Eccentric Investigations of (Post-)Humanity*

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Abstract

In 1928, a German zoologist and philosopher named Helmuth Plessner (1892-1985) published a book titled *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch: Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie*. Almost a 100 years later, Jos de Mul has edited a collection of 26 new essays on Plessner's text, titled *Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology: Perspectives and Prospects*. The volume offers a variety of advanced discussions of its theme. In this review essay of de Mul's collection, I provide a critical overview of the contents of the new volume and some speculations on the possible motives and future directions of the current "Plessner renaissance."

1. Introduction

In 1928, a German zoologist and philosopher named Helmuth Plessner (1892-1985) published a book titled *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch:*

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Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie [The Stages of Organic Being and the Human: Introduction to Philosophical Anthropology]. Almost 100 years later, Jos de Mul (2014) has edited a collection of 26 new essays on Plessner's text, titled *Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology: Perspectives and Prospects*.[1] The volume offers a variety of advanced discussions of its theme. Here, I provide both a critical overview of the contents of de Mul's new collection and some speculations about the possible motives and future developments of the "Plessner renaissance."

I first give (a) a brief overview of Plessner's *Die Stufen*, followed by (b) discussion of one likely motive for increased interest in Plessner's work in recent years; (c) a review of essays in the new volume that (1) assess the strengths and weaknesses of Plessner's views in comparison with those of canonical figures in the history of late-modern philosophy, such as Immanuel Kant, Henri Bergson, Martin Heidegger, Ernst Cassirer, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty; (2) offer contributions to contemporary social and political theory; and (3) apply Plessner's concepts to contemporary discussions of technology and (4) of neuroscience; and, finally, (d) some suggestions about possible future directions for Plessner studies.

2. Plessner's Text

Helmuth Plessner (1892-1985) studied zoology and philosophy at Heidelberg, completing a doctorate in philosophy in 1918, at Erlangen, and a habilitation in Cologne in 1920, writing on transcendental truth and the critique of judgment, respectively. His dissertation and habilitation showed a specialized competence in the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant. He held academic appointments in Germany before and after World War II, and in the Netherlands, as an exile, during the war. Most of his published work is now collected in a 10-volume *Gesammelte Werke* (Suhrkamp 2003), but less than 20% of this material has been translated into English, the most prominent translations being those of *Lachen und Weinen. Eine Untersuchung nach den Grenzen menschlichen Verhaltens* (1941) [*Laughing and Crying: A Study of the Limits of Human Behavior* (1970)] and *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft. Eine Kritik des sozialen Radikalismus* (1924) [*The Limits of Community: A Critique of Social Radicalism* (1999)]. The most important works that remain untranslated into English include *Die Einheit der Sinne: Grundlinien einer Aesthesiologie der Geistes* (1923) [The Unity of Sense: Groundlines of an

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Aesthesiologie of Mind], *Macht und menschlichen Natur* (1935) [Power and Human Nature], *Die verspätete Nation: Über die politische Verfügbarkeit bürgerlichen Geistes* (1935/1959) [The Delayed Nation: On the Political Availability of the Bourgeois Spirit], and the main subject of this new collection, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* (1928). An English translation of the last text will be published in 2016 with Fordham University Press.[2]

Plessner's *Die Stufen* is composed of seven chapters.[3] The first two establish the problems that the text is intended to solve. In the wake of 19th-century developments in the human sciences—such as biological anthropology, ethnology, historical linguistics, psychophysics, and physiological psychology—there is a need, Plessner argues, for a revised hermeneutics based on anthropology, an anthropology that includes a fundamental conception or model of human beings' "setting" [*Stellung*] in nature.[4] Plessner also describes a fundamental need to overcome the "Cartesian alternative": that is, the view that all objects, events, or states may, and must, be classified as "mental" and "inner," on one hand, or "physical" and "outer," on the other.[5]

Chapters 3 and 4 of *Die Stufen* present and distinguish the modes of appearance of non-living and living things, through an analysis of the functioning of their "inner" and "outer" sides, as well as their "cores" and "boundaries." Plessner claims a distinction between the manifestation of these features in the cases of living and non-living things. Living things, unlike non-living ones, negotiate their boundaries and are responsible for them;

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[2] Meanwhile, a working translation produced by the cultural anthropologist and sinologist Scott Davis has been circulating through informal channels for many years, through Davis's generosity about its distribution.

[3] For more detailed discussion of Plessner's argument in *Die Stufen*, see De Mul's introduction to the volume under review; Grene (1974, chap. 18 and 19); and Honenberger (2015a).

[4] "Without philosophy of human beings, no theory of human life-experience in the cultural sciences [*Geisteswissenschaften*]. Without philosophy of nature, no philosophy of human beings" (Plessner [1928] 1965, chap. 1, §3). And, "Insofar as [philosophy] poses the problem of anthropology, it also raises the problem of the mode of existence of human beings and their setting [*Stellung*] in the whole of nature" (Plessner [1928] 1965, chap. 1, §2). This language of a "setting" in nature is productively ambiguous between a physical "setting" (e.g., an organism in an environment) and a logical "setting" (i.e., a place within an ordered series of possible types of being). For more on the way this ambiguity has functioned in the tradition of philosophical anthropology, see Honenberger (2015c).

[5] In his "Introduction" (16), De Mul usefully notes a parallel between Plessner's challenge to the "Cartesian alternative" and Gilbert Ryle's challenge to Cartesian dualism in *The Concept of Mind* (1949).

their boundary states are dynamic and self-referential in a way that those of non-living things are not. Plessner's analysis of the distinction between living and non-living things is conducted in both a phenomenological and ontological register (similar to Heidegger's "phenomenological ontology" in *Sein und Zeit* [1927] 1965) and engages with the views of Wolfgang Köhler and Hans Driesch on the same topic.

In chapters 5 and 6, Plessner details and distinguishes different "stages" of organic life on the basis of this newly acquired boundary-analytic framework. These stages are presented as different forms of positionality—that is, different modes of existence of beings in which inner–outer negotiation is constitutive for their way of being, and which are dynamically related to their environments through their boundaries. The main distinction Plessner articulates in these chapters is that between the positionality typical of plants—which lack a center and are relatively simply and non-reflexively related to the flows of energy and matter that cross their bodily boundaries in processes of nutrition, growth, and propagation—and the positionality typical of animals, which have a center (to a greater or lesser degree in different animals) and are related to their environments through more mediate and reflexive, internally folded, and thereby more independent structures, such as complex internal organ systems.

The final, seventh chapter has tended to draw the most attention from readers and commentators. Here, Plessner takes up the original problem of articulating the setting of human beings within nature by articulating the characteristics of human positionality in comparison with that of other forms of life. Plessner's main proposal here is that human positionality is *ex-centric* (hereafter "eccentric" to match the preferred translation in the volume under review). This eccentric positionality represents an additional stage of reflexivity and mediation, beyond that exhibited in animal "centricity" in general. To be "eccentrically" positioned is to be posited and positable outside of one's bodily center. It is as if the "inner" side exhibited by living things in general, were capable of occupying locations outside the organism's bodily boundaries. Accepting the distinction-yet-relation between spatial centricity and phenomenological (or "property") centricity, as articulated in earlier chapters, helps to defuse the apparent paradoxicality of this assertion, though it should be noted that Plessner, in the grand Hegelian tradition, is no enemy of paradoxes. The center of an eccentric being can be "out there," amidst the "outer" world. Plessner further elucidates this thesis through a description of the ways in which human technical artifacts, social environments, language, and history are both scaffolds and symptoms of this eccentric positionality.[6]

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[6] See Honenberger (2015a), for more detail.

This chapter includes Plessner's oft-discussed notions of the *Mitwelt* [mutual world] (Ch. 7, §2); the anthropological ground laws [*anthropologische Grundgesetze*] of "natural artificiality," "mediated immediacy," and the "utopian standpoint" (Ch. 7, §3; cf. also Grene 1974, chap. 19, and sub-section 4.3, "Eccentric Approaches to Technology," below); and the thesis that an eccentric form of embodiment is coextensive with personhood (Ch. 7, §1).

3. A Motive for the Recent "Plessner Renaissance"

Some of the intellectual motivations for the current turn toward Plessner can be discerned in the set of topics addressed in this volume, which are summarized in its breakdown into the three main sections of "Biology," "Culture," and "Technology." Although 20th-century thought has been concerned with all three of these topics, even at times obsessed with them, they retain something of the status of "unsolved problems" now and for the foreseeable future. If anything in 20th-century thought remains "unresolved," it is the interpretation of and orientation to these concepts. Ongoing changes in biological and anthropological science, in human cultural formations and developments, and in material technologies frequently "move the goal" of our philosophical interpretation of these phenomena. Thus, traditional philosophical and human-scientific projects of theoretical mastery are especially challenged in these domains. Plessner's *Die Stufen* and other works provide unusually ambitious and systematic conceptual tools for charting these waters. Although Plessner's approach may not provide the complete mastery that the traditional philosopher or social scientist would seek, it may plausibly serve as a stalking horse for anything that could succeed where it fails. A judgment of this kind, made implicitly or explicitly, seems to be a central factor in the current "Plessner renaissance."

The essays in this volume show a focused interest in concepts and approaches that can provide systematic insight into the combined functioning and status of various "material" conditions of traditional objects of philosophical concern—objects such as value, knowledge, perception, experience, identity, society, and history. These material conditions include those often classified as "biological" (or "evolutionary," "organic," "ecological," and "embodied"), "technological" (or "mediatic," "artifactual," or "material-cultural"), and "social" (or "cultural" and "historical"). Some authors in this volume express these concerns in terms of an inquiry into the "material a priori," a term borrowed from Plessner (Plessner [1923] 2003, [1928] 1965; see, for instance, de Mul's "Introduction" and the chapters by Ebke and

Kockelkoren, discussed below).[7] Even when they do not explicitly mention this material a priori, however, an awareness of a pressing intellectual need to better fathom the operation (and limits) of this diverse set of material conditions of our lives, reflections, societies, and futures, motivates the ingenuity of many of these contributions.

4. Review of Chapters

Although the volume's organization into the three parts of "Biology," "Culture," and "Technology" is well motivated, I will discuss the essays under a slightly different set of headings here, in the interest of bringing out some other features of its contents. Due to space constraints, I will not discuss every essay in the volume.[8] (On both points, compare de Mul's own introduction to the volume.)

4.1. Plessner among the Giants: Kant, Bergson, Merleau-Ponty, and Cassirer

Twentieth-century European philosophy is poor neither in systems, nor in clashes and oppositions between these systems. Some essays in this volume provide critical comparisons between Plessner's *Die Stufen*, on one hand, and the most influential of these systems, on the other. In particular, essays by

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[7] The history of the expression "material a priori" deserves further study. It appears in Edmund Husserl and Max Scheler's work as well as Plessner's. Whereas Husserl, Scheler, and Plessner appear to conceive of the material a priori primarily through contrast with the formal a priori, treating both as contents of consciousness, Plessner and the commentators of this volume sometimes construe the material a priori as pertaining to the material conditions of logical operations and ontological statuses, conditions that are not necessarily consciously apprehended. See, for instance, Plessner ([1928] 1965, 79; but cf. 119).

[8] In total, the chapters I've left undiscussed include Hans-Peter Krüger, "The Nascence of Modern Man: Two Approaches to the Problem – Biological Evolutionary Theory and Philosophical Anthropology"; Jasper van Buuren, "Plessner and the Mathematical-Physical Perspective: The Prescientific Objectivity of the Human Body"; Oreste Tolone, "Plessner's Theory of Eccentricity: A Contribution to the Philosophy of Medicine"; Martino Enrico Boccignone, "The Duty of Personal Identity: Authenticity and Irony"; Jetske van Oosten, "The Unbearable Freedom of Dwelling"; Esther Keymolen, "A Moral Bubble: The Influence of Online Personalization on Moral Repositioning"; and Mireille Hildebrandt, "Eccentric Positionality as a Precondition for the Criminal Liability of Artificial Life Forms." The decision not to discuss these chapters is of course not intended as any statement about their value.

Thomas Ebke, Heike Delitz, Maarten Coolen, and Henrike Lerch critically compare Plessner's views with those of Kant, Bergson, Merleau-Ponty, and Cassirer, respectively. In addition, Jos de Mul notes similarities and differences between Plessner and Heidegger, and Joachim Fischer presents Plessner as offering a third way beyond Darwinism and Foucaultism.

In "Life, Concept and Subject: Plessner's Vital Turn in the Light of Kant and Bergson," Ebke contrasts the Kantian categories—supposedly derived from the knowing subject alone—with Plessner's categories, which are derived from the subject–object relation. Ebke highlights an unresolved tension in Plessner's view between a commitment to transcendentalism and a discovery of organic life as a material a priori—that is, a material condition of the instantiation of categories—on the other. Ebke calls the latter discovery a "vital turn." Plessner's transcendentalism is manifest in his aim of tracing the fact that life appears *to* human beings, to something other than life itself (namely, the break with life that Plessner calls "eccentric positionality" and connects with human culture, language, and technology) (106-107, 109). Bergson, however, is more consistently vitalistic, treating the appearance of life to humans as arising directly from life itself, within the path that the *élan vital* follows in human forms of life. Ebke raises the question of whether we ought to prefer Plessner's or Bergson's position on this issue.

In "'True' and 'False' Evolutionism: Bergson's Critique of Spencer, Darwin & Co. and Its Relevance for Plessner (and Us)," Delitz discusses Bergson's influence on Plessner. She suggestively proposes that Plessner's notion of groundlessness [*Unergründlichkeit*], as expressed in his social and political works from the 1930s and after, may be a socio-political modulation of Bergson's thesis of an unpredictably "creative" power in evolution (83). Delitz recounts Plessner's sympathetic appeal to Bergson's critique of Spencer, yet also notes that Plessner criticized Bergson's philosophy for failing to appreciate the status of human beings as "*subjects* [rather than merely objects] of nature" (82). Drawing on a Deleuzian reading of Bergson, Delitz aims to defend Bergson against this objection. She also offers a tally of important points of agreement between Bergson and Plessner, which serves as a kind of translation manual between their systems and favored terminology.

In "Bodily Experience and Experiencing One's Body," Coolen compares Maurice Merleau-Ponty's and Plessner's theories of embodiment. On Coolen's reading, Merleau-Ponty construes the body as an integral medium of our "absorbed coping" with the world. As such, it is a condition of possibility of our experience, something that opens us to the world, and does so in a manner that we are generally not conscious of. What is arguably missing from Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodiment, however, is an account of how

the body can also be an object of consciousness, and, thus, how its mediating role can become an explicit and conscious part of human experience. Plessner's notion of eccentric positionality succeeds in articulating this additional level or type of mediation. Plessner thus provides a means of relating the inexplicit, embodied character of human experience and the explicit, conceptual, intellectual, and reflective capabilities of that experience.

Lerch's "Anthropology as a Foundation of Cultural Philosophy: The Connection between Human Nature and Culture by Helmuth Plessner and Ernst Cassirer" presents a comparison of Plessner's and Cassirer's philosophies of culture. Lerch begins by highlighting a common problem that Plessner and Cassirer inherited from post-Kantian philosophy—namely, the question of the status of cultural sciences and their objects (such as linguistics and languages, and history and historical artifacts) within a Kantian epistemological framework. Lerch then details Dilthey's notion of "expression" as an initial answer to this problem, before exploring the different ways in which Plessner and Cassirer developed their theories of expression as answers to the same problem, at the same time setting a foundation for their philosophies of culture. The basic difference between Plessner and Cassirer's theories of expression, according to Lerch, is that Plessner sees expression as something connecting mind and body within the unity of *life*, whereas Cassirer sees expression as something connecting the subject of knowledge and action (who is not especially conceived as organically *living*) to *culture*. For Cassirer, culture is understood symbolically or semiotically (i.e., through study of the symbolic forms), whereas for Plessner, culture is understood as a need of human organic life (208). Lerch instructively suggests that Cassirer's semiotics of culture is more thoroughly worked out, and in more different areas, than is Plessner's, but Plessner's situation of culture *vis-à-vis* material and organic processes is an advantage of Plessner's approach over Cassirer's.[9]

Fischer's essay, "Philosophical Anthropology: A Third Way between Darwinism and Foucaultism," situates Plessner's approach between what he calls "naturalism" and "culturalism." Fischer holds these poles to be exemplified by the views of Darwin and Foucault (and their followers), respectively, and ascribes the split between naturalism and culturalism to the legacy of a Cartesian split between body and mind:

> For naturalism, the distinction between nature and culture is a distinction within nature itself; for culturalism, and all social-constructivisms, the distinction between nature and culture is an a priori distinction made by culture

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[9] Regarding Plessner's theory of culture, however, see also *Die Einheit der Sinne: Grundlinien einer Ästhesiologie der Geistes* (1923).

itself. . . . [T]hese two theories continue the legacy of classical Cartesian dualism, a dualism between the thinking thing and the extended thing (mind and nature), but with new terms and new means: the evolutionary paradigm now takes the side of the natural, physical thing, and culturalism takes the mind as its subject. (43)[10]

Fischer also distinguishes between philosophical anthropology as a discipline and as a paradigm (41-42; see also Fischer 2008, 2009), and distinguishes two kinds of bio-power—the Darwinian and the Foucaultian (45-47; cf. also Hans-Peter Krüger 2009). He stresses the special strength of Helmuth Plessner's philosophical method, as of the paradigm of philosophical anthropology more generally, that it is "biologically-responsive," neither dualistically ignoring biology as irrelevant to philosophical questioning nor reductively referring all philosophical questions to be decided by biology (47-48). Complementing Ebke's reading of the relation between Plessner and Kant, Fischer notes that Plessner's "positionality" is analogous to Fichte's "positing of the Ego," though Plessner's "positionality" is a more passive condition than Fichte's "positing" insofar as positionality emerges within natural history and is dependent on environmental and bodily processes. Finally, Fischer notes that Plessner's "anthropological categories" provide a point of transition between vital and historical categories, both of which contribute to the concrete character of descriptions of human lives.

In "Artificial by Nature: An Introduction to Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology," de Mul provides (in passing) a comparison between Plessner's *Die Stufen* and Heidegger's near-contemporaneous *Sein und Zeit* [1927] 1965 on the topic of human finitude. De Mul follows Odo Marquard ([1981] 1989) in suggesting that, in the course of modernity, our understanding of the concept of "finitude" has changed from a definition of the "finite" as that which is "created by God" to that which is "limited in space and time." Plessner and Heidegger explore these newly conceived dimensions of finitude, with Plessner focusing on space and Heidegger focusing on time (15). It is possible that Plessner undertheorizes temporal distinctions within his philosophical anthropology. Along these lines, de Mul does significant service to Plessner studies by reporting the criticisms of one of Plessner's students from the Netherlands, Lolla Nauta, who suggested an undertheorized difference in time scale between the "three worlds" discussed in Plessner

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[10] Compare Kockelkoren's essay in this volume (discussed below), which argues that the central representative that Fischer selects for the culturalist view, Michel Foucault, was very much concerned about the body and material processes in his later work (roughly from *Discipline and Punish* [1975] 1977 onward).

([1928] 1965, chap. 7): a "non-parallel historical development of the inner world, . . . outer world, . . . and mutual world" (17-18).

4.2. Biologizing Society, Socializing Politics

Philosophical accounts of society have often been disconnected from any (or many) biological considerations, and vice versa.[11] Likewise, "political philosophies" have often made use only in a very shallow or oversimplifying way of any considerations of social structure (including whatever biological and anthropological factors may be relevant to the instantiation of one or another such structure). Philosophical anthropology promises a transdisciplinary framework through which relations between (and possible lessons from one to the other of) these different domains can be explored.[12]

In "Habermas's New Turn towards Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology," Matthias Schloβberger reviews Jürgen Habermas's changing views on Plessner's philosophical anthropology from the 1960s to today. According to Schloβberger, Habermas's recent sympathetic appeal to Plessner's philosophical anthropology (in Habermas [2001] 2003) is in contradiction with his previously expressed thesis that distinctive human attributes—such as laughter and distinctively human forms of intersubjectivity—can be explained on the basis of a capacity to participate in linguistic communication alone, independent of any specific structure of embodiment (310-12). The choice between a Habermasian anthropology founded on language and a Plessnerian anthropology founded on organic embodied life, has important ethical and political consequences: for instance, for the understanding of the phenomenon of humiliation or developing a defensible position regarding genetic manipulation (311-12).

Janna van Grunsven makes a related point regarding torture in "The Body Exploited: Torture and the Destruction of Selfhood," arguing that Kantian approaches to torture, such as David Sussman's (2005), neglect some morally relevant roles of embodiment in the experience of torture (157). Kantian accounts treat moral relevance as restricted to what a rational agent can choose in regard to, and thus has responsibility for. The body, however, is ambiguous between being free and being determined: it is both subject and object, and in a variety of ways partly analyzed in Plessner's "*Leib-Körper*" (lived body vs.

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[11] The recent literature on biopolitics is an exception: see Lemke [2007] 2011 and Krüger 2009.

[12] For more on these themes, see Moss and Pavesich (2011), and Honneth and Joas (1985).

physical body) distinction and the eccentric positionality. Kantian conceptions of rational moral agency are, thus, incomplete and distortive in comparison with accounts of embodied moral agency such as Plessner's.

In "The Quest for the Sources of the Self, Seen from the Vantage Point of Plessner's Material A Priori," Petran Kockelkoren argues for the importance of a "material a priori" in understanding the "sources" of human selves, distinguishing between linguistic accounts of the sources of such selves, on one hand, and more "materialistic" alternatives. (In this regard, his essay might be compared with Schloβberger and van Grunsven's contrasts between more and less "embodied" starting points in ethics and political philosophy.) Kockelkoren reads Nietzsche and Wittgenstein as analyzers of a "linguistic deception" in prior philosophical theories of the sources of the self (320-24). Plessner's "material a priori" supplies an alternative to this linguistic deception, through its focus on "mediation," for instance, by artifacts and social practices (324-237).[13] Kockelkoren suggests that Descartes's theory of the self as *res cogitans* was itself so mediated insofar as it was inspired by early technological predecessors of the camera obscura, which were used by renaissance and early modern painters to enable rendering of depth perspective in their paintings (327-30). In general, attention to material mediations facilitates recognition and analysis of non-semiotic sources of cultural diversity (for instance, technological, geographical, and bodily organic sources).

Kirsten Pols' "Strangely Unfamiliar: The Debate on Multiculturalism and Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology," discusses Plessner's social and political writings in connection with multiculturalism. Pols glosses Plessner's concept of *Unergründlichkeit* as that of an "openness, unfathomability, and indeterminacy of human nature" (261), and elucidates Plessner's definition of "power," in political contexts, as a product of this *Unergründlichkeit*. Not only human individuals, but also cultures, traditions, and social movements harbor this indeterminacy at the borders of their contingent, individuating conditions. Pols uses Plessner's experience as an exile in the Netherlands to exemplify how one can become aware of this indeterminacy and the anxiety about one's self-definition that such awareness can introduce. Pols notes that the bodily ambiguity expressed in Plessner's "eccentric positionality" might figure in political indeterminacy more generally.

In "Bi-Directional Boundaries: Eccentric Life and Its Environments," Robert Mugerauer presents a multi-tiered exploration of the concept of

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[13] It is not clear to me whether Kockelkoren intends Plessner's view of the sources of the self to be considered an alternative to Nietzsche and Wittgenstein's views, or an alternative to the sorts of views that Nietzsche and Wittgenstein criticize, or both.

"boundary" [*Grenze*] as this plays out in (a) living cells (212-14), (b) organisms (214-18), (c) architecture (218-23), and (d) nations (224-25). Mugerauer relates and compares Plessner's use of the boundary concept with that of several influential contemporary figures, including Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (regarding tiers (a) and (b)) and Niklas Luhmann (regarding tier (d)). Regarding tier (c), Mugerauer describes how architectural boundaries, especially distinctions and relations between inside and outside, figure in the embodied lived experience of human beings. These include, for instance, the difference between round and square columns in the degree of welcoming or distancing they imply for humans that observe them or pass through them (220) and the way houses present a closed appearance to outsiders looking in, yet signify openness to those for whom they are homes, associated with the openness to one another of members of the interior family world.

Essays by Veronika Magyar-Haas and Bas Hengstmengel discuss contemporary applications of Plessner's views on social roles and role-playing (as in Plessner [1924] 1999). In "De-masking as a Characteristic of Social Work?" Magyar-Haas defends the value of masks, looking at cases where masks are forced off ("de-masking") and the associated function of shame in social-work contexts. On Plessner's view, human life exhibits a fundamental indeterminacy, which is also an ungroundedness [*Unergründlichkeit*]. The human soul thus exhibits an "ontological ambiguity," and masks are part of the mechanism that maintains this ambiguity. If one combines Magyar-Haas's account of masks and roles with Pols' analysis of the concept of power, one could say that the power (or freedom) of human individuals and communities depends on this lack of definition—or, to speak a Bergsonian-Deleuzian language, this "virtuality." De-masking actualizes this virtuality and thus forces individual behavior to fall into line with existent normative social structures. One question raised but not answered by Magyar-Haas's essay concerns the relative positive and negative value of this "socializing" function of shame and de-masking.

In "Helmuth Plessner as a Social Theorist: Role Playing in Legal Discourse," Hengstmengel analyzes several anthropological and social functions of legal discourse. According to Plessner, role-playing creates and protects an indeterminacy, which Hengstmengel associates with inner–outer distinctions by calling an "inner man." Hengstmengel connects this function of role-playing to Niklas Luhmann's sociology of law, which treats law as a social subsystem, functionally differentiated from the larger social system and following codes and procedures and input–output nodes specific to it. The legal system, through the maintenance of specific legal roles to be filled by the actors that enter the system (for instance, "prosecutor," "judge," "the accused," "witness," etc.), allows for instantiation of two values Plessner

attributes to social-role systems: *diplomacy* and *tact* (see Plessner [1924] 1999). Diplomacy facilitates the resolution of conflicts such that the dignity of both parties (especially important, that of the "losing" party) is preserved. Tact is the art of not getting too close to others within public and social interactions, as well as not becoming too open to the other, and thus (again) maintaining both dignity and room for hope of realization of one's aims, as well as future social maneuvering and novel self-definitions, on the part of both parties. Combining Luhmann's and Plessner's analyses, Hengstmengel suggests that modern legal systems lift conflicts out of the rich network of relations in which they arise and place them within the artificial and limited framework of the legal system itself, with its accepted roles, statuses, terminology, and distinctions, thereby preserving the dignity and indeterminacy of individual agents. Legal discourse's artificial system of relationships also allows subjects to learn something new about themselves and others through taking up roles within this framework and in accordance with this terminology.

4.3. Eccentric Approaches to Technology

Essays by Jos de Mul, Peter-Paul Verbeek, Dirk Spreen, and Johannes Hätscher discuss the sufficiency of Plessner's "eccentric positionality" to describe and elucidate the kinds of technological mediation that are beginning to, and will increasingly, characterize human forms of life, including such factors as genetic engineering, telepresence, and incorporated (bodily and brain implant) technologies. Spreen and Hätscher defend the adequacy of Plessner's notion to these new technologies, whereas de Mul and Verbeek question it.

De Mul's "Philosophical Anthropology 2.0" situates Plessner's view within a late-modern standoff between "greedy reductionism" and "greedy transcendentalism," construing it as a promisingly hybrid one (458-60). De Mul evaluates two common criticisms of Plessner: that his views are problematically essentialist and that they are problematically anthropocentrist. He defends Plessner from these criticisms in some ways, but concedes the need for modification of Plessner's views to be adequate to the theorization of new technologies, including "genetic modification, neuro-enhancement, electronic implants and distributed explants . . . synthetic biology, robotics, artificial intelligence and artificial life [which] might even create new artificial life forms" (467). The proposed revisions include recognition of a "type of positionality beyond the eccentric type," which de Mul calls "poly-eccentric." The key example of poly-eccentricity arises within the use of technologies of *telepresence*: that is, virtual reality technologies that involve the subject experiencing the sensory inputs and outputs, and controlling the motion, of a distantly

placed artificial (robotic) body (463; see also de Mul 2003). In addition, de Mul proposes three supplements to Plessner's "anthropological ground-laws," which he calls "post-anthropological laws" (471):

1. Going beyond the naturalness of human beings' artificiality proposed in Plessner's "law of natural artificiality," the "law of natural-by-artifice" describes the artificial construction of nature itself (or, "natures themselves")
2. Going beyond the mediate character of all seemingly immediate relations of human beings and their environments (Plessner's "law of mediated immediacy"), the "law of immediate mediality" involves a shift (a) from "found and discovered" mediations to "made and invented" ones, and (b) from a condition of relative visibility of these mediating technological factors to one of their "invisible visibility"—in other words, we are becoming and will continue to become less and less aware of the forms of technological mediation that affect our lives.
3. Going beyond Plessner's thesis that human beings occupy a "utopian standpoint," always able to stand apart from, criticize, and imagine alternatives to present conditions, our future will increasingly be characterized by a "tragic standpoint" wherein we cannot guarantee that technological changes will bring us what we want or that they will make us happier than we were before. In particular, we cannot guarantee that they will retain all or even any of what we consider part of our "humanity"—for instance, the biological species *Homo sapiens sapiens*, as opposed to the growth and evolution of intelligent machines that our species will have made possible.

In "Plessner and Technology: Philosophical Anthropology Meets the Posthuman," Verbeek discusses Plessner's views alongside canonical positions in the philosophy of technology, such as those of Don Ihde, Bruno Steigler, and Martin Heidegger. Verbeek recounts Ihde's four types of technological mediation in phenomenological experience: we variously *embody, read*, and *interact with* technology, as well as have technology *in the background* of our experience. In addition to these four, Verbeek adds the modes of *immersion* and *incorporation*. The last case requires an expansion beyond Plessner's notion of "eccentricity," which Verbeek calls "meta-eccentricity," insofar as by these technological mediations (Verbeek gives "deep brain stimulation" [DBS] as an example), we "influence the nature of human eccentricity" itself. "[M]eta-eccentricity" is a step beyond mere "eccentricity," on Verbeek's account, because these technologies involve "changing our own bodies" (453).

In "Not Terminated: Cyborgized Men Still Remain Human Beings," Spreen promotes a "cyborg" model of human subjectivity, as has been previously explored by Donna Haraway and others, and notes that cyborg models have the advantage of allowing for analysis of distinctions and combined influences of different kinds of material conditions (437). Spreen also argues against what he calls "posthumanism" (but what is probably better classified as "transhumanism": compare Wolfe 2010 and Braidotti 2013 with Bostrom 2005), and claims, *contra* de Mul and (to some extent) Verbeek, that no new extension of Plessner's "eccentric positionality" concept is necessary.

Hätscher looks at the new technology of DBS in his essay, "Switching 'On,' Switching 'Off': Does Neurosurgery in Parkinson's Disease Create Man-Machines?" DBS technology, which is already used as part of treatments for Parkinson's disease, involves implantation of a device that produces stimulation within the patient's brain. The functioning of this device can even be modified by a remote control, which has drastic effects on the behavioral capabilities of the Parkinson's-diagnosed subject with the implanted device: when the device is "on," he or she finds motion easier than usual (the Parkinson's symptoms such as violent shaking are greatly reduced); when the device is "off," he or she finds motion much harder to initiate, even than what would on average be possible before DBS was regularly administered. Hätscher argues that a Parkinson's patient with an installed DBS device is not "more than human," whether one calls such a thing a "man-machine," "cyborg," or something else, but rather still stands fundamentally under the anthropological condition as articulated by Plessner. Hätscher offers two arguments for his thesis: one, that there is nothing in principle different between psychoactive drugs and incorporative technologies such as DBS device implantation; thus, if we think human beings on psychoactive drugs are not non-human or more-than-human, we should by parity not suppose DBS-implantees to be non- or more-than-human (364-66); and, two, that Parkinson's patients with an implanted DBS device show a number of characteristically human responses to their condition, including shame and laughing at the limits of their behavior in connection with the device (368-72).

In sum, Hätscher agrees with Spreen on the substantive question of whether new technologies that mediate our experience through Verbeek's category of *incorporation* represent a break with "the human" as Plessner describes it. Both Hätscher and Spreen say "no," whereas de Mul and Verbeek say "yes." At the same time, Hätscher associates the "cyborg" concept with the "more than human," whereas Spreen argues it should be itself classified as human.

4.4. Eccentric Approaches to Neuroscience

Similar to Hätscher, Gesa Lindemann and Heleen Pott apply Plessnerian concepts to the discussion of contemporary neuroscience. In "The Brain in the Vat as the Epistemic Object of Neurobiology," Lindemann seeks to show the presence and functioning of an expression-based, second-person perspective in neuroscientific research, alongside the more familiar third-person perspective that takes material properties and organization of the brain alone to be the central topics of investigation. A second-person perspective treats subjects as expressive beings or persons, a status that is described by Plessner's concept of "eccentric positionality." Lindemann notes that whereas Bruno Latour's view of agency is non-dichotomous but flat, Plessner's view is non-dichotomous and not flat, allowing for strong distinctions between human and non-human agency (339). (A non-flat but dichotomous view, incidentally, might be exemplified by classical dualism à la Descartes.) Lindemann further argues that Hans-Jörg Rheinberger's notion of an "experimental system" (see, for instance, Rheinberger 1992) should be supplemented with recognition that the experimenter is not necessarily the only representer of epistemic objects within the system: in neuroscientific research, for instance, the organisms under study—whether humans, primates, or other model organisms— are potentially part of the experimental system that produces the "brain as an epistemic object" (339). The difference between organisms that must be approached in this way, and those that need not, within the experimental procedures of neuroscience, is described by Lindemann as a difference between "spontaneous consciousness" and a being that has "distance to itself" (349-51), as well as between behavior that is not, and that is, shaped by "mutual expectations" between experimenter and subject (350). Neuroscientific research faces special challenges of both an empirical and a conceptual sort in those cases where it studies the brains of eccentric, expressive beings such as human beings and other higher primates.

Finally, Pott's "On Humor and 'Laughing' Rats: The Importance of Plessner for Affective Neuroscience" looks at recent neurological evidence (presented by Panksepp and Burgdorf 2003) that rats can laugh: we just cannot hear the sounds they make when they do, due to their high frequency (375). Those familiar with Plessner's work on laughing and crying (Plessner [1941] 1970) may wonder: does this research constitute a falsification of Plessner's thesis that laughing is a human monopoly? Pott replies to this question by arguing that laughter in the human case is different from rat laughter because laughter in the human case reveals humans' eccentric positionality—that is, their ambiguity between being and having a body (385). In human laughter, the body answers as the person when the eccentrically

positioned person cannot find an answer to the situation. Thus, laughter shows the divergence and unity of human beings' centric (being a body) and eccentric (having a body) positionality. Pott accepts that tickling may be a trigger of laughter in rats, babies, and so on, but adult human laughter exhibits eccentricity, whereas the other cases do not.

It is noteworthy that both Gesa Lindemann's and Heleen Pott's essays suggest the merely mediate function of phenomena that have traditionally been interpreted as constitutive and determinative rather than mediating: brains and affective bodily processes, respectively. Lindemann and Pott thus propose a reinterpretation of these bodily objects and processes as components of the larger structure that Plessner calls "eccentric positionality," thereby arguing that certain ongoing neuroscientific research programs should be recontextualized within broader social and phenomenological frameworks.

5. Conclusion: Widening the Eccentric Circle

Whether new historical developments demand revisions of, supplementations to, or merely further internal distinctions within the Plessnerian conceptual framework is an important question. A question of arguably at least equal importance is whether researchers will continue to confront new developments with the same systematic depth and breadth and with the same openness to and inventiveness about novel concepts, as Plessner did. From this perspective, Verbeek and de Mul's "meta-eccentricity" and "poly-eccentricity" show the fecundity of Plessner's approach as much as any limitation to it. These innovations show that new analyses of centeredness and decenteredness of various kinds, within a model of space and movement that allows for interpenetration among physical, logical, and phenomenological modes of appearance and functioning, can be built through variations—eccentric variations, perhaps—on Plessner's initial account.

In conclusion, I suggest three especially promising directions for future Plessner studies—more broadly, and by appropriate analogies, for studies of and in the tradition of philosophical anthropology.[14] These directions are already being pursued in German and other European language literatures; Anglophone studies have some distance to go to catch up.

First, it would be instructive to even more thoroughly treat certain fundamental issues—such as action, perception, evaluation and normativity, social

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[14] For recent work on philosophical anthropology in general, see Fischer (2008), Iris (2009), Honneth and Joas (1988), Clammer and Giri (2013), and Honenberger (2015b).

structure, power, epistemology and phenomenology, time, space, and logic—with the Plessnerian conceptual tools in hand—including distinctions among various human positions and types of positionality, the dynamics of limits [*Grenzen*], the relation between privacy and publicity (at various levels and in various forms), varieties of (and varieties of functionalities of) indeterminacy, forms of embodiment and technological mediation, and the social, political, and personal role of roles, masks, and expressive states. Further applications and developments of the Plessnerian concepts should be sought not only in scholarly and historical modes but also in constructive and experimental ones. Some of the strongest and most interesting essays in the new volume are in this genre of extension and re-invention.

Second, Plessner's work (and, again, philosophical anthropology more generally) deserves further critical comparative study, productive dialogue, and selective integration with other strong movements of 20th-century philosophy, such as phenomenology, neo-Kantianism, critical theory, logical positivism, and pragmatism. Here, also, the German-language literature is well ahead of the Anglophone.[15]

Third, the accumulated discussions of Plessner, in the nearly 100 years since the publication of *Die Stufen*, already include remarkably insightful and provocative work, both in sympathetic and critical modes. I think, for instance, of the discussions of Plessner in Erich Rothacker's (1966) *Philosophische Anthropologie*; in many of Jürgen Habermas's works in works by Jürgen Habermas, Herbert Schnädelbach, Hans Blumenberg, Odo Marquard, Peter Sloterdijk, and Marjorie Grene[16]; in Axel Honneth and Hans Joas's (1988) *Social Action and Human Nature*, Roberto Esposito's ([2002] 2011) *Immunitas*, and Christof Wulf's ([2004] 2013) *Anthropology: A Continental Perspective* (see also, Gebauer and Wulf 2009); and now this volume. Plessner studies can become more compelling, more wide-ranging, and more eccentric, by building on a dialogue with this accumulating literature.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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[15] See, for instance, Fischer (2008), and Krüger (1999, 2001).
[16] Lysemose (2013) suggestively describes Blumenberg, Marquard, and Sloterdijk as members of a "second generation" of philosophical anthropology.

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