

Exploring the Core Identity of Philosophical Anthropology through the Works of Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen

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Abstract: “Philosophical Anthropology,” which is reconstructed here, does not deal with anthropology as a philosophical subdiscipline but rather as a particular philosophical approach within twentieth-century German philosophy, connected with thinkers such as Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner and Arnold Gehlen. This paper attempts a more precise description of the core identity of Philosophical Anthropology as a paradigm, observes the differences between the authors within the paradigm, and differentiates the paradigm as a whole from other twentieth-century philosophical approaches, such as transcendental philosophy, evolutionary theory or naturalism, existentialism, and hermeneutic philosophy. In determining the human being as “excentric positionality,” Philosophical Anthropology arrives at unique categorical intertwining between the biological, social and cultural sciences.

The initial state of affairs can be summarized as follows: from the late 1920s onwards various texts have cropped up under the heading of “philosophical anthropology.” Max Scheler’s *Man’s Place in Nature* (1928),¹ Helmuth Plessner’s *Man and the Stages of the Organic* (1928),² and – with a slightly later publication date – Arnold Gehlen’s *Man: His Nature and Place in the World* (1940),³ are commonly attributed to this phenomenon in the history of philosophy. That “philosophical anthropology” exists is clear, but what distinguishes a text as following a specifically philosophical-anthropological argument?⁴ Though

¹ M. Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*, Darmstadt: Reichl, 1928; [*Man’s Place in Nature*, trans. H. Meyerhoff, Boston: Beacon Press, 1961].

² H. Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch. Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie* (1928), Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1975.

³ A. Gehlen, *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt*, in K.-S. Rehberg (ed.), *Arnold-Gehlen-Gesamtausgabe, Textkritische Edition unter Einbeziehung des gesamten Textes der 1. Auflage von 1940*, vol. 3, Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1950/1993; [*Man: His Nature and Place in the World*, trans. C. McMillan and K. Pillemer, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988].

⁴ In what follows it is important to keep in mind the differentiation between “philosophical anthropology” as a subdiscipline and “Philosophical Anthropology” as a paradigm. Two distinct things have emerged since 1928: on the one hand, a new subdiscipline of philosophical

various noteworthy summaries and articles have been written on the subject, no satisfactory answer has been forthcoming.

I. Core Identity in the Difference between the Authors

The very title, Philosophical Anthropology, indicates that, irrespective of their differences, there are fundamental theoretical similarities between the authors. To begin with, the word “anthropology” indicates that each is concerned with treating, observing, quantifying, and describing various aspects of the human sphere, human living conditions, and man’s relationship to self, culture, and society in the categories he constructs. At the same time, “anthropology” shows that each proceeds from an understanding that, from the nineteenth century onwards, anthropology is also, irrevocably, a biological discipline. Therefore the internal theoretical reference to biology is the pivotal point in Philosophical Anthropology for all three authors. The theoretical program they each outline highlights a philosophical biology,⁵ for which Philosophical Anthropology provides a theory on relationships to the self, the world, and others. In other words, for Scheler, Plessner, and Gehlen the comparison between plants, animals and human beings or, at the very least, between animals and human beings, is a postulate for the development for their argument. The “philosophical” half of “Philosophical

anthropology was established by authors such as Bernhard Groethuysen, later by Michael Landmann, and currently by Christian Thies, who are interested in collecting and systematizing the questions and views on “man” (*Mensch*) that have emerged during the history of philosophy; on the other hand and in parallel, there has emerged a certain paradigm with a characteristic approach to the concept of man – and this is the achievement of Scheler, Plessner, Gehlen, Rothacker and Portmann. One can compare “philosophical anthropology” as a discipline with other disciplines within philosophy – such as ethics, epistemology, metaphysics *et al.* But having reconstructed “Philosophical Anthropology” as a paradigm, you can compare it with other twentieth-century approaches – such as phenomenology, existentialism, hermeneutic philosophy, critical theory, naturalism, structuralism and so on. My contribution concentrates on Philosophical Anthropology as a paradigm (which is why the term is in capital letters in the text). For an explanation of the difference, see J. Fischer, *Philosophische Anthropologie. Eine Denkrichtung des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Munich and Freiburg: Alber 2008, pp. 14–15, pp. 483–488.

⁵ For a discussion of the philosophical biology that philosophical anthropology took as its starting point and an introduction to the most important authors in this field (Plessner, Portmann, Buytendijk, Straus), see M. Grene, *Approaches to a Philosophical Biology*, New York and London: Dordrecht, 1965. With reference to Adolf Portmann in particular, see also J. Fischer, “Biophilosophie als Kern des Theorieprogramms der Philosophischen Anthropologie. Zur Kritik des wissenschaftlichen Radikalismus der Biologie und der Kultur-/Sozialwissenschaften,” in G. Gamm, A. Manzei and M. Gutmann (eds.), *Zwischen Anthropologie und Gesellschaftstheorie. Zur Renaissance Helmuth Plessners im Kontext der modernen Lebenswissenschaften*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2005.

Anthropology” indicates that, though interested in various individual scientific approaches, Scheler, Plessner, and Gehlen could not, indeed would not, be content with a philosophy based on any one approach in isolation from either the natural, cultural, or social sciences.

In order to answer the question of the possible core identity in the difference between the authors, I will limit my analysis to one point. I will not attempt to explain the philosophical background to the theory; i.e., the way of looking at a problem that led the authors to construct their categories.⁶ Instead, I will simply consider whether their respective approaches to categorization present a common and characteristic stance.

One characteristic strand of thought that might constitute a common core runs as follows: in the relevant texts by all three authors the self-certainty of “mind” (*Geist*) is the irrefutable starting point. However, perception begins not with the efforts of subjectivity but “elsewhere,” “indirectly,” at the factual existence of life. Put another way: the mind’s inner self-identification or linguistic self-assuredness is taken as a given, but it is not satisfied by itself. Instead the focus is external, on the living world. The theoretical view takes life as its subject, not the material world *per se* (or nature in general), or the material world only in so far as inanimate objects throw animate objects into relief. Nor is the focus (of the theoretical concept) “intuitive,” directed at the “life force” or *élan vital* (as the speculative principle of all existence); rather, it is directed at concrete, empirical life. This concrete, tangible experience of the living world is not arrived at by virtue of one’s own corporeality (the thinking subject in the medium of its own body) but through a distanced focusing on the object “life” (which also includes the physical self, in as far as it is a body). The ideological point of departure does not reside in the physical body, but, crucially, it takes the distanced, biologist’s view of the organism, of the living body in its medium or environment. Each of the relevant authors begins by considering the living body, placed at a remove, within its environment, and then proceeds through the classification of the various types of life (plants, animals), to arrive at the end-point, which is the mind. Crucially, they do not posit a teleological view of the relationship between body and mind (as in German idealism), neither do they reduce the phenomenon of mind to an evolutionary continuation of life (as in the paradigm of evolutionary biology since Darwin).

This, then, is my outline of the posited thought process that is, arguably, typical of the key texts of the three authors. Such a view contains other possible, but discarded, forks in the paths of reflection. Pursuing other paths

⁶ O. Marquard, “Zur Geschichte des Begriffs ‘Anthropologie’ seit dem Ende des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts” (1965), in Id., *Schwierigkeiten mit der Geschichtsphilosophie. Aufsätze*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973. See also Fischer, *Philosophische Anthropologie*, pp. 507–514.

would mean considering other theoretical programs. I will now present, in six points, what I consider to be typical of the philosophical-anthropological approach to categorization.

1. The categories of Philosophical Anthropology are based on the premise that it is possible to take a sideways glance at the subject-object relation, to observe it at a remove. In other words, the point of view that is generated internally and that, intentionally, establishes the subject-object relation, is placed outside of the body, so that the perception relation is observed at a distance – from an external vantage point. Put yet another way: this approach to categorization makes it possible in principle for the mind's internal subject-object relation to be observed from an external, distanced position. This is a crucial idea to grasp for the purposes of this discussion, for when viewed at a remove, the subject-object relation also appears as a relation of being. The perception relation *also* appears as a relation *in* being, as a relation that is wholly absorbed within, or that rises to the surface of being.
2. It follows that reflection is not generated by the subject of the subject-object relation, just as the private sphere of observation and thought does not give rise to the perception of the distanced external observer. Instead, perception is directed at “something,” at the object “Something” – a something, a living body in its environment – that becomes the focal point of a someone who could be anyone. Placed at a remove, the object is, as it were, subjected to the common gaze, to the public observation of common sense (not to be confused with common language – a pre-existing linguistic communication of what is observed; rather, language is tested by the presence of an object that could be observed by anyone).
3. Any request for a demonstration of a typical philosophical-anthropological thought-process will therefore be met with a description of a reflection, which begins at, and delves into, the objective level. The decisive point here is that this reflection, which is generated at the objective level, is consciously stimulated not at the human level – not, that is, when confronted with the human body. Instead, it is stimulated by life lower down the scale, at least at the level of sub-human living bodies (i.e. at the level of animals), which can be observed in relation to their environment, and serve as a baseline from which to think through to the higher levels. This way of constructing the categories of Philosophical Anthropology always implies a certain scale or hierarchy from bottom to top. The scale begins below the human level – not as far down as the level of inanimate objects, but somewhere in between, within the realm of living beings, between inanimate objects and human beings. In Philosophical Anthropology, then, the conceptual focus is not on the comparison between human beings and inorganic objects, e.g., between a stone and a human being, but rather on the

comparison between human beings and other living beings, e.g., plants, animals, and humans, or at the very least, on the comparison between animals and human beings.

4. The aspect that this philosophical approach or movement recognizes at the level of organic life, be it plant or animal, is the *Funktionskreis* [circle of function], or the *Lebenskreis* [biocycle], that links an organism to its environment.⁷ Between the causal relationships of the material world and the intentionality of mind the theoretical view identifies a respective relation between organism and environment. At the objective level then, in the constituent differentiation between an organism and its respective environment, an observation post, or point of view, is established that observes the relationship at a remove. This distanced viewpoint drives the categorization of Philosophical Anthropology, as it encompasses the whole spectrum of the circle of functions (from plants and their surroundings to animals in their environments). There is already an elementary contact, a type of bracketing of subject-object moments, an “environmental intentionality” in the correlation between life form and living environment, between plants and animals.
5. A typical philosophical-anthropological thought-process begins at the lower level, proceeds through a system of levels or through a comparative contrast of the various levels of organic life to reach the level of the human organism, its life form and living environment, where it identifies a break in the “biocycle” of life. “Break,” here, is meant not in the sense of a break-away, but rather in the sense of a rupture in instinct, impulse, sensory organs, movement (everything that is characteristic of living beings). In the concrete reality of the living human body and its environment, there is a chasm in which the entity known as “the mind” (by itself, in self-affirmation) takes its position. The mind is necessary to bridge the gap in life, but at the same time it is necessarily reliant on the living thing. Expressions such as “spiritualization of the senses” or “sensitization of the spirit” (Plessner), or “spiritualization of life,” “enlivening of the spirit”⁸ (Scheler), demonstrate the doubly dual-aspect that Philosophical Anthropology suggests or follows in its categories. The line of thought that proceeds along a sequence from bottom to top through a series of contrasts and comparisons, and that introduces or elevates mind (in as

⁷ For a discussion of the theory of “Funktionskreis,” “Handlungskreis” and “Gestaltkreis” in Philosophical Anthropology see Rehberg, Editor’s Notes, in Gehlen, *Der Mensch*, p. 908. For a discussion of the relevance to “kybernetische Anthropologie” (“cybernetic anthropology”) see St. Rieger, *Kybernetische Anthropologie*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2003.

⁸ Translator’s note: *Geist*, translated here as “spirit,” is elsewhere throughout the text translated as “mind.”

far as it is known to itself) to living experience, has, from its inception, a dual-aspect: at the very moment when, through categorization, mind is elevated and set apart from organic life, it is simultaneously anchored within the living world. The sphere of human life is therefore distinguished by the fact that the biocycles of life are, in certain regards, broken and indirectly mediated anew, while at the same time retaining their reliance on life. One could also say: all the succinct concepts of Philosophical Anthropology are broken and newly-mediated biocycle concepts.

6. The thought process that is, arguably, typical of Philosophical Anthropology has therefore succeeded in tying the factual reality of the objective level (the observation of the living body at a distance, which itself implies a relation to its environment) into the initial exposition of the factual reality of the internal sphere (the subject-object relation, as experienced by the perceiving and thinking subject). Man finds himself in his (objective) body, in the living thing as a body, and from within, as a living subject in the world and confronted with the world (the subject-object relation), without ever feeling at one with the internal perspective. For man exists in this double-aspect. From within, he feels like and as a centered living subject, but at the same time, by observing himself out of the corner of his eye, at a distance, he finds himself as a body among material bodies, marginalized, de-centered, objectified, like a “mere animal” (Plessner), a thing among other things. At the same time, in this double aspect, in the incongruity between an internal and external perspective, the thinkers associated with this movement of thought envisage the potential for further development of the philosophical approach. For through the systematic inclusion of the vital sphere, it is not only the seemingly body-neutral phenomena of reason and language that can be considered the monopolies of man, but also passions, emotions, the various senses of sight, hearing, and touch, as well as body postures, tool-, picture-, and music-making, dance, laughing and crying, orgiastic excess, and burial. In short, all types of movement and expression can be developed as constituents that open up the world and make it a human world.

Now, a philosophical approach can only really be held to exist when its concepts are expounded, not just by one individual, but in the texts of two or more authors. I will argue that the three authors coincide in this reconstructed line of thought, in this way of constructing categories, whatever the putative and actual differences in the way they formulate their ideas might have been. I will demonstrate this with regard to their key concepts, at the same time providing a first demonstration of Scheler, Plessner, and Gehlen’s respective argumentations.

The key concepts Scheler introduces to describe “man’s place in nature” are *Neinsagenkönnen* [he who can say no], *Weltoffenheit* [openness to the world],

and the ability for the living being in question to regard something as having a *Gegenstand-Sein* [to be an object]. The structural characteristics of the mind, which it can demonstrate to itself for the purpose of self-identification – i.e., matter-of-factness, self-confidence and freedom – are deemed prerequisite by Scheler. However, in his text published in 1928, Scheler’s viewpoint, before reaching the human sphere, begins with the cosmos, starting at the bottom, at the level of living things, which is characterized by “urge” and, as such, is already in a contact relationship with something other than itself, a relationship that cannot simply be reduced to causality. In the *Gefühlsdrang* [urge to feel] a living entity – a plant – comes into contact with something other than itself. Through a series of comparisons with “biopsychic” life and its various types (instinct, associative memory, practical intelligence) Scheler establishes the fact that, in the animal, instinctive urges are coupled with an environment-based experience of resistance. When the principle of this experience of resistance becomes itself negational, then there is a break in the biocycle. This phenomenon of life, in which the experience of resistance is negational, is the phenomenon of the human living being. The mind as principle of negation, of confrontation, of the renunciation of its position, is the tense state of interrupted life. It is in this way that, according to Scheler, the “mind” reaches its defining classification – namely, its matter-of-factness, the ability to be influenced by the reality of things.

But the mind does not arrive at this reality of “being an object” through itself, of itself, by virtue of its own volition, but only “indirectly,” only when there is a break in the living entity’s circle of function. For though the relationship to its environment is objectified through the act of negation of the living experience of resistance, the living entity has an object experience only in so far as the experience of urge (which is a characteristic of vital life, and is the very precondition for the reality of things) comes up against resistance in the material world. *Gegenstandsfähigkeit* [the ability to be an object], the acknowledged defining characteristic of the mind, is achieved through the combination of the double-aspect movement that is typical of Philosophical Anthropology with primordial vitalistic resistance to urges. Through negation – the suppression of the urge to resist – the resisting entity becomes a “thing” within the perception of human living beings. This living thing can, with vitality as a prerequisite, allow phenomena to approach it as independent things, i.e., in their “essence,” rather than only acknowledging the behavior-related nuances of an energetic interweaving of situational force and counter-force. The phenomenological position of recognition – the demonstration of essences along the intentionality between subject and object – thus receives a distinctively anthropological classification or explanation through Scheler’s construction. It is precisely in Scheler’s spe-

cifically anthropological categorization that his approach is shown to have a non-dualistic base. The human living being's "openness to the world" – as a transformation of the animal's *Umweltgebundenheit* [state of being bound to the environment] – is neither a defining feature of the mind nor a defining feature of the vital, but is the result of a genuine wedding of "urge" (resistance) and "mind" (negation) in the human living being.

This typically philosophical-anthropological double-aspect movement, in which the mind – without pursuing any teleological aspect – attains its internally familiar characteristics from the bottom up (characteristics that are simultaneously modified in their vital reference), is also incorporated within Scheler's categorical formula, for man is described as "he who can say no." "No" is the pure principle of the mind, it is objection; but in the ability to "say" no (saying no) – in the sense of making an assertion, taking a position in order to elicit a response (the establishing of a position) – "no" relies on the mind, which alone can provide the necessary force for the position of objection – the speech act – by borrowing it from the living body; and this borrowing, and re-channeling, of energy is only possible because the vital energy circle of urge-and impulse-resistance is simultaneously broken through the pure principle of mind. In the hierarchy of organic life Scheler identifies a "change" at the human level. "As an idea, man is the point, the phase, the place in the cosmos where the one organic 'life' (whether psychic or physical) that develops through all families, genera, species, loses its absolute power and becomes subservient to a principle – mind – for which and for whose possible effectiveness, goal and value-setting, the organic has opened up a gap, which is the point of breakthrough."⁹

The style of categorization that I have described as typical of Philosophical Anthropology is also explicit in Plessner's text *Man and the Stages of the Organic*. The key concepts that Plessner introduces are *exzentrische Positionalität* [excentric positionality], *natürliche Künstlichkeit* [natural artificiality], *vermittelte Unmittelbarkeit* [mediated immediacy], and *utopischer Standort* [utopian standpoint]. According to Plessner, man's distinguishing characteristic is his *excentric positionality*. Excentric positionality is the most artificial category of the theoretical program; at the same time, it lends particular clarity to the typical philosophical-anthropological thought process. It follows the same approach to categorization as that employed by Scheler. In order to formulate a conceptual understanding of the human sphere, Plessner explicitly begins within the subject-object relation, with the experience of the entity that is confronted with the subject.¹⁰ It is his intention to distinguish the "living thing" from

⁹ M. Scheler, *Schriften aus dem Nachlaß*, vol. 3, *Philosophische Anthropologie*, Gesammelte Werke, vol. 12, M. Frings (ed.), Bonn: Bouvier, 1987, p. 129.

¹⁰ Plessner, *Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, p. 50.

the non-living thing at the level of the object. His hypothesis is that the living thing is distinguished from all other things, not only by virtue of its border, which marks the point where it begins or ends, but by virtue of the “boundary” nature of its layer. The living thing is characterized by border traffic in relation to its environment, it is a boundary-setting thing. Plessner also refers to this boundary-setting thing as positional, a thing that is positioned for, and exposed to self-affirmation, self-expression, a “positionality.” The theoretical viewpoint now observes, as it were, from the side, stages of the organic as stages of the correlation between positional living entities and their respective spheres of life, cycles of functions between organisms and their environments. In contrast to plants, which are described as having an “open positionality,” animals have a “closed positionality.” The most highly developed animal is described as having a “centric positionality,” it perceives itself through a process of neuronal feedback and moves in circles of functions with differentiated environments; this living entity, this animal lives “into its center, and out of its center” in the respective positional field.

As such the theoretical viewpoint identifies a break in the circle of functions at the level of the human organism, a break in the sensory-motor-dynamic-impulsive bio-cycle. Plessner refers to this break in the cycle of functions at the level of the human living entity as “ex-centric positionality.”¹¹ The center is removed, without being able to extricate itself from its positionality – the position of vital positioning. Excentric positionality marks a break in positionality, it is not an autocentric positionality, that is, it is not a coming to itself of the living entity or of the *élan vital*. The rupture in the living entity is not to be understood as a breakthrough of the mind, which could essentially operate for itself. Excentric positionality is intended to describe the situation of a living entity that has an in-built detached viewpoint, an excentric point that cannot exist without the energy of the centrally positioned body, from whose realm of responsibility it remains removed. Through the systematic exegesis of the concept of “positionality” Plessner arrives at the typically philosophical-anthropological category of “natural artificiality,” “mediated immediacy” and “utopian standpoint.” The living entities referred to as humans are those living entities that take a position, that have a position, that are intended to take or have a position with regards to the positions assumed by natural history. They are by “nature” “artificial” or constructed – in nature. They arrive at their achievements “through” media, which enable them to achieve things and at the same time distort those achievements. By dint of their “excentric position” they occupy a “utopian standpoint.”

¹¹ J. Fischer, “Exzentrische Positionalität. Plessners Grundkategorie der Philosophischen Anthropologie,” *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 48 (2000), pp. 265–288.

The virtual organ of their “vital imagination” (Palagyi), their rich imaginative capability, allows them to wander wherever they please, though they are always grounded in a material reality of their own perceptions (tied down to standpoint). Everything that the mind knows of its own possibilities – technology, morality and law, language, history, art, religion – is accessible through the categorization of Philosophical Anthropology and, at the same time, this approach to categorization allows for the vital moment to be preserved and made manifest.

For Arnold Gehlen, “Man: His Nature and Place in the World” is characterized by *Handlung* [action], *Entsicherung* [security-withdrawal] and *Entlastung* [unburdening], *Institution* [institution]. The way in which Gehlen introduces the traditional concept of “action” in the conceptual context of “security-withdrawal” and “unburdening” as the distinguishing character of the human living being provides a particularly good demonstration of the philosophical-anthropological train of thought. The possibilities that the human mind inherently knows and can prove in itself – i.e., recognition, speech – are taken as given. However, in Gehlen’s text, the theoretical viewpoint concentrates on the view that starts from below, and takes a sideways glance at the correlation between organism and environment. The contrastive comparison between animals and humans is central. The animal living being is equipped with all the morphological elements, dynamism, and drive that it needs in order to deal with the environmental demands tailored to it, and lives out its life within its space of life in an instinctive coupling of perceptions and patterns of movement. The dynamic drive circulates rhythmically within the circle of functions, which couples organism and environment. In the phenomenon of the human living being there is a break in the circle of life, not simply because it appears to be less morphologically specialized – in this respect man is a *Mängelwesen* [deficient being] – but in the “hiatus” between a drive and its fulfillment. The naturally co-dependent dynamic relationship between inside and outside, between perception and behavior is *entsichert* [made insecure] in the human living being through *Instinktdifferenzierung* [instinct differentiation]; in man the behavior of the living being is exposed to the undirected complexity of external stimuli and internal drives.

Into this gap in life steps the ordering influence of “action” as a mental act, but, at the same time, the pressure of the situation can only be alleviated by action as a result of this gap, by action that lends vitality to the material that has been liberated through security-withdrawal (i.e., the movable drives, the perceptive flexibility, the room for maneuver); and by constructing its own artificial world as culture against the pressure exerted on it by the rupture in the external and internal world, it re-establishes the contact in the vital circulation. On the basis of the life of perception and movement that has

been newly secured through the overarching *Handlungskreis* [circle of action], language, as one of the higher functions, can close the self-ordered circle of functions, by simultaneously releasing the pressure of the here and now and leaving open ordered references to the opened up world. Gehlen continues to use the same non-naturalistic approach to categorization in his concept of “institution,” which, above all, is intended to characterize the peculiar nature of social relations among human living beings. If the perceptions and modes of behavior between those animals that have any dealings with each other at all are instinctively dependent on each other, then the meeting of circles of functions that have been instinctively made insecure demands an “instead,” a new equivalent of interdependent coordination of life. To this end, Gehlen suggests the category of “institution,” which is based on the interdependent re-utilization of behavioral modes, and has a vitally stabilizing function, providing the framework for the formulation of life-style goals.

It has been my intention here to demonstrate how the three thinkers coincide in the way they form categories. Each takes the human mind as his starting point, but begins by taking a view of the living body, and through comparative analysis of the various types of life – at the very least in contrast to animal life – establishes a break in life at the organizational level of the human body, in which the phenomena of the mind come to the fore as the new mediators of the circulation of life. The style of categorization that can be described as specific to Philosophical Anthropology does not simply show the hiatus at which the mind appears and disappears within the living body but rather follows this hiatus as a line, as a broken line, so to speak, without exception, through all of the cultural and social phenomena it covers and deals with. The relationships to self, the world, and others, that is to say, the inner, outer, and shared world, arise from the bios (the world of living things), they are a displacement (ex-centric) of the bios, which remain within the bios, indeed live within it. It is for this reason that there is an underlying tension of life that resonates in all the categories of Philosophical Anthropology, and the moment of the vital, the shadow of the living body runs deep into the ramifications of the subsequent concepts in psychology and the cultural and social sciences.

II. Difference between the Authors relative to the Core Identity

In as far as the authors coincide in their approach to categorization, it is possible to speak of an independent philosophical approach. At the same time, it cannot be denied that there are real differences in their respective texts. The question to be considered here is whether there is a systematic explanation for these undeniably divergent views, which constitute a deviation from the core

identity of the theoretical program. Having already established the common bonds between Scheler, Plessner, and Gehlen, such an explanation would provide further vindication of Philosophical Anthropology's core identity.

There are substantial, substantive differences between the key terms the authors employ to describe man's relationship to the world, himself, and others. For example, in Scheler's description of man's relationship to the world, the stress is on the attainable *Weltgrund* [foundation of the world], whereas Plessner concentrates on the "world" that is accessible only through various sensory perceptions, i.e., mediated and fragmentary, and Gehlen on a *Weltbild* [image of the world] that is both structured and solid. As for the individual's relationship to self, Scheler approaches the question from the perspective of the "person," whereas for Plessner it is a relationship that is defined by the structural characteristics of "masks" and "role-play," and Gehlen finds an explanation in the culminating achievement of "character." While for Scheler "sympathetic feelings" underpin man's relationships to others, Plessner stresses the distancing "openness" of the relationship, while Gehlen provides yet another interpretation, introducing the term "institution."

My hypothesis is as follows: if all three thinkers are held to have a shared approach to categorization then the differences between them can be described as a systematic difference, stemming from the aspect of life they choose to stress in the comparison between plants, animals and humans; that is, stemming from which *aspect* of life they choose to consider in the human sphere, where it is characterized by a hiatus.

All three consider life as a "circle of function" between an organism and its environment, drawing on a basic principle of theoretical biology introduced by Jakob von Uexküll. The biocycle of life is a term used to explain how "an organism is, as a whole, only half of its actual life"¹² We can identify at least three independent characteristics of the biocycle. In the first instance, it is indeed the case that, via the circles of perception and action, the biocycle always considers the living being as being in real, and at the same time intentional, contact with that which is not itself, i.e., with the world that surrounds it, or the world it shares, in the sense of those living organisms it resembles. In the biocycle, the living being comes into contact with "the other," over and above mere materialistic causal links. It reaches something through the mediation of sense and movement, it sees and feels in an *unmediated* way, it is impressed, or impressions are shared with it. This real-intentional contact between an organism and its environment is noteworthy. As for the second characteristic, it obviously cannot be denied that the correlation between the living being's environment and fellow men appears simultaneously within it, and that even at the border sur-

¹² Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, p. 255.

faces of its bodily form the living being expressively appears in the environment for those it shares its circumstances with. Environment and fellow men are mutually dependent on one another, though *mediated* through appearance. This mediation, this media-based contact, can be considered noteworthy. Then, a third noteworthy characteristic consists in the fact that the circle of function of unmediated immediacy between the living being and its environment/fellow beings actually *functions* – in animals it is a cycle that takes places rhythmically, through instinct and adaptation as a natural way of living.

It is now possible to consider the differences between the three authors within the philosophical approach of Philosophical Anthropology – irrespective of the reasons for the differences themselves. Each one identifies man’s “nature and place in the world” as a function of the rupture and new mediation of the biocycle, which establishes a new space for man’s encounter with his environment as a world, with fellow living beings who are others of a different nature (fellow beings, alter ego), with familiarity with self as an internal world.

Scheler pursues the contact-break in the living circle of function in the human sphere as the real opportunity for unmediated *participation* in the otherness of the world, i.e., for one’s own biophysical living/actual body to participate in other fellow living beings. Plessner, on the other hand, takes the break in the biocycle with reference to *expression*, to the modalities whereby world appears indirectly in man, and whereby man appears to other men. Gehlen, by contrast, stresses the interruption in the rhythmically secured circulation of life in the human sphere with reference to the mechanisms of artificial *security* that man must, and can, establish in his relationship to self, the world, and others.

The hypothesis is as follows: the respective key terms employed by Scheler, Plessner, and Gehlen to explain man’s relationship with the world, himself, and others, are the result of the various nuances in stress outlined above. From a systematic perspective, this explains the different approaches each adopts in his analysis of phenomena related to human existence within the shared theoretical program. At the same time, this distinction illuminates the manifold applications of the philosophical approach.

Because Scheler is concerned with the intentional real contact of that which is alive, his focus – with regards to the *relationship to the world* – is on the experience of resistance of that which is alive (the quintessence of real contact) at the point where it is changed, is transformed into the ability of the human living being to become an object; and this line of thought is rigorously followed through, culminating in the consideration of the extent to which a “foundation of the world” is at all attainable. Through the mind’s ability for negation, for which it must subject itself to the power of life, the experiences of resistance in a given reality, which are an inherent compo-

ment of a living being's *Gefühlsdrang* [emotional impulse], develop into feelings of participation, and as such constitute "windows onto the absolute" (Hegel). For Scheler the quality of being "open to the world" means that the "world" actually opens itself to the specifically positioned living being, is placed within it. As such, he describes the *relationship to the self* as a living "center of action," in which the individual achieves an actual contact to self through the fullness of "intentional feeling" within the relationship to the world. Scheler's theoretical interest is exclusively dedicated to feelings such as "shame" and "regret," in which the human living being confronts itself. It follows from Scheler's choice of focus that the relationship to others is based on the ability of the feelings of mutual arousal – which characterize the relationship between animal living beings – to be broken and transformed into "sympathetic feelings," whereby this sympathy enables a participation in the objectifiable core of the other being. All in all it is Scheler who adopts the most ecstatic position among the philosophical anthropologists. It is Scheler who, in his choice of focus, articulates the ecstatic potential of Philosophical Anthropology's "excentric positionality."

Because Plessner takes the sensory appearance-relationship of the correlation between an organism and its environment as his starting point, he considers the differentiated manifestations of the world in the *Grenzflächen* [border areas] of the motor-sensory organism with regard to "relationship with the world." In the *Ästhesiologie des Geistes* or the *Anthropologie der Sinne* he sets out a theory based on the radical change in the animal modalities (modals) of the senses (eye, ear, touch) within the human sphere, of mediated immediacy, media (music, pictorial representation, dance, language), each of which supplies a means through which man culturally creates a space for accessing the world. The relationship with the world as conceived by Plessner is a relationship that is mediated by media through which the world appears in a different light, depending on the respective medium. Plessner therefore proceeds from the sensory appearance-relationship to a description of the relationship to self as a *Futteralsituation*; the self that can feel the living body that is itself, and can at the same time observe that living body from an excentric position, behind the casing (*Futteral*) of which it remains forever hidden to itself, only experiences itself – mediated – as an actor, who gives a sentient/meaningful "embodiment" to this fractured situation. In this displayed embodiment the self is made manifest, but at the same time it remains veiled to itself during the display. As such, in an attempt to analyze (life's) broken circle of functions through the concept of "mediated immediacy," Plessner considers the nature of the relationship with others in terms of the public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*). With the accent on mediated immediacy the relationship with others cannot be a relationship of unreserved openness. Instead, given the rupture in

the protective boundary surfaces of life, only a staged relationship is possible, with masks and roles, in whose typical representational forms of mediated immediacy there is a balance between two extremes, i.e., between the desire to be seen and the desire to remain veiled.

Because, above all, Gehlen has the functions of life's circulation of function in his sights, his consideration of man's relationship with the world focuses on how, given the break in the unquestioning, animalistic bio-cycle, an efficient, functioning order can be newly established at the level of man. He is interested in how, when faced with an open reality of sensory overload and an uncoordinated array of movements, the living subject is able to process moments of reality that are suspended in loops of awareness and movement, by action and through doing, into the secure foundations for an ordered, richly suggestive and accessibly placed world.¹³

Gehlen therefore introduces the key term "character" into his discussion of the relationship to self, whereby the living subject exerts discipline over the broken, easily displaceable, agitated dynamism of its inner world, and establishes itself as a "character." Finally, by placing the accent to stability Gehlen characterizes the relationship to the others, in the light of ritual and institution.

Scheler, Plessner, and Gehlen share the approach to categorization that I have described as typical for Philosophical Anthropology. In the hiatus of the living circle of functions they identify a completely new living space for encounter and challenge. This space can be referred to, and reconstructed as, the human sphere. However, they each pursue this idea from different angle: Scheler's philosophical enquiry focuses on the intentional correlation of an encounter – that which is encountered, or the being. Plessner's enquiry takes the modals of an encounter as its subject, the mediation or the appearance of character between the correlates of the correlation; while Gehlen, in his enquiry, concentrates on the structuring influence of an encounter, the establishment of positionality between the correlates that an encounter brings.

The noteworthy differences between the philosophers can therefore be explained through reference to the core identity of Philosophical Anthropology. Their differences do not constitute a challenge to this core identity as a philosophical approach. To argue otherwise would be to argue that Fichte, who considered the reality of the objective mind as springing from the acting deed of subjectivity, and Schelling, for whom it emanated from the unfolding of nature, and Hegel, who saw it as a logical historical consequence of the self-unfolding of an absolute mind, were at odds with the core identity of German idealism, when in fact they draw exclusively on its system of categorization – the dialectic. The same holds for critical theory,

¹³ Gehlen, *Der Mensch*, p. 203.

where the substantial differences between, for example, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, can always be explained by reference to the core identity of a materialistically functioning “negative dialectic.”

III. Core Identity as Distinct from other Theoretical Programs

The final test of the core identity of Philosophical Anthropology is very simple. In its categorization, as demonstrated, Philosophical Anthropology as a theoretical program cannot be confused with any other philosophical approach. The relative superiority of one theoretical program over another is not at issue here; the principal concern is the uniqueness of the approach.

My proposal is as follows: take any text by Scheler, Plessner, and Gehlen from the given list and it will be clear from the approach to categorization in evidence that despite variations in topic, style, and statements, we are not dealing with a text that can be ascribed to either transcendental criticism, evolutionary theory, phenomenology, existentialism, hermeneutic philosophy, linguistics, or structuralism.

Philosophical Anthropology cannot be regarded as a *subject theory of transcendental criticism*, because the latter always takes the (epistemological) achievements of culture as its starting point, from which it proceeds to question critically the conditions for what is possible in the achieving subject (as in, for example, Cassirer’s *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*).¹⁴ Conversely, Philosophical Anthropology takes the world of living things, the positionality of organic life, as the precondition for any positioning achieved by human subjectivity.

Philosophical Anthropology cannot be confused with *evolutionary theory*, because the latter considers all forms of life, including the human living being, relative to the common principles of evolution and, as such, provides a naturalistic description of all forms of life within the theory of evolutionary epistemology and social biology, i.e., according to the principle of adaptive self-preservation of the individual organism and the principle of adaptive genetic reproduction through the organic individuals. Philosophical Anthropology, on the other hand, takes a systematic view of the contrast between forms of life, at least in the comparison between animals and humans, and as such allows for the burgeoning of a unique logic of a specifically human “living world.”

¹⁴ Plessner’s subsequent description of Cassirer’s *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* as “anthropological philosophy” in his contribution to the commemorative volume of Adorno’s work, is a turn of phrase in the spirit of philosophical anthropology that Scheler and Gehlen would have appreciated. “Cassirer is well aware that man is also a living being, but he does not exploit this fact philosophically.” H. Plessner, “Immer noch philosophische Anthropologie?” (1963), in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983, p. 243.

Philosophical Anthropology is a theoretical program distinct from *phenomenology*, in that the latter takes intentional consciousness or inter-subjectively composed consciousness as its starting point, imbued with an inter-subjective experience of being an object as core of a universal (human) “living world” (“living world” as inter-subjectively shared world). Philosophical Anthropology, by contrast, starts from a philosophical biological stance, and is programmed-in at the organic level, in the world of living things (living world as the world of living things), as the prerequisite for a human living world; it is an attempt to provide a foundation for the possibility of phenomenology.

Philosophical Anthropology is systematically different from *existential philosophy*, which always takes the inner experience of consciousness lodged in the body as its starting-point – a subjectivity immersed in a concrete reality. If even the Heideggerian moments of care and finiteness are characterized by a corporal sensitivity, then it is possible to detect a continuation of Philosophical Anthropology in corporal existential analysis or phenomenology of the body (e.g. in the works of Merleau-Ponty or Hermann Schmitz), first of the *corps propre*, then of the body as object. Philosophical Anthropology does not begin systematically with the inner experience of the lived body, but in the acknowledgement of the distanced body as a thing that establishes its boundary: first physical body, then lived body.

Philosophical Anthropology must be systematically different from *hermeneutic philosophy*, *linguistic philosophy* or *structuralism*, in short, from all approaches that – despite their respective differences – inaugurate a linguistic turn, in as far as they are approaches that begin with language, language as the medium for all relationships to the self, the world, and others. Philosophical Anthropology, by contrast, takes the process of life as its starting point, from whose break in continuity language springs as just one medium among others to bridge the divide (pictorial representation, music, dance, etc.).

IV. Conclusion

In addition to its recognized status as a philosophical discipline (“philosophical anthropology”), Philosophical Anthropology has been shown here to be an independent, distinct theoretical program within the history of twentieth-century theory. It is possible to identify a core identity of the philosophical approach, which is equally prominent in the relevant texts by Scheler, Plessner, and Gehlen. The difference between the authors can be explained as a systematic difference within the core identity, and the core identity serves as a distinct demarcation relative to other philosophical approaches.

There is considerable potential for further study of the unique and incomparable aspects of the philosophers in question. This essay has not demonstrated the diagnostic vigor of the philosophical approach, or its potential applications, nor has it comprehensively engaged with the criticisms made against it. My objective was simply to confirm that Philosophical Anthropology is indeed a theoretical program, a paradigm among other twentieth-century paradigms; and this in itself is already a significant result, for the thinkers united in the theoretical program – Scheler, Plessner, and Gehlen – are, in their own right, already acknowledged as important figures in the history of twentieth-century German philosophy.

(Translated from the German by Christina Harrison)

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