The Public Nature of Human Beings. Parallels between Classical Pragmatisms and Helmuth Plessner’s Philosophical Anthropology

HANS-PIETER KRÜGER

Abstract: Though Helmuth Plessner (1892-1985) elaborated his philosophical anthropology independently of the classical pragmatisms, there are many parallels with them. He combined a phenomenology of living beings (a parallel with William James) with a semiotic reconstruction (a parallel with Charles Sanders Peirce) of what we are already using whenever we specify living beings, among them ourselves as human living beings in nature, culture, and society. In Plessner’s distinction between having a body (Körperhaben) and being (or living) a body (Leibsein), there is a parallel with George Herbert Mead’s “Me” (taking over the perspective of others) and “I” (spontaneous actions/reactions of an organism in a situation). Dewey and Plessner elaborated a public procedure for overcoming the old dualism of matter and idea in a process of learning better habits. Their historical conceptions of communication involve the primacy of interactions on three levels (discursive, conscious, pre-conscious living). Facing the plasticity of human conduct, both approaches open the door to a pluralistic self-understanding that includes value-conflicts and that therefore needs civilized forms to solve such conflicts. With regard to the limits of human conduct, Plessner proposed a phenomenology (of laughing and crying) that seems to have no equivalent in pragmatism.

With Max Scheler and Helmuth Plessner, Philosophical Anthropology became a special kind of philosophy designed to meet the new challenges coming from anthropologies emerging in the sciences as well as in the humanities. Though Scheler had begun with a philosophy of the spirit, by the end of his life, in 1928, he had founded Philosophical Anthropology. As a member of the next generation, Plessner emancipated Philosophical Anthropology from Scheler’s Christian metaphysics of the spirit. Opposed to every kind of absolute synthesis (as exemplified by Hegel’s absolute spirit of reconciliation), Plessner elaborated a purely negative conception of the absolute as the open end of history.

1 See M. Scheler, Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos (1928), Bonn: Bouvier, 1986.
3 See H. Plessner, Macht und menschliche Natur. Ein Versuch zur Anthropologie der geschichtlichen Weltansicht (1931) [Power and Human Nature. Essay on an Anthropology of Historical...
Instead of providing a positive conception of absolute predicates, his philosophical procedure proposed that phenomenology and semiotics complement one another.\(^4\) He combined a phenomenology of living beings (in the broadest sense) with a semiotic-discursive reconstruction of what we must already be using whenever we describe and specify living beings (ourselves included) as (for example) human living beings in nature,\(^5\) culture, and society.\(^6\)

Before I begin to draw systematic parallels, however, I must make one preliminary remark, in order to prevent a historical misunderstanding. Plessner did not know of Peirce’s integration of phenomenology and semiotics. Plessner had been only slightly impressed by William James’s “living stream” and “saddle” (in connection with Henry Bergson’s critique of Cartesian dualism), and had not been influenced by Dewey’s conception in *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922),\(^7\) which he read in the context of Max Weber’s “social action.” In principle, Plessner elaborated his Philosophical Anthropology independently of the Classical Pragmatisms. Only later on, in the 1950s, after his exile in the Netherlands, did he sometimes refer to George Herbert Mead. By the same token, it is clear that Philosophical Anthropology (in the German sense) had no influence on Classical Pragmatisms.

In the following I select only five systematic parallels, and I shall end with one interesting difference.

1. **Body, Self and Thirdness**

My first parallel involves Mead and Plessner. One of Plessner’s most famous statements runs: “The nature of human beings is from the very beginning an artificial one.”\(^8\) How are we to understand this summary remark? Plessner means that, since human nature is too plastic in comparison with the nature of other animals, its conduct has to be fixed in an artificial way. But, since any fixation

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\(^8\) See Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, p. 310 ff.
of conduct also endangers it, human beings need a public process in order to establish judgments. Mead and Plessner share an approach that construes roles in social and cultural terms. Mead emphasized the difference between plays (roles of concrete others) and games (roles of generalized others). Plessner drafted the distinction between playing in role masks (participation in them) and playing with role masks (attaining distance from them). In both approaches, there is a way of elaborating the public and private dimensions through role playing. This enables human beings to judge their habits in the best way possible.

Plessner focused our attention on the performative (J. L. Austin) relation between socio-cultural roles and our own bodies. The body is experienced as the following difference: In certain respects, we can “have” our body just as we can “have” other bodies too, namely, in social modes of mediation and reflection. In these senses of “having” a body under certain conditions, our own body can be made equal to other bodies, exchanged for other bodies, and substituted for other bodies. This takes place in accordance with the technologies of nature, culture and society. In another respect, we cannot have our own body, insofar as we are “being” it in a living manner, spontaneously here and now, without reflection and technological mediation. Now, if we compare this conception with Mead’s theory, there is once again a parallel: Plessner’s distinction between having a body and being one’s body is equivalent to Mead’s distinction between “Me” and “I.” On Plessner’s approach, the “I” is equal to “being body” or “living body.” And a “Me” is “having a body” in accordance with the measure of a social role of others in cultural terms.

The second parallel regards Peirce: What is constitutive of Plessner’s method of proceeding in reconstruction? In all cases, Plessner poses the question of the “third position”; i.e., the position from which we make the distinction between having a body and living it. He called this third position the “ex-centric position,” which is, hypothetically, specific to human beings. According to Plessner this ex-centric position enables a double movement. On the one hand, the third position enables a de-centering away from one’s own body towards a center of conduct coming from outside. To that extent, we merely have our bodies. On the other hand, the third position enables a re-centering towards one’s own body (body being) as the center of conduct. To that extent, we live our own bodies. This double movement gives rise to the problem of striking a balance between the two directions. In solving this problem, human beings take advantage of the ex-centric position. They are entitling themselves in using a third position. The latter is necessary, but it is not a pre-given certainty.

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Now, in comparison with Peirce, one could say that Plessner’s ex-centric position is something like Peirce’s irreducible sign. For Peirce, a full sign (a sign without any deficit; a sign that is not degenerate) can be taken as thirdness in a cycle of changing human conduct. A full sign is a relation of three relations; namely, between a material sign, an object, and an open interpreter. In Peirce’s philosophy, there is no separation of semiotic relations from phenomenological findings (as is later the case in structuralist semiotics). On the contrary: semiotic relations are drafted in order to enable phenomenological discoveries. A sign is grasped as a living being of a special kind. A full sign as phenomenological Thirdness thus differs from a Secondness, which is only a two-dimensional relation of action and reaction. And it differs, too, from a Firstness, which consists in an unmediated response (feeling, for example) to a perception of quality.\(^\text{10}\) Plessner drafted his semiotic approach of three-dimensional relations in his book on “the unity of senses” (1923),\(^\text{11}\) which is a keystone of his work. I am in agreement with Orth in recognizing that Plessner discovered the symbolic function earlier than Ernst Cassirer did.\(^\text{12}\) For Peirce as well as for Plessner, thinking is not situated in the brain. Rather, thinking is a semiotic practice of interactions aimed at ameliorating human conduct.

2. Public dimension, language and nature

Third parallel: Dewey and Plessner elaborated a public procedure to overcome the old dualism of the material and the ideal. Their anti-dualism was no one-sided emphasis on a mystical unity, an intuitionist unity, or an organicist unity as the origin of all separations. Rather, their public procedure of communication\(^\text{13}\) involves the primacy of interactions on three levels.\(^\text{14}\) In both models, self-consciousness is re-integrated into discursive communication ("level a"). The conscious self is developed in learning a language. The use of language requires making reference to oneself in contrast to other possible

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\(^\text{11}\) Plessner, *Die Einheit der Sinne*.


referents of cooperation. But, at a given moment, self-consciousness is not the same as consciousness of something else that does not need a discursive explanation. (For instance, we can be aware of something at the periphery of our habit). Therefore, conscious conduct (with respect to perceptual and sensory qualities only) is a function of bodily communication (“level b”). “Level b” is not specified by a self-referential use of language as expressed, for example, in the double structure of performative and constative acts. Finally, both models draft a “level c” of purely living interactions. Though living interactions are already capable of self-organization and self-reproduction, they are not centralized in the way that consciously focusing on a particular thing is. Usually, in everyday life, we take a constellation for granted without becoming conscious of it. This preconscious level of interaction can be translated into consciousness and language only in an imperfect way (when one has a problem with it). Such translations are the incomplete results of reconstructions (as in therapeutic contexts, for instance).

Fourth parallel: Now, both models of learning conduct are also models of historical change. What can be changed in a cycle of history? A history of human living beings involves running through a new coordination of the three levels a, b, and c. Dewey and Mead call such a coordination a “significant symbol.” No level can substitute for another level quite generally. But, certain contents of the levels can be coordinated in a new functional way step by step (in phases). Life, history, and language are thus the three main conceptions necessary to connect the material with the ideal aspects of the leading of a human life. The specification of human beings does include (instead of excluding) all three levels of living nature. Both philosophies lead us to a re-evaluation of nature as a participation in living nature. The human self-specification is carried out within the semiotic continuum in living nature, not outside of it. The public nature of human beings is an extension of the public nature of living beings generally, though discursive communication provides an additional way of specifying the former. To that extent, discourse (i.e. written language) is actually self-referential: it requires re-contextualization via re-embodiment. In both philosophies, human self-specification is understood inclusively and from the bottom up instead of exclusively and from the top down.

17 Plessner introduced and developed this difference as the distinction between a-centric, centric, and ex-centric ways of “conduct” (which is the equivalent, here, of “positionality”) in his Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch.
3. Categorical subjunctive and sovereignty

Fifth parallel: The historical self-specification of human beings opens the door to a pluralistic self-understanding, which includes value conflicts and which therefore requires civilized forms to resolve such conflicts. On the one hand, human nature is so plastic that it has to be fixed in playing and gaming social roles in general. This is thesis (A). On the other hand, the history of every particular kind of social culture is contingent. Its certainty is contingent not only with regard to humankind, but also with respect to the life history of a particular modern individual. This is the content of thesis (B). Plessner combined thesis (A) – the categorical need for one social culture in general – with thesis (B) – the contingency of each culture in particular – in the following expression: Human life is characterized by a “categorical subjunctive.”

By the way: Peirce called his conceptional equivalent “would being.”

In Plessner’s philosophy, the categorical subjunctive replaces Kant’s “categorical imperative.” But, if this is the case, we need civilizing procedures to resolve value conflicts in a way that enables public judgments of what is better or worse in this or that respect. Instead of privileging Western values, we have to open public procedures to all possible cultures not only in their interest, to give them a fair chance, but also in our own, in order to build up better self-differences in the future. Plessner’s book *Power and Human Nature* is an experimental shift of primacy in our self-understanding. He is playing through the primacy of natural anthropology, philosophy of life, and a new kind of politics. If we dissolve the fixation on primacy, we are confronted with the inscrutability of the essence of human nature. The cognitive aspect of inscrutability consists in the indeterminacy of essence in human nature. Only insofar as power formations accept this inscrutability (indeterminacy in cognitive terms) are they able to become “sovereign” in order to win in the future.

This conception of sovereignty is the contrary of Carl Schmitt’s conception. For Schmitt, sovereignty is the dissolution of inscrutability (indeterminacy) by over-determination, namely, by allowing one and only one opposition of friend and enemy.

In Classical Pragmatisms we also find such an intimate connection between pluralism and the negativity of absolute predicates. William James introduced this connection in his books *The Pluralistic Universe* (1909) and *The Varieties...*
of Religious Experience (1902). Only insofar as we understand the Absolute as negativity (instead of positivistic determination) are we able to recognize plurality in nature, in society, and in culture. But here I follow Dewey, because usually it is not to be expected that the above-mentioned connection appears as constitutive in his philosophy.

4. Plurality and contingency

The old pure modernisms defended a separation of pure spheres, for example, those of pure science, of pure arts and literature, of pure politics, of pure economy. Against such old “pure” modernisms, Dewey drafted new “interpenetrations” of spheres in what he called “publics,” “inquiries” and aesthetic “consummations” of experience. Dewey proposed a public intercommunication of laymen cultures and expert cultures. Ruth Anna and Hilary Putnam rightly interpret Dewey in a non-scientistic way: We do not need democracy because we know who we are. Quite the contrary. In principle, we do not know who we are. Therefore we need the public procedures of a democracy, which is qualified in cultural terms. The same kind of reiteration of the question is valid for Plessner, for instance, in his essay “on the emancipation of power.” Because we need to produce ourselves in future history, qualified democratic procedures (that include elites) are better (in comparative terms, not in terms of any absolute positivity or any “last foundation”) than other social mechanisms. Public methods enable learning feedbacks, revisions, and ameliorations instead of the old game: either all or nothing for our old certainty. Public procedures emancipate a modern individuality from membership in exclusively one community and enable him or her to participate in different cultures.

Dewey and Plessner share a quasi-Aristotelian understanding of justice in the broadest sense, namely, of being appropriate to situations and to individu-

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als. In both philosophies, the process begins in novel situations of aesthetically experienced individual indeterminacy. And the model finishes with a singular solution to a certain problem. Dewey had a certain preference for the juridical dimension in making judgments as precedent. Plessner favored the medical-therapeutic attitudes that also play a role in Dewey’s writings. But, neither of them continues the old power game of pushing “the” (presumable) universal against “the” (not less presumable) particular.

It is sometimes claimed that “contingency” and “singularity” were only discovered by “Postmodernity” and “Poststructuralism.” I am convinced that these discoveries are already present in Dewey and Plessner, and that they therefore enjoy an advantage: neither of them began a new dualistic battle against “necessity” and a “universality” generally shared by a plurality of civilizations. Each of them criticized pure spectators, as well as spectators for whom everything is exclusively contingent and singular. The necessity of living one’s own body is a real limit of contingency, even for armchair philosophers. Singularity does not make any sense without its semiotic contrast of plurality. And, instead of merely thinking about plurality with the best of intentions, the consequences of living plurality prevent us from using force against one another. Thus, in order to coordinate contingencies, we need as a common minimum a procedure for publicly finding out the best currently available way towards a common future. In all these respects, the salient point does not consist in substituting the one pole for the other. Rather, it consists in a better historical connection between contingency and necessity, between singularity and plurality.

5. Between laughing and crying: limits of the human condition

I come to my last point, which marks an interesting difference between Pragmatisms and Plessner. Both Dewey’s and Plessner’s philosophies propose distinctions that open an otherwise closed self-identity for a less exclusive and a more inclusive future self-understanding. In doing so, both philosophies have a limitation problem. What is the right measure for opening and closing relations, for inclusion and exclusion in relations? Take, for example, the self-difference between I and Me. If I understand Mead and Dewey properly, then significant symbols are necessary links between levels of interaction; i.e., they couple unconscious, conscious and self-conscious levels. In that case, significant symbols ensure an integrated self-identity amid the stream of differences. But what are the borders in bodily terms, and what are the limits in symbolic terms between a better and a weaker proportion of self-identity via self-differences? Where are the turning points between health and pathology?
In empirical terms, of course, the limit question depends upon certain conditions that vary even from individual to individual. But what sort of philosophical framework can we offer in order to pose these questions? How do we experience the borders and limits of our conduct? How can we describe and evaluate them without falling back into an old dualism?

In this regard, Plessner proposed an intriguing phenomenology of laughing and crying. We learn to specify human conduct between laughing and crying. Human living beings cannot learn to specify conduct beyond them.24

a) Usually, in everyday life, we laugh or cry in the course of play. It is still a play or a game but, at the same time, it is already a significant symbol: Do not step over this line! Be careful not to push your luck too far! You are playing with fire! The play culture of laughing and crying is like a prevention or like an invitation to hold on conventionalized lines. Having crossed that border we can no longer play in laughing or crying.

b) We are getting into laughing or crying. We are losing our distance and self-control. We are becoming more passive than active. The living body responds to the question posed by the situation. In crying, we break down into the living body. In laughing, we break out of the living body. In the first case, we lose a sense of proportion in general. In the second case, we reap too many mutually inconsistent meanings of possible responses. In both directions, the body movements can no longer cohere while holding onto discursive lines. Nevertheless, we are sure in such circumstances that we are experiencing phenomena that specify the human condition.

c) Because it is necessary to shape human conduct inside these limits, it is inhumane to push past or to pass over an act of laughing or of crying that is not being “played” and that therefore has to be taken seriously. According to Plessner, habits, implementations, and institutions involve a real potential for inhumanity insofar they begin with a transcendence of laughing and crying. These are the limits of a necessary interplay between the material and ideal dimensions of human conduct. Plessner drafted this criterion in regard to the socialization and acculturation of human beings in order to oppose, for instance, authoritarian types of such processes. Passions and addictions are very human as individual deviations from playing a social role; i.e., as long as they are conditioned. But insofar as they have become unconditioned absolutes, we reach the turning point and a real potential for inhumanity.

A further elaboration of this approach could help us to understand the limitation function in human conduct for individuals, communities, and socie-

ties in the future. I could not find an analogue to this in Dewey’s philosophy, though it obviously fits together both with Mead’s conception of play/game and Peirce’s demand for phenomenological discoveries in philosophy. Thus, I have tried to build a transatlantic bridge between both philosophical traditions for the future. Both of them can and should complement one another.

Hans-Peter Krüger
University of Potsdam
wilhelm@uni-potsdam.de