

The body and its surplus

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The Political Body. Plessner and Foucault on Power and Human Nature

When the news of Covid-19 spread, the first death tolls increasingly rose, we all found ourselves in a situation, where praising isolationism and closing borders against “those” who might spread the disease became a *sine qua non*. Vulnerability of individual and societal bodies became an “ideology”: and this not only among right wing parties. More than this: It became a manifestation of what Roberto Esposito calls the immunitarian trait inherent in any community. “Immunity” means “freedom from something” – like illness, criminal prosecution and jurisdiction, but also not to be accessible for criticism as we find “strategies of immunization” against arguments, and finally free from burdens that others have to bear: “*munus*” in its Latin origin can be translated as “office” with the meaning of “duty”, “burden” or “duty”, a gift that I owe or must sacrifice; the plural “*munera*” means a service for the general public. I am immune when I am relieved of this service and released from the obligation this service for a community places on me. Immunity, however, is a privilege: not everyone enjoys it – only the politician, the diplomat, the ideologist or a self-proclaimed “us, the people”, but nobody else outside this group who has stepped outside of a community of duties: To be free of such duties others have to perform for the sake of certain values or laws, means to be immune, says so Roberto Esposito¹.

Thus, vulnerability – feeling vulnerable in a state of only an ambiguous knowledge of its causes – and to prepare for securing one’s life against this vulnerability seems to function as a segregating, an excluding category: It is “them” and “us”: a perpetrator (i.e. an enemy) and a victim, on the battlefield of bodies that count differently:

¹ R. Esposito, *Immunitas: Protezione e negazione della vita*, Einaudi, Torino 2015.

Keeping us alive is our first task in the deadly fight against this virus. At the same time, however, we are called upon to defend the second life, the institutionally established life, which, as such, is in turn “instituted”, i.e. able to produce new meanings. At the moment when we naturally do everything we can to keep ourselves alive, we must not do without the other life – life with others, for others and through others².

To talk about power and human nature means to be aware of such anthropological fallacies that mix in so easily when we start to think about so called universal principles – our *conditio humana* – as our bodily existence, its vulnerability and immunity as they are praised *in favor* or too often even as a higher good than a life we have to institute politically in order to gain a meaning for a life apart from only individual security which excludes itself from duties we owe to each other *and* to a community we are part of as being dependent not only on ourselves but from each other:

Yet, what about those universal principles which are counted to matter ethically: We all are vulnerable as a bodily subject, yet as we victimize ourselves too easily, bodies become subjects that no longer are universals but singularize: as the one closest to myself, my family, my country, bodies that are more valuable than others – being far away, alien, hostile. We have experienced a development of this in the current discussions about how to distribute scarce beds in intensive care units, but also whether European countries are still willingly to welcome people from the Greek refugee-camps.

A political anthropology is more important than ever. And thus, we should pose the questions, why and what for we exert our powers to immunize ourselves against others, exert our powers for a body-count between “us” and “them”: As for the “Why”, this is an important philosophical issue of scrutinizing life as a value in itself which count nevertheless obeys to culture – and to the powers of those who count; thus, it is worth to scrutinize historically and systematically about the so called *apriori* of these values.

As for the “What for”, this is a matter of how we want to understand ourselves as political bodies with not only the inclination but also the responsibility to act within and beyond fields of power our institutions and more than ever the societies in crisis of Covid-19 pandemia constitute, regulate and juridically intensify against human rights as they institute a life which bears meaning to a community – a *polis* – which is aware of the self-imposed

² So Esposito in an article for «Neue Zuercher Zeitung» from March 16, 2020: <https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/coronavirus-roberto-esposito-ueber-moderne-biopolitik-ld.1556128> (last check: 10/11/2020).

dangers of immunization – inclusion of a “we-identity” against an exclusion of “them” who tend to be more and more ambiguous and thus a prey for scapegoating.

What both Helmuth Plessner and Michel Foucault stand for is the conviction that subjectivity – thus, the life which bears and institute meaning beyond only an individual life – is never a substance with fixed characteristics or even values, but is rather a crossing of potencies, of indeterminacies and is inscrutable (*unergründbar*) in itself. This means not only a delimitation of our knowledge of human subjectivity and of “man”, but also a indeterminacy of our potencies to act and to decide. It means the offspring of a sense of possibility (*Möglichkeitssinn*), as Robert Musil termed it in the beginning of the 20th century for the situation he explored in his novel “Man without qualities” for living a life where the frontiers of (new) emerging identities became more and more contested: When politics were open to swing to democracy or to totalitarianism. To deal with this indeterminacy, its paradox to injure and even to dispose itself while being able to shape this indeterminacy, to determine, to classify it: *This is the task, to scrutinize not only the power we have, but the one we are, the one we are able to due to our very indeterminacy*³.

Shaping and thus determining a non-fixed and inscrutable human nature – or rather: a life for an inclusive community – is a historical project, history revealing these developments and its underlying structures of power and violence. It is Plessner who dealt with the historical apriori of our (always already bodily) existence, and Foucault who developed an archeology of power subjugating our (always already bodily) existence. This will be my topic and the question of what still has to challenge our ethics, politics and: a political anthropology is my “What for”.

In certain ways, Plessner’s project of sketching out philosophical anthropology as an own and genuine style of thinking as Joachim Fischer called it a «*Denkrichtung des 20. Jahrhundert*»⁴ paraphrases Foucault’s notion of an archeological and genealogical critique: a generation before Foucault started his project. Clarifying the epistemic orders of transcendentalism and empiricism to explore the question how we as epistemic subjects and objects (duplicated in our existence) claim our experiences to have a transcendental validity. It is the quest of the status of a historical *apriori*. Foucault claims

³ “*Pouvoir*” as the power which enables us to something – and also to thinking about our being vulnerable, indeterminate, finite – and: inscrutable.

⁴ J. Fischer, *Philosophische Anthropologie. Eine Denkrichtung des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Verlag Karl Alber, Freiburg-Muenchen 2008.

this quest to be an ethos of «critique of what we are»; and this means also: a critique which is at the same time a historical analysis of the limits given to us and a probing of their possible «transcendence»⁵.

After a short introduction (1) into the historical backgrounds of Philosophical Anthropology, I will consider three stations of Plessner's way of interrogating, problematizing, and reflecting on anthropological categories and principles: (2) Plessner's interrogation of the principles and categories of human understanding; (3) the way he used constitutive anthropological laws – namely, eccentric positionality and human inscrutability – against ideological notions of essentialism and thus opened a space for ethical and political reflexivity; (4) the practical consequences and possibilities of Philosophical Anthropology within this reflexive space, as Plessner described them in the spacing distances of play, social roles, and diplomacy as well as in his theory of the “Categorical Subjunctive”; and, finally (5) the further ways in which this might open up to a historical epistemology according to Foucault's notion of critique of subjectivity and certain notions of a Political Anthropology that might serve to understand current crises as a task of reflection of philosophy, history, and politics of the power we are (and thus not necessarily have).

1. *The Limits of Anthropological Reason – An Introduction*

Wilhelm Dilthey's longtime project of a post-metaphysical and post-transcendental Kantian critique of historical reason can be read as an anthropology *avant la lettre*. Only a short time before he died Dilthey summed up his theoretical works under the heading «Anthropological Research»⁶. Helmuth Plessner methodically and conceptually developed Dilthey's task of systematizing human understanding from the context of *Lebensphilosophie*,

⁵ Cfr. M. Foucault, *What is Enlightenment?*, in P. Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*, Pantheon Books, New York 1984, pp. 32-50.

⁶ The interlacing of studies of the human being with history is the main thread in Dilthey's self-explanation of method as Georg Misch claims in his *Vorbericht des Herausgebers* (Report of the Editor) to W. Dilthey, *Die geistige Welt: Einleitung in die Philosophie des Lebens. Erste Hälfte: Abhandlungen zur Grundlegung der Geisteswissenschaften*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1957², pp. VII-CXVII: «“anthropologische Forschung” und “geschichtssystematisches Verfahren” sind bis zuletzt die Ausdrücke, mit denen er das Eigene seiner Grundlegung in ihrer philosophischen Absicht bezeichnete» (G. Misch, *art. cit.*, p. L).

Kantian and Husserlian transcendentalism, and the positive sciences. He intertwined the theory of historical reason with anthropology, and gave anthropology an ethical function in relation to the inscrutability of human nature. Plessner methodically drew from two lines of thought, phenomenology and hermeneutics, in order to address the questions of how life becomes self-conscious, and how to formulate the categories that allow us to understand such self-conscious life.

Plessner's critical task is to describe and analyze the limits of our self-understanding. Beyond this, his question concerns how to relate to these limits, and how to respond to the inscrutability of human nature disclosed in lifeworldly practices. That is, he asked the question: how can and should we take a stance towards the human power to transcend the limits of current forms and norms of life? Thus, his anthropology is not only comparative because of the relative openness and indecidability of historical and cultural forms of life: Yet, it might offer a critical and a humanizing possibility by confronting the consequences of nihilism and empirical relativism in a modern disenchanted world. Both – critique and skepticism – link theoretical and epistemological questions with the practical and ethical dimensions of philosophy. Insofar it gains a broader horizon than moral philosophy, and insofar it understands itself as ethical in a universal sense of the praxis of self-interpretation within social contexts and structures, it opens up to horizons to an institution of political forms of life – the *bios*, rather than the survival of our sheer bodily life (*infra* Esposito).

The status of the historically based humanities leads to problems that are not only a question of separate scientific disciplines, but involves issues concerning «the philosophy of human existence»⁷. Dilthey was the first one to recognize that a critique of historical reason meant more than a sheer broadening of the field of logic, and that it is a theory of understanding and experience of life. That the inscrutability (*Unergründlichkeit*) of life is impenetrable to reason, this is one of the strongest convictions of Dilthey and it is the source of his claim that experience resists being petrified in scientific explanation. Thus, his influence should be regarded as an opening for philosophical anthropology as well as an essential source of the new questions of a Political Anthropology, as it deals with its own limits set in our inscrutability.

⁷ H. Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch, Gesammelte Werke Bd. IV*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1980, p. 54.

2. *Principles and Categories of Human Understanding: Plessner's Anthropological Critique of Dilthey*

In his essay *Das Wesen der Philosophie*, Dilthey writes:

[It is] philosophy's task to define its essence necessarily leads from a systematic to the historical point of view. [...] In order to decide, how to speak of an essence of philosophy, we have to turn from the definitions of terms individual philosophers gave to the historical facticity of philosophy itself⁸.

Here, we have to keep in mind that the categories of life gained from historical facticity are not universal forms of understanding of each life-nexus (*Lebenszusammenhang*), but structural forms of how life concretely expresses itself. Thus, for self-understanding, there is always a divergence between the abstraction we take up to understand life and the concrete horizon of sense involved in the expressions unfolded in leading our lives. The formal characteristic of categories has its origin in thought. But the characteristic of the “real categories”, as Dilthey distinguishes them, is «the inscrutability of their content for thinking». They are founded in the coherency of life (*Lebenszusammenhang*) or more accurately they are the coherency of life and thus life is conscious of them and its own sense as a whole – a notion we have to keep in mind, when talking about identity of ourselves or “other selves”⁹. For Plessner, exactly this is the difficult task of analyzing the «organ of understanding» in which both the subject and object of understanding are involved. For him, this is our incarnate existence in eccentric positionality as social and political bodies.

Plessner “s essay “Power and Human Nature” (*Macht und menschliche Natur*) bears as its subtitle: «attempt at an anthropology of the historical world view» (*Versuch zur Anthropologie der geschichtlichen Weltansicht*)¹⁰. This both echoes Dilthey and displays a difference from Dilthey’s “Critique of historical reason” at the same time insofar as a merely historical apriori

⁸ W. Dilthey, *Das Wesen der Philosophie*, in W. Dilthey, *GS V – Die geistige Welt*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Stuttgart-Goettingen 1990⁸, p. 340.

⁹ W. Dilthey, *Grundlegung der Wissenschaften vom Menschen, der Gesellschaft und der Geschichte*, *GS XIX*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1997, p. 361.

¹⁰ For an extended discussion of the historical course of Plessner’s (political) anthropology and the different angles he shapes his terminology from a phenomenological, psychological stance and finally a hermeneutical account on the history of ideas see: N.A. Richter, *Grenzen der Ordnung. Bausteine einer Philosophie des politischen Handelns nach Plessner und Foucault*, Campus, Frankfurt am Main-New York 2005, pp. 147-174.

becomes an anthropological one. Further, it becomes an explicitly anthropocentric one, which Plessner calls the “*hypothetical a priori*”.

Plessner adopts this program and formulates his own categories or “principles”. Yet, he adopts it for philosophy only insofar as it is a focus from and on human life in the present *and* future. It does not achieve a spectator position before a historical panorama. For him, philosophy *and* anthropology *and* politics are the practice of self-understanding, on the one hand, and the sedimentations and objectifications of the historical tradition of this self-understanding, on the other hand. We are situated within a hermeneutical circle for which we have to find appropriate modes of interpretations.

The problematic status of Dilthey’s concept lies in two decisive points: the stabilization of existence and the liberation of the mind within a metaphysical setting. It is the relation of the two to each other within the metaphysical setting that brings forth the difference between Dilthey’s and Plessner’s venture. The task of Philosophical Anthropology is to clarify the basis of historical change, and this task forms Plessner’s critique of historicism and its philosophical constructions: With Dilthey, human existence dissolves as an absolute term in its historical factors¹¹.

Plessner sets out with his own categories of life in *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*. Here, he adopts a methodology of phenomenological description and develops his own hermeneutics of life. Phenomenology – understood both as method of description and as the understanding of the phenomena of life – is explicitly described as «an instrument to accomplish Dilthey’s program»¹². Here, it addresses both organic and historic life as horizons framing human existence.

Plessner is looking for categorical structures of the interpretation of life, i.e., of human behavior, expression, and self-awareness that can be experienced. The constitutive categories are essential *indices* of organic, corporeal life, but they do not refer to any substantial essence or attributes of life as such. Therefore, categories are not merely descriptive but the foundation of any possible critical description. They are a “*hypothetical A priori*” proving its foundational character only in giving way to a situationally (and historically) adequate comprehension of cultural-anthropological elements; thus, they are non-metaphysical and non-transcendental.

For the categories, especially important is the “eccentric positionality” of

¹¹ Cfr. H. Plessner, *Immer noch Philosophische Anthropologie?*, in H. Plessner, *Gesammelte Schriften VIII*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1980, p. 242.

¹² H. Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, cit., p. 66.

human life: Plessner has in back and in front of his analyses the human point of view from which his own nature, including natural and cultural surrounding, is both close and distant and always in a difference to himself. Man is necessarily and naturally alienated from himself, being always self and other in his lived body. Plessner's anthropological categories¹³ have no concluding but rather an opening character, as they mediate new items of knowledge.

Philosophical hermeneutics falls short, if it only relies on experiences and a theory of experience in its historical course. Yet, it is important to situate man within the lifeworld and its historic structure in order to gain ethical reflexivity through a specific anthropological attitude from a pragmatic and practical point of view. Plessner developed this point in *Macht und menschliche Natur* (published in 1931, three years after the "Stufen")¹⁴ when he entered into a dialogue with Dilthey's question of the order of apriori and empirical structures. He did so with a new beginning in order to clarify inscrutability both by an analysis of human expressivity and by a hermeneutics of the European history of mind. This became his theoretical turn to the socio-politic sphere and to his so-called "Political Anthropology".

The focal point of his anthropology is – as mentioned before – human "eccentric positionality". We gain our individual existence by necessity by shaping and transcending historical and present forms of our lifeworld and worldviews in our everyday practices. These very forms change themselves and thus might elucidate themselves in being enacted, as a kind of performative hermeneutics. Dilthey's historical apriori thus becomes *performative* in Plessner's intertwining of both diachronic and synchronic reflections on a plural lifeworld. His reflections accordingly embrace both transcendental reflexivity and empirical analysis.

Plessner interrogates the structure of historical variability to find a point to maintain human reality. Is there any reason, any coherent world in spite of its discontinuity, in spite of the reality and facticity of change? Here, he agrees with Husserl's criticism of Dilthey's *Weltanschauungsphilosophie*. Against such "empirical understanding", philosophy as a rigorous science has to be founded on "*phenomenological eidetics*"¹⁵. There is a direct intu-

¹³ E.g.: "Natural artificiality", "mediated immediacy", "the utopian point of view"; for his later works explicitly the "inscrutability hypothesis" (*Unergründlichkeitstheorem*).

¹⁴ H. Plessner, *Macht und menschliche Natur. Ein Versuch zur Anthropologie der geschichtlichen Weltansicht*, in H. Plessner, *Gesammelte Schriften V*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1980, pp. 135-234.

¹⁵ Cfr. E. Husserl, *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft*, Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1965, p. 53, fn. 1 and p. 55.

ition of the dynamic principles of understanding, not only the sum of historical observations.

For Plessner, these principles are expressed in historical forms of the “life of the mind”. We have to keep this in mind, since the principles of historical experience still enables us to value and criticize particular expressions due to our eidetic intuition into their adequacy and inadequacy for the here and now. For Plessner, this is due neither to a theory of historical change nor to Husserlian scientific *eidōs*, but rather to political judgment and decision, and even before this to knowledge of the “political nature” of man. Human power within its constitutive yet inscrutable essence, this awareness of the source requires enacting both the biological and the historical frameworks of human eccentricity and transcending facticity.

Therefore, we must look for these principles in in human existence as incarnate and thus eccentric and inscrutable. This is intuited in our self-awareness of expression, in our divergence, and our eccentricity. Plessner attempts a purification of principles and categories. What does self-awareness of an eccentric being mean? How do categories change in their life-worldly application? And is this a political task, analyzing the special power of man, not only the meta-individual force of history?

3. *Inscrutability as the Openness of the Political Space: Expressivity against the Ideology of Essentialism*

Historically, philosophy has taken a twofold route. On the one hand, a direction in search of the objectivity of the things in front of us and, on the other hand, a direction towards the origins of being and truth. The empirically directed strain formulates problems, whereas the metaphysical orientation deals with enigmas¹⁶. Balancing out the enigmatic and the problematic strand gives way to interpretation or to keeping open theoretical questions with regard of the inexhaustible ambiguity of tradition and of life¹⁷. This problematic status has to be upheld, and Plessner calls this “the open questions”. They are open for practical decisions due to their specific situations and socio-historical embeddedness and their epistemological indeterminacy. They are open not only for a cautious and self-reflective attitude towards our

¹⁶ H. Plessner, *Gibt es einen Fortschritt in der Philosophie?*, in H. Plessner, *Gesammelte Werke Bd. IX*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1980, p. 182.

¹⁷ Cfr. H. Plessner, *Macht und menschliche Natur*, cit., p. 98.

history and its multiple world-views but also towards the eccentricity of human nature that has to be dealt with in the immediacy of the here and now, and in the face of the urge and exigency of social and political decidability.

In addition to eccentricity as an anthropological focus, there is another methodological and ethical prerequisite that Plessner draws from his analyses of the open and the inscrutable nature and history of man. The “inscrutability-theorem” leads eccentric positionality beyond a mere panoramic analysis of different worldviews to the question of *why* and *how* we should relate to eccentricity and a self-reflexive stance. Philosophical anthropology with a moral intent and engagement has to become aware of its own practical responsibility towards the inscrutability of the possibilities of man, since it is always already involved in the forming lifeworld and in the attitudes informing human action through its conclusions. These conclusions are an expressive testimony of human life in its self-interpretive character as much as any other forms of activity. Inscrutability offers an awareness of the limits that we meet in our eccentric way of life. Yet, what qualifies eccentricity and its standpoint to judge a here and now and the direction of transcending it? Here, Plessner’s anthropology takes its turn to the social and the political sphere¹⁸.

Inscrutability becomes an “*anthropological Apriori*”, and gains a practical dimension as a hypothetical stance. This apriori is as condition of the possibility (for Plessner, the power) of human inscrutability. Power does not only have the tragic tendency to subjugate (as having power), but also to set free dissenting forces (in being power).

Political anthropology mediates the paradox between the relation of inscrutability and human self-determination, of indeterminacy and facticity. The paradox consists of the way human power necessarily turns against its inscrutability to find a form or *Gestalt*. And thus, for Plessner, politics becomes elemental for the historical understanding of human life and nature, and becomes a question of the ethical strain running through anthropology. Primarily, politics is not a certain field of human life where it juridically imposes a constitution on itself from outside. It is its range where it essentially constitutes and asserts itself towards (and against) the world. Politics is the horizon wherein man gains sense of his world, of his understanding and action¹⁹.

¹⁸ Cfr. for the political role of inscrutability, see V. Schürmann, *Unergründlichkeit und Kritik-Begriff: Plessners politische Anthropologie als Absage an die Schulphilosophie*, in «Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie», 45, 3 (1997), pp. 345-361.

¹⁹ Cfr. H. Plessner, *Macht und menschliche Natur*, cit., p. 201.

Plessner achieves the possibility of reaching out to historical humanity through a history of ideas with this “inscrutability-theorem”. But historicity and historical forms of human life and expressive nature are only modes where the relation of historical power and of natural unconsciousness to accomplish form takes shape. From this point of view, historical forms show their limits for anthropological understanding, for individual understanding as a foundation for thinking, deciding, and acting. There is always an inherent potential to transcend and to shift them in order to have a movement or a development of history. This is not only valuable for gaining a retrospective view of “learning a lesson from history” but for considerations of ethical action which for Plessner is an “ethos of tact and diplomacy” as he points out in his book *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft* from 1924.

4. *Spacing Distances: The Categorical Subjunctive and Modes of Expressivity in Game, Social Roles, and Diplomacy*

Plessner explores conditions to enlarge and differentiate a space for practices of expressions where we gain our identity: maintaining the distances and spaces for mutual approaches, creating forms of role-behavior and experimental expressivity, and leaving room for alternative possibilities to act beyond the immunization of communities by dividing into “us” and “them”. This is a political and not only an ethical task, since it is a task of the situation that calls for realizing factual power constellations and knowing how to deal with individual actors. In the social and political sphere, the fluidity of roles mediates the immediacy of the individual and the social clashes of everyday behavior. For Plessner, this is summed up in the structures of “game”.

The public lives of and within a «spirit of game and play»²⁰. In «playing the games of implacability and of joy», if by nothing else, freedom can be seen in the distance to oneself that the game introduces: «While the soul absorbs the continuing impulses and the tension of its corporeal sphere, it prevents its surprise attacks by flourishes [and outward ruptures]. Rather, these energies [of playing] are used to satisfy a unity of body, soul, and mind»²¹.

²⁰ H. Plessner, *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft. Eine Kritik des sozialen Radikalismus*, in H. Plessner, *Gesammelte Schriften V*, cit., p. 94.

²¹ H. Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, cit., p. 94.

In contrast to this, ideology tries to separate and purify origins and elements of the human social structure against an enemy: in game, there are opponents which are part of this setting. Ideology reacts along the conviction of cause and effects, adopting a technomorphic logic of predictability and practicability, whereas a logic of the game takes into account the primacy of lateral powers and the joint activity with its own contingencies and emergent powers²². A vital part to facilitate this might be the power structures: Might these even prompt this in dissent to structures limitation eccentricity. It is here, that a Foucauldian critique of the genesis of such structures in the back of our awareness comes into play.

Politics deal with human inscrutability. But unlike Carl Schmitt's decisionism to provide and legitimate stable political structures, Plessner believes in the social dynamics of the game, which dissolves constellations and situations into histor(ies) and sets of alternative possibilities to act, thus evading the hostile antagonism of the "either-or". Diplomatic acting (in the sense of an inclusive approach to make political actions possible as opposed to individual interest-based strategies), voluntarily limits a space of action, reducing its complexity and enabling different actors to encounter each other. This encounter should take place – in the game – according to the individual dignity of the actors which is ethically (and for Plessner not juridically) founded in inscrutability: since nobody can be identified solely in his or her role. There is a «new quality of responsibility» with this distancing from absolute demands and the conviction in factual (not virtual) eccentricity. It is here, that for Plessner an anthropological ethics have to interfere with judicial morals.

"Diplomacy" means to leave the dignity of the other untouched, compensating possible inferiority with his or her participating in this process of mediation, and facilitating further arrangements on a stable base²³. There is always a mediating space between persons and parties that cannot simply be met but has to be generated according to its own various aspects and achieve possible reciprocity²⁴. There is no final end, giving way to a metaphysical or theological passage to the absolute or the *finis hominis*. Unity is only due to interpretation and diplomacy.

²² H. Plessner, *Der Mensch im Spiel*, in H. Plessner, *Gesammelte Schriften VIII*, cit., p. 310.

²³ Cfr. H. Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, cit., p. 99.

²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 100.

5. *Power and Human Nature: From Plessner to Foucault and beyond?*

Through the necessity of acting and thus shaping mediated intersubjective relations, this means that the power of human nature is not infinite but inscrutable in itself. Reflexively realizing its eccentricity, this power becomes productive and inventive of alternatives to act beyond necessity, if it is situated towards a limit²⁵. Thus, this theory explaining human creation has to remain open to a perspective on human life that allows appreciation of the range of all cultures, epochs, and all that man is capable.

There is a skeptical and prudential limit to the irreducible plurality and alterity – which for Plessner is in fact not posited as absolute but always mediated as a relation of strangeness – in human finitude and human openness towards an incalculable future. Enlarging the field of critique from history to politics, Plessner recognizes lifeworld in its plurality: Here, the inscrutability of human nature gains liability within a historical consciousness: recognizing one's own historicity by grasping the living reality as a project of human practice, means «to deduce the own presence in its broad scope of all its dimensions to the human behavior that opens this scope»²⁶.

This is the reason why the inscrutability of human existence comes into the center of anthropology. Against relativism, probing and realizing the “reflexive power” of political anthropology gains coherence in the methods and practical contents of conceptualizing. This does not necessarily lead to a post-anthropological thinking with its end of the image of the human self as an autonomous subject, as Foucault envisages in the course of his genealogical project. Rather, as Plessner puts it, the autonomy, the freedom, the reasonable sovereignty necessary to think and act, grasps its limits as inherent and constitutive of humanity.

Plessner's anthropological thinking strengthens the pragmatic, i.e., the social and political and not only anonymous, strain in the mutual “work on human nature”. His emphasis lies on the responsibility of man understanding himself as an imaginative and creative power towards the possibilities of the openness of life. Eccentricity means not only to be here, but also there. It is to be detached from the situation, and always bordering at several perspectives. To know oneself as a self – an I – is at the same time to find oneself as a Thou, the third person of He or She, and a community of We or Them.

²⁵ Cfr. H. Plessner, *Macht und menschliche Natur*, cit., pp. 183 f.

²⁶ *Ivi*, p. 182.

This differentiation is structured by the three “anthropological principles” as Plessner formulates them in his *Stufen des Organischen*²⁷: “Natural artificiality” gives man desire for form and creativity, “mediated immediacy” is met by any form of human life and society, by artifacts, images, concepts, worldviews etc. to handle life and world, it is an attitude towards, a relation to its artificiality which is not a product of history, but a complex structure of an individual actively relating herself towards lifeworld and its demands. Finally, the “utopian position of man”, being always already de-centered which is the condition to acknowledge the contingency of any factual setting of situations, power-relations or identity of an individual or communal self: This provides the condition to acknowledge a particular situation, setting or identity as open to being in a different way from the factual one: to gain a sense for possibilities not yet experienced, thought about or acted for (an *Unmoegliches*).

The “principles” unfolding from eccentricity cannot be apriori, since they have to explain the growth of the guiding truths and the reliabilities of life in their horizon of history and its experiences. As such, they are an “*innerworldly apriori*” at the most²⁸, and they cannot be apriori since they have to show human existence as a «creative source of his worldly objectivity»²⁹. This paradoxical structure leads to the interrogation of the very particular situation we situate ourselves in. Man is a “liminal being”, existing as an open identity – an identity emerging from plurality as different relationships of power we gain – for example – in the game we have mentioned before. But a critique of such evolving identities has always to be oriented from historic knowledge towards future anticipations of transformations within these power relations, as for example Foucault envisaged a critique matched with ethical and political engagement.

There is both a historical and a structural point of view towards this openness, and this is fundamental for a historical (i.e. archeological) understanding of man, and for the critical (genealogical) interpretations of his expressions of life and his practical orientation: with the possibility of a political perspective to structure the power that shapes our living and acting in a communal sphere differently: to resist to and transform certain regimes of power-relations. The historical point of view claims that man has to be freed towards his own history. Understanding the historical signifies to discover

²⁷ H. Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, pp. 383-425.

²⁸ Cfr. H. Plessner, *Macht und menschliche Natur*, cit., p. 151.

²⁹ *Ivi*, p. 153.

«the beyond of transient man». Understanding from a historical point of view «means to recognize oneself and one's own world as outcome of past generations». Only then is one able to recognize one's own present time as an open field of human eccentric attitudes³⁰.

This has yet to be transposed to the structural point of view. Philosophy, anthropology, and politics have their shared ground of possibility in human inscrutability³¹. They have to find their order from a pragmatic point of view with *both* conceptual *and* empirical knowledge, yet they also have to deal with the immediacy of the here and now in face of the finitude of social and political decidability.

Anthropological reflections focus on developing and strengthening a faculty and prudence to respond to human contingency. Human reason as human self-awareness has to find its lifeworldly order from a pragmatic point of view with a self-critical commitment to the limits of our concepts. It also has an ethical and political commitment of shaping an open space to maintain anthropological *praxis*. Thus, ethics and its socio-political urgency always underlie the anthropological question, reflecting its ways of interpretation and helping us to gain a responsible stance in expressing our particular, personal, and socially shared ways of self-understanding.

Philosophical anthropology is only beginning to be a discipline that tries to transform the limits of disciplines. Aware of the problem that there is no “concept of man”, and of the impossibility of conceptualizing man, a reflexive anthropology never provides a foundational or ultimate answer to the enigma of the essence of the human being. Instead it indicates a task to form or invent sets of practices for human life. Not in a theory or a technique of human self-understanding in the public sphere, but as an ongoing interrogation that finds its form in the inter- and intrasubjective sphere of words and deeds.

Plessner wrote in his critique of social radicalism that

our moral stance suffered from an overestimation of conviction, conscience, and values only mentally and theoretically ascertained. Man has a right [...], even has a duty, to give space to the riches of those powers of his nature that cannot be restrained by reason, mind, and values, moral laws and principles³².

Without the focus on politics and its conditions in human sociality and the open ways of community, ethics will only be truncated. What remains

³⁰ *Ivi*, p. 182.

³¹ *Ivi*, p. 202.

³² H. Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, cit., p. 111.

for a politically engaged philosophical anthropology is the awareness of its practical responsibility towards the inscrutability of the possibilities of man. This means to open a socially pacified space, pacified by political mediation, and to enact our eccentricity while confronting relativism by carefully structuring this worldly framework with experience and philosophical reflection. There always is the ethical question that qualifies eccentricity as a responsible stance – thus the political life evolving with eccentricity as responsible for the forms and deeds of its institutions.

Responsibility does not need to be ascribed only to a subjectivity incorporated in an individual, but also to communities that are always already tend to fall prey to immunization – to disclose their eccentricity, also in their sense of self, their sense of vulnerable identity.

For Foucault, eccentricity might be stated for the double-aspectivity of ourselves experiencing ourselves:

Man's mode of being as constituted in modern thought enables him to play two roles: he is at the same time at the foundation of all positivities and present [...] in the element of empirical things. This fact – it is not a matter here of man's essence in general, but simply of that historical *a priori* which, since the nineteenth century, has served as an almost self-evident ground for our thought – this fact is no doubt decisive in the matter of the status to be accorded to the „human sciences“, to the body of knowledge [...] that takes as its object man as an empirical entity³³.

It is a practical concern, that man is included into the objects of science, and is decided to be identifiable as they are. This is an issue which Plessner tries to tackle and to resolve critically with his *inscrutability-theorem* both for the sciences and our practical orientation within them as we institute our lives.

According to Foucault, the human sciences have to define their field – negatively and positively – both against a pre-set anthropological condition or a set of grounding functions and towards the power we exert; and here, we do not have a «very particular form (a somewhat special physiology and an almost unique autonomy)», but gain form(s) by our representations of our instituted lives: Man «is that living being who, [...] constitutes representations by means of which he lives, and on the basis of which he possesses that strange capacity of being able to represent to himself precisely that life»³⁴. There is no base, yet inscrutability.

³³ M. Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Vintage, New York 1994, p. 344.

³⁴ *Ivi*, p. 352.

Foucault's concern is yet, that this only addresses to some «high-minded few», but that this “high-minded” philosophy falls itself prey to its own discourse of transcendental base-lines that try to secure inscrutability, yet take them for a granted empirical form: «And so we find philosophy falling asleep once more in the hollow of this Fold; this time not the sleep of Dogmatism, but that of Anthropology»³⁵.

How to lay out a critical analysis of what can be presented to man's experience as a concrete subject within his or her structures within the power-relations of work, administration, politics etc. – and in his historical living on he is neglectful of? Which kind of language and theoretical setting of discourse might be applicable to create a range not only to perceive settings of these power-relations alternatively, but to interpret and live them alternatively? It is a perspective on modes of being not only on epistemic structures, on modes of being that so far have limited our sense of possibilities to experience and to interpret ourselves.

This is a question of origin of such new critical analyses from a historical point of view: There is no longer an origin both in a transcendental subject or in an objectivity mixed up with the subject of knowledge and science:

[I]t is historicity that, in its very fabric, makes possible the necessity of an origin which must be both internal and foreign to it: like the virtual tip of a cone in which all differences, all dispersions, all discontinuities would be knitted together so as to form no more than a single point of identity, the impalpable figure of the Same, yet possessing the power, nevertheless, to burst open upon itself and become Other³⁶.

Plessner tackles this mode of being in experiencing and using this experience to instantiate the (power-)structures we have as a space or range of action according to a model of play or game; this means to him: to recognize an aporetic situation where further moves in a fixed set of rules no longer seem to be possible. The “diplomatic form of play” would be one where we both recognize an aporetic situation as such *and* interpret it in different ways – invent different sets of rules, not only to subjugate ourselves anew to them, but also to virtualize them for possible developments, or – as Plessner puts it: to give meaning to the meaningless³⁷ or the impossible. Antagonists

³⁵ *Ivi*, p. 341.

³⁶ *Ivi.*, pp . 329 f.

³⁷ See for this: H. Plessner, *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft*, cit., p. 99. This space or range of the diplomatic play or game aims at recognition of all those acting within the range: recognizing a «principle of mutuality» (*ivi*, p. 101).

(or opponents in a game) can shape their profile, their sets of possibilities, for example their modes to articulate themselves and to be understood in this diplomatic play, that provides modes of distancing oneself from a fixed perspective towards the “utopian point of view”.

Unlike Plessner, Foucault does not see the empirico-transcendental constitution of man as «an ever-open question»; rather, it «refer(s) back to a precise and extremely well-determined epistemological arrangement in history»³⁸.

Thus, a science of man has as a condition firstly to analyze how we represent to ourselves our relations to each other, to our institutions, to our practices as certain forms of discourses. We have secondly to analyze the functions of these relations and these discourses. And, thirdly, we have to critically ask whether these discursive representations clarify or rather mask these functions – this in order to obtain an understanding, how we are subjects of these discourses. And the same applies to the ways we express ourselves, «reveal and conceal» in discourses³⁹.

It is exactly this, Plessner’s program to analyze, clarify and shape the awareness of the way we shape the phenomenal field of political actions and how codes of conduct and expressions may facilitate our social and or political intercourse, starts from: For the sake of an understanding that implies the ethical background of such analyses for the sake of an anthropology in pragmatical regards. With Foucault, human sciences are an analysis starting from positive facts about man in order to give guidelines of understanding what this life is and means. For Plessner, we might say, this is exactly the role of a philosophical – and as he proposes this in *Power and Human Nature* – a political anthropology should bring forth. Thus, this style of thinking might not so easily fall under suspicion of the so-called “Anthropological Slumber”. Even further, Plessner tries to establish a knowledge of how to act, to differentiate a range of possible activity and thus to extend human power to a knowledge also applicable in concrete – and until then – unthought-of, even impossible situations: A set of given constellations might become transformable into possible narrations of how to adapt them differently.

Foucault characterizes human sciences by a two-level structure: on the one hand an objectifying historically way – oriented towards contexts of expressions, items, discourses etc. who have been already passed down or recorded; on the other hand as a critical stance of certain forms of knowledge with its range of possibilities to modify and change these structures. This

³⁸ M. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, cit., p. 346.

³⁹ Cfr. *ivi*, pp. 352 f.

structure provides a possible distance, a cleavage, an ambiguity; Foucault talks about a «space given to the human sciences to withdraw into, away from what they spring from, and the fact too, that this action can be applied to themselves suffice to demonstrate their peculiar configuration». It is a «“hypo-epistemological” position»⁴⁰. Thus, this leaves still open the question how to empower this position. Plessner characterizes his own concept not as a meta-science, yet it is a «style of thinking», a habit of thinking: A style that is a self-distance according to human eccentric positionality, the condition of possibility to take a distance, another perspective. Thus, this is less transcendental than rather an option we already have the possibility of in our incarnate being which has to be practiced – in the sense of to be rehearsed – and established within our social and political behavior, institutions etc.⁴¹. In fact, this might be explored further by Plessner’s structural description of a sociology of play and game in the context of human eccentricity and inscrutability within the realm of our social exchange – rooted in our incarnate existence in its historicity – giving way for a commitment towards dignity rooted in the inscrutability and a solidarity as to our vulnerable eccentricity exposing ourselves to each other.

If politics might need an ethics in the sense of a critically applied anthropological style of thinking giving space for knowledge and behavior in respect for eccentricity and inscrutability of the other: this is the regulative idea of Plessner’s concept. A concept that stays open with its hypothetical categories with the “*historical a priori*” of our own historicity both towards past and future guiding us for future decisions facing situations we do not know how to relate them to the structures that worked before, to the structures that might have brought forth this situation, to the power lines that enabled these situations to come about, to the power lines that might inhibit our thinking and acting according to something unthought-of until now⁴².

⁴⁰ *Ivi*, pp. 345 f.

⁴¹ Foucault’s three pairs organizing human sciences: function-norm (biology), conflict-rule (economics), signification-system (language, philology) (cfr. *ivi*, p. 357) might be applied to Plessner’s concept of philosophical and/or political anthropology) in the three constitutive laws: natural artificiality, mediated immediacy and the utopian point of view (the latter presupposing a system, a worldview, yet which is always only established in words and deeds, and is always on the verge of being transgressed in individual expressivity. Plessner tries to bring these pairs in an intertwining, whereas Foucault sees a shift in the development of sciences from the classical to the modern age (cfr. *ivi*, pp. 360 ff.).

⁴² Since historical experience does not provide a cumulated essence of man; it only indicates what he is, after he historically accomplished it, see N.A. Richter, *Grenzen der Ordnung. Bausteine einer Philosophie des politischen Handelns nach Plessner und Foucault*, cit., p. 173.

This might mean to keep in mind the «What for» of us discussing our bodily vulnerability as we are faced with politics that more and more tend to restrict themselves to in-groups of nations, fate or a so called facticity of a virus, of an enemy across our borders, perpetrating our security or rather: challenging our vulnerability. Being vulnerable means also: to be open towards a world with is not exclusively ours but always a world of a multiplicity and plurality of factors, of bodies, of lives – in fact: an inscrutable world.

Abstract

To scrutinize not only the power we have, but the one we are, the one we are able to due to our finitude, might become the task of a Philosophical Anthropology: This task takes into account our bodily and thus vulnerable being: Being vulnerable seems to be an universal category of conditio humana; yet, too often it counts bodies in categories of body politics. It is a long-time project of Helmuth Plessner to develop a political anthropology of regaining a space for counter-acting such immunization-strategies of power relations – a way before Michel Foucault started his own epistemological and political account of archeo-genealogical critique of power. The essay will discuss lines of thought of “Political Anthropology” and how philosophy, anthropology and politics as different disciplines might intertwine to open a reflective space.

Keywords: Political Anthropology; Vulnerability; Immunization; Historical epistemology; Critique of power.

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