes. Hence we have FP, an ability that is distinct from our more general understanding of the world and dedicated to dealing with these entities. Of course, FP can only be successfully applied if it operates in conjunction with a more general ability to navigate the world, given that minded agents are also spatiotemporally located objects and subject to the same causal influences as inanimate objects. Thus an understanding of the physical world is required in order to predict and explain their behaviour. However, FP is still a discrete and more specifically applicable ability, rather than something that is inextricable from an appreciation of the world more generally. Predicting people is a matter of applying FP plus a more general understanding of things.

But is it really the case that the world, as we ordinarily understand it, is just a realm of causally interacting entities residing in space and time? If this sounds too simplistic, the question can be rephrased: Is the world, as taken for granted in everyday life, something that is comprehensively described by the physical sciences? Some suggest not. For example, Baker (1999) argues that such a view is highly misleading. She claims that ‘commonsense psychology’, construed in FP terms, is not a discrete ability that we apply to only a sub-class of entities within the world. Rather, it is inextricable from an appreciation of the ‘commonsense world’ more generally; it is ‘part and parcel of the comprehensive commonsense framework of persons and medium-sized objects in terms of