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To cite this article: Carl Gelderloos (2019) Anthropology, Philosophy, and Politics in Weimar Germany—Helmuth Plessner in Translation, *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 94:4, 363-370, DOI: [10.1080/00168890.2019.1660077](https://doi.org/10.1080/00168890.2019.1660077)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00168890.2019.1660077>



Published online: 13 Oct 2019.



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Review Essays

Anthropology, Philosophy, and Politics in Weimar Germany—Helmuth Plessner in Translation

Helmuth Plessner. *Political Anthropology*. Translated by Nils F. Schott. Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2018. 130 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8101-3800-1.

Helmuth Plessner. *Levels of Organic Life and the Human: An Introduction to Philosophical Anthropology*. Translated by Millay Hyatt. New York: Fordham University Press, 2019. 375 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8232-8398-9.

Carl Gelderloos

How political is the human? Or, as Helmuth Plessner puts it in *Political Anthropology*, Nils F. Schott's new translation of Plessner's 1931 *Macht und menschliche Natur: Ein Versuch zur Anthropologie der geschichtlichen Weltansicht*: "The principle question of political anthropology is: to what extent does politics—the struggle for power in human relations among individuals, groups, and associations, nations and states—belong to the essence of the human?" (3). The answer that Plessner develops over the subsequent eighty-some pages—that politics is central to the essence of the human—is justified not, as one might expect, by some specific vision or another of human nature, such as an innate bellicosity. The reason that politics as such, which Plessner, drawing on Max Weber and Carl Schmitt, understands as a necessarily conflictual division of the world into friend and enemy, is central to the definition of the human is rather more interesting. Politics is necessary because the human cannot be defined in any one way for once and for all, because every historical form of human existence is but one possible answer to what Plessner calls the "open question" or "unfathomability" of the human being. Every society must seek to answer this question anew, ideally aware of the provisional nature of the answer yet compelled to commit to it nonetheless, thus delineating the human world into inside and outside, friend and foe. The human being is unique because the human "only becomes human

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by making himself so, and only lives by leading a life” (298) as Plessner wrote in his 1928 *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, also newly available in English translation by Millay Hyatt. An awareness of contingency and mediation are built into human existence; the insight into this characteristic human “excentricity” and “natural artificiality” are brought in *Political Anthropology* to bear on political philosophy in ways that reveal a good deal about the intellectual landscape of Weimar Germany while also offering generative ways of thinking about such matters today.

Among the most interesting insights of *Political Anthropology* include Plessner’s characterization of the human being in terms of its constitutive “unfathomability,” (“Unergründlichkeit”) i.e., as open, contingent, and always changing, such that it cannot be limited to any one particular definition. Not only can the human being not be defined in an a priori way; neither can any one of its particular historical manifestations be absolutized, for such would be blind to the historical, anthropological fact of human cultural diversity, and would unfairly bind “the human as an open question” by foreclosing other possible answers to this question. The task of defining the human being is a necessary paradox, and the most compelling parts of *Political Anthropology* occur when Plessner unfolds its implications. For example: the discovery of the concept of human universality was itself not universal, but historically particular and contingent, emerging (for Plessner) over the course of European history. Accordingly, drawing the consequences of this recognition and remaining faithful to the discovery of human universality mean relativizing this very discovery. As Plessner puts it,

The human, responsible for the world in which it lives: if we accept in the first place that it is a progress, a discovery, that we, unlike non- and pre-Christian nations, have attained the concept “of the human” as a reality that is formative of world and indifferent to religious and racial differences, then the standard of this universal perspective precisely obliges us not only to bring our culture to the “heathens” as an absolute, but also to relativize our culture and our world over against other cultures and worlds. Perhaps this is the first step toward its abandonment. But we cannot get around this step if we want to hold on to our discovery, i.e., precisely hold on to our culture of knowledge, which is anchored religiously in the sense that everything that bears a human face is equal before God. The affirmation of our own culture and religion thus means renouncing its absolutization; it means acknowledging non-European cultural systems and worldviews that are relative to their bearers and thereby indirectly are relative to God, before whom, as “humans,” they are all equal, equally legitimate, or at least equally possible. (14)

Among other reasons, Plessner’s work exerts a fascination because it emerged in response to a precarious moment of disciplinary reconfiguration, when it seemed both possible and necessary to articulate a unified theory of the human being. Originally trained as a zoologist, Plessner’s wide-ranging work during the Weimar Republic was in dialog with fields including developmental biology, ethology, animal psychology, and with debates in philosophy, phenomenology, and the humanities more generally. As Plessner writes in the

preface to *Levels of Organic Life and the Human*, his project in that book arose from the “profound tensions between natural science and philosophy” he glimpsed as a student in Heidelberg, and from his desire for a theory of nature that would be rigorously accountable to both biology and philosophy (xv). Central questions of *Political Anthropology* and *Levels of Organic Life and the Human*—can the human be defined in an a priori way? among philosophy, anthropology, and politics, can one be said to have primacy over the others? how does human self-knowledge relate to knowledge of the natural world?—are ontological, but they are also questions about the relationships between disciplines. Not yet firmly regimented into two cultures, but already confronting from all directions questions about the relationships between the humanities and the natural sciences and their respective epistemologies and methods, the intellectual culture of the Weimar Republic had space for many who, like Plessner, sought to reconcile biology and philosophy, science and the humanities. In a sense, such a cross-disciplinary definition of the human being was the guiding project of Philosophical Anthropology, less a unified movement than what Joachim Fischer has described as a “Denkrichtung.” As Max Scheler put it, “For we thus have a scientific, a philosophical, and a theological anthropology each unconcerned with the others—but we do not possess a unified idea of the human being.”¹

Plessner’s solution to this conundrum is seen in his magnum opus *Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, newly available in a rigorous, readable English translation by Millay Hyatt, accompanied by an outstanding introduction by J. M. Bernstein. Plessner defines the disciplinary split voiced by Scheler in more specific terms, as the incommensurability of the quantitative, empirical natural sciences and the humanities’ qualitative interpretation of culture, mind, and spirit. This disciplinary divide, which Plessner sees as a legacy of the Cartesian division of the world into thought and physical extension, is a problem for the humanities, which thereby lose access to material phenomena and the human being’s relationship to the natural world, as well as for the natural sciences, which have become “blind to those properties of physical nature that cannot be measured” (38), such as pattern, form, expression, and behavior. The problem—finding a non-reductive way of explaining living phenomena that also does not invoke a transcendent vitalism—loomed large for biology in the early twentieth century, and it involved as well the disciplinary struggle of defining the object of biology in ways that could not be reduced to the laws and methods of chemistry and physics.

One of the most interesting things about Plessner’s project in *Levels of Organic Life* is the way he derives human uniqueness from his definition of organic life, deriving discontinuity out of continuity and locating, as Joachim Fischer has put it, *Geist* within *Leben*.² He does so by beginning with the boundary (*Grenze*) of the living organism in order ultimately to redefine the human being in terms of its “excentric positionality” and “natural artificiality.” According to Plessner, where the nonliving thing simply has an edge that marks the limit of its spatial extension, the living thing is characterized by a boundary

¹Max Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* (Bonn: Bouvier, 2010), 7.

²Joachim Fischer, “Exzentrische Positionalität. Plessners Grundkategorie der Philosophischen Anthropologie,” in *Leben und Geschichte. Anthropologische und ethnologische Diskurse der Zwischenkriegszeit*, ed. Thomas Keller and Wolfgang Eßbach (Munich: Fink, 2006), 240.

that mediates between it and its environment, such that transcending its own boundary is an essential property of the living thing. Plants are characterized by an immediate relationship between their bodies and the surrounding medium Plessner describes as “open,” whereas animals, by contrast, are marked by a relationship to their environment mediated through the relative closure and autonomy of their bodies. This mediation of the body intensifies with the transition from the animal to the human. Because the human represents the full realization of the “positionality” of the living thing, being human is at once the awareness of one’s own positionality, and a distancing from it. The human for Plessner is a sort of second-order animal that experiences its own experience—they are outside their centers, or excentric. “Natural artificiality” thus indicates the way that everything that distinguishes humans from the rest of the natural world—technology, culture, symbolic representation, etc.—result, in Plessner’s account, from a development intrinsic to the logic of life itself. Constitutionally out of balance, the human being’s situation demands that humans seek to create a balance—an imperative that is as impossible as it is necessary. Unlike all other living beings, therefore, the human alone must *lead* a life in order to live at all: “Der Mensch lebt nur, indem er ein Leben führt” (384). So the need for the human being to make its own history constantly anew emerges organically from the logic of life as Plessner formulates it in *Levels of Organic Life*, and specifically from the human being’s excentric positionality; the foundation for the political philosophy developed in *Political Anthropology* is therefore not, as Heike Delitz and Robert Seyfert perhaps unintentionally imply in their introduction, an either/or choice between a philosophy of nature or of history, between a view of the human being as a subject or an object of nature, for the human being is necessarily the “subject-object” of nature and culture (28). Innate to the human being is an excentric positionality that develops from the structure of human nature; this is necessarily true for all human existence, but it also precisely means that the human being must constantly seek to create an absent equilibrium, and the myriad ways in which this need is met constitute the unfathomability and indeterminability of the human. It is human nature not to have a fixed nature. The task of *Political Anthropology* is thus to unfold at length the political implications of the anthropological necessity of politics.

After posing the book’s guiding question—does the “struggle for power” “belong to the essence of the human” or does politics simply mark a lapsed state that can and should be overcome?—Plessner clarifies the terms of the question. To look for some timeless or merely biological “essence” of the human would be to misstate the problem both ontologically and methodologically, because this kind of question presupposes a predicative answer. Yet the human necessarily remains an open question that cannot be answered definitively; rather, posing the question of the human being belongs to what it means to be human, but this question, and the answer it yields, is itself always relative to a given culture and history. In a critique of Eurocentrism that is remarkably insightful for 1931, Plessner concludes that “Our own position has to remain aware of this relativity if [. . .] it wants to avoid the danger of dressing the alien in a uniform it has tailored according to its own essence” (24). Other “nations and epochs” that lack the concept of the human are themselves no less human, and the absence of a concept of universality is itself a possible expression of universality.

To flesh out what such a dynamic understanding of human cultures as expressions of a universal tendency towards diverse particularity might look like, Plessner’s text takes

a detour through Dilthey's hermeneutics and his insights for the humanities in particular. Unlike the natural sciences, which pose methodologically restricted questions of objects that in themselves have no meaning (*cognitio circa rem*), the kind of interpretation necessitated by the humanities involves open questions of cultural objects that "express themselves and lend themselves to meaning something to those concerned with them" (43) (*cognitio rei*); because of this epistemological and disciplinary distinction, the questions of the humanities—and, centrally, the question of the human—cannot be answered definitively and unambiguously, but must remain open and always implicate the act of questioning in a historically specific, reciprocal relationship. "Values and truths rise up from reality and for a certain time are normative and binding; the historiographer's reflection grows from history, which is itself shaped only in the historian's own work" (35). The idea of the "open question" is a way of understanding what the human being *is*, but it is also therefore the guiding principle for what human beings and societies necessarily *do*. This is why Dilthey's concept of *Leben* is central to Plessner—not because it invokes an irrational vitalism, but on the contrary because it establishes a precise relationship between history, interpretation, and meaning specific to human cultures and histories. "Every generation thus acts back on history and thereby turns history into that incomplete, open, and eternally self-renewing history that can adequately be approached only in the interpreting penetration of this generation's open questioning" (45). In other words, even defining the human being is itself a historical project that necessitates the active and ongoing participation of human beings and societies. This discovery of "the human as power" returns Plessner's text to the difficult necessity of relativizing universal claims about the human being:

Thus returns the fundamental difficulty of doing justice to the claim to universality, which appears in the perspective of the European form of existence, without for all that forgetting the claim's relativity to this form of existence, which has itself come about historically. [...] The solution to these questions is given in the very conception of the human as power according to the principle of immanence or of unfathomability. It lies in this conception's sense of a principle that opens the view onto history. In conceiving of itself as power, the human conceives of itself as conditioning history and not only as conditioned by history. (50)

But in this activity of conditioning history also lies a risk: in articulating one particular version of human life, human groups also thereby establish a distinction between self and other, familiar and unfamiliar—friend and enemy. Yet Plessner, by invoking Freud's uncanny, makes it clear that this unavoidable relationship is due neither to natural bellicosity nor to the need to protect one's own against a hostile world, but instead emerges from the familiarity of the foreign: just as the phenomenon of the "other I" is an essential part of the human *Mitwelt* in *Levels of Organic Life*, here the Other represents other ways of being human, thereby necessitating a competition that involves conflict, but also recognition and relativism. Even the discovery of human universality does not obviate the need for the friend/enemy distinction, because human beings constitutively have no choice but to try to answer the open question of how to live. There can thus be no question of

applying “philosophical insight to the field of the political,” in the sense of deriving codes of conduct from transhistorical laws about what the human being essentially is, since such appeals to natural legitimacy inevitably absolutize one historically contingent way of philosophizing or defining the human being.

Thus the human being is power and powerlessness, subject and thing, itself and the other of itself, a physical, living body among other bodies yet, by virtue of its specific excentric embodiment, more than just a body. For Plessner, this constitutional “unfathomability” of the human being means that human existence is always refracted into particular forms, hence nations: “If [. . .] it is a given that the human can live open to community only as friend or enemy, [. . .] then the refraction and thereby the nationality of the human’s life and Being are given as well” (85). It is worth lingering with that particular queasiness that results when hearing interlocutors from the early twentieth century talk about nations. This framework seems to homogenize too much within a particular society or culture, in order the better to draw suspiciously tidy boundaries between societies or cultures. One might wish to substitute “cultures” or “societies” for “nations,” and such a substitution would seem legitimate and useful, yet it still wouldn’t avoid an apparent drawback of Plessner’s approach to history, cultures, and conflict. A weakness of this particular friend/enemy distinction may be that, while it captures dynamics of differentiation, competition, struggle, and recognition, it seems less able to account for complex totalities involving relationships of domination or exploitation. The focus on out-group relations comes at the expense of in-group conflicts as well as commonalities and possible solidarities across similar segments of different groups. The nations at times seem to face each other as monads, despite the formal mutuality built into Plessner’s adoption of the friend/enemy distinction (which, not incidentally, resembles the role of the organism’s boundary, which both separates and joins). The possibility of an internal fault line is erased when the friend/foe boundary is located between nations rather than within them. Besides the serious question of which conflict lines have been more formative for human history, the effect of considering a given nation as the expression of one form of being human is strangely homogenizing. The point is not to choose one demarcation over the other but to suggest that where one draws the border is itself a political act that Plessner’s approach forecloses. Likewise, the account of how Europe might relate to the rest of the world as an example of universality relativizing itself (“In letting go, Europe wins,” 28) is strangely ahistorical and idealist, as if the encounters between nations and worldviews take place within philosophy rather than within history or geopolitics. Students of colonialism may well wonder when, where, or how “Europeanness [. . .], in stepping back from its monopolization of human-ness, releases the foreign to self-determination according to its own will and begins to engage in fair play with the foreign, on the same level” (83). This must seem like wishful thinking today. There is a missed opportunity to explore the material—and not just intellectual—factors that have historically prevented certain groups of people from offering their own answers to the open question of what it means to be human. And there remains a blinkered Eurocentrism despite the best intentions and thoughtfulness of Plessner’s approach; it is a dubious claim that Europe alone discovered the human being as a universal category, though the formal dilemma of reconciling a concept of human universality with a commitment to plurality and self-determination remains no less pressing.

And this suggests one way Plessner's thought might be useful today. To be sure, it certainly does not seem as though the most pressing concerns involve defining politics and the human being in relation to each other, so much as identifying and mobilizing the political forms that could prevent or even slow any one of the epochal, enmeshed, and rising catastrophes that mark our own era: a rapidly cooking planet, various resurgent fascisms, murderous levels of inequality. So what can we learn from Plessner today? For one, what distinguishes Plessner's considerations of universalism from the brownish articulations of a "European identity" clogging the airwaves in our own present (leaving aside the obvious differences in coherence, generosity, and erudition) is precisely his commitment to the paradox of it: in order to remain faithful to the historically particular discovery of human universality, allegiance to this absolutized particular (i.e., to "Europe") must go. One needn't endorse all of Plessner's assumptions or conclusions to welcome the reminder that the nationalist weaponization of an Enlightenment legacy—more relevant for the 21st century than for the 20th—is deeply incoherent. Furthermore, while assumptions about human nature have seemingly vacated the humanities, they seem to continue to fascinate the popular imagination, especially as inflected through discussions of genetics. Plessner's rigorously derived rejection of a static, foundationalist, or essentialist view of human nature is therefore a welcome resource, and seems compatible with recent work on the coevolutionary roles played by culture, language, shared intentionality, and teaching in shaping the human body and mind.³ Moreover, the philosophy of biology that defines human specificity within a coherent theory of organic life should make *Levels of Organic Life and the Human* required reading for anyone interested in environmental humanities or the philosophy of science; Bernstein even argues that "its new paradigm should be regarded as belonging to the forward edge of contemporary philosophical thought" (xxxviii). Plessner's disciplinary reflections, and in particular his articulation, drawing on Dilthey, of what the humanities can do that the natural sciences cannot, is a refreshing challenge for thinking about the humanities amidst their ongoing devaluation, defunding, and various discourses of crisis. And finally, these new translations, in introducing Plessner's linkage of biology, philosophy, hermeneutics, and political thought to a wide new readership, will go a long way towards deepening and complicating our understanding of the intellectual and disciplinary landscape of the Weimar Republic.

Plessner's only two works available in English had long been *Die Grenzen der Gemeinschaft: Eine Kritik des sozialen Radikalismus* (1924) and *Lachen und Weinen: eine Untersuchung nach den Grenzen menschlichen Verhaltens* (1941). Both Schott and Hyatt do the exacting work of rendering Plessner's terminological intricacies into coherent, engaging English prose; indeed, one of the pleasures of reading these new translations alongside the originals is being reminded that Plessner, even amidst thickets of challenging conceptual specificity, is in fact a good stylist. And while terminological precision is

³See for example Eva Jablonka and Marion J. Lamb, *Evolution in Four Dimensions: Genetic, Epigenetic, Behavioral, and Symbolic Variation in the History of Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Bradford, 2014); Kevin N. Laland, *Darwin's Unfinished Symphony: How Culture Made the Human Mind* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2017); and Michael Tomasello, *Becoming Human: A Theory of Ontogeny* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2019).

almost everywhere preserved, it is seldom possible to discern the German formulations, syntax, and idioms hulking behind the English prose, which is permitted to form its own, fresh coherence. There were moments of imperfect consistency in *Political Anthropology* that demanded comparison with the original—the decision to render “wesenhaft” as “entitative” and “wesentlich” as “essential” is soon hedged as “Wesenhaftigkeit” blurs into “essentialness,” for example—but these are rare. Other quibbles with either translation would be merely academic (as they say): whether to translate “Grenze” as “border” or “boundary,” “Stufen” as “stages” or “levels,” “exzentrisch” as “eccentric” or “excentric.” In *Levels of Organic Life*, Hyatt opted for the second of each of these; I happen to prefer the first, but only slightly. The translator’s preface thoughtfully justifies the use of “levels” as avoiding the misleading genealogical connotations of “stages,” yet “stages” may better capture the qualitative difference and immanent development Plessner describes. The only terminological change I would have rooted for would be “eccentric” over “excentric.” The latter is used in *Levels of Organic Life* as a technical term signifying how human positionality is defined by the dislocating awareness of a center. Yet the more everyday term “eccentric,” without ceasing to be a technical term (think of an eccentric orbit), would have additionally connoted the sense of off-kilterness that is also contained in the German “exzentrisch” and which is certainly meant among the implications of human positionality. The tradeoff here results in an unfortunate reduction of sense and resonance, though if “excentric” can add some terminological cachet to the Plessner renaissance, it was probably worth it.

Those who cannot access Plessner in the original will now be able to grapple with these important works, which will be of interest to people working in the environmental humanities, continental philosophy, intellectual history, the history of science, political theory, and other fields. Those who are already familiar with Plessner in German will have the rare treat of seeing the work from a different angle, from which different connections, meanings, and implications might emerge. Each book is equipped with a thoughtful apparatus that will make navigating and working with these texts easier and more exact. Both have indexes and glossaries of terms. *Levels of Organic Life*, in addition to offering both of Plessner’s prefaces (1928 and 1965), has a translator’s preface, helpful and interesting in its own right, and a substantive introduction by J. M. Bernstein that explicates, contextualizes, and argues for the continued necessity of Plessner’s project. The only additional paratext one might have wished for would be Plessner’s “Nachtrag” to the second edition, which fascinatingly contextualizes his theory of organic life within mid-twentieth-century biology. The much slimmer volume *Political Anthropology* opted for both an introduction, co-written by Heike Delitz and Robert Seyfert, and an epilog by long-time Plessner advocate Joachim Fischer; as a consequence, this boat feels a little crowded at times, though both explainers provide necessary context and perhaps fit with the pluralist spirit of Plessner’s text. Nils F. Schott and Millay Hyatt have done an incredible service with this difficult and well-rendered work.