MEDIATING LIFE:

ANIMALITY, ARTIFACTUALITY, AND THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF THE HUMAN IN THE PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGIES OF SCHELER, PLESSNER, GEHLEN, AND MEAD

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ABSTRACT

What is a human being? In the early 20th century, the "philosophical anthropologists" Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen approached this question through a comparison between human and non-human organisms' species-typical interaction with environments and an account of the conditions of the emergence of "higher" cognitive and agentive functions on this basis. In this text I offer a critical review of the central arguments of Scheler, Plessner, and Gehlen on these issues, as well as of their debates with figures such as Jakob von Uexküll, Martin Heidegger, and G. H. Mead. I take note of the consequences of various answers to this question for the interpretation of human beings' dually biological and cultural status and for the theory of the human self or person. I argue that the approaches of Plessner and Gehlen, despite objections raised by Hans Joas and others, have important advantages over those of Scheler, Uexküll, Heidegger, and Mead, as well as over recent suggestions by Korsgaard and Tomasello. I conclude by outlining a reconstructed philosophical anthropology that supports a new perspective on the question of human distinctiveness and on a number of related questions in the context of contemporary debates.

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To the memory of Thomas Meyer –

for the humanity and culture

he inspired us to seek

FOREWORD

This is a text about the 20th century German tradition of philosophy known as philosophical anthropology. In particular, it is a study of certain texts within that tradition in terms of their treatment of themes that continue to have philosophical significance. It is hoped that a study of this kind will do the things that good history of philosophy often does, namely, suggest innovative conceptual resources, and provide greater historical relief and orientation, for contemporary thought. I expect the text will be particularly interesting to scholars of the history and philosophy of biology (particularly as regards the significance of biology to philosophy and the human sciences) and of 19th and 20th century German philosophy.

The themes in question are among the most difficult in contemporary philosophy, including the conception of nature and the estimate of the validity of various "naturalisms"; the theory of human society and the concept of culture; the theory of technology; the intersection of biological and cultural evolution; and the ontology and conditions of possibility of entities falling under such categories as "life," "self," and "person." It is hoped that a review of one early 20th century tradition of discussion on these themes may shed new light on them – that is, throw in new relief our understanding of ourselves and the world of which we are a part.

The core analytical apparatuses of the study are fairly simple. First, it must be recognized that a kind of argument has been employed throughout the history of philosophy that may roughly be called a "human distinctiveness argument." Plato,

Aristotle, and Descartes may all be said to have employed arguments of this sort. The argument or argument schema survives to the present day and has been employed by figures as varied as J. G. Herder, Charles Darwin, T. H. Huxley, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Ernst Cassirer, G. H. Mead, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Michael Tomasello, and Christine Korsgaard, as well as by the "philosophical anthropologists" (whose texts are the primary focus of this study) Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen. Simply put, arguments of this type are distinguishable by their sharing in the following form:

> Human beings are the only organisms capable of X.
>
> But a capacity for X is a prerequisite of Y.
>
> Therefore, human beings are the only organisms capable of Y.

The schema is sometimes modified to produce other arguments of similar though slightly different type, as in the following:

> Humans are the only organisms capable of X.
>
> Humans are the only organisms capable of Y.
>
> Therefore, plausibly, capacity for X is a prerequisite of a capacity for Y (or vice versa)

Or – as in the cases of Darwin and Huxley – a negative form of the same:

> Humans are not the only organisms capable of X.
>
> But all that is required to be capable of Y is to be capable of X.
>
> Therefore, humans are not the only organisms capable of Y.

In different versions of the argument, the variables "X" or "Y" are filled by different

contents: “language” and “selfhood” in some, “consciousness of con-specifics’ intentional states (i.e. theory of mind)” and “ability to innovate improvements to learned behaviors” in others. Whatever the attributes that fill these open variables, so long as the argument turns on a premise about human distinctiveness (or non-distinctiveness), it counts as a “human distinctiveness” argument in this sense.

My intuition is that such arguments are nearly universally, if not universally, unconvincing. Nonetheless, I believe such arguments succeed in initiating analyses into a problem space of real philosophical significance – significance that has little to do with the difference between human and non-human animals *per se*. In other words, the arguments succeed or fail, and are significant, but their true success and failure and significance is of a different kind than their adherents and critics generally suppose. Their primary significance is, let us say, an indirect one.

In what follows I will be laying out a number of arguments of this general form, some of them quite complex. I will be evaluating their successes and failures, as well as their overall import for the larger themes that I believe are illuminated – fragmentarily but tellingly – by a reconstruction and critical evaluation of their details. My running criticism will not focus on the tenability of a successful human distinctiveness argument *as such*, but rather on relevant details internal to the “human distinctiveness” framework, even as my ultimate conclusion is that such a framework is, indeed, untenable.

The other piece of analytical apparatus is more evidently my own contribution. It is a ground-plan or framework of an approach that better addresses the range of issues implicitly under consideration in human distinctiveness arguments – “better” both

because it elides the central confusion of such arguments, and because it itself more effectively and expansively opens the field of research, reflection and discussion regarding the issues these arguments were intended to address. In this way, I hope to have preserved and revivified something of the analytical core of philosophical anthropology after the excision of one of its most maladaptive appendages. The health of the unusual creature that results I leave for the readers of this document to decide.

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INTRODUCTION

"The human being is a cultural animal." This thesis is hardly a shocking one today. But what it means to assign to human beings a status as both cultural and animal is not – and perhaps has never been – clear. How is it possible that something may simultaneously be an object of biological science, on the one hand, and a participant in what is (broadly and perhaps imprecisely) referred to as "culture," and thus an object of the more interpretive and reflexive sciences of culture (*Kulturwissenschaften*, *Geisteswissenschaften*), on the other? Does such a situation entail that human biology is *itself* an interpretive, reflexive science? Or that those human sciences that veer from biological fact are inevitably arbitrary, illusory, or erroneous? Where should we locate, and how should we understand, interpret, model, study and discuss the place or places where the animal and cultural "parts" of the human form of life coexist and interpenetrate? Questions of this sort are implicated today in nearly all philosophical and human-scientific research: ethics, cognitive science, behavioral science, primatology, epistemology, action theory, political theory, anthropological and sociological theory, and even aesthetics. The overall aim of the project before you is to enter the field of these questions in defense and elucidation of certain interpretive options regarding the core issue: the relationship between the animal and the cultural dimensions of the human form of life.

The consistency and promise of the approach I favor on this issue will have to be demonstrated in the course of the text. But some of its conclusions can be stated

immediately and simply. These include the conviction that a human being is, in the usual cases, *both* an animal *and* something more or different than any other animal, and thus not *either* wholly animal *or* non-animal, though not for the familiar Cartesian or theological reasons; that biological sciences apply to human beings, and may sometimes "preempt"[1] or describe the (deeper) conditions or grounds for (shallower) explanations in the cultural or "philosophical" sciences (thus, in potential agreement with behavioral genetics, reductive neuroscience, sociobiology, and evolutionary psychology); that no biological or other naturalistic explanation yet offered for any significant sweep of human action or experience has fully succeeded, and this (among other things) suggests that the conceptual resources necessary for making sense of human action and experience are not available in biology or physics alone, nor in any foreseeable extension of those sciences consistent with their current methodological premises; and finally, that many important questions about human animality and human culture are today obscured by the habit of dividing research in philosophy and the human sciences into the categories of the "naturalistic," on the one hand, and the "culturalistic," "historical," "literary," or "interpretive," on the other. There is a dearth of conceptually-sophisticated reflection on what kinds of models might effectively integrate treatment of "natural" and "cultural" factors in the study of human behavior or social systems, as well as on what various possible or actual models of that sort reveal or obscure.[2] It is the evaluation of such

[1] Alexander Rosenberg's term: see Rosenberg 1980.

[2] Two important exceptions here are the field of "developmental systems theory" – see Oyama 1985, 2000, and Oyama, Griffiths, and Gray 2001 – and the conversations around biopolitics, as in Foucault 1976 [1990], 2003, Agamben 1995 [1998], and Esposito 2004 [2008], 2002 [2011].

models of the human being as simultaneously animal and cultural that concern me here.

From this perspective, reductively naturalistic approaches are obviously unsatisfactory, as are those forms of post-modernism or social constructionism that ignore or treat as irrelevant or arbitrary the empirical sciences pertaining to the characterization and interpretation of human beings. Yet these extreme moves are the ones that define most of the contemporary domain of discourse. My elision of such "reductive naturalist" and "anti-naturalist" extremes is motivated by the conviction that adopting either comes at the cost of factors essential to the interpretation, explanation, and understanding of human forms of life becoming theoretically inaccessible. Here I intend to demonstrate the consistency and promise of a different approach, one that involves an effort to more precisely identify and place the sorts of factors that theorists on each side of the polarity between "naturalists" and "culturalists" have emphasized, detailing their causal interaction and their definitional or phenomenological constitution, and thus sketching a map of the "middle ground" or "space" between nature and culture[3] (or rather, the space wherein the various factors that have heretofore been collected under one or the other side of the dichotomy between the "natural" and the "cultural" interact and sometimes produce and support one another). This document aims to articulate – and

[3] I borrow the phraseology of a space "between" nature and culture from Keller 2010. Keller calls the idea of a space between nature and "nurture" (which is only a very loose analogue of "culture") a "mirage." I agree with the main argument of her text, which points to the complexity of systems wherein natural and nurtural factors, as normally defined or classified, interact, and concludes on this basis that the project of parsing out and measuring the relative degree of influence of nature and nurture in producing human action is misguided and doomed to fail. However, seeking a more precise and nuanced understanding of the concrete mechanisms of interaction between factors normally classifiable as "natural" and "cultural" (such as evolutionary history, genetics, physiology, language, society, and cultural history) and a more nuanced and reflective approach to their terminological parsing seems to me a thoroughly worthwhile effort.

to explore in detail the various complex problems involved in articulating – the results of an approach to the study of human beings that is both naturalistic and hermeneutic (that is, historical and interpretive) in this sense. It thus may be described as a "naturalistic hermeneutics" and a "hermeneutic naturalism."[4]

This approach derives from a distinct predecessor tradition in philosophy: the tradition of philosophical anthropology, extending from its roughly Weimar-era German incarnation in the work of Max Scheler (1874-1928), Helmuth Plessner (1892-1985), and Arnold Gehlen (1904-1971) to a variety of contemporary inquiries in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere around the globe.[5] The inquiry proceeds by way of a critical engagement of this underappreciated predecessor tradition. For reasons of scope, I focus

[4] In a response to Krüger 1998, John McDowell suggested that Plessner's work might be approached as an attempt to reconcile naturalism and hermeneutics. See McDowell 1998. (Krüger had suggested a possible agreement between McDowell's project in *Mind and World* [1994] and Helmuth Plessner's philosophical anthropology.)

[5] The Weimar-era discussions prominently include Scheler 1928a [2009], Plessner 1928, and Gehlen 1940 [1988]. I refer to these three figures throughout as the "classical philosophical anthropologists." Discussions of philosophical anthropology in the other philosophically-significant literature of the time include Horkheimer 1935 [1993]; Heidegger 1927 [1962], 1929 [1997], 1930 [1995]; and Cassirer 1928 [1996]. Since then, the German tradition boasts a number of independent inquiries, and a number of introductory textbooks, in the discipline of "Philosophische Anthropologie." These prominently include Rothacker 1964, Landmann 1969 [1974], and Haeffner 1982 [1989]. The most reliable and comprehensive historical survey of the tradition appears to be Fischer 2009a, glossed (in English) in Fischer 2009b. Contemporary Anglophone discussions include Dallmayr 1974, 2011; Rickman 1985; Schacht 1975, 1990; Pihlström 2003; and Moss 2005, 2006, 2007. The secondary literature from non-English language sources is extensive and growing (particularly in continental Europe, Scandinavia, and South America). Texts discussed here include Schnädelbach 1984, Honneth and Joas 1985 [1988], and a 2009 issue of *Iris:* http://www.fupress.net/index.php/iris/issue/view/269, accessed 04/12/2012. The North American philosophers Marjorie Grene, Charles Taylor, and Joseph Margolis have also suggested affiliations (centrally or in passing) to philosophical anthropology, or to particular members of the German tradition of philosophical anthropology, in the course of their own works. See Grene 1965, 1974, 1995, 2002; Grene and Eldridge 1992; Taylor 1985a, Introduction; Taylor's introduction to Honneth and Joas 1985 [1988]; and Margolis 2008.

my discussion on just one of its motivating concerns: namely, the question of what, if anything, distinguishes human beings from non-human animals. This question has historically been central to philosophical anthropology (though it is not the only or even the defining question of the tradition[6]), and the philosophical anthropologists have the advantage of offering an unusually philosophically nuanced discussion of the question of human distinctiveness – including the implications of that issue for other philosophical issues, such as the theories of animality, biology, culture, sociality, normativity, and selfhood – in an intellectual context especially informed by biological and biologically-inflected human-scientific discoveries of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Briefly stated, the argument proceeds in the following stages. In the first chapter, certain methodological and substantive philosophical commitments of the classical philosophical anthropologists are articulated and defended. Here Scheler's philosophical anthropology is employed as an example. I contrast Scheler's basic substantive and methodological commitments with those of a number of rival programs: the suggestively philosophical biology of Jakob von Uexküll; the longer standing traditions of (Cartesian and Kantian) rationalism and (Humean and Darwinian) empiricism regarding the human distinctiveness question; and the fundamental ontology of Martin Heidegger. I note what I take to be the major advantages and disadvantages of Scheler's account.

In the second chapter, I critically re-evaluate Plessner's and Gehlen's answers to the human distinctiveness question. Plessner's answer (the "ex-centric positionality") and

[6] Fischer 2009a and 2009b perhaps overemphasize the centrality of this question to the tradition. See Ch. 1 below for discussion.

Gehlen's answer (the "law of relief") are explained in the context of their respective systems. I then discuss some of the strongest criticisms of Plessner and Gehlen, particularly those of Axel Honneth and Hans Joas, who charge that Plessner and Gehlen's philosophical anthropologies are insufficiently attentive to the way in which distinctive features of human sociality serve as enabling conditions of other distinctive features of the human form of life. I concede only a limited validity to this criticism. (In later chapters, I continue this argument by stressing the unique advantages of Plessner and Gehlen's philosophical anthropologies over the most celebrated alternatives, such as the social psychology of G.H. Mead, and by suggesting ways in which their views on the social mediation of individual human organisms' lives could be strengthened.)

In the third chapter, I address, in tandem, the question of human distinctiveness and the question of the constitution of, and conditions of the emergence of, human selves. Here I critically evaluate the seemingly parallel views of Tomasello, Korsgaard, Mead, and Plessner on this question before introducing and defending my own view. In brief, my thesis is that the human form of life is distinct in the naturalness (that is, the species-typicality) of human organisms' status as selves of a certain sort, which I call "persons."[7]

[7] By the use of the term "natural" here I just mean "species-typical." I realize there will be complications in identifying what is typical for any organism of a given species, and (of course) that there is an ongoing controversy about the right means of identifying species themselves. I don't mean to get involved in the latter controversy, but let me briefly indicate my views in regards to the former. I identify what is "natural" in the sense of "species-typical" with what attributes or behaviors of an individual organism x are *generally* exhibited by members of species X in circumstances of type Y. See Thompson 2008 for defense of a similar view. Generally these attributes and behaviors can be identified with whatever attributes and behaviors have been selected for in the evolutionary history of the species. Where there are ambiguities there (as in the case of "exaptations"), of course, appeal to evolutionary history alone cannot decide; and there may be cases where the circumstances and behaviors of a species change so much from some previous state to a later one that either (i) we would say the later population is a population of organisms of

Persons are understood to depend – constitutively, that is, to depend for their very existence or definition – on both the special role of historically contingent artifactual systems, of which language, technology, and society are the most important, and on a physiology open to developmental transformation through interaction with these systems.[8] What is decisive is the way in which these systems serve as mediating factors of human organisms' relations to their environments, including one another. The historicality of such systems – particularly of languages and social structures – and the historicity that arises from the interaction of these organisms, their environments, and the artifactual systems that constitute and mediate the relation between the two, are essential enabling conditions of the emergence of the characteristically human kind of self – that is, persons.

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a different species from that of the earlier population; or (ii) we would say that what is species-typical for members of this species (the same species) has changed. Nonetheless, our concepts even of biological individuals rely, to some extent, on our ideas of these individuals being types of things, and therefore predictable in their potencies and dispositions. (See Thompson 2008 for a similar argument.) In that sense, I think the idea of "naturalness" for a type of organism (or species) is more or less unavoidable. What's more, in most of the animal world, such generalizations do indeed make sense – that is, they seem to be well-supported generalizations. The human case is a special one, of course, a point to which we'll return in due time.

[8] By a "historically contingent" system or process I mean one that is reliant, in its concrete character, on past events of a sort that are not generally characteristic of the environment of the species – that is, that are not "species-typical." (The "contingency" is thus relative to the presumed relative fixity of species-character. The view would have to be nuanced to accommodate cases where biological and cultural evolution influence one another, as in, for instance, the Baldwin effect [see Richards 1989, pp. 451-503] or the kinds of processes hypothesized by Boyd and Richerson 2005. But for comparing "forms of life" at the temporal scale of single life-cycles, this definition of "historical contingency" should suffice.). By an "artifactual" system or process I mean one that is both produced by, and affects, organisms of the same species. So a "historically contingent artifactual system or process" is one that is produced by and effects organisms of a species, but is also not species-typical for organisms of the species. Such systems are present in some non-human animal cases, but the human form of life is specially attuned to mediation by them, as I will argue in what follows.

In the fourth chapter, I describe a framework for a philosophical anthropology that would extend the strongest features of the classical approaches, yet elide their weaknesses. To this end I suggest an analytical framework for comparative studies of forms of life (human and non-human, or human and human) as mediated interactions between organisms and environments. In constructing this framework, I make use of Plessner's concept of organism-environment "mediation" [*Vermittlung*] as well as Richard Schacht's suggestion that contemporary philosophical anthropology pursue an empirically-informed project of "transcendental mediation." The various ways in which such interactions can be mediated are a focal point of the analysis. At the end of the chapter I briefly indicate how such a framework illuminates a number of live questions for philosophical anthropology today, including the question of the scope and underlying causes of commonality and diversity in human forms of life, the question of what kind of approach to the concepts of "nature" and "culture" may still prove fruitful in philosophy and the human sciences, and the question of the relation between "fact" and "interpretation" in a human science and philosophy open to the instruction of modern biological and other empirical sciences.

It might be wondered at this point whether I really believe there is anything that distinguishes human beings from all non-human animals definitively and completely. Let me say that I believe the right answer to the question turns on noticing and avoiding a common equivocation. We must distinguish between *persons* – that is, the sorts of things that express themselves; are aware of themselves, other selves, and a world; and which question themselves, each other, and the world – on the one hand, and *human organisms*

– that is, members of the genus *homo* – on the other. We should not allow the fact that the designations almost always refer to the same objects, "extensionally-defined," to distract us from the different meanings of (and the entirely different whole networks of meanings associated with) the two designations. Human organisms are so far distinctive among all organisms in that they naturally – that is, biologically-normally, or species-typically – become persons. But there is nothing to preclude the possible transformation of a non-human organism into a person (without supposing, of course, any shift of species designation), as is arguably the case with some cats or dogs held by humans as pets[9], or of some especially intelligent non-human mammals such as elephants, dolphins, or apes; or even to preclude the complete transformation of an entire non-human species along the same lines – for instance: if all apes of a certain species acquire a degree of facility and freedom of expression with a communicative system sufficiently analogous to a human language.[10] This further suggests a point implied by the analyses we are about to undertake – namely, that "personal" status is not a strictly biological status, at least not in any sense of "biology" widely recognized today, even though it is a real status, closely connected to our own pragmatic standards and form of life.

In short, there is at least one species-typical feature that distinguishes human beings from all other organisms, but it is not a feature that appears within the disciplinary

[9] Though I prefer, in these cases, to say such pets "participate in the personal" rather than "are persons." I discuss this further in Ch. 3 below.

[10] Nor is it necessary to suppose that, in order for personhood to be species-typical for human beings, all members of *homo sapiens* must become persons. Some human organisms – say, those without brainstems – may never achieve personhood in this sense.

perspective of biology itself.[11] Human beings are, in the usual cases, persons; the paradigmatic case of personhood is an adult human being. We are, one might say, biologically distinctive among organisms in being *natural* selves or persons. A self or person, in turn, is defined in terms of the accessibility to it of a historically-contingent, creatively-manipulable world – accessibility in the form of a capacity to mediate and be mediated by that world and its distinctive kinds of elements. In the study of such beings, the "soft" sciences and the softer of the hard sciences – what one contemporary philosopher suggestively calls "the fragile sciences" – have an especially important role to play.[12] Here, then, is the outline of an approach to the study of human beings open to the lessons of both naturalism and hermeneutics.

[11] At least not as currently constituted. But one might follow Susan Oyama in distinguishing between an "exclusive" and "inclusive" sense of the term "biology," where the former matches the current constitution of the field, while the latter includes consideration of such "environmental" factors as complex cultural processes: "Notice that as conceptions of cognition, sociality, and development are broadened and related, they become part of the same process… I would call them all biological, not in the exclusive sense that distinguishes them from other, nonbiological aspects of persons, but in the inclusive one of 'pertaining to life.'" (Oyama 2000, p. 171) And: "Rather than restricting the proper scope of biology, as many critics have wished to do, I broaden it to encompass the entire life cycle. Biology so construed cannot be used to parcel out developmental… responsibility to internal and external factors. Nor can it define an invariant core of human nature." (Oyama 2000, p. 185) I would press the point even further: one can't explain human events in biological terms unless the "biological" lexicon is enriched to the point of including all, or nearly all, of the resources of the human sciences.

[12] Robert Wilson 2004, 2005. The "fragile sciences" are sciences of complex objects wherein inquiries are often motivated by normative and pragmatic concerns: sociology, anthropology, psychology, cognitive science, economics, history, biology, and medicine could be examples.

CHAPTER 1

UEXKÜLLIAN BIOLOGY AND CLASSICAL PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY ON THE QUESTION OF HUMAN DISTINCTIVENESS

Introduction

"[I]n no historical era has the human being become so much of a problem to himself as in ours."[1] In 1927 Max Scheler began his famous lecture, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* [*The Place of the Human Being in the Cosmos*], with this bold claim. The thesis applies as much to our own time as to his. As Scheler also noted at the outset of his lecture, we have inherited at least three potentially incompatible strategies of answer to both the substantive and the methodological questions: a Greek philosophical, a Christian (religious, theological), and a modern scientific approach.[2] These offer interpretations of human beings under the attributes of *rationality* (or ability to speak – *logoin*), of divine *createdness* or *creatureliness*, and of *materiality* and *animality*, respectively.

It is undoubtedly true that theological, natural-scientific, and philosophical approaches to the question, "What is a human being?" continue to compete for the

[1] SMK, p. 11; HPC, p. 5. (For the key to abbreviations, see Bibliography.)

[2] SMK, p. 11; HPC, p. 5; see also Landmann 1969 [1974], who develops this suggestion of Scheler's through a detailed historical inquiry into the concept of the human being in the ancient Greek, medieval Christian, and modern scientific eras.

conviction of humanity itself.[3] And yet, for all the continued relevance and insight of these opening gestures of Scheler's lecture, it ought to be clear to us today (even if it couldn't quite be clear to him) that he neglected to mention another type of interpretation of the mode of being of human beings. By contrast, this option was much more clearly seen by his direct successors Helmuth Plessner and Arnold Gehlen.[4] This is, in short, that perspective that emphasizes the human being's place and appearance within the framework of a *culturally*-structured understanding or interpretation: that is, his or her status as a *cultural* being.[5] The fundamental outlines of such a perspective are familiar to us today, having been developed by mid-20th century social and cultural anthropology, as well as late-20th century post-structuralism and post-modernism.[6]

My aim in what follows is, like that of Scheler in his own lecture, to offer some clarification in regards to this important question. In *Die Stellung*, Scheler developed his

[3] My own sense is that the natural-scientific and philosophical approaches are more compelling than the theological. For the most part, I will merely assume (rather than explicitly defend) such a perspective here.

[4] Plessner 1928, Gehlen 1940

[5] Without elucidation, the word "culture" fails to satisfy. I want to avoid resting my own argument on a loosely-defined concept of culture. In the analysis that follows, I explicitly take up the challenge of developing a robust theory of culture, including a theory of its material constitution and conditions.

[6] Perhaps the most important source for this perspective is Frans Boas and his students: see Stocking 1968 and Moore 2002 for review. In social theory, a relatively recent strong statement of "social constructionism" can be found in Berger and Luckmann 1966, who draw extensively on Scheler, Plessner, and Gehlen. For post-structuralism, see Foucault 1966 and Derrida 1967 [1978], and, for post-modernism, Lyotard 1984. Berger and Luckmann's social constructivism and French post-structuralism both suffer from notable problems, particularly the apparent incoherence attaching to any putative justification of the privilege of the explanations they themselves offer. Because of their concern with precisely articulating the effects of physical and biological factors upon cultural ones, the anthropology of Boas and his students, and the original philosophical anthropology of Scheler, Plessner, and Gehlen, may have an advantage here.

answer to the question, "What is a human being?," through an account of what made human beings distinct from other forms of organic life. Like him, I will focus on this question of human distinctiveness. In my view, the peculiar relation of those features normally assignable to human beings' status as biological organisms (that is, as *animals*) and to their various statuses as culturally-responsive and culturally-significant entities (that is, as *cultural*, and, relatedly, as *persons*) is and must be at the center of any adequate answer to either question. Scheler himself articulated the distinctiveness of the human being in terms of the latter's access to *Geist*, the well-known German term that variously means "individual mind," "collective mind," "spirit," and "culture." But Scheler's account offers few details about the metaphysical constitution and origins of what he called *Geist*. In the latter regard, Scheler's answer appears less impressive than those of his most immediate successors, Helmuth Plessner and Arnold Gehlen.

In this chapter I will argue, first, that Scheler has the advantage over his better-known contemporaries Heidegger and Uexküll, as well as the longer-standing rationalist and empiricist traditions, in his basic strategy of response to the human distinctiveness question: that the human being is a biological organism *and* "something more," with that "something more" closely connected to what many today refer to as "culture." Plessner and Gehlen can, for the same reasons, claim the same advantages over the better known figures. But I will also argue, secondly, that Scheler's substantive answer – namely, that it is their capacity for participation in *Geist*, which arises through a suspension of the processes of biological life, that distinguishes human beings from non-human animals – is satisfactory only in its barest outlines. In this regard, Plessner and Gehlen display a

subtlety in their treatment of the relation between the biological and non-biological factors in human action that outstrips Scheler's own treatment of the same problems.[7]

Uexküllian biology and the question of human distinctiveness

In a series of ingenious and unusual biological works that became foundational texts for the discipline of ethology (a field that later drew Nikolai Tinbergen, Konrad Lorenz, and E. O. Wilson), Jakob von Uexküll introduced the idea that life is a process of interaction between an organism and a lived-environment [*Umwelt*].[8] Uexküll's most widely discussed example is that of the tick, whose lived-environment [*Umwelt*] includes only a few factors, such as the smell of butyric acid (signifying the presence of a mammal, to which the tick's response is a clutching behavior) and the feeling of warmth (signifying the bare skin of the mammal, to which the tick's response is a burrowing and feeding behavior).[9] The tick's lived-environment is thus vastly simpler than our own as well as that of many "higher animals," and is vastly different even from that of many animals of roughly equivalent simplicity of organization such as earthworms, mollusks, and bees. In other examples, Uexküll discusses the jackdaw, for whom "grasshoppers" are only part of the lived-environment when the latter are jumping; the bee, which lands on cross-like shapes (the shapes of open flowers) but not on circular ones (the shapes of

[7] For Plessner's and Gehlen's views, see Ch. 2.

[8] See Uexküll 1909, 1920 [1926], 1934 [2010]

[9] See Uexküll 1934 [2010]. See Agamben 2002 and Buchanan 2008 for discussion. Though the examples given in this paragraph are drawn from Uexküll 1934 [2010], his 1909 and 1920 texts includes examples that make essentially the same points.

closed flowers and non-flowers), and of which we can thus conclude that cross-like shapes are a part of its lived-environment while circular shapes are not; and the human being, for whom pressure to the skin at two different points is only recognizable if the distance between the points is sufficiently large: that is, as the distance between the points approaches a fraction of an inch or less, at certain places on the skin, the human being will report that he or she feels only one point of pressure rather than two.[10]

Uexküll's texts consist mostly of reports and reflections on examples such as these, along with construction on that basis of a general system of explanation for the interaction between animals, their lived-environments (that is, the parts of their physical and organic surroundings that they respond to), and the surrounding world (the totality of their physical and organic surroundings). According to Uexküll's general model of the organism, there are two systems of relevance in the organism's interaction with its surroundings that actually define the lived-environment [*Umwelt*] itself: a sensory system based on environmentally-located and identified *perception-marks* [*Merkmal*] and a motor system based on response to environmentally-located and identified *effect-marks* [*Wirkmal*].[11] The convergence of these in the organism's behavior constitutes environmental "objects" within the organism's lived environment. Each (type of) organism, then, has its own species-typical lived-environment and corresponding species-

[10] See Uexküll 1934 [2010]. For a logically-sophisticated defense of the meaningfulness of assigning attributes to generic species-typical individuals ("the bee," "the jackdaw"), see Thompson 2008.

[11] For a summary statement of Uexküll's model as described in this paragraph, see the introduction to Uexküll 1934 [2010], pp. 44-52.

typical world of objects. Uexküll's project was to analyze the basic mechanisms of this environment-construction within the form of life of various animals, and to devise a single terminology and a single model that would apply equally well to an analysis of the *Umwelten* of all forms of life, including those of human beings.[12]

The "surrounding world" that is a common factor in all animal lives – which is part of the essential conditions of the description and comparison of *Umwelten* themselves, yet itself stands outside of accessibility to the vast majority of these *Umwelten* – is simply the *Umwelt* of the human observer: "[t]he animal's environment . . . is only a piece cut out of its surroundings [*Umgebungen*], which we see stretching out on all sides around the animal – and these surroundings are nothing else but our own, human environment [*Umwelt*]."[13] But does this common and seemingly all-inclusive "surrounding world" have the features that characterize animal *Umwelten*? Is it limited in a species-typical way, for instance, or is it not essentially so-limited?[14] These questions naturally lead to another question that is decisive for evaluating even the consistency of Uexküll's own approach, in addition to the interest it has for other reasons: To what

[12] I won't evaluate the "problem of other animal minds" here, except to say that Uexküll's approach to the problem is unusually supple. His analytical method is not necessarily incompatible with behaviorism, for instance. His method founded the biological discipline of ethology, inclusive of such figures as Tinbergen and Konrad Lorenz. Uexküll's way of approaching the problem was thus accepted within at least one well-established scientific community of his time.

[13] Uexküll 1934 [2010], p. 53.

[14] The suggestion of incoherence here is also raised by Gadamer 1960 [2006], pp. 447-449. See also Winthrop-Young 2010.

extent is the human form of life bound to a species-typical *Umwelt*, or bound to any *Umwelt* at all?

Classical philosophical anthropology and the question of human distinctiveness

As part of their larger project of radically re-engaging the question, "What is a human being?" in the wake of important developments in 19th and early-20th century empirical sciences, especially biology, the classical philosophical anthropologists revisited a familiar philosophical *topos*, shared by (yet differently treated by) Aristotle, Descartes, Hume, Kant, and Darwin: the issue of the similarity or difference between human and non-human organic life.[15] Hierarchical conceptions of life as fitting into a "great chain of being," traceable to Aristotle's *De Anima* if not before, were thus the starting point of both Scheler's and Plessner's approaches.[16] This profoundly influential Aristotlean idea is vividly expressed in a well-known image from the 18th century *Oeuvres* of Charles Bonnet. The image features a set of steps wherein mollusks and plants occupy the lowest places, birds and reptiles the next-lowest, a dog and a lion the

[15] For a review of historically important answers to that question in the course of the Western philosophical tradition and their implications for epistemological and ethical questions, see Grene, "Some Distinctions between Men and Brutes," in Grene 1974.

[16] Scheler seems to matter-of-factly assume this hierarchy, and even supposes it is supported by modern biological theory. Though this would today be considered a naïve mistake, ideas of biological evolution were sufficiently contentious circa 1927 to provide some partial justification for Scheler's position. Gehlen 1940 [1988] is explicitly critical of such a hierarchical conception. Plessner 1928 employs the conception and provides an explicit justification for the ranking, without supposing any normative "bias" in nature herself. The rationale comes rather from the "constitution" of the various forms of organic life within our (that is, we late-modern humans') phenomenological interpretation of them.

next-to-highest, and a human being the highest.[17]

All three of the classical philosophical anthropologists Scheler, Plessner, and Gehlen followed Uexküll in supposing that a type or species of living thing could in most cases be uniquely characterized by its species-typical form of environmental interaction. Its specific organs, means of nutrition and reproduction, perceptual, motor, and cognitive capabilities, and typical patterns of behavior could in principle be captured in a single structural description characterizing each species-typical member of the species. When it came to human beings, the challenge was to articulate the specifically human form of interaction with environments. And here the difference between the human and non-human animals appeared to them to be a radical one. The distinctiveness of human beings among kinds of living things could even be characterized as a "break" or hiatus in what would otherwise be (that is, for members of other species) the basic form of any species-typical form of organism-environment interaction at all.

In and in accordance with this break, "culture" [*Geist*, *Bildung*, or *Kultur*] emerges in the form of mind [*Seele* or *Geist*], language, production and use of artifacts, responsiveness to norms, and participation in institutions. The philosophical anthropologists analyzed the continuity and discontinuity of the human form of life with non-human forms, where the emergence of "culture" roughly coincides with the beginnings of the most significant discontinuities. Joachim Fischer summarizes the "typical philosophical-anthropological thought-process," by which this analysis was

[17] Bonnet 1779-1783, vol. 1, p. 1.

conducted, as follows:

> [I]t 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' [*Geist*] . . . takes its position. The mind [*Geist*] is necessary to bridge the gap in life, but at the same time it is necessarily reliant on the living thing.[18]

According to the philosophical anthropologists, Uexküll's model, which was largely appropriate to the study of non-human animals, either broke down in regards to, or required theoretical supplementation in order to apply to, the special conditions of human life.[19] But even their articulation of the distinctiveness of the human form of life is

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[18] Fischer 2009b, p. 157. The German in parentheses comes from a German text (Fischer 2008) that mostly parallels the English-language version.

[19] It is sometimes said that the philosophical anthropologists challenged the applicability of Uexküll's model to the human case: for instance, Winthrop-Young 2010. Such indeed seems to be Gehlen's conclusion (as well as, incidentally, Heidegger's and Cassirer's), but it is not easy to find direct evidence of that challenge in either Scheler or Plessner. See Gehlen 1940 [1988], Cassirer 1928 [1996], Heidegger 1930 [1995]. There is no explicit disagreement with Uexküll on this point in Scheler 1928a [2009] and Plessner 1928, though see Plessner 1946, 1950, and 1975. As I understand it, Plessner 1946 makes the point that, whatever the sense in which humans are bound to an Uexküllian *Umwelt*, they are also capable of breaking free of any particular such condition – that is, are not just bound to a lived-environment [*Umweltgebundenheit*], but are also open to the world [*Weltoffenheit*].

I would say there is as much justification for construing Scheler and Plessner's work as developing a richer account of the human animal's interactions with its lived-environment in continuity

still, in common with Uexküll, conducted in terms of a comparison between human and non-human animal interaction with environments. The human being even appears at times, paradoxically, as that organism whose species-typical, characteristic feature is *not to be* typical, not to *have* a characteristic feature (or, at least, not to have this in certain important domains of its form of life, such as mating, communication, social organization, and dwelling). We could say the human being is "naturally unnatural" and "essentially unessentializable."

Though Scheler does not discuss Uexküll directly in *Die Stellung*, it is clear that he has the latter's notion of the *Umwelt* in mind – as, for instance, when we writes that each non-human animal has a lived environment [*Umwelt*], which it carries around "as a snail carries its shell with it everywhere it goes."[20] In contrast to this feature of animals, Scheler claims that the human being has a relationship to a world [*Welt*], or, as he puts it, is "world-open" [*weltoffene*], can suspend its own organic drives, has cognitive access to the essences of things, and can participate in "spirit" [*Geist*].[21] Scheler's thesis entails that the Uexküllian model does not apply to all dimensions of the human form of life. In some sense, the human form of life even constitutes a fundamental reversal or

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with Uexküll's studies of non-human animals, as there is to construe it as an argument that *there is no* human *Umwelt*, even if their description of human beings, within that framework, reveals that human beings are (in most cases) radically different from any other animal describable within the framework. The right question to ask here is not, "Did the classical philosophical anthropologists agree or disagree with Uexküll about whether human beings had a species-specific *Umwelt*?," but rather "In what specific ways did the classical philosophical anthropologists rely on or diverge from Uexküll's model of animal-environment interaction in their construal of the human form of life and its distinctiveness?"

[20] SMK, p. 34; HPC, p. 28

[21] SMK, pp. 30-35, 42-56; HPC, pp. 25-30, 37-51. The relations of support or entailment among these attributes is discussed below.

contradiction of the Uexküllian model, since it involves the suspension of organic drives: "the ultimate determination of a being with spirit – no matter what its psycho-physical make-up – is its *existential detachment from organic being*, its freedom and detachability – and the detachment of its center of existence from the bondage to, the pressure of, and the *organic* dependence on 'life' and everything which belongs to life."[22]

In *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* [The Stages of Organic Being and Man] (1928), Plessner took issue with some features of Uexküll's model of non-human as well as human organisms: for instance, Uexküll's exclusion of any appeal to the inner "experiences" of animals within a study of their form of life, and Uexküll's claim that each animal "creates" its environment.[23] Plessner objects not to the methodological or epistemological point about animal consciousness, but rather to the implied anti-realism about both animal inner states and objective environments. Yet he also claims that all of the basic features of animal life follow as a consequence of Uexküll's model: thus he clearly holds the model in high regard.[24] However, Plessner's own model of human life stresses certain features of human life that diverge from the Uexküllian model: for instance, its constitutive artificiality as marked by the seamless integration of humanly-produced artifacts into the human being's interactions with its environment – a feature Plessner labels "natural artifactuality" [*natürlichen Künstlichkeit*]) – and the seemingly

[22] SMK, p. 32; HPC, p. 27

[23] Regarding the first point, DS, pp. 67-69; SOBM, pp. 58-60; regarding the second, DS, pp. 204-205; SOBM, pp. 259-261

[24] DS, p. 230; SOBM, p. 181

unique ability of human organisms to take a position or take a stand in regards to their own state. Plessner assigns great significance to the latter ability, which he calls "ex-centric positionality" [*Ex-zentrisch Positionalität*]). The right application of anything like the Uexküllian model to the human case, then, reveals (contrary to Uexküll's own analysis of the human case) a "biologically" empty space within the model itself. This in turn suggests that there are limits of the model's explanatory power, and the necessity of a super-biological (*übervitaler*, as Scheler puts it) component to any analysis of the human form of life.[25]

In *Der Mensch: Seine Natur und Seine Stellung in der Welt* [Man: His Place and Nature in the World] (1940), Gehlen begins with the observation – familiar from Herder's essay on the origin of language, if not before[26] – that the human being is remarkably deficient (in comparison to other animals) in the sort of instincts and innate physiological or behavioral powers (such as claws and fangs) that would aid their survival. Gehlen, like Herder, construed this lack of instincts as the central clue to understanding the human form of life. Humans, unlike other animals, must *construct* a system of habitual responses and available powers of manipulation of their environments if they are to have any prospect of surviving. This difference is evidenced by other unique features of human physiology, such as upright posture, opposable thumb, brain size, and facility with spoken language, as well as of human ontogenesis, such as an earlier birth

[25] PA, p. 129; CHB, p. 137

[26] Herder 1772 [2002], pp. 77-97, esp. pp. 77-87.

and longer childhood as compared to that of other primate species.[27] In comparison to other primates, the later stages of the human infant's "coming to term" take place outside of, rather than inside of, the mother's womb. These phases of their development thus take shape in dynamic interaction with historically, socially, and culturally contingent factors in the environment, such as the images and sounds recognized to be significant by the community to which they're born. According to Gehlen, these differences in species-typical developmental trajectories signal a fundamental difference between human and non-human animal survival strategies and serve as partial explanation of the extraordinary diversity of human behavior, both individual and social. Gehlen's account thus points to concrete physiological, behavioral, and ecological mechanisms that underlie the *prima facie* extraordinary diversity, and potential for diversity, of human forms of life.

In accordance with this emphasis on human beings' *lack* of certain features that characterize every other species of animal organism – species-typical instincts, desires, forms of social organization, and physiologically-given powers that would aid survival – Gehlen does not hesitate to draw the conclusion that Uexküll's model does not apply to the human case.[28] Yet Gehlen's analysis, focusing as it does on the category of action, proceeds at key points through a comparison (and not just contrastive, but also, at many

[27] This thesis was also developed by Adolf Portmann: for instance, Portmann 1944 [1990].

[28] DM, Ch. 9, pp. 73-85; MNP, Ch. 9, pp. 65-76

points, analogical) between human and non-human animal behavior.[29] This raises the question of whether Gehlen's articulation of his position as a rejection of Uexküll's is entirely fair. Is it not the case that "action," in the human case, is in some important sense continuous with any non-human organism's interaction with its environment?

To what questions did classical philosophical anthropology propose an answer?

Because classical philosophical anthropology is so conventionally associated with the problem of human distinctiveness[30], and because this document (again) focuses on precisely that question, it is worthwhile to emphasize that although the question of human distinctiveness was indeed a main focus of the classical philosophical anthropologists, it was not their only focus; nor was it pursued by them for its own sake, but rather for the sake of the insight it provided into other difficult and significant philosophical questions: the place [*Stellung*] of human beings in nature; the meaning of the concepts of "nature" and "culture" and their applicability to the study of human lives; the understanding of the scope and limits of biological and "superbiological" [*übervitaler*] perspectives in the interpretation and understanding of human beings; the explanation of the *prima facie* extraordinary diversity of human forms of life; and the theories of human selfhood, agency, cognition, and normativity. Furthermore, the philosophical anthropologists elsewhere approached these larger questions by other

[29] DM, Ch. 6, pp. 51-56; MNP, Ch. 6, pp. 43-48

[30] For instance: in Fischer 2009b

means than reflection on human distinctiveness.[31]

Scheler and Plessner do present their views, in *Die Stellung* and *Die Stufen*, respectively, by way of construction of a *De-Anima*-style hierarchy of organic beings. For Scheler, the basic types of organism-environment interaction exhibit increasing levels of complexity of skill: if we compare plants, lower (non-human) animals, higher (non-human) animals, and human beings, we see a gradually increasing approximation to human skills at each "higher" level, moving through the categories of *feeling-impulsion*, *instinct*, *habit*, *intelligence*, and *spirit*.[32] So a comparison of types of living things indeed reveals a continuity of advances of complexity leading from non-living things, through plants, to non-human animals and eventually to humans.

Plessner's account orders various forms of life (plant, non-human animal, human) in terms of the complexity of the mediating processes that relate the organism to the

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[31] Regarding the theme of selfhood, for example, the approach of the classical philosophical anthropology may more generally be described as one that carried the emphasis on the philosophical significance of the self or subject characteristic of transcendental philosophy (particularly idealism and neo-Kantianism, where the self was understood as the unified subject of experience, knowledge, and action) but enriched this concept of the self with resources drawn from the human sciences, particularly the most philosophically puzzling developments of 19th and early-20th century sciences pertaining to the human being – namely, Darwinian biology and cultural anthropology. Classical philosophical anthropology thus read the human being as "object" of knowledge (as it had been for the late modern human sciences) back into the philosophical description of the human being as "subject" of knowledge and action (as it had been considered for most of the modern period) and asked about the systematic consequences of such self-description. Philosophical anthropology may thus be said to have attempted to work out a philosophical theory of the self, subject, or person, and whatever in philosophy and other inquiries is implied by that theory, in response to the major 19th and 20th century developments in empirical sciences pertaining to human beings. These responses were variously sympathetic or critical, but they assumed the potential relevance of empirical discoveries and empirical theories to philosophical questions, and thus incurred a responsibility to dialectically engage the relevant empirical science.

[32] These categories are discussed in more detail below.

environment and vice versa. This complexity can be discerned most clearly in the increase of organ differentiation and diversity of potential (environmentally-situated) action as one moves "higher" up the scale. Thus, Plessner appears to support the idea of a natural "hierarchy" of organic beings, insofar as organisms can be ranked on this scale according to the complexity (one might say, the multiplicity of the folds) of their species-typical forms of interaction with environments. Briefly put, one could say that non-human animals' relations to environments are more complexly mediated [*vermittelte*] than plants' relations to environments; and humans' relations to environments are more complexly mediated still. This answer raises the question of *how* the human form of life is so complexly mediated, as well as what this mediation consists in, what it enables, and how.[33]

But this hierarchical conception is not the constant or only focal point of classical philosophical anthropology. Scheler's extensive notes for his unfinished and posthumously published *Philosophische Anthropologie* contain many analyses of the problem of ontological constitution of human beings from entirely different angles than that of the distinctiveness question itself: for instance, faculty psychology.[34] And, in the first chapter of *Die Stufen*, Plessner noted both a "vertical" and a "horizontal" approach to the philosophical-anthropological problem, assigning *Die Stufen* to the vertical route and the earlier *Die Einheit der Sinne: Grundlinien einer Aesthetiologie des Geistes* [The

[33] Previous commentators on Plessner, such as Grene 1974, have not noted the significance of the concept of mediation [*Vermittlung*] in Plessner's answer to his central questions.

[34] Scheler 1928b [2008]

Unity of Sense: Fundamental Lines of an Aesthesiology of Spirit] (1923) to the horizontal.[35] (The latter text analyses how various domains of human culture – notably mathematical geometry, music, and the fine arts – and human sensory capabilities are co-constituted and thus fitted to one another.) And while much of the first third of Gehlen's *Der Mensch* focuses on the human distinctiveness question, most of Gehlen's text could as well be described as a comprehensive inquiry into the causal and constitutive conditions of human language, action, perception, cognition, and motivation, as it could be described as an articulation of an answer to the distinctiveness question.

Finally, Plessner often refers to the significance and novelty of 19th century developments in both biological *and non-biological* sciences as a motive for the founding of philosophical anthropology. For instance:

> [T]he development of scientific specialization has [mostly] followed the Cartesian model. Not until the nineteenth century did the new sciences dealing with life and man –biology, sociology, and the historical disciplines dealing with culture [*die historischen Geisteswissenschaften*] – reveal the artificiality of this model and its inapplicability to experience… [Here] it was not philosophical considerations which proved decisive but the deepening and enrichment of the range of human experience, for which we are indebted to the nineteenth century. In history, ethnology [*Völkerkunde*], sociology, psychology, and psychopathology, men confront human beings of other times and cultures, with

[35] Plessner 1928, Ch. 1; Plessner 1923

> other attitudes toward life and other forms of self-interpretation. The obviousness of one's own familiar existence itself becomes questionable, and its interpretation, followed and acknowledged as valid for centuries, loses its persuasive power. In consequence, old models of human nature [*das Wesen des Menschen*] lost their value, but the readiness to replace them by new ones was weakened by relativism.[36]

And again:

> Our knowledge of man has changed to a great extent [since the 19th century], because of the discovery of pre-historic and early historic skulls, because of a cultural anthropology [*Kulturanthropologie*] deepened by psychoanalysis, and above all because of behavioral research. Only philosophy has played no part in this development. But in the long run philosophy cannot avoid the obligation of recognizing these facts, since the question of the nature of man has always been central to it.[37]

In sum, the question of human distinctiveness is undoubtedly a central one for classical philosophical anthropology in its first and most characteristic manifestations.[38] But the question was hardly a focus for its own sake; and other texts of the classical philosophical anthropologists exhibit other foci.

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[36] Plessner 1941 [1970], p. 29-30. See also Plessner 1928, Ch. 1.

[37] Plessner 1969, p. 353 [1969, p. 497]

[38] Namely, Scheler 1928a and Plessner 1928

Scheler's Philosophical Anthropology in Outline

I will now closely examine one instance of classical philosophical anthropology, which is also (in my view) the most problematic – namely, that of Max Scheler. I will argue that even this weakest form of classical philosophical anthropology exhibits advantages over the programs of Uexküll and Heidegger, as well as rationalist and empiricist programs, in regards to the issue of human distinctiveness and related issues in philosophy, biology, and cultural anthropology.

The "sequence of levels" [*Stufenfolge*]

In the well-known lecture *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* (given in 1927, published in 1929), Scheler addresses the question of human distinctiveness as a means to achieving a more adequate understanding of the ontological constitution and status of human beings generally. In *Die Stellung*, Scheler begins by comparing various forms of organic being, ordered in an implicitly ascending hierarchy: plants, "lower" non-human animals, "higher" non-human animals, and human beings. Like Aristotle in *De Anima*, he offers a developmental and comparative psychology that parallels the main lines of this division. He describes this procedure as an inquiry into the "sequence of levels [*Stufenfolge*] of psychic powers and abilities" visible in the living world.[39] The distinction between levels is given in terms of the powers exhibited by each type of thing.

In the notes to his uncompleted and posthumously published *Philosophische*

[39] SMK, p. 12; HPC, p. 7

Anthropologie, Scheler discusses a number of difficulties faced by any such effort to answer the "human distinctiveness" question by a comparison between humans and non-human animals. First, there is the difficulty of establishing a right to analogize between humans and animals at all.[40] Second, there is the question of "whether it is justified to assume that just because one subject has on the face of it achieved more in the way of growth, perfection, and differentiation of his or her works and actions, than another subject, whose achievements appear more modest, then this means that the former is in possession of superior soul or mental functions."[41] Scheler suggests that such hierarchical rankings of forms of consciousness should be allowed only if real, qualitative discontinuities, and not merely aggregative effects, between forms of behavior can be demonstrated.[42] Thirdly, there is the question of the validity of our interpretations of cognitive states other than our own, particularly where we have some additional reason (being members of a different species, from a different epoch, or from a different cultural tradition) to suspect our own abilities to understand. Regarding this point, Scheler offers a few suggestive examples:

> If we consider nest-building, or a chimpanzee's ability to reach down a fruit from a tree with a stick, or even Japanese Shinto-temple construction, what we come up

[40] "[W]e need to consider what right we have to conclude that certain actions, achievements, and works in animals, are comparable to those we imagine to be precursors of the human soul or mind." PA, p. 122; CHB, p. 130

[41] PA, p. 123; CHB, p. 131

[42] But why? As far as I can tell, Scheler gives no answer here. Thanks to Miriam Solomon for pointing out that the assertion is questionable

> against is that the only way we can give sense to these is by means of a sort of 'second-hand experience' [*Nacherleben*], or by transporting ourselves in imagination into the mind or soul of the creator of the work [*Miterleben*] or through so-called empathy [*Einfühlung*]. Any success in such attempts diminishes the more our own state of soul and mind diverges from the state we are intending to get to know and understand.[43]

But Scheler also argues that, while achieving such understanding does pose special challenges, the skepticism about other minds that motivates, for instance, "the American school of behavior psychology" is misguided, since "we [do] grasp the meaning of events in another soul in a broad and immediate fashion by way of a symbolic apprehension of its expressive appearances and actions."[44]

The five powers of Scheler's typology in *Die Stellung* – (i) feeling-impulsion [*Gefühlsdrang*], (ii) instinct [*Instinkt*], (iii) habit [*gewohnheitsmäßige*], (iv) organically bound practical intelligence [*organisch gebundene praktische Intelligenz*], and (v) spirit [*Geist*] – increasingly approximate to the distinctive powers of human beings. Each "higher level" on this scale has all of the powers of the lower levels.[45] For the most part,

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[43] PA, pp. 123-4; CHB, p. 132

[44] PA, p. 124; CHB, p. 132

[45] This is a claim that Gehlen, in particular, will contest. And there do seem to be a problems in Scheler's account here. For instance: What is the principle by which powers are assigned to a "lower" or "higher" level? Bats have sonar whereas human beings do not: so why is "sonar" not a basic power alongside the five that Scheler lists, and one that a putatively "higher" form of life (human beings) do *not* have? Unless Scheler can provide some derivation of the categories he employs within this ranking, it would seem that any account of "higher" and "lower" here is merely question-begging.

levels (ii)-(iv) are reserved for animals. Presence of abilities at level (iii) and (iv) is a mark of so-called "higher" animals. For instance: arthropods exhibit a complex system of instincts, but very little habit (as these are associative and learned), and no practical intelligence. Level (iv) is rare among non-human animals, though Scheler accepts that it is exhibited in some: for instance, the chimpanzees in Wolfgang Köhler's well-known experiments.[46] Level (v) is reserved for human beings alone.

A number of Scheler's views are remarkable here. He argues that all living things exhibit something he calls "feeling-impulsion" [*Gefühlsdrang*], including plants.[47] Yet no plant exhibits instinct. Nor do plants exhibit sensation, since sensation emerges in conjunction with action as part of the so-called "reflex arc" in the animal form of life. Regarding action and sensation, each is necessarily exhibited by any form of life that exhibits the other.[48] Instinct and habit are distinct; that is, there is a real distinction between "inborn" capabilities and patterns of response, on the one hand, and acquired ones, on the other. Higher forms of intelligence are entirely different from habits and instincts – *contra* Locke, Hume, Mill, and associative psychology, who claim or claimed that intelligence is the result of habits of association.[49] Some non-human animals *do* have intelligence, including goal-directed and even "chosen" behavior in the sense that their

[46] SMK. pp. 27-31; HPC, pp. 21-25; and Köhler 1921 [1925]

[47] This is a rough analogue, and probably successor, of Schoepenhauerian "will."

[48] Aristotle, of course, had already argued the same thing in *De Anima*, Book 3, Ch. 12; and Plessner will later agree (see Ch.2.).

[49] SMK, pp. 22-31; HPC, pp. 16-25

behavior sometimes involves spontaneity and selection among various drives:

> From the *center* of their drives (which animals possess, but not plants) which they have because of their unitary nervous system, animals can, up to a certain extent, also act spontaneously on the constellation of their drives, which allows them to avoid nearby, more compelling advantages in favor of reaching greater advantages located in remoter distances, despite having to make detours to reach the latter.[50]

So habit is distinct from instinct, intelligence is distinct from habit, and all of these are distinct from "feeling-impulsion" [*Gefühlsdrang*]. And what distinguishes human beings from non-human animals, definitively, cannot be any of characteristics (i)-(iv).

Geist and human distinctiveness

In *Zur Konstitution des Menschen* (1922), a fragment intended for incorporation in *Philosophische Anthropologie*, Scheler provides two lists of features that cannot serve as answers to the question of human distinctiveness.[51] The first is a list of features that would be insufficient as answers to the question because they are features that humans and at least some non-human animals share. The list includes: (i) instinct, (ii) ability to learn through associative memory, (iii) ability to teach offspring, (iv) beginnings of "a mediated referential thought activity [*mittelbaren beziehenden Gedankentätigkeit*] by

[50] SMK, p. 30; HPC, p. 25. Here Scheler is likely thinking of Köhler's animal psychological experiments.

[51] PA, pp. 121-132; CHB, pp. 129-142. The manuscripts are dated 1922.

means of which the relationships of things are classified in terms of identity, similarity, analogy, and means-to-an-end references"[52], (v) "general representations" and "anticipatory schemata" – including "behaving against instinct" [*Instinkt zerfällt*][53], (vii) communication with con-specifics and sometimes members of other species, (viii) expression of joy, sorrow, curiosity, jealousy, tenderness, "the beginning of" humor, (ix) beginnings of clothing and tool construction, (x) authority, friendship, and other complex social relations, (xi) individuality (personality), (xii) sensory ability, and (xiii) appreciation of beauty.[54] The second list is apparently higher-order: it suggests three *types* of answers to the human distinctiveness question that are unsatisfactory, seemingly because they fail to properly address the question in its full significance.[55] These include (1) details of anatomical make-up, (2) bodily or vital structure (whether internal or external, body or soul), and (3) a quantitative increase in any characteristic of the animal soul (presumably because the difference between human and non-human animal must be "qualitative" [of kind] rather than "quantitative" [of degree]).[56] In particular, Scheler

[52] According to Scheler (who is probably thinking of Köhler's chimpanzee experiments) some animals can even recognize cause-and-effect relationships and "use all this knowledge in a free combination of ideas to serve [their] practical concerns." PA, p. 127; CHB, p. 135

[53] PA, p. 127; CHB, p. 135. But this seems to contradict Scheler's account of the human being as distinctively able to suspend his or her organic drives, as given in *Die Stellung*.

[54] PA, pp. 127-128; CHB, pp. 135-6. Compare the first chapter of Fernandez-Armesto 2002, where a variety of such putative distinctions are considered and rejected in light of studies in primatology and animal behavior; and the classic statement of Darwin 1871 [2004].

[55] PA, pp. 128-129; CHB, pp. 137-138

[56] As noted above, this requirement is suspicious.

states that the difference cannot lie in the "richer mediated thinking power" [*reicherer mittelbarer (technische Intelligenz) Denktätigkeit*] of human beings in comparison with non-human animals, since this would be merely a quantitative and not a qualitative difference.[57]

In *Die Stellung*, Scheler presents a clarified statement of the question to which these constraints have driven him, as well as (by this very narrowing-down of the possible answer) a hint at his own preferred answer to the question of human distinctiveness, when he writes:

> Assuming, as I do, that the human being is an empirical earth-bound thing... and that it is something which has escaped from its animal origins by way of a discrete leap, then, given the fact that its nervous system and brain are not greatly different from those of higher primates, in order to explain the exceptional place in the universe that we find ourselves in, which is just high enough to release us from the environmental constraints [*Bedingungskomplex*] which characterize an animal – however this comes about, whether we are a newly created entity or whether we have effected a breakthrough from vital soul to a completely different sort of 'acts' rather than functions of the soul and which belong to what we call mind [*Geistes*] – then no amount of scientific observation [*naturwissenschaftlich-biologischen Merkmalen*] about the human being can ever reveal its true nature or its true unity. The difference between human and animals must therefore be of a

[57] PA, p. 128; CHB, p. 137

> 'supravital' [*übervitaler*] order, and cannot be reduced to any obvious correlation with anything to do with the nervous system.[58]

The feature that distinguishes humans from non-human animals, on Scheler's account, is "spirit" [*Geist*]. Precisely what this feature is, and how it emerges, are not entirely clear from Scheler's description of it. But it is something like the Hegelian notion, which includes objective *Geist* – material culture, practices, common ways of life and thought, historical traditions, and institutions – as well as subjective and absolute *Geist* – which encompasses systems of thought, interpretation, and experience. For Scheler, *Geist* is closely related to the uniquely human appreciation of objective reality – that is, consciousness of objects – which is made possible by the human capacity to intuit "essences."[59] Scheler also describes this mechanism as "ideation": "the grasp of the essential qualities and structures of the world in terms of one example of some essential region, independently of the magnitude and number of observations and inductive reasoning from them."[60] These capacities correspond to the unique world-openness [*weltöffenkeit*] of the human form of life, that is, to the way in which human beings have a world [*Welt*] rather than merely (as Uexküll had construed it) an environment [*Umwelt*].

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[58] PA, pp. 128-129; CHB, p. 137. The omitted passage (signaled by the ellipses) reads "whether homogeneous as to its phylogenetic origin or heterogeneous in this respect, the latter being more probable." I take it that the validity of that claim by contemporary paleo-anthropological light is dubious, *pace* the editor's footnotes to Scheler 1927 [2009], p. 67, though there is some evidence of interbreeding between *Homo Sapiens Sapiens* and other now extinct hominid forms, such as *Homo Neanderthalis*.

[59] The "intuition of essences" is an important and well-known component of Scheler's philosophical methodology in general, which I will not attempt to treat in detail here. For review, see Frings 1997 and Zahavi 2011.

[60] SMK, p. 41; HPC, p. 36.

Scheler also notes the human experience of a self[61], of space as empty and continuous, and the impossibility of objectifying spirit itself[62], as corollaries of his basic account of spirit.

Scheler's description of the relation between life [*Leben*] and spirit sometimes suggests an opposition between them, such that spirit would arise from a reversal or contradiction of life. For instance: Scheler writes that spirit arises in conjunction with the human capacity to say "No" to his or her desires. Scheler describes the human being as (essentially, distinctively) a no-sayer [*Neinsägerkönner*].[63] But Scheler rejects both the view that spirit arises out of a *cancellation* of life itself (as in Buddhism or Freud's theory of the "death drive") and the view that spirit is an independent, positive force with power of its own comparable to that of life (as in Plato or Hegel).[64] On Scheler's account in *Die Stellung*, spirit is a positive force rather than a negative one. Spirit depends on life because spirit draws its energy from life; and yet, spirit, so long as it is adequately fed by life, is productive, and its productions follow entirely different laws from that of life (thus

[61] "[B]y virtue of having spirit, the human being is given to himself a third time: in terms of his consciousness of self, in terms of his ability to objectify his own psychic processes, and in terms of his sensory and motor system. In this threefold structure, the 'person' of the human being has to be conceived as the center above the polarization of organism and environment [*Umwelt*]." SMK, pp. 35-36; HPC, p. 30.

[62] This can be read as connected to the famous problem of reflexivity in the human sciences, and the (related) difficulty of prediction therein. For instance, see Smith 2007.

[63] SMK, pp. 40-45; HPC, pp. 35-40

[64] SMK, pp. 45-56; HPC, pp. 40-51

being "beyond" life and explanatorily irreducible to life).[65]

Scheler *contra* rationalism and empiricism

Scheler's construal of the human being as the *spiritual* [*geistlich*] animal distinguishes his view from a more familiar proposal in the canon of Western reflections on human distinctiveness – namely, that the human being is distinguished from other animals by its "rationality." This thesis, present in some form in Plato, Aristotle[66], Descartes, and Kant, and recently defended by Christine Korsgaard[67], was questioned in a fundamental way, in the modern period, by the British empiricist tradition inclusive of Hobbes, Hume, and Darwin, all of whom emphasized the continuity of human and non-human animal mental processes. Later, German biological thinkers such as Ernst Haeckel and Uexküll held views of a similarly "continuist" sort.

Scheler does not agree with either the *rationalist discontinuist* or *empiricist continuist* traditions just mentioned. Contrary to the latter, he holds that there is a

[65] SMK, pp. 45-56; HPC, pp. 40-51

[66] Aristotle may not be a rationalist in other respects, but his views on human distinctiveness, as expressed in *De Anima*, show him to be one on at least this question.

[67] See Korsgaard 2006, 2009. Korsgaard believes (like Scheler) that both humans and non-human animals can display intelligence. But on Korsgaard's account, the crucial distinction between human beings and non-human animals is that human beings exhibit a kind of decision-making (or practical rationality) that animals do not: basically, that when they choose what they will do, they are thereby also choosing who they will be. This choice and responsibility is dependent on (and unavoidably given to) self-consciousness, which is (in turn) dependent on enhanced representational capacities that entails that the agent will represent him- or herself within the context of his or her goal-directed actions. With this novel mechanism of decision-making, novel normative structures – in particular, ethical responsibilities – arise. For further discussion of Korsgaard's views in comparison and contrast to the philosophical anthropologists, see Ch. 3.

qualitative difference between human and animal forms of life. But the point of difference he articulates – *Geist* – cannot be identified with "rationality" in any of the classical (Aristotelian, Kantian) senses, nor with "mind" in the Cartesian sense. Yet it arguably includes and involves a revision of the theories of rationality and mind within its larger scope. Scheler's thesis is thus unusual, within the terms of the long-standing debate about human distinctiveness, in its identification of a distinguishing feature of human life (unlike the empiricists) that is nonetheless non-rational or not solely rational (unlike the rationalists). In making this move, Scheler thus exemplifies a key philosophical-anthropological innovation, characteristic of his successors Plessner and Gehlen as well, which goes beyond the traditional opposition between rationalist discontinuist and empiricist continuist views on the question of human distinctiveness.

Scheler denies that either the rationalist or the empiricist view can satisfy as an answer to the distinctiveness question. The answer cannot be a matter of greater "mediated referential thought activity" [*Mittelbaren beziehenden Gedankentätigkeit*][68] or a "richer mediated thinking power" [*reicherer mittelbarer (technische Intelligenz) Denktätigkeit*][69]. Likewise,

> the essence of the human being, as well as what one refers to as the cosmic *special place* that humans occupy, is *far above* mere intelligence and the ability to make free choices. One could not reach this special place even by trying to

[68] PA, p. 127; CHB, p. 135

[69] PA, p. 128; CHB, p. 137

> imagine the capacities of intelligence and free choices as extending, by whatever measure of quantity, into the infinite.[70]

Yet, at the same time,

> it would also be a mistake to imagine this novel phenomenon – which makes humans what they are – to be an addition to the psychic levels of impulsion, instinct, associative memory, intelligence, and the capacity to make free choices; an addition which would belong to functions of the *psychic* and *vital spheres*, the study of which would, of course, lie within the competence of psychology and biology.[71]

In short, both the rationalist (Aristotelian, Cartesian, and Kantian) and empiricist (Humean, Darwinian) accounts of human distinctiveness (or non-distinctiveness) are mistaken.

Scheler's concept of "spirit" must refer to something that is, contra rationalism, not merely a distinctive "capacity to make free choices." This is because the answer to the human distinctiveness question must be one of kind, not degree, and animals have the capacity to make choices, according to Scheler's interpretations of Köhler's experiments. If the rationalist's description of human cognitive capacities were the full story, Scheler seems to reason, there would thus be no grounds for supposing that there is a difference of kind between human beings and non-human animals. This is because animals, too,

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[70] SMK, p. 31; HPC, p. 26

[71] SMK, p. 31; HPC, p. 26

have now been shown – by Köhler's primatological experiments, if not by others – to have the kind of means-ends based or classificatory reasoning that the rationalist tradition has, for a long time (but now, we see, mistakenly) restricted to human beings.

Here it is plausible to read Scheler as influenced primarily by the biological science of his day, as exemplified (for instance) by Darwin, Uexküll, and Köhler, to deny that human intelligence is different in kind from non-human animal intelligence.[72] Yet Scheler also affirms, apparently in contrast to strong voices representative of those biological sciences, that there *is* a distinctive feature of the human form of life that does not lie "within the competence of psychology and biology," and is rather "supervital" [*übervitaler*]. Spirit meets this description because, rather than being a simple manifestation of life, spirit is independent from life: "[T]he ultimate determination of a being with spirit – no matter what its psycho-physical makeup – is its *existential detachment* [*existentielle Entbundenheit*] *from organic being*, its freedom and detachability [*Ablösbarkeit*] – and the detachment of its center of existence from the bondage to, the pressure of, and the *organic* dependence on 'life' and everything which belongs to life, and thus also its detachment from its own drive-related 'intelligence.'"[73] Importantly, the distinctively human attribute of spirit enables a detachment from or even contradiction of "reason" and "intelligence" themselves. Human beings' unique power is

[72] Such is the conclusion of Uexküll 1934 [2010] and – as is well-known – of Darwin 1871 [2004]. On the conclusions that were drawn from Darwinism in late 19th and early 20th century theories of intelligence, see Richards 1987.

[73] SMK, p. 32; HPC, p. 27. The term "detachment" [*Entbundenheit*] should not be overemphasized here: it is used just once in this passage; the English translation distributes the verb throughout the sentence.

exhibited as much in their capacity to violate or contradict reason as in their capacity to follow it.

The passage in which Scheler first introduces the term *Geist* in *Die Stellun*g is perhaps the best summary of the differences between his view on this point and those of his rationalist discontinuist and empiricist continuist predecessors:

> Already the ancient Greeks asserted the existence of such a principle [distinguishing human beings from non-human animals]. They called it 'reason.' We wish to suggest another and more comprehensive term for this X. This term also contains the concept of 'reason,' but it encompasses, in addition to the thinking of ideas, a specific type of an 'intuition' [*Anschauung*] of primordial phenomena and essential contents, and it encompasses also a specific class of volitional and emotive acts such as kindness, love, repentance, awe, states of wonder, bliss, despair, and free decision-making: this more comprehensive term is 'spirit' [*Geist*]. The center of acts, however, through which this spirit appears within all finite spheres of being, is what we designate as 'person' to sharply differentiate it from all functional centers of life which, as seen from their inside, are also called 'psychic' centers.[74]

Thus, under the category of *Geist* Scheler collects not only the distinctively human power of "reason," but also the distinctively human powers of "intuition" of essences and of "a specific class of volitional and emotive acts." This reason (which is not merely

[74] SMK, p. 32; HPC, p. 26

intelligence), this intuition, and these acts, make the center of such acts – the person – distinct from other "psychic centers," that is, those of non-human organisms.

Scheler conceives of *Geist* and personhood as arising together and as arising through a rejection or reversal of life. That the volitional, emotive, intuitive, and perceptual powers of human beings, in addition to their "rational" powers, are included in this reversal, and thus also distinguishable in kind from the otherwise analogous powers of non-human animals, distinguishes Scheler's view both from the rationalist continuism of the longer-standing tradition and the collapse of any principled distinction between human and non-human animals in empiricist discontinuist traditions.

Scheler *contra* Heidegger

The most important feature of human existence to issue from the divergence of *Geist* and life, according to Scheler, is its world-openness [*Weltöffenheit*]: that is, human beings' capacity to intuit objective essences and access the "ultimate Ground of all entities of which life happens to be one particular manifestation."[75] One might then say that, for Scheler, what makes human beings special is their capacity for metaphysics. In this respect, there is an interesting congruence between Scheler's views and those of his younger contemporary Martin Heidegger. It is nearly the same feature of human existence that, according to Scheler, constitutes the answer to the human distinctiveness question, that also, according to Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit* [*Being and Time*] (1927),

[75] SMK, p. 31; HPC, p. 26.

makes human beings an especially important subject-matter for fundamental ontology: namely, openness to the world, to things "as they are," to "essences" [*die Wesen*], to Being itself.

There also seems to be a congruence between this aspect of Scheler's view on the human distinctiveness question, as presented in lecture form in 1927, and the position developed by Heidegger in his 1929-1930 lecture course on the concept of world.[76] There Heidegger distinguishes between the stone, the animal, and the human by saying that the stone "has no world," the animal is "poor in world," and the human "is world-constituting." What Heidegger stresses about human beings in the 1929-1930 lectures, as well as in *Sein und Zeit* [1927], is their openness to Being. In the lectures on the concept of world, the focus is on this openness to Being in the form of worldhood, an openness that is denied animals, even while animals show something like an unactualized (and unactualizable) capacity for this openness. So Scheler and Heidegger clearly share an emphasis on the way the human being is open to being itself – in Scheler's language, through "world-openness" [*Weltoffenheit*] and a capacity to intuit essences; in Heidegger's case, through being "a being for whom Being itself is in question," or, a being to whom Being itself comes, a being who stands in the open.[77]

But Scheler's concept of *Geist*, under which he collects these distinctive powers

[76] Heidegger 1930 [1995]. It seems Heidegger did not attend Scheler's 1927 lecture, but it is likely that he knew of it. See Frings 1997, pp. 250-51.

[77] Heidegger 1927 [1962]; 1930 [1995], pp. 186-287. For recent discussion of these themes from Heidegger's 1929-30 lectures on the concept of world, see Buchanan 2008 and Agamben 2002.

and attributes of human beings, retains a Hegelian pedigree. The Hegelian character of the Schelerian answer to the question of human distinctiveness, inclusive of its quasi-genetic analysis of the incremental order of attributes making up the hierarchy of living things, comes with the advantage of allowing an inquiry into the conditions of possibility (or, conditions of emergence) of those capacities, like "world-openness" and "rationality," that Scheler claims to be distinctively human. This inclusion of the possibility of an inquiry into the origins, or constitutive or causal conditions-of-possibility, of these attributes protects Scheler's view from a difficulty faced by Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit* and in the lectures of 1929-30: namely, that it seemed impossible to show, from a Heideggerian standpoint, that Uexküll was wrong in thinking human beings also live within a species-specific *Umwelt*; or, to put it slightly differently, to rule out the possibility that non-human animals are also *Dasein*.

Yet Heidegger had criticized Scheler's writings on philosophical anthropology in section 10 of *Sein und Zeit*, writing that although Scheler was correct to distinguish the mode of being of "acts" and "persons" from that of "objects" (or, the mode of being of things "objectively present"), Scheler failed to clarify the mode of being of these beings because he neglected to ask the question of Being itself.[78] In this regard, Heidegger claims, Heidegger's own analysis of Dasein, conducted within the fundamental-ontological project of *Sein und Zeit*, arrives at deeper insight into the mode of being of *Dasein* – that is, human being, the being that we are (that, as Heidegger puts it, is "always

[78] Heidegger 1927 [1962], section 10, pp. 71-75

already mine"). There is some validity to Heidegger's criticism here: Scheler's treatment is more superficial than Scheler's own aims would seem to require. Yet Heidegger's own fundamental ontology is problematically disjointed from the empirical and historical content that would appear to make it possible and provide an indispensable source and support for ontology's own constructions and discoveries. It is not that Heidegger doesn't make use of such sources and supports, obliquely, in his own account in *Sein und Zeit*, as well as the lectures of 1929-30, but rather that he explicitly rules out such use in his discussion of the methodology of fundamental ontology[79]; and it is this methodological protocol to which he appeals in criticizing philosophical anthropology (as well as biology, ethnology, and Cassirer's cultural philosophy in turn). This ultimately makes the Schelerian question about the distinctiveness of the human, and the conditions of the emergence of the human, unanswerable for Heidegger's explicitly stated program, but not for Scheler's.

Problems with Scheler's view

There are a number of problems with Scheler's answers to the human distinctiveness and the hierarchy questions. One set of problems, which Gehlen highlights in his criticism of Scheler's position, concerns Scheler's use of a "hierarchy" model of comparison between forms of life.[80] First, Scheler's way of posing the question

[79] Heidegger 1927 [1962], sections 10 and 11, pp. 71-77

[80] DM, sect. 2, pp. 20-31; MNP, sect. 2, pp. 14-23

leads to a forced choice between two kinds of answer to the question: the thesis that there is nothing "distinctive in kind" about human beings vis-à-vis non-human animals, since human beings exist on a continuum that includes non-human animals; and the thesis that human beings are essentially animals plus some distinctive further attribute. The problem with the first of these options is that a perceived lack of a distinction "in kind" then leads to failure to perceive what *is* distinctly human, a rejection of the supposition that there are non-biological dimensions of human life, and a temptation to apply models only really applicable to non-human animals to the interpretation of human beings. The problem with the second option is that, again, it lead to the undue "animalization" of at least some aspects of human life. The *human* nature of human beings is manifest (Gehlen argues) in *every* facet of their being – including traits or attributes they may seem to share with non-human animals (feeding, sex, vision, etc.). In addressing the problem of human distinctiveness we should rather (Gehlen argues) be looking to understand and describe a single "structural law" [*Grundgesetz*] under which all attributes distinctive of the human form of life may be collected.

Secondly, this hierarchy conception, and the effort to map gradually more advanced abilities to different levels of the hierarchy, can also lead to other misunderstandings. By assuming that behavioral abilities fall onto a "continuum" that parallels the assumed ordering of lower and higher, for instance, the account of these behavioral attributes may also be thereby distorted, even in non-human animal cases.

Another set of problems arises from the lack of specificity in Scheler's account of the constitutive and causal conditions of spirit [*Geist*] itself, issues that he has arguably

underestimated the significance of. The concept of spirit itself is only very abstractly described. For one thing, it is unclear what part of spirit is appropriately attributed to individual persons (or "minds"), which to communities, and which to the non-human and non-living worlds. In other words, it is unclear about where spirit resides or arises: in individuals or communities, and in organisms, behaviors, or ecologies. It can't be in individuals, except in a partial sense (that is, such that the individual *has* spirit only *by way of* participation in a community); and, if it's in communities, it must be in the material culture and conditions of the community's "form of life" as well as in the actions of the human organisms that make up these communities. This last point, however, would seriously challenge Scheler's claim that *Geist* draws its energy from life alone – it would have to draw its energy from physical reality and from other episodes of *Geist* itself, as much as it does from life.

Something like Scheler's view might nonetheless be defended in the following way. For Scheler's *Geist*, we can substitute *culture* and whatever culture makes possible. This is not an interpretive extrapolation far beyond the limits of the meaning of the German term itself. If we intend this interpretation to escape criticisms of the sort that apply to Scheler's view, however, we must then address the complicated question of how "culture" itself should be defined and how the causal and constitutive conditions of culture should be understood and articulated.[81] This move may also require a weakening of Scheler's insistence that the difference in question be one of kind rather than one of

[81] On this question, see Ch. 4.

degree. It seems that many non-human animal life-processes are occasionally mediated by cultural processes, though these processes are generally not autonomous, and never very highly autonomous processes that are themselves capable of generating and sustaining any significant force over the lives of the organisms that produce them.[82] In human cases, by contrast, cultural processes accrue tremendous force over human lives, as well as over environments and the lives of other organisms. This constitutes a case where *Geist*, originally emerging from and powered by life, acquires steering effects upon life itself. Furthermore, the "natural" or already culturally reformed life-processes of human beings themselves become mediating factors in these seemingly autonomous cultural processes.[83]

Related to this interpenetration of life and *Geist*, it may plausibly be argued that only under conditions of cultural mediation such as is typical of human forms of life is something like what Scheler calls a "person" possible. In that case, *Geist* would be understood to precede the existence of any individual human person and to provide the means by which the human organism becomes a person. By the same process, "the energies of life" would have been turned towards *Geist*, as various of the human organism-cum-person's drives are formed, allowed, encouraged, turned to other purposes, or negated by *geistlich* processes. This uniquely wide-ranging reversal of the causal and constitutive determinations between *Geist* and life would thus be what makes

[82] For examples and discussion, see Laland and Galef 2009.

[83] By "autonomous" here I just mean "happening according to rules or processes other than those of organic or physical nature alone."

human forms of life so *prima facie* different from those of non-human animals.[84]

As we will see in the following chapter, the more developed philosophical anthropologies of Plessner and Gehlen preserve the major advantages of Scheler's view while avoiding the problems just highlighted.

[84] A turn in this direction might be facilitated by incorporation of Scheler's sociology of knowledge into his philosophical anthropology. The former may provide resources to flesh out the mere sketch of *Geist* provided in the latter. See Scheler 1926 [1980].

CHAPTER 2

ANIMALITY, ARTIFACTUALITY, AND SOCIALITY IN PLESSNER AND GEHLEN'S PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGIES

Introduction

In recent discussions, the tradition of thought associated with the term "philosophical anthropology" and the figures Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen has been criticized as offering a problematically asocial, ahistorical, and essentialist interpretation of human beings. Axel Honneth and Hans Joas, for instance, claim that the philosophical anthropologies of Plessner and Gehlen suffer from the same basic defect: a failure to appreciate the extent to which the human form of life, including human agency, cognition, and motivation, is constitutively mediated by social factors.[85] Historian Roger Smith and the anthropologists Guntar Gebauer and Christof Wulf argue that the systems of the classical philosophical anthropologists are insufficiently attuned to the possible scope of historical transformations of, and historical transformations of interpretations of, human life.[86] Sami Pihlström describes the classical philosophical

[85] Honneth and Joas 1985 [1988]; see also Joas 1980 [1985], 1996. Joas further argues (in other writings) that the challenge of modeling the contribution of social factors to human development, the distinctiveness of human skills and abilities (when compared to those of non-human animals), and the constitution of action, is better met in the social psychology of G. H. Mead. Joas 1980 [1985]

[86] Smith 2007; Gebauer and Wulf 2009. Smith follows his discussion of classical philosophical anthropology with a discussion of the work of Michel Foucault, implying that Foucault's diagnosis of the "end of man" and his historicist methodology are an advance on those of the classical philosophical anthropologists. Smith 2007, pp. 35-61

anthropologists as "essentialists," a view he criticizes for failing to recognize the role of local, human-made institutions in the constitution of particular manifestations of human nature itself.[87] And Max Horkheimer once made a more politically charged version of the same objection, in regards to the projects of the classical philosophical anthropologists, when he pointed out that any "philosophy of human nature" tends to reify existing forms of life and falsely convince us of the impossibility of personal and social transformation.[88] Roberto Esposito has recently criticized the philosophical anthropologists from another direction: their adherence to an "immunitary" paradigm characteristic of modernity itself. According to this analysis, the philosophical anthropologists, in their construal of human biological life as constitutively subject to dangers that only the mediation of artificial institutions can provide, participates in a biopolitical logic of individualistic protection and exclusion that gives full reign to sovereign political powers and rules out the possibility of true community.[89]

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[87] Pihlström 2003.

[88] Horkheimer 1935 [1993]. Horkheimer's paper only mentions Scheler, not Plessner or Gehlen.

[89] See Esposito 2002 [2011] and 2004 [2008], and especially Esposito 2002 [2011], pp. 88-111. Esposito draws the initial "biopolitical" optics for his analysis from Foucault and Agamben, but offers an original contribution in his description of the "immunitary" logic that characterizes modernity. See Foucault 1976 [1990], 2003, and Agamben 1995 [1998]. I became aware of Esposito's work too late to adequately incorporate it in my discussion here. But let me just flag my suspicion at Esposito's estimation of the extent of the problems attending the so-called "immunitary paradigm," as well as Esposito's own preferred alternative, which he variously describes as "contagion" or as a boundless community. I also suspect that the familiar analogies between "group" and "organism" are less reliable, as well as less historically influential, than Esposito's discussion makes them seem. On the other hand, if there is some truth or inevitability to the immunitary models themselves, whether in the case of individual organisms or in that of groups, institutions, and systems of thought, then this should only make the basic strategy of the philosophical anthropologists, which seeks to negotiate the borders between the biological and the cultural, as well as between the individual and the social (as I will argue here), more attractive to us, and a careful

Are the verdicts expressed in these commentaries justified? Do the classical philosophical anthropologists indeed fail to do sufficient justice to the sociality (as charged by Pihlström, Honneth and Joas) and historicity (as charged by Pihlström, Smith, Gebauer, and Wulf) that constitutes and mediates the human form of life? Does their basic analytic framework restrict the creative freedom and developmental potential of life and community (as Joas and Esposito charge)? And does this failure entail problematic consequences for political theory (as Horkheimer, Joas, and Esposito claim)? In this chapter I will argue that there are indeed problems with the philosophical anthropologies Plessner and Gehlen expressed in their most famous systematic works, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* (1928) [*The Stages of Organic Being and Man*], and *Der Mensch: Seine Natur und Seine Stellung in der Welt* (1940, first ed.) [*Man: His Nature and Place in the World*], respectively. But Plessner's and Gehlen's accounts also exhibit a few marked advantages over those of the most well-known historicists (such as Foucault) and sociologists (such as G. H. Mead): namely, the ability to articulate a coherent synthesis of broadly naturalistic and hermeneutic commitments. This also means: to bring the philosophical understanding of the problems of human *animality*, as well as the definition of *humanity* and the interpretation of *culture*, up to date with the most significant developments of 19th and 20th century empirical science.[90] And these

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study of their views more valuable. In general, I expect that Plessner and Gehlen are closer to a reasonable view of these matters than is Esposito.

[90] The implications of such choice of approach for biopolitics is another extremely important question, which (unfortunately) I must leave for another time.

advantages are plenty strong to motivate a critical renewal of philosophical anthropology in contemporary philosophy.

In my estimation, Plessner's approach is ultimately more promising than Gehlen's.[91] The reasons for my preference – will be made clearer in the course of what follows. They can primarily be traced to differences in the deepest methodological commitments of Plessner and Gehlen, commitments that I believe make Plessner's work more amenable to the range of possibilities of interpretation of the human condition that a properly hermeneutic standpoint should seek to preserve. But Plessner's work is also less definite in some relevant details than is Gehlen's; thus it calls for supplementation by those who would want to address, today, the questions Plessner's work insightfully but enigmatically addresses in his own time.[92]

The chapter proceeds by way of a review of Plessner's and Gehlen's philosophical anthropologies, as expressed in the works just mentioned.[93] Among other things, these works focus thematically on the question of the human "place" [*Stellung*] in nature through a comparative analysis of human and non-human animal forms of life; and my reading will focus on this main line of argument in each text. My review of the main arguments of the texts will give special attention to the common criticism (expressed

[91] This goes against the grain of some previous scholarship. See Rehberg 2009, p. 136; Joseph Margolis, personal communication. In an aside, Schacht suggests Gehlen is "perhaps the most important of the three": Schacht 1974, p. 298. Preference for Plessner is expressed by Dallmayr 1974 and Grene 2002. I take it that Gehlen's well-known temporary affiliation with the Nazi party is potentially hermeneutically relevant, but not by itself sufficient grounds for deciding the validity of his philosophical views.

[92] See Chs. 3-4 below for my substantive attempt at this project.

[93] Plessner 1928, Gehlen 1940

particularly clearly by Honneth and Joas) that these philosophical programs ignore or undervalue historical and social factors in the constitution of human forms of life. I will argue that the philosophical anthropologies of Plessner and Gehlen fare much better on the challenged front than their critics typically acknowledge. In this chapter and the next I will argue that, where these criticisms do apply, they may be addressed through a recasting of Plessner's and Gehlen's theories of language and culture. I also hope, in this chapter and the next, to begin to make the case that Plessner's and Gehlen's views offer an attractive option among those contender approaches favored by the critics of philosophical anthropology – such as Foucaultian historical anthropology and Meadian social psychology – insofar as the philosophical anthropologists more effectively provide a point of theoretical mediation between naturalistic and hermeneutic perspectives or discourses.[94]

Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology in Outline

Against the Cartesian Alternative

The main argument of Plessner's *Die Stufen* is built around an attempt to overcome what Plessner calls the "Cartesian alternative" – namely, the insistence that all events be classified and analyzed in terms of the two distinct categories of extended, non-qualitative, and "outer" reality, on the one hand, and non-extended, qualitative, and

[94] For a detailed comparison of Plessner and Mead, see Ch. 3.

"inner" reality, on the other.[95] The theoretical need to overcome the "Cartesian alternative" has become compelling above all through the development of 19th century empirical science, particularly biology, history, linguistics, and ethnology, since these fields require the possibility of modeling systems that involve both qualitative and quantitative, and inner and outer, components, and allow for analysis of the transitions and transformations between them. Plessner does not deny the existence of a "double-aspect" [*Doppelaspekt*] character to human life similar to that assumed in the Cartesian alternative. But he claims that this double-aspect has not been properly understood. For one thing, the *Doppelaspekt* is a feature of all living processes. This is evident in the distinctive way that living things appear to us in phenomenological intuition, as compared to non-living things, as having both an "inner" and an "outer" side. All organisms are constituted, phenomenologically and ontologically, by both an "inner" and "outer" dimension. The "inner" side is the living thing's "center" or "core," which is roughly analogous to the experience, mind, or soul of the human being. The "outer" dimension is the outer boundary of the living thing's body, which is always in dynamic interaction with its environment. The appeal of the "Cartesian alternative" can be traced to this *Doppelaspekt* character of the phenomenological appearance of life itself.[96]

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[95] Plessner 1928, Ch. 2.

[96] Here it might be pointed out that the single entity of which these two aspects *are* aspects, and in which they are grounded, however – the living organism – was arguably not recognized by Descartes, and (partly due to the influence of Descartes) today it is still too rarely recognized and rarely understood. For further development of this theme (partly inspired by a reading of Plessner), see the work of Marjorie Grene, especially Grene 1966, 1974, 1985.

But the two sides of this duality are in tension with one another, and the consistency of the *Doppelaspekt* is a puzzle, as Descartes' botched treatment of it shows. The resolution of the tension requires an explanation of the *Doppelaspekt*'s origins, a strategy that might be described as therapeutic or genealogical. As in the case of the Kantian antinomies or a Hegelian *aufhebung*, this double-aspect cannot be directly denied but must rather be "explained away" at another level. Plessner's strategy of resolution in *Die Stufen* is to trace the emergence of the *Doppelaspekt* in two sequences: a phenomenological sequence that follows the phenomenological constitution of "an organism" within human experience, and a sequence of "levels" [*Stufen*] of types of organism, which runs roughly parallel to familiar historical, developmental, and evolutionary sequences, and which records the varying conditions of more or less complexly-mediated forms of life. Plessner describes, compares and contrasts the form of life characteristic of each level [*Stufen*]: plants, lower non-human animals, higher non-human animals, and human beings. The "lower" levels increasingly approximate, and provide conditions for the emergence of, the human form of life. At the end of this analysis, the sequence of stages is seen to anticipate, confirm and explain the phenomenological starting point, so that the double-aspect is seen both as applicable to human beings themselves considered as organic beings, and as an essential and unavoidable dimension of the human experience of organic beings.

Plants and animals

Plessner's approach parallels Aristotle's in *De Anima* – namely, a ranking of

various forms of life on a scale from "lowest" to "highest."[97] In Plessner's account, the "lower" are in a less complexly mediated relationship with their environments than the higher.[98] The human mode of engagements with environments is the most complexly mediated.

Following Uexküll, Plessner characterizes living things in terms of a dynamic, functional relation between their bodies (as delimited by their bodily boundaries [*Grenze*]) and their environments.[99] This dynamic relation he (following Uexküll) calls the life-cycle [*Lebenskreis*].[100] Living things are, according to Uexküll's and Plessner's construal, constitutively dynamically coupled to their surroundings [*Umgebung*] in such a way as to have a lived-environment [*Umwelt*]. Yet Plessner goes beyond Uexküll's analysis in a number of ways. For one, he proposes that there are two different kinds of *Lebenskreis*, that is, two basically different ways of being related to a surrounding environment by way of one's bodily boundaries, corresponding to plant and animal life, respectively. Plessner labels these "open" and "closed" form.[101]

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[97] This procedure also parallels that of Plessner's older contemporary and cofounder of philosophical anthropology, Max Scheler. See Ch. 1.

[98] Plessner doesn't use the term "complexity" and instead describes increasing levels of reflexivity and "boundedness" as one moves from lower to higher on the scale. "Complexity of mediation" is my own gloss on his primary meaning here.

[99] Uexküll 1920 [1926]; Plessner 1928, hereafter by abbreviation (key in the bibliography)

[100] DS, Ch. 5, sect. 1, pp. 185-196; SOBM, Ch. 5, sect. 1, pp. 148-155.

[101] DS, Ch. 5, sects. 5-6, pp. 218-236; SOBM, Ch. 5, sects. 5-6, pp. 172-186. Plessner borrows the distinction between open and closed form from his biological teacher, Hans Driesch, who borrowed the concept (with modifications) from Karl Ernst von Baer. See Driesch 1908, vol. 1, pp. 45-49. For more on

In "open" form, the living thing's boundaries closely parallel the life-sustaining features and processes of its environment. Though the plant has bodily boundaries, and these constitute a point of break between the plant organism and its environment, there is a relatively unbroken relationship between the relevant processes of energy transfer and material transformation going on outside of the organism, in its environment, and those going on inside of the organism itself. A form of life that parallels its environment in this way is classified as an "open form." Plessner offers the following features as evidence and analysis of this "openness" of the plant form: the maintenance of earlier stages within the development of the organism[102]; passive reproductive processes[103]; "autotrophic" nutrition, that is, feeding from the non-living environment directly[104]; fixity of place[105];

Plessner's relationship to Driesch, see Fischer 2009a. For discussion of "closed" and "open" form in Plessner, see Grene 1974, Ch. 18, pp. 320-345.

[102] DS, pp. 220-221; SOBM, pp. 174-5. In the case of animals, earlier phases of morphological development (both in and out of the egg or womb) are typically transformed by later phases. Plessner claims that this allows us to say the animal has really distinct phases of its development: an animal can, at one or another point of its overall life, become "ready" [*fertig*] for new tasks specific to that stage of life. Plants, unlike animals, never reach a point where they are "ready" in this sense (though one might wonder about the bearing of fruit). Relatedly, the so-called "embryonic zones" (von Baer's term) are distributed throughout plants, whereas they only appear in animals in the germ cells. This claim about "embryonic zones" was the central characteristic of the "open form" on Driesch's account. Plessner borrows the point from Driesch, who borrows it from von Baer. See Driesch 1908, vol. 1, pp. 48-49.

[103] "The significance of the kind of reproduction that . . . is dominant in the case of plants is none other than the expression of the sense of passing through, the transitional essence of the open form . . . . Pollen is carried around with the help of the wind or . . . the insects. The color and form of the blossoms, the saccharide of the nectars, the growth of the pollen, and the aromatic material" are constituted so as to attract "the pollen-distributing animals." DS, p. 222; SOBM, p. 175, translation modified. Even reproduction closely parallels (passively) the tendencies and forces in the surrounding environment.

[104] This form of nutrition also requires less internal (organ) differentiation than in the case of animals. "[A]ny differentiation of tissues into consumptive, digestive and excretory organs is cut off." DS, p. 222; SOBM, p. 176

and lack of a "center."[106]

In animals, in contrast, there is an additional break between the animal and the environment. In rough parallel to the features of the open form of plants listed above, Plessner's account of the "closed" form of animals includes the following attributes, which are argued to be distinctive of the "closed" form: a high degree of internal differentiation and distinction among organs; capacities for sensation; capacities for action (self-movement); formation of a "center"[107]; capacity for "having" or "possessing"; neediness, that is, usually being in a regular condition of *non-satisfaction* vis-à-vis one's needs; dependence on the environment for fulfillment of requisite life processes; dependence on *heterotrophic* nutrition.[108]

This "center" mentioned above – which animals have but plants lack – is a simple pre-cursor of what, in the human case, we call a "self." It is the deeper or shallower

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[105] "Most plants live in a fixed spot, which corresponds to the highest possible degree of being built into the surrounding medium." DS, p. 223; SOBM, p. 176, translation modified

[106] "Opening and closing of the blossoms, day and night positions of the petals, orientation of the stem, the roots, to light, to the force of gravity, are *not* mediated in any central zone, from movements going back to impulses of drive or even of will. . . As Hedwig Conrad puts it, all movements go on in plants 'before themselves,' never 'beginning from' the plants; since the open form has no center starting from which impulses of movement – whether instinctive, driven, or voluntary – are possible." DS, p. 223; SOBM, p. 176, translation modified.

[107] DS, Ch. 6, sect. 1, pp. 237-245; SOBM, Ch. 6, sect. 1, pp. 187-193. See esp. DS, p. 241-42; SOBM, p. 90. Plessner intends this idea of a "center" phenomenologically, as a part of our experience of the living animal; thus it cannot be directly identified with the central nervous system. Yet a central nervous system tends, empirically, to be a crucial part of the physiological means by which centeredness is actualized. It is thus like a sign or symptom of the centeredness of the organism that has it.

[108] This amounts to a dependence, for continuance of life, on the consumption of other living things. This in turn suggests, Plessner argues, that life intensifies only at the expense of life. DS, p. 234; SOBM, pp. 184-85.

"inner side" of an animal. This center cannot be identified with the body itself or any part of it. It is "lifted away" from the organism itself:

> [T]he organism accedes to a higher level, which does not lie in the same plane with that occupied by its own body. It is the unity of the body, mediated over the representation of unity of the links, which just for that reason depend upon the central representation. Its body [*Körper*] has become its *living-centered body* [*Leib*], that concrete center [*Mitte*] through which the living subject hangs together with the *surroundings* [*Umfeld*].[109]

Paraphrasing Plessner, we could say that the animals have a "center" to the extent that they (i) are conscious and (ii) have the capacity to learn. That "higher" animals are more centered shows that they stand in a more complexly mediated relationship to their environments than "lower" animals.

This "higher" status on a scale of *reflexivity* or *complexity* of organism-environment interaction is generally marked by the fact that more centralized animals are characterized by the following features: (i) their perception is mediated by a unified field – a "consciousness" – and (ii) their motion in response to environmental conditions is mediated by their histories. There is, as Plessner puts it, a historical reaction-basis [*historischen Reaktionsbasis*] for their behaviors.[110] The historical reaction-basis is simply the function by which present behavior is affected by past events involving the

[109] DS, p. 230-231; SOBM, p. 182, translation modified

[110] See DS, sect. 6-7, pp. 277-287; SOBM, pp. 217-224.

organism – or what might broadly be called "experience."[111] The term refers to any mediation of an organism's behavior by its own past, which, though present in all animal forms of life to some extent, becomes more complex and multi-layered – "mediated" [*vermittelt*] – as one ascends the ranks from "lower" to "higher" animals.[112] The abilities to form habits on the basis of experience, to consciously remember or recall, and – which appears unique to human beings – to inscribe for posterity or engage in an inquiry into events of the past not personally experienced or remembered, would be instances of such a "historical reaction-basis." Conditions (i) and (ii) constitute basic differences between more decentralized or "lower" and more centralized or "higher" types of animal organization (as Plessner labels them).[113]

The ex-centric positionality and the distinctiveness of the human

All animals exhibit "positionality" [*Positionalität*]. The positionality of an animal form of life is, roughly, the characteristic dynamic of its simultaneous relationship to a

[111] Plessner borrows this concept from Driesch. See Driesch 1908, vol. 2, pp. 59-66, and 75-82.

[112] Incidentally, Plessner also recognizes that the organism's relation to its past is mediated by its future-orientation, a point with significance for the theory of action, memory, and history, and resonating with well-known themes of Heidegger 1927.

[113] Regarding the consciousness criterion: the zoologist Adolf Portman was likely thinking of Plessner when he claimed that the intuitive hierarchy of living beings – the justification for which he recognizes as a difficult and controversial problem – could be reconstructed on the basis of the degree of sensibility of the creature in question. Portmann 1964, p. 54: "Though we think we are fairly clear about what we mean by 'higher' and 'lower' forms of life, we should be hard put to it if we were asked to give an exact definition. In fact, every hierarchical decision is an intuitive decision about levels of *sensibility*, i.e. about a given animal's aptness to be affected by external influences. Though sensibility itself is difficult to measure, it can usually be gauged by accompanying factors…" And Portmann 1964, p. 59: "The development of the brain stem is a measure of the general degree of evolution."

surrounding world (the world of things) and to its lived-environment [*Umwelt*]. But only human beings can take a stand in relation to their animal positionality itself; that is, to the shifting boundary between themselves and the world. That they can do this, however, is merely a development of a possibility inherent in the "closed form" common to all animals. A form of animal life is conceivable – and, in higher animals, is actually the case – such that it is aware of parts of itself and distinguishes these from what is not itself. If we then imagine an animal that can become as fully aware of its inner being as it is of any other part of its environment, then it would thereby also be able to extend its awareness to whatever "world" would match its imagined states, which would mean that the "position" of its awareness would not be restricted to its own body. Plessner indeed calls this condition "ex-centric positionality" [*exzentrisch Positionalität*].

According to Plessner, organisms that live the *animal* form of life live out from their bodies. But, short of the ex-centric positionality that distinctively characterizes the human case, they don't know themselves or control themselves. This is because the bodies of non-human animals are not fully reflexive.[114] In order for something to be reflexive, it must be both referrer and referent. But how is this possible in the case of an animal body? In order for an animal body to become reflexive, it would seem that the bodily center from out of which the animal lives must both come apart from itself (so that it can be the referrer, on the one side, and the referent, on the other), yet also, as a center,

[114] "As far as the animal is living-centered body [*Leib*], it is given to itself, related to the positional center; and can take influence from it as the overall body standing in Here-Now, procure physical results from central impulses. However, the overall body [*Gesamtkörper*] has not yet become fully reflexive [*reflexiv*]." DS, p. 288; SOBM, p. 225

remain the same. But if the organism is also *posited* in its center, then it must be able to be posited outside of its center. Yet, again, its being posited at all is conditional on its living out from its own body, as all higher animals do. In this sense, the organism's *body* is said to be reflexive, and the organism exists both centrally (as do all higher animals) and ex-centrically:

> This individuum [that is, this animal organism] is posited in the being posited in its own center, through the In-through of its being, which is mediated [*vermittelten*] to unity. It stands in the center of its standing... In this way, the condition is given making possible the total reflexivity of the living system, that the center of positionality has distance from itself, is lifted away [*abgehoben*] from itself.[115]

Plessner's thesis of the "ex-centric positionality" of human beings may initially sound tenuous and extravagant. But it can plausibly be read as a version of the familiar thesis that human beings differ from non-human animals in being self-conscious. Plessner acknowledges that some non-human animals are conscious of themselves in some limited sense: of their bodies in the same space in which they act, for instance. But they are not conscious of themselves in a manner that would allow them to select among various possible "ways to be."[116] Plessner's unusual formulation of the attribute of self-

[115] DS, p. 290; SOBM, p. 226.

[116] I tend to think humans' and various non-human animal species' type of self-consciousness could be ordered and compared on a spectrum (or a number of spectra), but Plessner usually writes as if he believes human self-consciousness is distinct in kind from all non-human animal self-consciousness.

consciousness as "ex-centric" can be explained by his emphasis on the metaphysics of spatiality and boundaries, particularly in regards to living things, throughout *Die Stufen*, which has certain advantages as a strategy for comparing, contrasting, and analyzing forms of life. Within this framework, the thesis of the ex-centric position of human beings is a logical answer to the question, "How is the self-consciousness of an animal organism possible?" Plessner's answer to this question is, "Only on the condition that it has the capacity to take up a position of consciousness of itself from 'outside' of its own body."

The three worlds and the anthropological ground-laws

There are thus three aspects according to which human beings live: as body [*Körper*], in (and "out from") body [*Leib*], and outside of body, respectively. The last aspect is distinctively human.

> Positionally, there is present a triple fact: the living being is body, is in the body (as inner life, or mentality), and is outside of the body [*ist ... im ... außer*], as the point of view from which it is both. An individuum that is triply characterized positionally in such a way, is called a *person* [*Person*].[117]

Plessner describes the human being as living simultaneously in three "worlds" corresponding to these three aspects: an outer world [*Ausserwelt*], an inner world

[117] DS, p. 293; SOBM, p. 228

[*Innenwelt*], and a mutual world [*Mitwelt*].[118] As noted in the passage above, the distinctively human world of persons is enabled by the unique introduction of the third aspect, that is, the ex-centric point of view. This last is distinctively enabled by the *Mitwelt*, to which corresponds what Plessner calls *Geist* ("culture").

In each of these three worlds, the *Doppelaspekt* between existence *as* body [*Körper*] and existence *in* body [*Leib*] appears in the form of what have long seemed philosophically puzzling dualisms. The *Ausserwelt* is split between a space-time centered in the lived-experience of the organism, and a space-time corresponding to the entire range of "ex-centric" places available to the organism – that is, the "empty" space of classical geometry and physics. Likewise, the human being is aware of its body as something that appears in both space-time frameworks: as both a body which it experientially is and from which it lives [*Leib*] and as a body which occupies an objective, "third-personally" interpreted time and space [*Körper*]. The *Innenwelt* is split between experience as an active, constituting, and as a passive, receptive process. A human being is able to experience its conscious states as passively received, yet alternatively to consciously recall or modify these conscious states, or even to generate new ones as an active power. What's more, each active state is also, from another vantage point, classifiable as passive, and vice versa. The *Mitwelt* is split between self-awareness as individual and unique and awareness of oneself as sharing in generalizable or even universal human experience. A human being is aware of himself as an individual distinct

[118] DS, Ch. 7; SOBM, Ch. 7

from all other individuals, yet also as *like*, and sharing in a common experience with, other individuals.[119] The latter as evidenced in those transpersonal experiences that have been discussed in the philosophical literature under headings of "empathy," "sympathy," and the various forms of linguistic and symbolic mediation ("communication," "translation," "interpretation," and "understanding") that precede and structure the powers of the self; the former is evidenced in the individual's ability, despite this constitutive involvement in transpersonal processes, to cognitively and performatively self-individuate.

Plessner's analysis of the *Ausserwelt*, *Innerwelt*, and *Mitwelt*, if it is correct, explains a number of longstanding philosophical controversies regarding tensions in the interpretation of human experience. These controversies are seen as arising from the double-aspect [*Doppelaspekt*] of animal forms of life and the ambiguity of, and responsibility for, their mediation, in the case of the specifically human ("ex-centric") form of life. The resolution of such controversies takes the form of *specific* choices or positions – that is, specific negotiations or "stand-takings" – within the overall space of possibilities given by that mode of living organization.

Plessner concludes by offering three anthropological ground-laws [*anthropologische Grundgesetze*], each of which is constitutively characteristic of the human form of life. According to the law of natural artificiality [*natürliche*

[119] And potentially like all human individuals, and even non-human animals and non-living things as well. The human being can plausibly be said to have the capacity to "sympathize" with anything and everything, though some things provide greater affordances for such sympathy.

Künstlichkeit], the mediation of human actions by artificial (humanly-made) conditions is "natural" to the human form of life. Humans require such artifactual mediation as a balance to the weight [*Gewicht*] of their existence, that is, their sense of their own incompleteness corresponding to ex-centric awareness. According to the law of mediated immediacy [*vermittelte Unmittelbarkeit*], the complexity of human interaction with environments, mediated as it is by language, past experience, artifacts, and social structure, actually enables a more direct and immediate kind of influence of the human organism on its environment, and vice versa. Finally, according to the law of the "Utopian standpoint" [*utopischen Standorts*], human beings can imaginatively take up a position at any place or time, or even no place or time at all. They are thus always in a state of potential dissatisfaction and uncertainty, but also independence, with respect to their present, bodily circumstances.[120] The human organism's "ex-centricity" entails that it is fundamentally homeless and fundamentally self-alienating. From this perspective, religion is (and, we can expect, always will be) attractive to human beings, insofar as it offers explanatory and evaluative closure to this constitutive homelessness; yet it is also inevitably dubitable, insofar as such closure can always be relativized and called into question.[121]

The "ex-centric position" is closely connected to the highly complex social,

[120] DS, Ch. 7; SOBM, Ch. 7. For discussion and application of these "anthropological ground-laws" [*anthropologische Grundgesetze*], see the final two chapters of Grene 1974; Grene and Eldridge 1992; and Fischer 2009b.

[121] See the discussion of the Utopian standpoint [*Utöpischen Standorts*] in DS, Ch. 7; SOBM, Ch. 7, and the role of religion in "covering over" or "compensating for" this essential homelessness.

linguistic, and artifactual systems that human beings species-typically produce and through which they species-typically carry out their lives. The scope of possibility for navigating or bridging-over the gap between the human's lived-body [*Leib*] and its environment [*Umwelt*, *Welt*] is seemingly infinite. In the expansion of its scope of possibilities of *becoming*, possibilities which exist "for" it, the human organism also becomes aware of *objective* conditions. What is "subjective" for it (its ex-centric freedom) and what is "objective" for it (its responsiveness to a world with a definite, impartial character) keep pace with one another. Human possibilities are only actually, concretely expanded through an expansion of social roles, cognitive contents, artifactual sculptings of its environment, and other mediating factors. The drive to expansion of possibilities, but also the flight from possibility and the reaffirmation of closure (as, for instance, in religion), are themselves possibilities opened by the ex-centric form itself.

Problems with Plessner's view

According to Hans Joas, Plessner's approach is problematically inattuned to sociality and intersubjectivity. In particular, Plessner has neglected the opportunity to trace the origins of the ex-centric position to some special feature of human sociality, a defect that Joas claims G. H. Mead's social psychology can rectify. Joas briefly states this criticism when he writes that Plessner

> correctly focuses on human expressivity as an area of essential importance and performs significant preparatory work for an anthropological founding of hermeneutics. He restricts hermeneutics, however, through the connection of his

> theory with the framework of transcendental phenomenology, inasmuch as he grounds intersubjectivity in the fundamental organic structure of the human being, conceived of as 'ex-centric positionality', rather than arriving at an understanding of human self-reflectivity – which is to be found, Plessner shows, even in 'sensuousness' itself – from the structures of intersubjectivity. What was thereby not achieved in the German tradition [given the problems Joas has noted with Gehlen's and Plessner's accounts, and the lack of any other voice within the tradition that closely treats the same issues] is a theory of the fundamental structure of human sociality that is based in a thoroughgoing way on intersubjectivity and is not apriorist and transcendentalist, that is non-relativist, and draws upon and is consistent with the findings of natural and social science.[122]

My first strategy of response to this criticism is to highlight the ways in which Joas has underestimated the role of material social factors in Plessner's analysis of the ex-centric

[122] Joas 1980 [1985], p. 44. Though I can't address the issue in any detail here, Honneth and Joas 1985 [1988] also criticize Plessner's political philosophy, which emphasizes the significance and value of the distinction between public and private spheres (as in Plessner 1924 [1999]). On Plessner's view, the distinction between society [*Gesellschaft*] and community [*Gemeinschaft*] cannot, and should not, be collapsed such that the ideal or real political body is viewed primarily as a community. This is a matter of what is "natural" for human beings, or what fits and tends to arise out of their species-typical form of life: on Plessner's view, the public sphere, the formation of social roles, and the devices of tact and civility, are "natural" to human beings. According to Honneth and Joas, Plessner's view is a continuation of the tradition of "Bourgeois" individualism: though Plessner recognizes, in various political speeches and other texts on political subjects, that the individualist tradition has led to fascism in Nazi Germany, he is unable to propose any real alternative to this fascism besides a "humanism that is in itself theoretically unfounded" (Honneth and Joas 1985 [1988], p. 90). See Honneth and Joas 1985 [1988], pp. 86-90, and the similar criticisms of Plessner by Esposito 2002 [2011].

position's realization in particular human forms of life. My second is to suggest a reading or reinterpretation of Plessner that would more explicitly meet Joas's demands, at least in part. This supplementation will turn primarily on the construal of language and "culture" [*Geist*, *Kultur*].[123]

For Plessner, self-consciousness arises conjointly with other-consciousness insofar as the ability to see oneself or the world "from outside oneself" is also the ability to see oneself or the world from another's point of view. Plessner's account suggests that human self-consciousness and reason has a constitutively social character. Such is the meaning of his emphasis on the *Mitwelt* and its connection both with *Geist* and personhood. This social character is for Plessner both species-typical, that is, given with the ex-centric form itself, and, in its particular manifestations as a constitutive factor of particular human forms of life, contingent on the concrete social realities that give it its content. In other words: it is both present in all normal human organisms as an inclination and ability, and only shaped into concrete form by the particular circumstances in which the individual human organism lives and develops. The particulars of its life and development are shaped by the historically and culturally contingent particulars of its setting among other human organisms. It is thus neither correct, on Plessner's view, to say that (i) the human, ex-centric form of self-consciousness is wholly dependent (in its existence or in its specific features in any given case) upon its concrete social conditions

[123] In the next chapter, I actually carry out a third part of a larger strategy of response by pointing to the insufficiencies of G. H. Mead's approach to the same problem. (Joas champions Mead's view over Plessner's and Gehlen's.)

or that (ii) concrete human self-consciousness pre-exists or can fully transcend its concrete social setting, through which it is mediated. The human being is essentially ex-centric, essentially social, and essentially self-conscious. These features of the human being are interdependent when viewed in terms of their conditions: they arise together. And the details of their concrete manifestations are as they are, in each case, only because of – or, it might be better to say, through the mediation of – all of these factors.

Thus Plessner writes that "the general 'I' never manifests in its abstract form, but concretely through the mediation [*mittels*] of the first, second, third person."[124] Yet, on the other hand, "[h]umans say to themselves and others, You, He, We – , … [for reasons] due to the structure of their own way of being."[125] And:

> The reality of the *mutual world* [*Mitwelt*] is guaranteed to humans through the ex-centric positional form itself, of themselves. Therefore it is nothing which must first come to consciousness for them on the ground of definite perceptions, although naturally it acquires color and life in the course of experience, at the opportunity of definite perceptions…[126]

This means that, for Plessner, humans are species-typically physiologically and behaviorally prepared for the characteristically human kind of sociality, even while the details of their social life and social consciousness only arise concretely and in context. A parallel point applies to nearly everything Plessner says about the "ex-centric position" in

[124] DS, p. 300; SOBM, p. 234

[125] DS, p. 300; SOBM, p. 234

[126] DS, pp. 301-302; SOBM, p. 235

Die Stufen.[127] In the background of this discussion is a sense of the richness contributed to human life, species-typically, by a variable, artifactually-sculpted environment, including a social environment. This environmental dependence of human life unsurprisingly exhibits continuity with the environmental dependence of all life – plant, animal, and human.

Expression and language

For Plessner, language has its roots in a type of expression possible only for an ex-centric being.[128] There is an "essential connection between ex-centric positional form and [the] expressivity of humans' mode of living."[129] And: "[e]very human naturally recognizes, from his experience, a compulsion to expression, a Must-Express-Oneself, and he derives it from the fact that humans are born for social life. This need to communicate is subject to personal variation."[130] Expression displays the structure of *mediated immediacy* [*vermittelte Unmittelbarkeit*]: whatever one tries to say or do is mediated by the medium (language, circumstances). This constitutively involves a "breaking" of the ray of intention: human expressions, like human intentions more generally, always partially succeed and partially fail. This entails the basic semantic

[127] DS, Ch. 7; SOBM, Ch. 7

[128] This section is based on Plessner's discussion of expressivity and language in DS, pp. 321-341; SOBM, pp. 250-264

[129] DS, p. 323; SOBM, p. 251

[130] DS, p. 323; SOBM, p. 251

structure of human expressions – their divisibility into form and content (or, signifier and signified):

> If the results of an effort, of whatever kind whatsoever, exhibit the character of mediated immediacy, then it is represented somehow as What, as content in a form. The possibility that in the execution of the intention, the What can be lifted away from the How, makes this character plain. Only in this way does the goal of the subject's efforts succeed for him, in the creative act, in a primary contact with reality, and, in *spite* of the disconnection and breaking of the intention in the medium [*der Ablenkung und Brechung der Intention im Medium*], in possibly reaching reality. Indeed, the point aimed for by the efforts never coincides with the endpoint of the realization; in a certain sense, humans never get where they want to go – whether they make a gesture, build a house, or write a book – , however, this disconnection does not thereby make their efforts futile, and deny them fulfillment. The *distance* of the point aimed for by intention from the endpoint of the realization of the intention is just the How, or the form, the type and way of realization.[131]

Thus humans are motivated to renew the expression or intention, to try to say or do again what has so far only imperfectly been said or done. This further entails that expression and the meaningfulness of expression are, in the human case, fundamentally *historical*:

> In expressivity there lies the characteristic motor of the specific historical

[131] DS, p. 337; SOBM, pp. 261-2

> dynamic of human life. Through their action and work, which should give, and *also really gives*, them the balance [*Gleichgewicht*] refused by nature, humans become at the same time further thrown out beyond it, in order to seek it anew, with luck and yet in vain.[132]

For Plessner, expression connects the individual human organism both to its community and to its community's history. Expression arises both from the need for communication and from the need for understanding. Indeed, these needs must be understood to be co-constitutive, insofar as the concrete realization of the ex-centric position depends on the concrete character of its *Mitwelt*, and thus both the concrete forms and concrete contents of expression and understanding are relative to the latter. Yet human expression and understanding always fail to some extent. Why do they fail, and what are the standards of their success? Extending Plessner's analysis beyond his own explicitly-drawn conclusions, we could say that its perfect success would be *total ex-centricity*, that is, total understanding. Success here would give the human being (organism, ex-centric being) access to the entirety of all possible mutual worlds [*Mitwelten*], and thus to understand itself and the world without complication, to be fully open to the world, and to be such that the world is entirely open to its gaze.[133] It would be to be at one with the world in the mode of thought or understanding. But, as Plessner's grounding of human life in its organic and environmental conditions shows, this complete

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[132] DS, p. 339; SOBM, p. 263

[133] To be, in Scheler's term, entirely world-open [*weltöffene*]

revelation of all-to-all is impossible. This is because the disclosure of the world is itself an act, and this act is (like all living processes) subject to the law of mediated immediacy [*vermittelte Unmittelbarkeit*].[134] The criterion of *success* here *is itself* a criterion of adaptability. But no organism is perfectly adapted to its environment.

In summary: For Plessner, all human expression – indeed, all human intention, thought, and action – is constitutively semantic, historical, and social in the ways just described. But language is an especially powerful form of such expression. "Language," writes Plessner, "[is] an expression to the second power."[135] This is because in language the *structure* of mediated immediacy, as a basic form of interaction between an organism and environment, enters "its own element": "In the strange nature of utterance meanings, the ground-structure of mediated immediacy is purified from everything material and seems to be sublimated in its own element."[136] And again:

> Language demands a special place in the stratum of expressive capability . . . [This is] because it gives what expressive capability in general rests upon: the correspondence between the structure of immanence and the structure of reality – both zones represent mediated immediacy [*vermittelter Unmittelbarkeit*], and between both the relation of mediated immediacy dominates – explicitly. It makes

[134] This is also an indication of why Plessner, in his political writings, is suspicious of ideals of "community" [*Gemeinschaft*] that would overcome or substitute for "society" [*Gesellschaft*]: the latter is necessary by virtue of the inevitable failure of understanding and communication that always characterizes human social life to some extent and in some way. See Plessner 1924 [1999].

[135] DS, p. 340; SOBM, p. 263

[136] DS, p. 340; SOBM, p. 264

> the expressive *behavior* of humans, in which they live with the world, into an object of expression. It is possible, not only on the ground of the situation of immanence, the doubled distance of the person-center [*Personzentrums*] from the living-centered body [*Leib*]; but also, due to the ex-centricity of this center, it expresses this situation in relation to reality. The ex-centric center of the person, the accomplishing middle of the so-called "cultural" [*"geistigen"*] act, can, just through its ex-centricity, *express* the *reality* which "corresponds" to the ex-centric position of humans.[137]

Thus language enables the coming-to-(collective)-consciousness-of-itself of the position of human beings *vis-à-vis* their environment. It enables the *expression* of their relationship to the world, including the (particular) position in which one or another of these expressing-expressed beings – *persons* – stands.

That the grammar and vocabulary of human languages are diverse, variable, and historically contingent is rooted in the essence (the nature, *Wesen*) of language itself, understand as "expression raised to the second power." Plessner stresses the importance of this point, as well as the symptomatic quality of all failures to recognize it, when he writes:

> [T]he law of expressivity, which underlies the person's every living excitation demanding fulfillment, is maintained in language: there is no language, but rather

[137] DS, pp. 339-340; SOBM, p. 263. One might compare this emphasis on the significance of language's ability to describe human behavior and articulate its meaning explicitly to Brandom's well-known project of deriving the semantic content of human expressions from human practices, as in Brandom 1994.

> languages. The unity of intention is held only in the fragmentation into different idioms . . . . [O]ne should weigh the proposition that all searching for an Ur-language [*Ursprache*] is condemned to failure, and not only on empirical grounds. It betrays a lack of knowledge of the laws of concretion and objectification of culture [*Geistes*], which transpose the intention lying over beyond all restraining form only when in the process of objectification it "*happens on*" a form (and indeed one not necessary in itself).[138]

More succinctly put, the problem is simply that "[*a*] language [as opposed to *languages* – those shifting, plastic, variable and various things] – could say nothing."[139] Language is not only intrinsically social, but it is also artifactual and historically-contingent.[140]

Gehlen's Philosophical Anthropology in Outline

Gehlen's approach in *Der Mensch* is both systematic and empirical. He presents three separate arguments, largely inductive, in favor of his understanding of the human "place in nature." His overall perspective on the latter question comes to light in the course of the reflections and reports of evidence that constitute these three arguments, whose themes are human physiology and evolutionary history (Part 1); the development of motor, communicative, and cognitive abilities within human post-natal ontogenesis, particularly in childhood (Part 2); and human impulses, desires, and other normative

[138] DS, p. 341; SOBM, p. 264

[139] DS, p. 341; SOBM, p. 264

[140] For a critical comparison between Plessner and Mead on these issues and others, see Ch. 3 below.

structures, as well as the role of institutions in the formation of these structures (Part 3).[141]

The undetermined animal

In Part 1 of *Der Mensch*, Gehlen suggests that the human being may be defined as the "not yet determined animal" [*noch nicht festgestellte Tier*].[142] And he sees evidence of this *unfestgestellte* character in human physiology and development. The range of possible human movements is greater than that of other primates, a feature supported by their upright posture, manual dexterity, and (of course) brain size.[143] Gehlen follows the anatomists Louis Bolk and Adolf Portmann in entertaining the thesis that human beings are born in a less developed and less specialized state than the newborns of other primates: thus they may be said to be born sooner than other primates, or even prematurely.[144] The first year of their extra-uterine life serves as a sort of second womb, wherein social, environmental and linguistic factors contribute to the paths taken by their

[141] Gehlen 1940. In the first and shortest of the four divisions of *Der Mensch*, the "Introduction," Gehlen provides an overview of the entire argument of that text, as well as an indication of his methodological commitments. The summary that follows is based primarily on this introduction, with supplements from the body of the work (Parts 1-3). Gehlen published the first edition of his *Der Mensch* in 1940, but the text underwent numerous subsequent editions, sometimes with significant revisions. Here I'll use the latest edition.

[142] DM, p. 10; MNP, p. 4. Gehlen borrows the term from Nietzsche

[143] DM, sect. 13, pp. 131-140; MNP, pp. 119-128

[144] DM, pp. 101-123; MNP, pp. 93-109; see also Bolk 1926 and Portmann 1944 [1990]. Interestingly, Bolk's version of the thesis was subsequently (independently) explored by Stephen Jay Gould. See Gould 1977.

physiological development and their formation of habits and skills. Their relative hairlessness, and the relatively large head-to-body ratio, when compared to other primates (and certainly to other mammals in general), suggests that the evolution of their developmental pattern has involved what Bolk calls "retardation"– that is, a trend toward a lengthening of earlier phases of embryonic development. (Such "retardation" or "embryolization" is similarly observable in some animals bred for domestication as pets.) This *unfestgestellte* character of human life suggests to Gehlen that the nearly universal social and institutional mediation of human life-processes is not just a miraculous supplement to an otherwise natural form of life, but an integral, natural feature of that form of life itself.[145] The human form of life is not naturally specialized to any one environment, but rather can behaviorally "adapt" to any environment through its own bodily plasticity and the enabling support of historically and geographically local – and thus, in many of their concrete characteristics, not species-typical – institutions. Through the formation of habits, thoughts, and language, via discipline [*Zucht*] and the building of character [*Charakter*], and with the aid of institutions [*Institutionen*] that provide a framework for formation of such skills and character, the disruptive, destabilizing effects of this indeterminacy are annulled – indeed, in a way, turned into an advantage.[146]

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[145] By "natural" I mean "species-typical." See the footnote about the term "natural" in my Introduction, above.

[146] Here Gehlen may have been influenced by Plessner's similar claim that, for human beings, the mediation [*Vermittlung*] of perception and action by artificial [*künstlich*] conditions is a natural condition of their species-specific form of life –that is, what Plessner had called the "natural artificiality" [*natürlichen Künstlichkeit*] of human beings. See DS, pp. 309-321; SOBM, pp. 240-249.

Gehlen's thesis treats the plasticity and variability of human beings as among their "essential," species-typical attributes. If human beings are accurately understood in their biological nature, then, *contra* the views of biological determinists, certain "essentialist" ways of approaching them will be ruled out as inappropriate. This point has not been lost on social scientists directly influenced by Gehlen's work.[147] Yet, at the same time, the perspective begins from the assumption that human beings are animals, to which at least some of the biological sciences apply. Thus, unlike in some radical constructionist views, Gehlen does not deny that human beings are animals – "natural" or "biological" beings – and that their possibilities are mediated by the physical conditions of their bodies (as are today studied by such fields as genomics and neuroscience) and by their natural histories (as evolutionary biology and paleoanthropology try to reconstruct), though the precise extent, type, and content of these mediations remains (of course) a matter of uncertainty and controversy.

The law of relief [*Entlastungsgesetz*]

In Part 2 of *Der Mensch,* Gehlen offers a reconstruction of important stages of human post-natal ontogenesis, particularly in childhood. His reconstruction attempts to account for the acquisition of complex motor, communicative, and cognitive abilities (in that order) in the developmental process. His account highlights the way in which these abilities differ from those of non-human animals, and, interwoven with his fairly detailed

[147] For instance: Berger and Luckmann 1966

analysis of particular moments within the developmental process as he describes it, he traces his conclusions back to a fundamental ordering hypothesis: that each of these abilities, as manifest in the human case, may be understood to follow the principles of a single "structural law" [*Strukturgesetz*] characteristic of human life itself:

> [M]an's difference from animals may lie in an all-pervasive structural law; in other words, the 'style' or form of his movements, actions, sound articulation, intelligence, drives might be fundamentally different from those of animals. I intend here to pursue this line of reasoning, which will prove to be impossible to refute if a structural law can be identified that governs all human functions from the physical to the intellectual. The difference can no longer be seen as resting solely with the mind but instead is equally evident in all physical movements.[148]

This "structural law" is the law of relief [*Entlastungsgesetz*].[149] In each case of its manifestation, relief [*Entlastung*] involves a transition from a troublingly infinite potentiality of movement, perception, expression, and thought, in the biologically-given human case, to a contingent actualization of a specific subset of such powers of motion, perception, expression, and thought within particular human lives and actions. In very broad outline, Gehlen's argument in Part 2 is that this law is manifest in the very earliest stages of human development, in the formation of pre-linguistic motor and perceptual skills, and that the development of these skills naturally issue (in species-typical human

[148] DM, sect. 2, p. 22; MNP, p. 16

[149] DM, sect. 8, pp. 62-73, and *passim*; MNP, pp. 54-64

development) in the acquisition of language, which then transforms and raises to a new level of power the same structural law present in the pre-linguistic case. Finally, language enables what is called "thought," which in turn enables and becomes an integrated part of complex forms of perception and action.

According to Gehlen, the acquisition and employment of language are also instances of this general "structural law" [*Strukturgesetz*] – the law of relief [*Entlastungsgesetz*] – that characterizes the human form of life. What is distinctive of the human species is that this relief [*Entlastung*] is necessary for their survival.[150] The fundamental feature of processes of relief is that they take a condition of overstimulation, or over-burdening, and reduce its import or demand upon the human organism by selecting points of focus that collect a wealth of information or type of stimulation under a single pattern of recognition or response.[151] For example: Gehlen notes that, when a child learns how to look for and find a single object, he or she has collected the wealth of sensory stimulation into a set of discrete, relevant points of perceptual focus, such as the object (which must be present to her mind only in imagination [*Phantasie*]) and barriers beyond which the object might reside (such as walls, cups under which the object may be hidden, and so on). "[A] study of the structure of skills reveals that these inevitably

[150] It might be wondered here whether relief is ever possible for non-human animals, even if it is not species-typical for them. I would say some non-human animal learning processes exhibit features of "relief" in Gehlen's sense. What Gehlen would say about this, I'm not sure.

[151] DM, p. 36; MNP, p. 28

involve an integration of perception and action to form an ability."[152] Furthermore, "[u]nder special, highly developed social conditions [*besonders, hoch entwickelten sozialen Bedingungen*], the action aspect may be abbreviated to symbols."[153] While Gehlen does not discuss these "social conditions" in detail in Part 2 (and only briefly discusses them further in Part 3), it is clear he has in mind the relieving function of a human language, itself composed largely of symbols, and dependent in its existence and in its concrete character on common practices, history, and educational and other institutions.

In playing the game described above, the child is already relieved [*entlastelt*] of what would otherwise be a burden of stimulation – an undifferentiated experience, all of which calls for attention, but none of which is mastered. The game is itself a crystallization of multiple processes of relief, or what Gehlen calls *discipline* [*Zucht*].[154] Every discipline is both an ordering of some part of one's bodily self (say, one's bodily movements, one's attention, or one's bodily and verbal and cognitive "reactions") and of some dimension of the environment:

> All human actions are twofold: first, man actively masters the world around him by transforming it to serve his purposes. Second, to accomplish this, he draws upon a highly complex hierarchy of skills and establishes within himself a

[152] DM, p. 62; MNP, p. 54

[153] DM, p. 62; MNP, p. 54, translation modified. While Gehlen, at least in later editions of *Der Mensch*, explicitly acknowledged the importance of these "certain social conditions," his treatment of them remains sparse at best. This criticism is made by Honneth and Joas 1985 [1988], discussed further below.

[154] DM, sect. 7, pp. 57-61; MNP, pp. 49-53

> developmental order of abilities; this order is based on potential usefulness of the skills and must be constructed singlehandedly by man, sometimes overcoming internal resistance to do so.[155]

In order to survive, the human being must make itself competent to survive: in this sense, it must be a "creature of discipline" [*Zuchtwesen*].[156] Thus, according to Gehlen, the mastery over themselves or the world that is manifested in discipline is something humans seek almost instinctively, and which they seem to enjoy for its own sake. The human being has an inclination to achieve this mastery or discipline (and thereby "relief," a kind of freedom), but this inclination is not pre- predisposed in any particular direction. It is a generalized "will" to discipline that propels the organism towards a more relieved state – a state wherein its relations to its environment have been freed of their brute, imposed, impenetrable, and oppressive character, and instead made open, adventurous, undetermined, and free.

The kind of organism-environment interaction that Gehlen summarizes under the concept of relief can itself be applied to results of prior processes of the same type. And, once a certain kind of movement is mastered, it may be transformed in an unlimited number of ways – for instance: freely combined with other movements, stopped midstream, reversed, or incorporated into larger conscious-intentional or habitual

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[155] DM, p. 37; MNP, p. 29. Here Gehlen may be influenced by Nietzsche's views on the malleable "order of rank" of human drives and the institutional and historical factors that shape and support one such order of rank or another. See Nietzsche 1886 [1966].

[156] DM, p. 61; MNP, p. 52

projects. Thus the concept of relief is taken by Gehlen to provide a framework for understanding the complexity and inter-dependence of nearly every attribute of human life and behavior – language, habits of movement, perception, impulse [*Antriebe*] or desire, and participation in institutions – in the abundant variety of their concrete manifestations.

Processes of relief are not, for Gehlen, intrinsically individual. Relief is rather a type of process that occurs at many levels and in many ways within human life. It is something that human physiology already bears witness to the centrality of, particularly in that physiology's characteristic features: *upright*, *physiologically plastic*, *encephalitic* (that is, large-brained), and *manual* (that is, with hands capable of grasping and transforming its surroundings). Structures of relief can be seen in the relation of society to its individual members as well. The Buddha, for example, relies on such a process of relief to make possible the existence of the position he occupies, including his nourishment, shelter, and freedom from direct responsibility for acquiring and sustaining these:

> [E]ven a contemplative charismatic like Buddha seeks not only revelation but also another form of living; he does not renounce communication, even if it is only of a nonverbal, symbolic nature, and he requires two things from the society of which he is a part; first, that society support such behavior as a higher ability, and second that society absolve such mystics from doing basic work by taking it on

itself.[157]

In fact, there is a "natural" inclination of human beings to push the processes of relief as far as they will go, insofar as this disburdens them of the excess of impulses. Thus, once a society's basic needs are met, if not before, social resources are poured into the cultivation of what is more than vitally necessary:

> [A]ll the energy and emotion liberated by the trivialization of the habitual gratification of biological needs are now directed toward these cultural achievements [*Kulturleistungen*]. How else can we explain the great passion in all early cultures [*Frühkulturen*] for the construction of artificial forms [*künstlich Gestalten*] as, for example, in rituals of magic, despite the obviously doubtful rate of empirical success? Clearly, these are so stubbornly retained because they have a higher gratification value for great amounts of energy, which are freed by the habitualization and trivialization of basic need gratification and can then be channeled into the *liberated* intellectual and motor functions.[158]

Many of the processes of relief Gehlen describes are like those above in being intrinsically social. And they often rely on *institutions* [*Institutionen*], either constitutively or causally. From this perspective, fashion, currency, religious ritual and tradition, marriage, property, the artworld, academic disciplines, research traditions, medicine, and rule of law would count as specialized processes of relief. In each case, the

[157] DM, p. 62; MNP, p. 54

[158] DM, pp. 66-67; MNP, p. 58

burden of human beings' total excess of impulses, awareness, and agential potency is dealt with through a narrowing of the points of focus – a setting of a standard of *relevance* – which organizes human experience and action.[159]

These processes are, as just noted, constitutively socially mediated in nearly every case. The institutions have most of their characteristic effects on human beings through human behavioral "incorporation" of the order inscribed in the institutional pattern of relief in question. According to Gehlen, all sustained future-directed action relies on some correlation of "internal," personal and "external," institutionally-maintained standards:

> Higher needs grow from inhibited ones; these 'enduring interests' [*„Dauerinteressen "*] sustain action into the future and, in contrast to the changeable needs of the present, remain internalized [*„innen bleiben "*]. They are always the subjective correlates of objective institutions.[160]

> [In order for human beings to survive,] enduring interests must … be cultivated, oriented, and retained and must remain conscious as inner invariants which control and outlast any changes in activities and circumstances of the present. Organizing this architectonic and well-ordered system of impulses is one of the problems man faces, perhaps even the most difficult one. Testament to this is

[159] DM, p. 31-40 and *passim*; MNP, p. 24-31.

[160] DM, p. 56; MNP, pp. 47-48

> provided by the often very limited stability of institutions, only through which or beyond which [*über die hinweg oder durch die hindurch*] this organization can be carried out.[161]

The roots of language [*Sprachwurzeln]*

The continuity of language with the remainder of the human form of life, including the sorts of processes of relief just described, should now be clear. For Gehlen, language is a form of relief [*Entlastung*], and it arises (in species-typical human development) directly following upon, and in conjunction with, certain pre-linguistic sensory and motor processes of relief. In this sense, no special or unique physiologically-rooted ability is required, beyond whatever sub-serves the sensory-motor processes that precede and parallel language learning, in order to explain the origin of the specifically human form of animal communication called language. Gehlen then emphasizes how this new ability enables the previously developing abilities to be expanded in new directions. These specifically *linguistically-enabled* (or, we might say, "constitutively linguistically mediated") human powers include the following:

> 1. *Greater achievement of (what Gehlen calls) "overview"* [*Übersehen*]: "It is possible to concentrate in symbols even that which is removed from direct experience [*unmittelbaren Bewegungskommunikation*] and thereby gain an

[161] DM, p. 56; MNP, p. 48, translation modified

overview [*übersehbar*] of it.[162]

2. *Achievement of "pure theory," that is, "theoretical behavior"* [*theoretischen Verhaltens*]: "[A] form of active behavior becomes possible that extends beyond direct interaction with the surroundings. This does not actually change objects, but in fact leaves them untouched."[163]

3. *Freedom of intentional states from the actual presence of their intentional objects*: "[T]o the extent that these sound movements can express an intention toward things, such intentions may be independent from the actual presence of the things or situations represented through symbols… This is the basis for 'imagination' [*„Vorstellens"*]… As Schopenhauer once said, through language, man acquires an overview [*Übersicht*] of the past and future as well as of that which is absent."[164]

4. *Ability to intend and communicate actions and forms of action, independently from concrete actions*: "[A]ny movement or action can be intended through language along with the subject it concerns, and can accordingly be represented through symbols and communicated independently of the actual situation."[165]

5. *Communication of intentions, which allows "entering into" the worlds of others*: "[L]anguage allows man to *communicate* intentions, whereby he is

[162] DM, p. 49; MNP, p. 41

[163] DM, p. 49; MNP, p. 41

[164] DM, pp. 49-50; MNP, p. 41, translation modified

[165] DM, p. 50; MNP, p. 42

directly *freed from his own realm of experiences* and becomes able to act based on *those of others*."[166]

In the later sections of Part 2, Gehlen discusses and analyzes how language enables a number of other specially-human powers, particularly thought. Linguistically-mediated cognition enables the development a more finely ordered conception of the world; of a freedom of thought by way of creative production of, and subsequent selection from, a variety of systems of classification of objects; and the modeling of past, future, and merely possible situations within imagination [*Phantasie*].[167] These abilities enable development of finer powers of both perceptual and active (motor) relief. In every case, Gehlen emphasizes the close connection between the new cognitive powers undergirded by the form of relief characteristic of mastery of a language, on the one hand, and the ever-present problematic (for the human organism) of effective *action*, on the other.

Impulses [*Antriebe*] and institutions

In Part 3 of *Der Mensch*, Gehlen discusses the structure of human impulses [*Antriebe*][168], the formation of character [*Charakter*][169], and institutions and "culture"

[166] DM, p. 50; MNP, p. 42

[167] DM, pp. 240-266; MNP, pp. 230-259

[168] DM, Chs. 38-42, pp. 327-369; MNP, Chs. 38-42, pp. 321-364

[169] DM, Ch. 43, pp. 370-381; MNP, Ch. 43, pp. 365-376.

[*Geist*] as these relate to the main themes of the text so far.[170] Regarding human motivation, Gehlen is especially concerned to show that human impulses [*Antriebe*] are not instincts [*Instinkts*] or drives [*Triebe*], and thus are not species-typical (as are the instincts or drives of non-human animals). Unlike in non-human animal cases, human impulses are "excessive" – that is, they extend in many directions at once, a feature that corresponds to lack of environmental specification – and there is thus no limit or structure to these impulses apart from whatever is imposed upon them by discipline [*Zucht*]. As noted above, discipline is a process that involves both the action of the body and the structuring role of institutions. Gehlen suggests three mechanisms that are especially important to understanding human impulses in their relation to, and distinction from, animal instincts: the reduction of instincts (that is, in the human case as compared to the non-human animal), residual instincts (that is, instincts that survive this "reduction"), and "dedifferentiation."[171] The last term refers to cases where instincts, drives, or impulses are "redirected." Freudian sublimation describes one kind of dedifferentiation, but the shift of psychic motive power from one object to another through the combined effects of

[170] DM, Ch. 44, pp. 381-404; MNP, Ch. 44, pp. 377-400. This section underwent significant revisions between earlier and later editions of the book. Gehlen discusses these changes in the section itself. The earlier version appealed to something he called "the highest directing systems." [*Oberste Führungssysteme*]. The later version sought to analyze the functions earlier ascribed to these "highest directing systems" (namely, to order human social and individual life) in a more nuanced way. Gehlen acknowledges that the theme of *Geist* is not fully accessible to the analytical standpoint adopted in his text, since that standpoint only seeks to shed light on the behavioral, physiological, developmental, and evolutionary dimensions of human nature through articulation of categories that are simultaneously empirically sound and philosophically coherent. The sphere of *Geist* includes aspects that exceed the resources of an inquiry focused primarily on establishing terms of translation between philosophy and biology.

[171] DM, Ch. 38, pp. 327-332; MNP, Ch. 38, pp. 320-326

what might otherwise be divergent active interests is a more general phenomenon than sublimation theory alone suggests.

"Character" results from the development and maintenance of an ordered set of impulses that is well-matched to the situation within which the human organism's life is carried out.[172] Such ordered sets of impulses, including the specific features of the impulses themselves, are non-species-typical and are contingent on the experiential history of the individual human organism. Cases where social and environmental situations change, so that already-formed characters are no longer effective, pose a particular kind of tragedy for human lives, a tragedy nowhere more evident than in the rapidly changing situation of modern societies.[173]

In the final section of the book, Gehlen addresses the theme of *Geist*.[174] Regarding the study of *geistlich* structures, Gehlen emphasizes the advantages of an historical approach over an idealistic or materialistically-reductive sociological approach, as, among these three, only a historical approach can mediate between the "essential" structures of values and thoughts (donated by these "highest directing systems," or, in the language of the later version, by institutions) and their material and social conditions. Gehlen further argues that the most common ways of interpreting *geistlich* structures today (whether in theoretical study of them or in participation) are ineffective for

[172] By "well-matched" I mean, such that it facilitates satisfaction of needs, with survival as the most basic of these needs.

[173] Gehlen explored this theme further in later works, such as Gehlen 1957 [1980].

[174] *Geist* here might be translated as "culture," "mind" (as in "the Babylonian mind") or "spirit" (as in, "the spirit of the Egyptians"). In MNP, it is misleading translated simply as "mind."

founding and maintaining institutions that can effectively guide human life. In other words, *Geist* itself is in crisis, and only the right approach to institutions can carry us through this crisis. The approaches that are common but unworkable are the historical-psychological and the instrumental-technical: the approach to institutions as ideologies or contingent learned behaviors, on the one hand, and the approach to institutions as entities to be used, on the other. In contrast to these, Gehlen seeks to articulate a third, less commonly recognized, but extremely important (historically and perhaps for the future) type of approach to institutions, which he calls *ideational*. This approach actually founds new value-differentials and systems of behavior that turn out, "secondarily" – that is, without such success being anticipated – to be beneficial for human survival. Gehlen closes his text by discussing one historically-important example of such an ideational institution: namely, animal totemism.[175]

Problems with Gehlen's view

According to Hans Joas, the main problem with Gehlen's views, as with those of Plessner's, is that these underestimate the intersubjective conditions of human action. Joas writes that "Gehlen's anthropology suffers generally from an inadequate notion of intersubjectivity."[176] And: "the substantial deficiencies of [Gehlen's] theory of language, conceptions of perception, ethics, and theory of institutions can be accounted for by the

[175] DS, pp. 394-404; MNP, pp. 390-400

[176] Joas 1980 [1985], p. 44

politically motivated rejection of democratic intersubjectivity."[177] In a later work, Joas develops another line of criticism against Gehlen's view by arguing that the fundamental and constitutive *creativity* of human action does not come into view for a theory like Gehlen's that treats the actor as in constant *danger* (through "overburdening") from the open-endedness of his or her possibilities themselves.[178] Relatedly, Joas takes issue with Gehlen's construal of instinct in animals, and thus also with the specification of what is common or different between human and animal instincts. According to Joas's account there, Gehlen's theory of instinct

> obscures the fact that there are differences in the various stages of the development of animal behavior and animal learning and it exaggerates the degree to which animal behavior is characterized by rigidity, inability to learn and pre-programming. Ethological research shows that the simple notion of rigid links between stimuli and instinctive responses is no longer valid in the case of organisms that possess a central nervous system. Even prior to that stage of biological complexity, the stimulus-response schema is inappropriate, for it does not correspond to the complexity of congenital coordinated movements…[179]
>
> In other words, the creativity of human action does after all have precursors in animal behavior and it cannot be understood without this pre-history. But it was the 'breaking of the instincts' in the transition from animal to

[177] Joas 1980 [1985], p. 44

[178] Joas 1992 [1996], pp. 172-74.

[179] Joas 1992 [1996], p. 174

> human being that first created the precondition for a gradual and individual transition from exploitation of the scope left by the genetic programming of behavior to the 'constructive self-control' (as Piaget termed it) of extensive domains of action. Therefore Gehlen is wrong to suggest that rigid institutions must take up where rigid instincts left off. Instead, intelligence and creativity ensue from the emerging behavioral scope that already existed in instinct-based behavioral control. The pre-reflective intentionality of the human body is thus not some residue of animal behavior, upon which some pure intellectuality is superimposed, but is in fact the structure of the relation between organism and environment that is typical for human beings. The assumptions of action theory are built on quicksand if they do not match our knowledge of this structure.[180]

In other words, according to Joas, Gehlen construes animal instincts overly rigidly. This leads to a misunderstanding of both human and animal behavior, and the supposition that human beings need rigid institutions in order to survive and flourish.

Does Gehlen neglect social factors in human development, or fail to appreciate the intersubjective character of that development, as Joas' first objection states? It is true that Gehlen only begins to analyze the many ways in which the processes he describes – human evolutionary history, development of motor abilities and habits in childhood, acquisition of language, perception and thought, and motivation – are mediated by social entities, events, and structures. Gehlen recognizes that these are socially mediated, as his

[180] Joas 1996, p. 175

categories of institutions and of *Geist* indicate, but he doesn't say much about how. In this sense, Joas' claim that Mead's approach can effectively supplement or substitute for Gehlen's is suggestive, but there are significant problems with Mead's approach as well.[181]

Regarding Gehlen's decision to focus on the development of the human individual, I think he can hardly be faulted. Gehlen described his "individualist" approach as a kind of shorthand and topical analysis, and gave some indication – in the discussions of institution, *Geist*, and elsewhere – of the paths of inquiry that would be required to supplement that analysis. It is as if Gehlen takes a methodological path that is the reverse of Socrates in the *Republic*: he will seek to understand the main components of the human form of life in both the individual and the collective case by first getting clear about the way those components manifest and operate in the individual case alone. But a conception of the potential social, institutional and environmental frameworks within which the development takes place is implicit throughout. The choice of perspective is not inherently problematic: a philosophical anthropology is not and does not need to be a philosophical sociology or a social psychology, even if it requires the contents and interpretive commitments worked out in the latter fields to answer some of its questions.[182]

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[181] Discussed in Ch. 3 below.

[182] Gehlen often expresses the human being's relationship to its environment as one of "creating the conditions of its survival." For instance: "[S]imply getting by poses great problems which he must face alone and solve through his own efforts… Since man is obviously able to survive, it logically follows that the necessary conditions for solving his problems must lie within himself" (DM, p. 36; MNP, p. 28). And:

What about the charge that Gehlen's account of the danger of excessive impulses, and of the need for an analogue of the rigid animal instincts within human forms of life, closes his theory to appreciation of the scope of possibility for creativity in human affairs? Joas's identification and development of "creativity" as an especially useful, and historically undervalued, concept for the description and understanding of social action, does indeed give us a different and compelling perspective on many of Gehlen's themes.[183] It does seem that Gehlen's emphases on needs, the danger – in the absence of discipline – of an overburdening of human lives by the excess of impulses, and the constitutive human need for institutional frameworks that provide opportunities for such discipline as a safeguard against the danger of overburdening, produce an image of the human form of life that privileges categories of danger, lack, and bare survival, at the expense of "positive" categories such as creativity and expansion-of-life.[184] And this in

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"Man is incapable of surviving in truly natural and primitive conditions because of his organic primitiveness and lack of natural means. He must make up for this loss of means on his own by actively transforming the world to suit his own ends" (DM, p. 37, MNP, p. 29). But it is obviously extraordinarily rare, if not impossible, for a human individual to literally wholly create the conditions of her survival on her own. In any species-typical human case, these conditions have already been created by other humans and are being sustained in some form by the everyday activities of those humans. But Gehlen is not so stupid as to make a mistake of this kind; his dictum that "the human being must create the conditions of its own survival" is not meant to contradict such an obvious truth, but rather as a claim about what is or is not given to human beings *by virtue of being members of the human species*. It is just a way of saying that humans must cultivate non-species-typical skills, suited to local environments, in order to survive.

[183] Joas 1996, pp. 1-6, 196-258, and especially pp. 243-244, wherein Joas proposes that the instrumentally-rational social, political, and technological processes characteristic of modernity and modernization be further democratized – that is, that human selves and societies take a more creative approach to their social systems. Joas calls this a "democratization" of the "differentiation" question. ("Differentiation" in this context refers, roughly, to various patterns of social, technological, and institutional transformation apparently necessitated by modernization.)

[184] See Esposito 2002 [2011] for similar criticisms.

turn supports conviction of the importance of the stability of institutions, if basic human needs are to be met. Concern for the deleterious effects of destabilizing current institutions is, of course, a familiar conservative trope. But the relativity of such institutions to local conditions – a conclusion I do not see Gehlen eliding, despite his rejection of the "psychological-historical" approach to the interpretation of institutions – does not fit well with traditional conservativisms. Furthermore, a view that emphasized creativity and the expansion-of-life without any concern at all for protection from danger and satisfaction of needs would be equally, if not more problematic than Gehlen's.[185] The ideal distribution of liberalization and conservation of institutions is unlikely adequately decidable by theoretical considerations alone.

Conclusion and transition to later chapters

We've now considered all three of the classical philosophical anthropologists, focusing on their accounts of the human being as, in some ways, an organism like other organisms, while in others, unlike other organisms. We saw that classical philosophical anthropology's account of the human "place in the world" or "place in nature" [*Stellung im Kosmos*; *Stellung in der Natur*] proceeded uniquely – in comparison with nearly all of the prior systematic philosophical tradition – by classification of the human being as animal, yet also as more-than-animal; hence, as both subject of biological sciences (narrowly construed) and as more-than-biological [*übervitaler*], without establishing this

[185] Again, compare Esposito 2002 [2011].

distinction dualistically. And we suggested that, whatever the original intentions of the philosophical anthropologists, the strongest contemporary construal of their project is the one that treats the role of "culture" [*Geist*, *Bildung*, *Kultur*] within biologically "natural" human forms of life as the primary distinguishing factor between human and non-human animal forms of life. In Scheler's discussion of "spirit" [*Geist*] as the enabling condition of the human being's independence of any species-typical manner of relation to an environment [*Umwelt*], or "world-openness" [*Weltöffenheit*]; in Plessner's discussion of the "natural artificiality" [*natürlichen Künstlichkeit*] of human beings and the "mediated immediacy" [*vermittelte Unmittelbarkeit*] characteristic of the human relationship to environments and to one another in action, perception, and expression; and in Gehlen's discussion of the human being as a "being of discipline" [*Zuchtwesen*] in need of historically contingent institutional frameworks for survival and flourishing – in each of these cases we confronted a systematic construal of the human person or self as fundamentally both animal and cultural.

Classical philosophical anthropology thus offers promising theoretical resources in the philosophy of *nature*, *culture*, and *selfhood*. But how are these latter categories ultimately to be understood on the basis of these resources? How are these categories related, and in what ways do the various entities and forces highlighted by them appear and operate within human forms of life? Finally, what does a fuller understanding of such factors and their relations promise to teach us about ourselves and our "place in the world" more generally? In the second part of this document – Chapters 3 and 4 – I want

to follow the lead of the classical philosophical anthropologists by addressing these questions directly within a contemporary philosophical context.

CHAPTER 3

HUMAN SELVES

Introduction

Human action, including human understanding, is typically mediated by and, in its various forms, constitutively enabled by historically-contingent artifactual conditions. By "historically-contingent artifactual" conditions, I mean those that are created through the action of organisms (that is, are artifacts), yet not created in a species-typical way, but rather rely, in their concrete character, on details of the non-species-typical behavior of prior and present generations (that is, are due to contingent histories). This historically-contingent artifactual mediation of the human form of life extends to nearly every domain of human individual and collective action, including the arts, religious practice, and political organization, as well as to nearly every domain in which human mental activity is involved, including reflection, deliberation, self-conception, and scientific inquiry and classification. The mediating linguistic, social, technological, and symbolic processes and systems, and their histories, thus become important factors in the support and constitution of human action and the content of human understanding. The ubiquity and flexibility of these systems themselves – features supported both by their historical and social nature and by the creativity of human action[186] – in turn enables the opening up of a dynamics of dual veiling and unveiling, or, a historically alterable, locally non-infinite but generally

[186] Joas 1996

non-finite (that is, potentially infinitely extendable) horizon of human understanding and human agential possibility.[187] This dynamic, arising from the confluence of special physiological capabilities and historically-contingent artifactual conditions, is species-typical of human organisms, but extremely rare or non-existent in non-human animal cases. The distinctive powers of human organisms in species-typical cases – self-reflection and self-criticism, imagination, and practical, technological, and theoretical innovation – emerge from this dynamic and only on its basis.

This picture of human life and the systems and processes by which it is mediated, if correct, has implications for various aspects of recent theories of human selfhood, self-consciousness, other-consciousness, normativity and rationality.[188] Confirmation of this dually finite-infinite structure of human possibility, that is, its horizonal character, and the causal and constitutive rootedness of this structure and character in the species-typical mode of human organisms' interaction with their social and natural environments, would also entail the insufficiency of a number of celebrated contemporary views and suggest a re-evaluation of basic methodological strategy for inquiries regarding the human form of life – whether biological, scientific, philosophical, or otherwise.[189]

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[187] On horizons of understanding, see Gadamer 1960. On the dialectical relationship between the actual finitude and the potential infinitude of human understanding, see the Davos 1929 debate between Cassirer and Heidegger (documents reprinted in Heidegger 1997). Here I extend the points at issue in both Gadamer and the Davos debate beyond understanding to human life in general.

[188] Here I bring the account to bear on issues discussed in Mead 1934, 1964**;** Korsgaard 1996, 2006, 2008, 2009; and Tomasello 2000, 2008.

[189] The first of these tasks will be conducted in this chapter, which focuses on the questions of selfhood and human distinctiveness in particular. The second task will be conducted in the following chapter.

In the first part of what follows, I will review a number of recent arguments that closely resemble the argument just stated. The arguments come from researches in widely different fields: the action theory and moral philosophy of Christine Korsgaard; the pragmatist social psychology of G.H. Mead; the recent primatological and developmental-psychological researches of Michael Tomasello; and the speculative metaphysics of the Weimar-era zoologist-turned-philosopher Helmuth Plessner.[190] I will highlight problems with each of these versions of the argument. Finally, I will present my own version, which deepens its scope and avoids the noted problems, yet also entails a number of radical and perhaps controversial consequences.

Korsgaard on normativity, practical identity, and the self

In *The Sources of Normativity* (1996), Christine Korsgaard argues for a version of Kantian ethical theory by way of an analysis of human agency.[191] Korsgaard claims that human beings are naturally reflective beings and this reflective power means that their actions are understood to have implications for their "practical identities." These "practical identities" are basically the role or category that people fit into by virtue of their actions, relationships, and histories more generally, as well as their current or ongoing intentions. They include occupations such as doctor, lawyer, or teacher, as well

[190] Mead 1934, 1964**;** Korsgaard 1996, 2006, 2008, 2009; Tomasello 1999, 2000, 2008; Plessner 1928

[191]Korsgaard 1996. Korsgaard 2006, 2008, and 2009 are also relevant, but would be too much to address here. My purpose in this section, incidentally, is not to refute Korsgaard's conclusions, but rather to signal some problems with one version of her argument as an instructive example of what's at stake in arguments of this general form.

as affiliations such as daughter, father, Republican, Communist, or Catholic. Practical identities rely, for their formation and maintenance, on reflective consciousness:

> [T]he reflective structure of human consciousness gives us authority over ourselves. Reflection gives us a kind of distance from our impulses which both forces us, and enables us, to make laws for ourselves, and it makes those laws normative. To make a law for yourself, however, is at the same time to give expression to a practical conception of your identity. Practical conceptions of our identity determine which of our impulses we will count as reasons. And to the extent that we cannot act against them without losing our sense that our lives are worth living and our actions are worth undertaking, they can obligate us.[192]

But a condition of possibility of affirming one's practical identities is to affirm the universal condition of possibility of having any such practical identity at all – namely, being human: "If we do not treat our humanity as a normative identity, none of our other identities can be normative, and then we can have no reasons to act at all."[193] And to affirm humanity in one's own person is thereby (on pain of self-contradiction) to affirm the same humanity in every person:

> How does the obligation [to other persons] come about?... You make yourself an end for others [when you expect or want them to treat you in a way that respects the conditions of your general practical-identity-taking]; you make yourself a law

[192] Korsgaard 1996, p. 128-29

[193] Korsgaard 1996, p. 128-29.

> to them. But if you are a law to others in so far as you are just human, just *someone*, then the humanity of others is also a law to you. By making you think these thoughts, I obligate you to act in a way that respects it.[194]

Thus, in order to be human (in a biologically natural way), and in order to be a self (in the reflective, practical-identity-taking sort of way human beings naturally are), one must not behave in ways that contradict this free self-taking and self-determining action of oneself or other selves.

According to Korsgaard, others make normative claims upon us whenever they use language. Normativity, inclusive of "reasons for action," is inherently and thoroughly social, and its presence and influence occur by social means. Human reason, reflection, and action are thoroughly mediated by social as well as linguistic factors (which are themselves social). This ubiquity of the normative, as it appears even in any use of language at all, is a major part of Korsgaard's argument insofar as it is this, on her account, that means we have as much obligation to respect the humanity (as she calls it) of others as we do to respect our own humanity, since it is a condition of possibility of normativity itself that there be normatively-responsive agents: hence, such agency always calls for our respect (that is, respect for the condition-of-possibility of normativity itself: agency). But here there arises a problem for another of Korsgaard's commitments, namely, the commitment to a universal standard of normativity in human affairs. If the

[194] Korsgaard 1996, p. 143. Korsgaard argues for ethical obligations to animals by parallel means – animals experience pain, and so do we; we strive to avoid pain in our own case (we recognize avoidance of pain as a legitimate "reason" for action); therefore, we should (on pain of self-contradiction) avoid creating pain to animals. Korsgaard 1996, pp. 145-160.

foundations of normativity are themselves social and linguistic – that is, if norms themselves are inoperative except by way of linguistic and social factors – and if, as seems plausible enough, the norms associated with language and social structure are at least as diverse as the "practical identities" Korsgaard elsewhere discusses (and which she understands to depend on these shared norms), then it would seem that the sense of an underlying "humanity" that supports practical identity would be relative to the linguistic and social norms, rather than universal as Korsgaard (following Kant) supposes.

Korsgaard's defense of her view on this point would likely ask us to draw on the results of "reflection," which should lead us all (she would argue) to acknowledge the capacity for normative-responsiveness (that is, the *agency* or "*humanity*") in question as indeed the fundamental condition of possibility of any norms at all, and thus as itself an inviolable norm. But in what sense is this humanity, in each and every case, indeed a fundamental condition of possibility of any norm? What if human normativity is continuous with, and arises out of, structures and relations discernible in the non-human living world? Even so, she may say, such cases entail an expansion of, rather than a rejection of, normative universalism.[195] But even if a *general* respect for agency (or for life, or for other values) is indeed rationally required, what justifies the assertion that a *universal* respect is so required? Why could exceptions not *rationally* be made to any putative universal normative standard? The decision between utilitarian, Kantian, or other

[195] Korsgaard does recognize this: for instance, she writes that pain is perception of a reason, and pain is experienced by animals. See Korsgaard 1990, pp. 145-160.

substantive ethical doctrines could not be based solely on the considerations Korsgaard offers.

Korsgaard's heed to the fact that what people value is mediated by the normative structures that pervade their language and their form of life, including the sorts of historically-contingent systems that support "practical identities," is well-motivated. Such mediation was already recognized by figures such as Darwin, Marx, and Nietzsche, who variously emphasized the relevance of biological, historical, social, technological, linguistic-symbolic and other historically-contingent conditions to the constitution of particular normative frameworks. Yet she tries, within a view that acknowledges such structures, to nonetheless defend a universalism about at least some norms. The universal norms would just be those without which the others are not possible. But while it may be true that *some* norms must be recognized by *someone* in order for a particular range of other norms to be possible, it is not evident that there are any norms that must be recognized by everyone (even according to some idealization of "reason" or "rationality") in order for a range of other norms to be possible.

Perhaps the most enticing feature of Korsgaard's work is that it has attempted (in *The Sources of Normativity* [1990] and since) to accommodate and integrate such post-Kantian concerns – particularly concerns regarding the historically-contingent, artifactual conditions of the human kind of normativity and normative-responsiveness, as discussed by Darwin, Nietzsche, Freud, communitarians, and others – within a universalistic

Kantian framework.[196] The result, however, is that the former considerations stand out as all the more convincing, while the latter stands out as especially unconvincing. Contrary to this framework, a more fluid, open-ended, interpretive, "relativistic," and at the same time more empirically-informed and empirically-enriched sense of the conditions of possibility of selfhood suggests itself. Such frameworks are not far off – as, for instance, in the pragmatist social psychology of G. H. Mead.

Mead on "taking the role of the other" and the social self

In a series of papers published from 1903 to 1925, G. H. Mead developed a number of the most recognizable concepts of his social psychology.[197] In particular, he argued that social factors were just as important as physiological ones in the constitution of psychological processes and psychological objects and, in particular, of the "social object" we call a "self."[198] In conjunction with this argument, he attempted to build a

[196] Korsgaard 1996, pp. 157-160.

[197] For the purposes of exposition here, I focus on the account of these themes presented in Mead's published papers of this period, supplemented in a few places by that proposed in Mead's posthumously published collection of lecture notes, *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934). The papers are reprinted in G. H. Mead, *Selected Writings*, Andrew J. Reck, ed. (Bobbs-Merrill, Inc., 1964), pp. 25-149, and include "The Definition of the Psychical" (1903), "Social Psychology as Counterpart to Physiological Psychology" (1909), "What Social Objects Must Psychology Presuppose?" (1910a), "Social Consciousness and Consciousness of Meaning" (1910b), "The Mechanism of Social Consciousness" (1912), "The Social Self" (1913), "A Behavioristic Account of the Significant Symbol" (1922), and "The Genesis of the Self and Social Control" (1924-25). I focus on the published papers rather than the better-known 1934 text because of the well-known editorial difficulties of the latter – for instance, that it was compiled from student's notes taken during different semesters, without consistent ordering by chronology or elimination of repetition. For similar reasons, Joas 1985, Chs. 4-5, pp. 64-120, opts to give a chronological account, based on the published papers and relevant (sometimes dated) unpublished drafts.

[198] Mead 1909, 1910a, 1913, 1922

plausible account of the social origins of such individualized selves, consistent with the perspective on mentality and behavior initiated by Darwin and in dialogue with broadly Darwinian psychological science such as that of William James, James Mark Baldwin, and Wilhelm Wundt.[199]

Methodology and metaphysics

Perhaps because Mead thinks of his contribution in these papers as primarily psychological rather than philosophical, he does not often directly address the metaphysical and epistemological questions that arise in connection with the topics he discusses. Nonetheless, he does provide some indications of his answers these questions.

Much of Mead's early work, including his ontology of mental states and his theory of concept-formation, show the influence of John Dewey's "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology" (1896).[200] Following Dewey, and in opposition to the "parallelist" views that Mead claims were then dominant in psychology, Mead argues that mental states, whether in human or non-human cases, should be understood in terms of their role within a situated process – in particular, a process that involves an organism and its environment in dynamic interaction.[201] The ideas of "disembodied" sensations, as well as of a radical split between "mental" and "physical entities" or of any "reduction" of mental to bodily, or bodily to mental, attributes are all of them rejected. Here we see

[199] For instance: Mead 1903, 1908, 1909.

[200] Dewey 1896 [1981], pp. 136-148.

[201] Mead 1903. For discussion, see Joas 1985, Ch. 4.

Mead eschewing the dualism or parallelism of Descartes and Kant, the idealism of Hegel and Bradley, and the parallelism or materialism of the "scientific" psychology of his day, and opting instead for an organicist functionalism that, in Mead's reading, is the best lesson of his immediate scientific and philosophic predecessors – particularly Charles Darwin, James Mark Baldwin, William James, and John Dewey.[202] As in Dewey's "Reflex Arc" paper, sensations are functionally-distinguished entities. The same principle applies to any psychological state, including "memory," "consciousness," "reaction," "habit," "perception," and so on.

Mead's theory of concepts likewise bears witness to the influence of James' and Dewey's pragmatisms. With James and Dewey (and, though seemingly unknown to Mead, Charles Sanders Peirce), Mead argues that the meaning of a concept is nothing other than its implications for practice.[203] Mead develops this pragmatist definition of meaning in the direction of a precise articulation of the conditions of concept formation the dynamics of organism-environment interaction. Mead's definition and discussion of objects, in these early papers, also shows the influence of pragmatism and functionalism. In brief, Mead holds that "objects" exist only in relation to the life-process of an organism: they are just those features of the environment that make a difference to the organism's behavior.[204] "Concepts," likewise, are just the mental states or states of

[202] Mead 1903, 1908, 1909

[203] Mead 1900

[204] "I assume that the objects of immediate experience exist in relationship to the biologic and social individuals whose environments they make up. This relationship involves on the one hand the selection

awareness that correspond to these objects.[205]

Mead holds that there is a distinction between physical and social objects. In Mead's discussion of this distinction, selves are the paradigmatic social objects. We come to know these social objects – selves – first, and only on the basis of a later distinction do we recognize the difference between social objects and physical objects:

> Whatever our theory may be as to the history of things, social consciousness must antedate physical consciousness. A more correct statement would be that experience in its original form became reflective in the recognition of selves, and only gradually was there differentiated a reflective experience of things which

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through the sensitivities and reactions of the living forms [that is, the organisms] of those elements that go to make up the object. On the other hand these objects affect the plants and animals whose natures are responsible for them as objects, e.g., food exists as an immediate experience in its relation to the individuals that eat it. There is no such thing as food apart from such individuals. The selection of the characters which go to make up food is a function of living individuals. . . . . Whatever may be said of a mechanical universe of ultimate physical particles, the lines that are drawn about objects in experience are drawn by the attitudes and conduct of individual living forms [organisms]. Apart from such an experience involving both the form [organism] and its environment, such objects do not exist." Mead 1922, p. 240. But Mead goes on to say: "On the other hand, these objects exist objectively, as they are in immediate experience. The relation of objects making up an environment to the plants and the animals in no sense renders these objects subjective." Mead 1922, p. 240-41.It seems to me that the assumption that "subjective" conditions cannot also be "objective" is a mistake and has led Mead to confusion here. What he ought to say is that such objects are subjective in the sense that they depend, constitutively, on their relation to a subject, but that this subjectivity does not make them non-objective.

[205] "These two are the characteristics of an object in our consciousness – a content [i.e. a perceptual content] towards which the individual is susceptible as a stimulus, and an attitude of response [i.e. a concept, according to the pragmatic theory of meaning] towards this peculiar type of content. In our consciousness of this sensuous content and of our attitude toward it we have both the content of the object as a thing and the meaning of it, both the *perception* and the *concept* of it, at least implicit in the experience." Mead 1909, p. 98, emphasis added. This theory of objects and concepts suggests comparison with Uexküll 1905, 1909, 1920, 1934.

were purely physical.[206]

In terms of the "objective" history of the cosmos, physical objects precede social ones. In terms of the developmental, mental history of the knowing subject, to whom and for whom that cosmos and its history must be reflected, if these are to become objects of awareness at all, social objects (or, the awareness of social objects) precede physical objects (or, the awareness of physical objects).[207]

From animal communication to human language

Many forms of human and non-human animal communication involve what Mead calls (following Wilhelm Wundt) "gesture." A "gesture" is defined as a kind of truncated act. In a gesture, only the first phases of a larger act are "gone through," but these first phases are sufficient to generate a response in other organisms. In general, the function of a gesture is to produce the response in the other organism, not to carry out the full act of which the gesture is only the opening sequence.[208] Mead often describes animal communication as a "conversation of gestures":

> Conversation in gestures may be carried on which cannot be translated into articulated speech. This is also true of the lower animals. Dogs approaching each another in hostile attitude carry on such a language of gestures. They walk around

[206] Mead 1910a, p. 113

[207] Because objects are defined here as "for" a subject, the distinction between the object "in itself" and the awareness of the object need not be maintained.

[208] Mead's views here are partly inspired by Wilhelm Wundt's use of the concept of gesture, as well as by Darwin's work on the expression of emotion. See Darwin 1871 [2004]

> each other, growling and snapping, and waiting for the opportunity to attack. Here is a process by which language might arise, that is, a certain attitude of one individual that calls out a response in the other, which in turn calls out a different approach and a different response, and so on indefinitely.[209]

Another of Mead's examples is a pair of boxers anticipating one another's next blow.[210] One thing that distinguishes human linguistic communication from just any such conversation of gestures, according to Mead, is that, in the human linguistic case, the opening phases of the act (that is, the gesture) call forth the same response in the actor as in the intended audience of the act: in other words, the gestures have a common meaning for both actor and audience. By such a gesture "the individual can himself be affected as others are affected, and [this] therefore tends to call out in him a response as it would call it out in another."[211]

A set of gestures with meanings common to both actor and audience is not enough to define a language in the human sense, however. In order to display the unique features of a human language, Mead argues, the producer of the gestures must also intend for the audience to respond in the way that it does, and to respond in the way that it does *because of* its reaction to the observed gesture. Mead argues that such a situation can only emerge on the condition that the agent imagines itself reacting to its own gestures *as if* it were the

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[209] Mead 1934, pp. 14.

[210] For instance: Mead 1912, pp. 135-36 and Mead 1924-5, pp. 278-79.

[211] Mead 1912, p. 140.

audience.[212] In other words, in order for an agent to produce a linguistic act, the agent must be able to "take the role of the other."[213]

"The role of the other" and the emergence of the self

"Taking the role of the other" constitutively involves the organism being aware of itself as if it were looking at itself from the position of the other organism. To be able to look at itself in this way, namely, from the other's perspective, is thereby to have what Mead calls a "self." This is the self in the form of the "me" or "social self," to be distinguished from the "I" (discussed further below). Thus, on Mead's account, selves emerge prior to, or, at least, in conjunction with, linguistic abilities: "I know of no other form of behavior than the linguistic in which the individual is an object to himself."[214] Languages and selves originate together and both are unique to the human species. Many species live in societies, and many species have forms of communication, but only human beings have selves, and only human beings have language.

Mead argues that this "taking the role of the other" is a condition-of-possibility of the emergence of the self in the form of the "me." From the papers of 1909 onwards, Mead conceives of selves as fundamentally social objects. Indeed, in the early papers, selves are sometimes discussed as if they are the only social objects, or at least the

[212] Mead 1922, pp. 243-45.

[213] Of the papers discussed here, the well-known Meadian phrase "take the role of the other" first appears in print in Mead 1922, though the concept is present by Mead 1913 or earlier. As is well-known, it is a central theme of Mead 1934.

[214] Mead 1934, p. 142

paradigmatic ones.[215] What argument does Mead give for defining the self in this fundamentally social way? Though he does not present it explicitly in the early papers, his process of reasoning on this point would seem to be easy enough to reconstruct. A "self," in the traditional philosophical sense, is an entity that has the capacity of both *referring* and *being the object referred to* at the same time: "The self has the characteristic that it is an object to itself."[216] But remember that for Mead, following Dewey, an object is only the environmental correlate of an organism's life-processes, and, in particular, of its actions. So the "object referred to" must be referred to by an organism; and this means, if such an object is to be a self, it must also *be* an organism. This means only organisms can be selves.[217] It also means that only organisms that can refer to themselves can be selves. Non-human animals can refer to parts of themselves insofar as their field of awareness includes parts of their own bodies. To put it another way, parts of their bodies can be objects of their consciousness. But they cannot refer to themselves as a complete unit. Why would this be? According to Mead's reasoning, it is because they cannot see themselves as another organism sees them. They can anticipate the reactions of other organisms, but cannot imagine themselves into the position of the

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[215] In later papers, however, such items as "rights," "property," and "institutions" are also described as social objects. Compare Mead 1909 to Mead 1924-5.

[216] Mead 1934, p. 136. But Mead goes on to say, ""and that characteristic distinguishes it from other objects and from the body" (Mead 1934, p. 136). I'm inclined to believe the latter part of the statement problematically dissociates the "self" from the "the body."

[217] If this were not the case, then the formal definition of selfhood provided above – "an entity that has the capacity of both referring and being the object referred to at the same time" – would classify the phrase "this phrase" as a self, which would clearly reduce the definition to absurdity.

other organism and respond, from that position, to their own behavior. It is only on condition of such an "outside-in" perspective that one's own organism could be approached as the living, acting unity that it is – that is, as a locus of a range of possible actions. The conclusion to be drawn from the argument is that no animal incapable of "taking the role of the other" could grasp itself as a *unified* locus of causal power, that is, as a thing that *could* do any of a range of things. Animals unable to look at themselves "outside-in" have no sense of their own unity. Furthermore, they have no sense of their own possibilities, nor do they select among these possibilities, i.e. they are not free in the sense of being "deliberate choosers."

But where does the special capacity to look at oneself "from the outside-in" come from? In Mead's language, it is synonymous with the ability to "take the role of the other." This means imagining oneself into the conditions of perception and reaction of another organism, and then approaching one's own actions from the standpoint of that other organism.

The self-consciousness corresponding to "taking the role of the other" is expanded to greater proportions by a related function Mead calls "taking the role of the generalized other."[218] This involves imagining the response to one's actions of the social body as a whole – that is, the entire community or group. The difference between "taking the role of the other" and "taking the role of the generalized other" is exemplified in Mead's well-known example of the distinction between "play" and "the game":

[218] Among the papers mentioned, this phrase first appears in Mead 1924-5, though Mead discusses the same concept under the phrase "attitude of the generalized other" in Mead 1922.

> The play antedates the game. For in a game there is a regulated procedure, and rules. The child must not only take the role of the other, as he does in play, but he must assume the various roles of all the participants in the game, and govern his action accordingly. If he plays first base, it is as the one to whom the ball will be thrown from the field or from the catcher. Their organized reactions to him he has embedded in his own playing of the different positions, and this organized reaction becomes what I have called the "generalized other" that accompanies and controls his conduct. And it is this generalized other in his experience which provides him with a self.[219]

Mead argued that this ability to "take the role of the generalized other" was a distinctive ability of human organisms and foundational to the mode of existence of human selves.

The idea that there is some thinking or experiencing "I" that is immediately accessible to consciousness – that is, the Cartesian concept of the self – is, according to Mead, a confusion; the impression that there is such a thing arises because we not only respond to ourselves as others do (that is, think of ourselves as others do), which is our "me" (the empirical self; the social self), but also we respond to these responses.[220] In other words, we are aware of ourselves as spontaneously negotiating or navigating the character of our "selves" insofar as this character is something produced by the reactions of the society as a whole; that is, insofar as we are a "me." Our awareness of ourselves

[219] Mead 1924-5, p. 285

[220] This position is first outlined in Mead 1913, but refined in later papers and Mead 1934.

depends, fundamentally, on our ability to "take the role of the other" and "generalized other": but this only gives us conscious access to the "me." The "I" is not a self-sufficient source of awareness, and it is not even something of which we *can* be conscious, except in hindsight. It is best conceived rather as the source of spontaneous responses to the situation (environmental and social) in which we find ourselves, and of which we are aware.

In sum, whereas communication of some rudimentary kind is common to many non-human animal forms of social organization, in the human case it begins to involve anticipations, on the part of the individual communicating organisms, of the reactions of con-specifics. These anticipations can be understood to arise naturally out of a common kind of situation: namely, that wherein two organisms of the same species are reacting to one another's behavior. The behavior of the first leads to a reaction of the other; the reaction of the other, in turn, leads to a change in behavior of the first; and so on. This is the situation Mead labels a "conversation of gestures," and it is a precursor of the human kind of "natural language," which begins to emerge only to the extent to which the organisms involved in this conversation of gestures begin to *anticipate* one another's next response, and change their behavior on the basis of the anticipation rather than as a response to the actual manifested behavior. This anticipation, when it has developed to the degree that each organism can be said to have a map or representation of how each instance of his or her behavior will be viewed and reacted to by each "type" or "role-occupying" con-specific within its society or community, has reached the distinctively human level labeled by the term, "taking the role of the generalized other." The "other"

whose role is taken is now "general" rather than particular because the agent is conceiving of his or her action in terms of its implication for his or her status within the community as a whole, as well as of how the community as a whole will react to these actions. According to Mead, it is this ability that is fundamental to the emergence of the distinctively human *social self*, or "me," as distinguished from the "I," and this kind of self is a distinctive mediating factor within human social organization.

Problems with Mead's views

Mead's argument is a promising and useful one insofar as it involves a precise comparative analysis of human and non-human animal social organization and seeks to better understand human cognitive capacities by virtue of (i) analysis of the human social organization that (on the basis of the argument proposed, plausibly) enables these, and (ii) comparison and contrast with non-human animal social behavior to attempt to discern precisely those mechanisms that plausibly enable the distinctive features of human social organization. Mead makes a number of important and strikingly subtle observations here: (a) the discovery of the inverse relation between physiological specialization (as in insect species) and ability to share a symbolic system (that is, "take the role of the other"); (b) the distinction between "acts" and "gestures"; (c) the distinction between a "conversation of gestures" and "taking the role of the other," as well as between "taking the role of the other" and "taking the role of the generalized other"; and finally (d) the enrichment of the philosophical and psychological concept of the self by virtue of its connection with social processes (that is, the development of the concept of the empirical self or "me").

Nonetheless, Mead's account suffers from a number of weaknesses.

First, Mead's conjecture that an organism's "taking the role of the generalized other," that is, anticipation of the reactions of every position or self within society to its actions, is necessary in order for a "self" to emerge out of that organism's life-process, is arbitrarily severe. Mead has arguably overstated the requirements here. How much anticipation of how many con-specifics' reactions is required for a "taking of others' roles" to be sufficiently generalized to entail the emergence of selfhood? How common is such anticipation, or any great degree of such anticipation, in human and non-human animal cases? If Mead has overstated these requirements in this way, or anyway only very vaguely stated them, it would be hard to conclude that he has precisely identified the conditions of emergence of a specifically and distinctively human selfhood either.

Secondly, his account of the emergence of human linguistic abilities and selfhood by way of social consciousness is overly linear and overly simplistic. It ignores factors, such as the artifacts and artifactual shaping of environments, that are clearly relevant to the concrete contents that emerge in this way. Even on the basis of Mead's own premises, the emergence of linguistic abilities and selfhood should be understood to be mediated not only by anticipations of the actions of others but, by a kind of "second-hand mediation," by those factors that mediate social arrangements themselves, such as history, technology, and ecology, for instance. And if self-consciousness is mediated by social consciousness at first hand, why not suppose it is equally mediated by such factors as these – history, technology, ecology, language – at first hand as well? Mead's oversights on these matters lead him to fail to appreciate the full range of contributions

that historically-contingent conditions can make to individual self-conception, reasoning, and evaluation – including their contributions to veiling or unveiling, as well as activating or deactivating, possibilities for individual and social action.

Finally, Mead's distinction between the "I" and the "me" is also problematic. The fundamental problem here is that the line of demarcation between the "I" and the "me," and the supposition that these terms highlight what is most significant in the functioning of human selves, are under-defended. The "me" is the social self: but is this the self as reacted to by others, or as the self itself anticipates being reacted to (or, as it anticipates its range of options being reacted to)? Likewise, Mead assigns two functions to the "I": the spontaneous selection among those possibilities provided by the "me" (that is, the "empirical" self), and the primary active source of behavior itself (like the "vital principle" appealed to by vitalists to explain the power of motion of living things). But those two functions are not obviously identifiable. Why not distinguish them? Furthermore, the factors enabling the "I" and the "me," on Mead's account, may be combined in many different ways. There would seem to be social contributions to deliberation, selection, and spontaneity, on the one hand, and individual, deliberative, and spontaneous contributions to the "interpretation" of the role of the other – that is, to the way in which the "me" is taken by the self to appear, from the "outside in" – on the other. Finally, the relation between "I" and "me" described by Mead must itself be mediated by historical, technological, and other factors, regarding which Mead has almost nothing to say. The human self and its mediation by social, technological, symbolic, ecological, and other factors is just a denser, more complexly structured, and more variable nexus of

causal powers than Mead's description of the fundamental mechanism of intermediation of "I" and "me" suggests.

Tomasello on joint attention, the ratchet effect, and human distinctiveness

The primatologist and child psychologist Michael Tomasello has recently defended a thesis that parallels some features of Mead's position. Tomasello describes mechanisms of "joint attention" – that is, the ability to share the point of view of conspecifics on some external, observable situation – that he claims to be unique to the human case.[221] In short, the thesis is that only human organisms have a robust "theory of mind" of their conspecifics, and this serves as a fundamental condition of possibility of other prima facie distinctive capacities, such as the use of language and development of inter-generationally-progressive technology. This is because the acquisition of end-directed, technologically-mediated skills, as well as the ability to innovate in regards to those skills or technologies – that is, to alter objects or action-patterns to enhance achievement of end-results or the broadening of applications – requires the ability to share and understand the intentions of con-specifics. This is something that only creatures with a theory of mind can do. The ability to enter into practices, consciously, and make conscious, deliberate modifications to those practices, is what enables human beings, and human beings alone, to benefit from what Tomasello calls the "ratchet effect": namely,

[221] Tomasello 1999, pp. 56-93

the inter-generational, incremental progress of technologically-mediated powers.[222] Tomasello's account identifies the first physiological and developmental roots – and, one might say, the conditions of possibility – of this "ratchet effect" in the mechanism of joint attention itself.[223]

One point on which Tomasello offers little analysis, however, is that of the way in which, and the extent to which, the situations of joint attention he describes are themselves constitutively mediated by factors of a historically-contingent sort, including social, artifactual, linguistic, and "natural" (ecological, physiological, genetic) factors. Perhaps he wouldn't disagree that they are so mediated – but that recognition calls into question the postulation of the mechanisms of joint attention as the primary origin of the rest of what is distinctive about human beings. Focusing on this particular kind of relationship between human organisms, within the process of the organic development of children into adults, would thus be arbitrary, from an explanatory or interpretive perspective: the full account of the "origins of human cognition" or of many other *prima facie* distinctive features of human life, requires a broader-based analysis. And it is quite arguable whether Tomasello's "joint attention" *is* the province of human beings alone: it may be shared with some non-human primates, for instance.[224]

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[222] Tomasello 1999, pp. 37-40

[223] This would seem to be an account of "the cognitive origins of human culture," rather than, as the title of Tomasello's most comprehensive statement of his position has it: *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (1999).

[224] See Savage-Rumbaugh 2000. Tomasello and Call 2006 conclude that chimpanzees can indeed discriminate between circumstances where fellow chimpanzees see an object and those where they do not. This appears to provide evidence against the thesis of the uniqueness of human joint-attentional processes

It seems unlikely that the full range of *prima facie* distinctive human capabilities can be really explained by reference to a single such behavioral capacity, and a relatively narrowly circumscribed one at that. It might be wondered whether human life is not better understood as a different *order* of life as a whole, a kind of modulation of animal life into a different key or scale. One way of setting out such a thesis would be to first identify an order that distinctively characterizes life itself (in contrast with non-living things, and shared by human and non-human organisms alike), and then note what basic and generally-distinctive modulation of this order characterizes the human form of life. This was the procedure of the zoologist-turned-philosopher, and co-founder of "philosophical anthropology," Helmuth Plessner, to whose views we now turn.

Plessner on animality, artifactuality, and the self

Plessner's main argument in his 1928 text *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* [The Stages of Organic Being and Man] parallels Tomasello's, Mead's, and Korsgaard's in its appeal to an analysis of commonalities and differences between human and animal forms of life to shed light on the structure and conditions of possibility of the emergence of such features as human selfhood, sociality, language, rationality, and "culture." Plessner's account proceeds in two steps. First, Plessner seeks to articulate what is distinctive about living in contrast to non-living things, in a manner that, like

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proposed in Tomasello 1999 and elsewhere. For instance, in a 2009 postscript to his 1994 paper, "The question of chimpanzee culture," Tomasello writes, "Whereas previously I thought that there was a distinct qualitative difference in the imitative learning of humans as compared with the emulation learning of chimpanzees, I now see this as more a matter of degree." Tomasello 2009, pp. 218-219.

Mead's, cross-cuts the inherited metaphysical options of the modern period: dualism, materialism, idealism, parallelism, and so on. Plessner opts rather to begin from the phenomenological foundation of the description and analysis of our experience of things as "living." Plessner argues that living things are distinguished from non-living things, in our intuition of each, by the dynamic boundaries of the former, which both connect them to, and set them apart from, their surroundings. Plessner describes this feature of living things by way of the concept of "positionality" [*Positionalität*], that is, the organism's simultaneous "place" within both a concrete, spatially-extended, external surrounding world (as are all "things," both living and non-living) and within an "environment" [*Umwelt*] maintained by, and responded to by, its own activity.[225] Thus, positionality is a kind of simultaneously "inner" and mental, as well as "outer" and physical, organism-environment interaction. Secondly, Plessner attempts an analysis of various forms of positionality, such as those of plants, lower and higher animals, and human beings. Here he seeks to identify various formal types of positionality and, through this identification and comparison, to articulate what is distinctive about human positionality – that is, what distinguishes human from non-human forms of life. If successful, this analysis will identify the distinctive features of the human form of life in a manner consistent with recognition of the continuity, both material and evolutionary, between human beings and the rest of living nature.

[225] The idea of an *Umwelt* in this sense comes from Uexküll 1909, 1920 [1926], 1934 [2010]. Technically, Plessner holds that the concept of positionality only applies to animals, not plants, though there are analogues in the plant case.

The special character of human positonality, according to Plessner, is its "ex-centricity." Non-human animals have a more or less "centric positionality," that is, exhibit a more or less centralized organization, and thus can be said to constitute a more or less unified "self" (for instance: with sea anemones being only barely unified, and higher mammals being more highly unified, in this way). Only human beings, however, have a "center" in this sense that can also be "posited" beyond the boundaries of their physical body – indeed, which is not limited to any one spatio-temporal point at all. Precisely what Plessner means by this enigmatic locution is not obvious. At the very least, it is a way of saying that the horizon of human consciousness has no fixed species-typical limit. It entails, further, that the human being can reflect upon him or herself; can imagine unactualized possibilities; can imagine pasts and futures; and can imagine itself in the position of another (or can "take the role of the other" in Mead's sense). On Plessner's account, the distinctive powers and structural features of human selves can be understood to arise in conjunction with this "ex-centric positionality," which is their condition of possibility.

The advantages of Plessner's approach over those of Tomasello, Mead, and Korsgaard are that, *contra* Tomasello, Plessner identifies the distinctiveness of the human form of life with a comprehensive modulation of animal forms of life generally, rather than with some single physiological feature or behavioral mechanism (the older precursors of the latter view including those physical anthropologists that pointed to the thumb, the brain, or the upright posture as "the" decisive feature in the emergence of the human); *contra* Mead, that Plessner's construal of the structure of the self, and the

conditions of its emergence, are less fixed and less static than Mead's, and that Plessner's account is more responsive to the interlocking contributions of historically-contingent society, language, and technology in the emergence and functioning of human selves (and human forms of life more generally) than is Mead's; and, *contra* Korsgaard, that the linguistic, rational, and normative structures that mediate human conduct are infinitely plastic and thus that the potential of human individual and social organization – even of rationality and normativity – extends to infinity as well. This suggests that Kantian-style universalisms – and universalisms, a priorisms, and transcendentalisms more generally – can only be a posteriori descriptions of historically-contingent structures or of the "constitutive" conditions of meaning-fulfillment (that is, conditions of an object's meeting the description associated with the definition of a concept), or constructions designed to experientially highlight or effect changes within such historically-contingent structures and the human forms of life that they mediate.

Despite its advantages, Plessner's account suffers from a number of defects. Most significantly, Plessner seems to neglect the question of the material conditions of the emergence of the so-called "ex-centric position."[226] The question appears to be a fair one, even if explanations of human distinctiveness or distinctively human selfhood that appeal to extremely simple mechanisms, such as that suggested by Tomasello, are *prima facie*

[226] Another problem is that it is hard not to suspect some arbitrariness in Plessner's insistence on "positionality" and "ex-centricity" as the structural features most central to understanding the difference between living and non-living things, and human and non-human forms of life, respectively, but I won't address this here. My own argument, presented in the following section, attempts to elide this impression of arbitrariness.

suspicious.[227]

What are the means by which the "ex-centric positionality," or the special human form of sociality described in the idea of the *Mitwelt*, arises in the first place? On Plessner's account in *Die Stufen* this question is not given a straightforward or precise answer. But, borrowing a bit from Plessner's expositor Marjorie Grene, and informed by developments in anthropological theory from 1928 to the present day, we may say that these means are simply the presence of a *historically-contingent artifactual environment that serves as a constitutive condition of possibility of the human organism's species-typical biological functioning*; and *the human organism's species-typical suitedness (as judged from genetic, physiological, and evolutionary considerations) for a form of life that is mediated by such an environment*.[228] Awareness of this feature of the human form of life is captured in part in Plessner's notion of "natural artificiality" [*näturlichen Künstlichkeit*].[229] The human being is "naturally artificial" [*näturlich künstlich*] in two important senses: his or her behavior is naturally (that is, species-typically) mediated by

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[227] For discussion of other possible criticisms of Plessner's position, see Ch. 2, above.

[228] Grene 1974, Ch. 19, pp. 346-360. Grene more clearly refers to "participation in a culture" as the origin of the ex-centric position than does Plessner, and more explicitly articulates the significance of artifactuality. For instance, glossing Plessner, Grene writes: "The existence of other animals is wholly absorbed into their medium. They have no power of detachment from it, of criticism of it. Man has acquired such powers; he can stand apart, to one side, 'eccentrically,' from his biological and physical being and consider himself in relation to them. How can he do this? Not by possessing some new entity called soul or mind; but simply through the *achievement* of personhood as the *embodiment* of a culture. The achievement of the eccentric position of man, of *each man*, is dependent on the artifacts of culture through participation in which and in expression of which he achieves that position. In other words, just as much as a normally functioning central nervous system, an ongoing culture is a necessary, though not a sufficient condition, for the achievement of humanity." Grene 1974, p. 357.

[229] Plessner 1928, Ch. 7.

the complex, historically-contingent, artifactual sculpting of his or her concrete environment; and he or she is, him or herself, an instance of the same complex, historically-contingent, artifactual sculpting – that is, he or she *is* (or, his or her "self" is) a natural artifact.[230] This "historically-contingent artifactual environment" that mediates both human conduct and human selfhood is more or less identical to what has long been called "culture" in the human sciences (though unfortunately often without much subtlety of understanding or analysis). Self-consciousness and self-reflection also arise in conjunction with the specifically human form of sociality, with the historically-contingent, artifactual environment ("culture"), and with the specifically human physiology that enables the human organism to respond to its social and cultural environment in the unique ways that it can – and must, in order to, in turn, sustain relevant social and cultural features of that environment for other human beings of its own generation and the next. This view, in its broadest outlines, is the version I would propose of the "human distinctiveness" argument regarding the origins and structure of human selves.[231]

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[230] Margolis 2008 draws the latter conclusion.

[231] One must be careful not to read this proposal dualistically. The two conditions listed as "means" above are intimately dynamically interwoven. Their separation is imaginable only because we can form an idea of the general type of "human being" independent of participation in particular historically-contingent artifactual environments. There are concrete cases that correspond to this theoretical separation in some way or other: for instance, when a human being moves from one artifactual environment to another; or when the question arises of which of a variety of possible artifactual environments ought to be established and preferred for future generations of a society. The extent to which any conception of bare, unmediated humanity obtained by such subtractive reasoning is "correct" or "unbiased" is not a question I'll try to (or, I think, need to) answer here.

Human distinctiveness and selfhood reconsidered

The thesis in outline

The thesis I'd like to defend here is that the profound *prima facie* differences between human and non-human animal forms of life may be collected under the single reference to what has emerged, within hominid pre-history, of (i) a more and more complexly, historically-contingently, artifactually mediated relation between organism and environment, by way of both (ii) a physiology capable, in an increasingly open-ended way, of really responding to new and changing artifactual environments, and (iii) concrete changes in those artifactual environments themselves (that is, a cultural history).[232] These characteristics, when present in a form of life in any degree, suffice to describe a creature we could call both *animal* and *cultural*; and as these features appear more ubiquitously within a form of life, that form approximates more and more closely to the (species-typical) human form.[233] Furthermore, any form of life to which features (i)-

[232] Various aspects of this view have been defended by thinkers associated with the tradition of "philosophical anthropology," such as Adolf Portmann 1944 [1990], 1964; Helmuth Plessner 1928 (discussed above); Arnold Gehlen 1940; and Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann 1960. Such views have also found a hearing among thinkers associated with "developmental systems theory" – see, for instance, John Dupré's account of the complete and subsequently theoretically inseparable convergence of evolutionary and cultural history in the course of human history (Dupré 2001, Ch. 5); Tim Ingold's anthropology (Ingold 2009); and Lenny Moss's recent work at the intersection of genetics and philosophy. See Moss 2006 for discussion of the way in which a looser fit between genotype and phenotype may be at the root of human developmental plasticity; and Moss and Pavesich 2011 for applications of this perspective to social theory.

[233] The modern question of what "culture" is and how it may be understood could be said to have begun with Herder, Vico, and Rouseau. It remains an open one today. I discuss the question in more detail in Ch. 4, below. It bears noting here that human beings are not the only creatures that have transmissible, non-species-typical behavior – or, one might say, habitual or intelligent, goal-directed behavior acquired in part through imitation of (or, perhaps, some other forms of interaction with) conspecifics. See Laland and Galef

(iii) are not sufficiently ascribable is not "human" in the normal (that is, species-typical) sense. Non-human animal cases of "tradition" or "culture" are – exactly as one might expect if the argument that (i)-(iii) apply to a greater extent in the human case than elsewhere is valid – describable as an intermediate state on this continuum between the completely human, or "personal," and the not human, or "impersonal."[234]

The extent of the difference in form of life between a cultural animal and a non-cultural animal is comparable to that between a terrestrial and a sea-based animal, or between single-celled and multi-celled organisms. In the latter cases, too, there are transitional forms ("amphibians"; slime-molds), but there are also fundamental differences between the extremes that define the spectrum: for instance, between the kind of niche exploited in sea-based and terrestrial forms, or between the kind of organization of single-celled and multi-celled organisms. The thesis defended here rests not so much on the claim that there is a difference in kind between human and non-human animals, but rather on the claim that there is a difference in kind between a *cultural* and a *non-cultural* animal form of life. This difference is one that human lives are, for the most part, entirely on one side of, while non-human animal lives are, comparatively, so far almost always entirely on the other. The emergence of the human form of life in evolutionary history may be understood as a real novel event within the history of life on earth, insofar as it marks the advent of a form of life whose survival, under the species-typical

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2009 for recent discussion; also, Boyd and Richerson 2005 for explanation of the implications, for evolutionary and anthropological theory, of this conception of culture.

[234] For discussion of such cases of animal culture, see Laland and Galef 2009.

description, depends on exploitation of a previously largely unexploited ecological niche: the niche of culture itself in the sense described. Whatever "laws" apply to other niches may not be presumed, without argument, to also apply to this one.[235]

A fairly precise articulation of what is distinctive about the human form of life can be given as a set of three distinctive features, all of which "arise together": physiological preparedness for cultural transformation and for subsequent "carrying"[236] of and by culture; a culture – that is, a dynamic, historically contingent, artifactual environment in which such transformation and "carrying" can and does take place; and an ongoing process of such mutual "carrying" between ourselves and our actions, on the one hand, and one or more cultural traditions or frameworks, on the other. The difference between human beings and other animals, then, is not any less "fundamental" than that between single celled and multi-celled organisms; between plants and animals; or between terrestrial and sea-based animals.[237]

This answer to the human distinctiveness question suggests that many of the *prima facie* distinctive features of the human form of life arise together. We should thus

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[235] This conclusion echoes Max Scheler's prescient argument for the "autonomy" of the cultural (*geistlich*) sphere from the orderings of the physical and biological (or simply living) spheres. See Scheler 1928a.

[236] "Carrying" [*tragenden*] is Plessner's term: it captures the sense in which we live our lives through culture as a natural environment and medium (that is, culture carries us); and we ourselves perpetuate and maintain culture in our action (that is, we carry culture). See Plessner 1928 and Grene 1974

[237] What about the case of bat sonar? Is bat sonar a marker of a completely distinctive, "bat" way of life? Even if it is, admitting as much does not detract from the plausibility of the thesis defended here. The question of the distinctiveness of an attribute, and the question of its value, are obviously logically distinct. If we value what, most basically, makes the distinctive features of our way of life possible, this is only because we value that way of life and what is characteristic of it, not *because* it is distinctive.

seek to understand them not as deriving from some single principle or attribute, but rather as characteristic of an entirely different style of interaction between organism and environment and as serving this style of interaction. For instance, increased manual dexterity (opposable thumbs), increased brain size (which facilitates cognitive powers such as imagination, classification, memory, and inference), and development of precise and efficient speech capability (formation of the larynx) may be understood as physiological evidence or signs of this different way of life, but no one of them can be treated as its primary or fundamental "cause." Likewise, the important empirical question of what sequence of developments in the hominid line produced the changes that have led to this "distinctively human" way of life should not be allowed to obscure the ontological, phenomenological, or definitional question of what this way of life is.

The role of language

The thesis that historically-contingent "artifactual mediacy" characterizes individual and social processes in the human case to a greater degree than it does in non-human animal cases will be strengthened if natural languages can themselves be shown to be artifacts and to be contingently historically mediated. The centrality and significance of language to the human form of life is undeniable. It might be classified as an instance or extension of a general capacity for production and interpretation of symbols – a feature one might call "symbolic responsiveness" – but if it is one semiotic condition or process among others, it is nonetheless clearly a special kind of semiotic condition or process.[238]

[238] Thus, for instance, Gadamer once raised the question, about Cassirer's "philosophy of symbolic forms,"

Here I will argue that human linguistic abilities are structurally continuous with other forms of animal communication, yet distinct from most other cases of animal communication in being more highly historically-contingently mediated. Indeed, human language may be construed as a variant or development within the genre of those historically-contingent, artifactual systems that mediate organism-environment interactions. Wherever historically-contingent symbolic systems and abilities to respond to such systems are co-present, these would tend to enable new forms of mediation – that is, new kinds of organism-environment interaction – incomparable to those possible among animals without access to specifically historically-contingent symbolic forms of mediation.[239] According to this picture, human language is evolutionarily continuous with, yet structurally distinct in comparison with, various forms of non-human animal communication. It emerges from the general dynamics of human action, including the mediation of that action by non-linguistic artifactual conditions (technological, experiential, non-linguistic semiotic, and social); and it makes extremely powerful subsequent contributions, in dynamic conjunction with these other conditions, to the flexibility and efficiency of human actions.[240]

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of whether language was a symbolic form or rather the condition of there being any symbolic forms at all. Gadamer 1960 [2006], p. 405

[239] The formulation is guided, in part, by Gehlen 1940 [1988]

[240] It is at present an open question, and an extremely important one, to what extent and in what ways human linguistic ability is itself mediated by "natural" factors such as the evolutionary history of the species and the species-typical physiology (including the structure of the human brain) that has resulted from the evolutionary process. I will discuss this further in the following chapter. I take it that the account provided here begs no questions in regards to this controversy, except to say that both "conventional" and "natural" factors are relevant to human linguistic behavior and that much of the *uniqueness* of human

Linguistic mediation is particularly important in the formation and maintenance of both human selves and human institutions. Human selves are both objects of biological science and objects of other linguistically- and culturally-mediated concerns. The kinds of selves that humans have are constitutively mediated by historically-contingent artifactual symbolic systems. It is part of what human beings *are* (in the species-typical cases) that they can be understood by others like them, and can likewise understand these others, in a way that is mediated by language; that they can classify, and can be classified – in a manner mediated by language and social institutions – by others, and thus can "self-create" (as Korsgaard describes). For all of these reasons, language, understood as one kind of historically-contingent symbolic system, is a pre-requisite of the kind of selfhood that appears, species-typically, in the human case – that is, the kind of simultaneous *referring* and *being referred to* that is mediated by language. In other words: language is a condition of possibility of persons. And organic life responsive to historically-contingent artifactual systems – as is given by species-typical human physiology – is a condition of possibility of language.

"Person" is not solely or primarily a biological category: it originates from the sphere of the practical, practicing, and engaged lives of persons themselves, lives which depend (in their characteristic "inner" and "outer" features) on participation in culture, where this includes and depends on historically-contingent, artifactual conditions. The

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communicative abilities, and the other abilities that that uniqueness enables, can be traced to the "natural" (i.e. species-typical) role of "conventional" factors in the (species-typical) functioning of language in human life.

concrete character of the personal, in any instance, depends on the languages to which the personal organism responds, and by means of which it self-expresses; the institutions in the broad sense (where these form part of the socially- and artifactually-mediated environment of the organism); and the history that gives those institutions and that language their powers.[241] Because these factors are not simply biological ones (or, not biological in the "narrow" sense), persons are not simply biological entities either. They cannot be effectively theoretically accessed by means of the discourse of biology alone. Yet we also see that such "transformation" of a human organism into a person does depend on physiological capabilities of the transformed organism, and thus that this process of transformation, which is also not simply a biological process, is still such that it is mediated – though not necessarily constrained or determined – by the physiology (and, more distantly, the evolutionary historical origins) of the organism itself.[242]

We should also not forget that the very description and interpretation of the topics of this text (the one before you) – as with all linguistically-articulated descriptions and interpretations whatsoever – is mediated by the linguistic abilities of those doing the describing and interpreting and the specific tokens making up their utterances. So the very isolation of the phenomena to be understood or explained by us in our project, or by anyone else in any similar project, is itself a process that is mediated and hence has

[241] It's possible that language itself may be interpreted as an institution in the broad sense. I'll not insist on one or another classification here.

[242] Such examples of "natural mediation" are discussed further in Ch. 4.

certain *conditions*.[243] We ultimately must acknowledge the significance of the mediation of our linguistically-articulated descriptions, explanations, and interpretations by the language in which we offer them. The way in which language conditions philosophical inquiry and philosophical practice itself – indeed, practice throughout the sciences, human or otherwise – is an important fact, to which the account offered here readily directs our attention.

While the personal is an "achievement" of an organism and may be explained in terms of its conditions of possibility (physiological, historical, etc.), which conditions are themselves mediating factors in the process that is this organism's life, there is no *a priori* reason why a non-human animal could not also achieve personhood. Pets, linguistically-empowered non-human primates, and dolphins that communicate with their human trainers, for instance, constitute potential cases of non-human animal personhood, or at least cases where non-human animals seem to participate in what might be called "the personal." The question of what is "biologically normal" for members of a given species, and of what a person is (constitutively), simply come apart, except for the important fact that it is species-typical for human animals to become persons, something

[243] Linguistic mediation is thus a part of, and is often itself partly an instance of, "interpretive mediation" as described below (in Ch. 4). The point accommodates the observations of Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and many others about the effects of grammar on philosophical thought. See Nietzsche 1886, Wittgenstein 1953. In later sections of Part 2 of *Der Mensch* (1940), Gehlen interestingly stresses the materiality of language – that is, the way in which linguistic tokens (words and other expressions) serve as concrete, manipulable tokens for human speakers and thinkers. The point coincides with a "constructivist" interpretation of the role of language in human thought and action, and suggests comparison with Lévi-Strauss's concept of "bricolage." See Gehlen 1940 [1988] and Lévi-Strauss 1962 [1966], pp. 1-33, especially pp. 16-22.

that appears not to be the case for non-human animals.

A distinctive self?

But is the human kind of selfhood really a distinctive feature of its form of life? Self-recognition, or sense of "personal identity," among human beings, is likewise something that is both continuous with and distinct from similar forms of self-relation in non-human animal and even plant cases.[244] Nonetheless, selfhood in the human sense is extraordinarily rare.

By a "self" I mean an entity that can represent itself. This entails both (a) the *capacity to represent*, and (b) the functioning of this capacity in such a way that the *representer* is, or readily may be, the object of its own representations.[245] Insofar as an organism both *represents* and *is represented* by its representations, it has a self. What is crucial for this definition of selfhood is just that a single organism, considered as a unity, be both a representer and be represented by its own representation.

There is no such "space" wherein a plant can be said to "be itself *to* itself." Nonetheless, it is possible that parts of a tree, for instance, respond to chemical productions of the tree itself, or to environmental alterations it has itself brought about, in

[244] At a basic level, it's continuous with the identity of any living thing, as intuitively defined by its bodily boundaries. See the early chapters of Plessner 1928 and Varela 1991.

[245] Unlike the interpretive context wherein the traditional philosophical problem of "personal identity" arises, there is no metaphysical puzzle about how to correctly identify the representer *representing* and the representer *represented*, since the framework approaches this representing and represented organism from a third-person perspective wherein any questions of its "identity" in this sense are entirely trivial.

ways that approach or are continuous with the relation between organism and environment that we think of as characteristic of human selfhood. There do seem to be relations of the tree to itself – whether within physical space (within its environment), or within some subconscious space internal to the organism, or both. Such responses are the precursors of human selfhood, insofar as they involve a change in the behavior (or, the course of life) of the organism itself on the basis of the effects of its prior behavior (or prior course of life). But do these relations of the tree to itself represent the organism as a whole to itself as a whole? It seems that the tree is related to itself in a number of ways, but not in the form of representing itself to itself.

Many lower animal forms of life, likewise, have only very limited and disunified physiological and behavioral capacities for such acts. These organisms have too decentralized a system of functional cycles (that is, action-perception cycles) to be said to represent much of anything at all.[246] This is to be contrasted with the case of the "higher" animals, such as dogs, apes, and humans, which seem to be able to learn – that is, to develop individual patterns of behavior that can be creatively combined in the further behavior of the organism. It seems that in the latter cases, but not in the former, we must envision some kind of internal or external-behavioral representational "space" wherein these individual patterns of behavior are stored and can influence one another, and these begin to approximate to the distinctive structure of selfhood.

In sum, condition (a) above rules out a plant or lower-animal "self" only to the

[246] Uexküll 1934 [2010], Plessner 1928

degree to which such organisms' proto-representational systems do not form the kind of unity that would allow for these systems to count as representational systems at all. Condition (b), however, rules out plant and lower-animal selves much more thoroughly, insofar as few or none of these organisms' proto-representational systems have as their unified representational object the entirety of the organism itself, and few or none allow for the distinction of the entirety of this organism (or very much of this organism) from its surroundings in a unified way. Some higher animals, however, meet conditions (a) and (b), and thus may be said to have selves of some kind.

As is well-known, the notion of "representation" is a complex and multivalent one. There are cognitive as well as linguistic representations, and there are a variety of symbolic representations that are not wholly linguistic. Particularly relevant for what distinguishes the species-typical form of human selves from those of higher non-human animals are these socially-centered forms of representation – that is, forms of representation that rely on the existence of certain social structures in order to be representations, or to be the representations that they are. These are forms of representation that are constitutively dependent on social factors. Some organisms can be related to themselves in ways that are mediated by such socially-centered forms of representation. This introduces the possibility of constitutively socially-mediated varieties of selfhood. And mediation by such socially-centered representations does indeed appear to be a *pre-requisite* of selfhood in the species-typical human sense, as Mead, Plessner, and others have argued. The vocabulary and grammar of a natural language – in short, the so-called "rules" of a natural language – are socially-centered in

the sense just described, and they are among the most important mediating factors in human self- and other-representation.[247] Furthermore, the categories or "types" recognized in natural languages, as well as in social practices, in norms, and in institutions, are all examples of socially-centered forms of representation that, species-typically, constitutively mediate both the behavior of human organisms and the emergence of human selves. These socially-centered representational factors also mediate the ongoing conduct, that is, the lives and practices – including dreams, decisions, failures and successes – of these selves.

What is important here, however, is not *just* that human selfhood is mediated by the socially-centered form of representation that is human language, but additionally the distinctive qualities of human language in comparison with non-human animal organisms' systems of communication. These include the historically contingent quality of the former and the mutual-constitution of language and selfhood with other mediating factors typical of the human case and rare in non-human cases – in particular, with highly centralized, "representational" experience and with historically contingent social institutions. These "historically-contingent social institutions" include consciously appropriated and concretely (objectively) recorded histories; social and political hierarchies, organizations, and decision-procedures; artifactual sculptings of natural environments; systems of thought; and non-linguistic or only quasi-linguistic symbolic systems, whether cognitively, socially (for instance, "orally"), or concretely maintained.

[247] The analysis here owes a distant debt to Wittgenstein 1953.

What is collected here is often referred to by the name of "culture," though too often this last notion has been left unanalyzed, or analyzed only abominably imprecisely.[248] Thus the answer to the question of the distinctiveness of human selves may be said to turn on the special role of culture (so understood) in the formation, maintenance, and functioning of human selves. It bears emphasizing, again, that this thesis has little explanatory value apart from a clear and thorough analysis of what culture itself *is*. The analysis of the following chapter offers an explication of that complex term, as well as the (equally complex) idea of a human "nature" that transcends or undergirds this "culture."

[248] In Ch. 4 I offer some more detailed reflection on the question, "What is culture?"

CHAPTER 4

HUMAN SYSTEMS AND THE ANALYSIS OF ORGANISM-ENVIRONMENT MEDIATION: FRAMEWORK FOR A PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Introduction

In this chapter I offer a general framework for modeling and studying human systems. By "human systems" I mean such things as human organisms, human lives, human societies, and human practices. Human systems share the feature that they involve human organisms as principal components or factors. Human systems – including human organisms themselves, in most cases – can fairly be described, in comparison with other systems (of whatever sort: natural, logical, hypothetical, or otherwise), as unusually complex processes that display unusually dense concentrations of causal power. The framework sorts these systems, and models of these systems, in terms of the ways the human organisms that partially constitute the systems are mediated in their relationships to external conditions via technological, social, interpretive, and other factors. By extension, the framework also suggests analyses of mediated relations between non-human organisms and their environments, as well as – by a more tenuous analogy –social systems and their "exterior" conditions. This framework draws its inspiration from the tradition of "philosophical anthropology," as well as recent work in developmental systems theory.[249]

[249] For philosophical anthropology, see Plessner 1928, Gehlen 1940, and Schacht 1990. For developmental

In the first part of the chapter, I develop the main concepts of the framework, such as the concept of organism-environment interaction and the concept of "mediation." I provide an initial analysis of some theoretically significant kinds of mediation. Finally, I show how the framework can begin to be applied to three issues that have long occupied theoreticians in philosophy, human biology, and the social sciences – namely, the question of the definition (and relation to one another) of the concepts of "nature" and "culture"; the question of the scope and sources of the diversity of human forms of life; and the question of the relation between "facts" and "interpretations" in research into human systems.

The Framework in Outline

The framework may be initially characterized by the following commitments:

(i) Human beings are interpreted as organisms in dynamic interaction with their environments

(ii) Such interactions are studied, described, compared, and analyzed in terms of what factors support, enable, or otherwise "make a difference to" the behavior of the organism within the environment: the term "mediating factor" will be used to refer to such entities, conditions, or processes – in other words, to those factors that mediate the relation of organism and environment.[250]

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systems theory, see Oyama 2000, Moss 2001, 2005, and the papers in Oyama, Griffiths, and Gray 2001.

[250]Other human systems (societies, traditions), non-human living systems, and even non-living systems may similarly be described as being "mediated" by factors of various kinds; and it will sometimes be useful

(iii) The analysis of these mediating factors is itself constituted and mediated "in the first person," that is, in the approach taken by the theorist, in ways that are continuous with and comparable to the varieties of mediation that it studies "in the third person," that is, in the organism-environment interaction that it is studying.[251]

(iv) These factors include a kind of constitution or mediation that is essentially open-ended and interpretive.

In sum, the framework treats human forms of life as mediated interactions between human organisms and environments.[252] Such a framework is also characterized by the heed it pays to the variety of factors, observable within this interaction, relevant to the interpretation, understanding, and explanation of aspects of human forms of life. These factors include those from both sides of a number of contested divisions: "mental" and "bodily," "social" and "individual," and "natural" and "cultural." They span any imagined gulf between so-called biological and non-biological (or "super"-biological) sciences: for instance, they include social, technological, linguistic, symbolic,

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to analyze non-mediating *causal* and *constitutive* factors (as well as causally and constitutively mediating factors). These distinctions will be further addressed in what follows, though my focus here is on organism-environment interactions and the various ways in which these may be mediated.

[251] This commitment rules out arguments from the "privacy" of mental states. For the most part, I won't argue for it directly here, but rather just assume it.

[252] The term "form of life," with its admirable ambiguity between biological and cultural-anthropological significance, is borrowed, of course, from Wittgenstein 1953. See also its recent development in Thompson 2008.

experiential, physiological, evolutionary-historical, developmental, and ecological factors.

Commitment (i) above – the interpretation of human beings as organisms in dynamic interaction with environments – will be familiar to students of 19th and 20th century philosophy, biology, and the social sciences. The conception of living systems as dynamic interactions between organisms and environments appears to have risen to prominence for the first time in the biological science of the 19th century. It is a crucial assumption of Lamarckian and Darwinian accounts of evolution, for instance. It has subsequently had diverse (though by no means dominant) influence in 20th century philosophy and the human sciences.[253] It characterizes the work of many figures in the pragmatist tradition of philosophy, such as John Dewey and George Herbert Mead; many contributors to early 20th century anthropology, such as Frans Boas, Stanislaw Malinowski, and Ruth Benedict; the entire tradition of behaviorist psychology and, more recently, of extended and dynamical cognitive systems; the developmental systems theory of Susan Oyama, John Griffiths, Lenny Moss, and others; and Hans Joas's sociological action theory (itself strongly influenced by Dewey and Mead).[254] It also

[253] The historical origins of the idea of "organism-environment interaction" remain unclear to me. See Cheung 2006 and Pearce 2010 for (opposed) suggestions about these origins. Pearce notes that this use of the terms "organism" and "environment" first arose, in English, in Herbert Spencer's sociology, while Cheung points to the changing meaning of the term "organism" in the course of the 16th to 18th century (in Latin, French, German, and English language literatures), and highlights the relevance of 18th century French "milieu" theories for the growing significance of the "environmental" in the explanation of the typical manner of being of living things.

[254] See Dewey 1924, Mead 1934, Benedict 1934, Oyama 1985, 2002; Oyama, Griffiths and Gray 2001; Joas 1996; Joas and Honneth 1988. Regarding developmental systems theory, see also Dupré 2001 and Keller 2010.

characterizes the major works of the Weimar-era "philosophical anthropologists" Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen, who seem to have largely inherited the organism-environment model from the early 20th century biologist and founder of ethology Jakob von Uexküll.[255]

The framework's focus on the interaction between the human being and its environment, broadly construed, is supplemented by commitment (iii): the assumption that this interaction can be approached either from a third-person perspective that an observer takes towards an object of study, or within a first-person perspective that the observer (as an interpreting being) has available in his or her "own person." The interaction of human being and environment is recognized as "the same event" understood from two perspectives, though the perspectives themselves differ in important ways, which have consequences for the analysis.[256] This framework for describing and analyzing aspects of human forms of life – including agency, selfhood, cognition, and experience – begins from a third-person perspective. It approaches human beings as types of object or process encountered in experience. It connects its perception and description of human beings (that is, human organisms, selves or agents) to these human beings' context or situation, and it takes the human being's relation to an external context, situation, or environment to be the basic vantage point from which its analyses will be

[255] Scheler 1927, Plessner 1928, Gehlen 1940, Uexküll 1909, 1920, 1934. See Chs. 1-2 for discussion. For attribution of such an approach to Scheler, Plessner, and Gehlen, see Fischer 2009b. Regarding the influence of Uexküll on Plessner and Gehlen, see Winthrop-Young 2010.

[256] On the relation between 1st and 3rd person perspectives in classical philosophical anthropology, see Fischer 2009b.

conducted. Understanding the objects and processes in question may require further investigation into the bodily constitution, the behavior, or the experience (the record of and response to external events) of human beings; it may also or otherwise require further investigation into the environment in which, and in dynamic relation with which, these human beings pass through their changing states.[257]

Arguments for the Framework

What are the reasons for adopting this framework as the basic standpoint from which we study human systems (and perhaps, by analogy, other livings systems and forms of life)? Why adopt such a standpoint rather than, say, a first-person phenomenological or introspective standpoint (as have Cartesian epistemological philosophies, neo-Kantianism, and Husserlian phenomenology)? Or a naturalistic standpoint verging on reductionism (as in philosophical behaviorism and the positivistic unity-of-science movement)? Or a fundamental ontological inquiry (as in Heidegger)? Or a positioned, angular intervention in an ongoing historical, cultural, and political conversation – a project of "orientation," heterodox or otherwise (as in Nietzsche, Adorno, and Foucault)?[258]

Historically, the best defenses for choosing something like this framework as an

[257] Commitments (ii) and (iv) will be foci of later sections. I pass over them for now.

[258] To some extent, the framework I offer is compatible with adoption of these other perspectives within particular contexts of interpretation or analysis, just as these other frameworks may admit the adoption of this one for limited concerns. Yet there remains the question of methodological or explanatory priority.

initial or foundational perspective for philosophy and the human sciences have been given by three groups: defenders of pragmatism in philosophy; biological thinkers especially attuned to the significance of the environment for the understanding of the life processes and behavior of individual organisms; and the Weimar-era philosophical anthropologists.[259] These arguments include the following:

(a) Regarding controversies about inner states (including, say, the inner-states of non-human animals), as well as other ontologically or epistemologically controversial entities (the "meanings" of linguistic tokens and cultural practices, for instance), commitments (i) and (iii) allow disputing parties to appeal to publically-available evidence.[260] This argument alone is one that would equally support methodological behaviorism. However, the hermeneutic dimension of the framework as a whole – captured in commitment (iv) above and discussed further in later sections – distinguishes this framework from any traditional behaviorism.

(b) The framework appropriately highlights the role of natural and social environments in a number of agential processes – for instance, perception, action, social relations and responsibilities, and reflection. In this regard, the framework is consistent with the strongest trends of 20th century social and cultural anthropology, science and technology studies, situated and dynamical cognitive science, and developmental biology and "developmentalist" evolutionary theory.

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[259] For instance: Joas 1996; Oyama 1985, 2002; Oyama, Griffiths and Gray 2001; Grene 1974, 1995; Plessner 1928; Gehlen 1940.

[260] However, we would not want to ignore the difficulties that attend the notion of the "publically available."

(c) The framework makes instantly available to analysis a variety of philosophically and causally significant attributes of human subjects, selves, or agents – such as their capacities as actors, thinkers, perceivers, occupiers of social roles, and so on – in ways that first-person perspectives or ontological perspectives often do not. The relative weakness of first-person perspectives derives from their being too "dug in" to the first-personal standpoint of the individual self to allow ready access to in-principle publically-available features relevant to the explanation of action, thought, perception, and sociality. The relative weakness of ontological perspectives, on the other hand, derives from their focus being too "dispersed" and equivocal among the variety of forms of being, rather than focused on the beings that an approach to human systems and forms of life (and perhaps, by extension, living systems and non-human forms of life) seeks to interpret and understand.[261]

(d) The framework further allows ready inquiry into the causal and constitutive interdependencies of various features of processes of organism-environment interaction. Which of these – form of communication, social structure, specific technologies, physiological features, etc. – serve as enabling or constraining conditions of which others? Which can, in combination, generate creative or destructive interference with which others? Which are relatively independent of which others, that is, can increase or

[261] It is true, as Heidegger effectively argued against philosophical anthropology in Heidegger 1929 [1997], that the ontological problematic is not exhausted by the anthropological problematic. But our concern here is with living and human systems in particular, so ontology tout court is a field of overly large scope for our purposes. And, incidentally, Heidegger's actual practice in the body of *Sein und Zeit* reveals a greater affinity with a standpoint that is "humanistic" or "human-centered" (in this sense) than his construal of the "analytic of Dasein" as only in service to a "fundamental ontology" suggests. See Heidegger 1927 [1962], sect. 1-11.

decrease – within a defined range, perhaps – without changing the effects that the others have on some behavior? Adoption of the framework clarifies what kind of evidence is relevant to answering these questions and what answers the evidence more or less strongly supports.

(e) The framework facilitates interdisciplinary research, and development of interdisciplinary methodologies, by allowing for ready comparison of philosophical and empirical theses and perspectives pertaining to the description and understanding of human beings, including those paradigmatic of various empirical sciences, such as biology, sociology, psychology, and cultural anthropology, and allows for an interdisciplinary comparison and integration among findings and theses of these various empirical and philosophical disciplines.

The concept of mediation

The term and concept of "mediation" already has widespread use in philosophy – for instance, in Hegel and Hegelianism, Gadamer's hermeneutics, Plessner's philosophical anthropology, and recent work on philosophical anthropology.[262] My use of

[262] See Gadamer 1960, Plessner 1928, Schacht 1990, and Moss 2001, 2005, and 2006, discussed further below. Regarding the use of the term in Hegel, see Inwood 1992. There has also been ongoing debate, in modern philosophy, about the extent to which the self's access to the world is *immediate* or *mediate*. The idea that certain forms of knowledge are *immediate* has a source in Descartes and Locke, among others. The idea of immediate knowledge has recently been criticized by Sellars and MacDowell, who trace their criticism, obliquely, to Hegel. For instance, Sellars writes of "Hegel, that great foe of 'immediacy,'" in Sellars 1963b [1991], p. 127. The location of the idea in Hegel is not mistaken: Hegel frequently notes the *vermittelt* (mediated) or *unmittelbar* (immediate) status of what he discusses. See the entry on "Mediation and immediacy" in Inwood 1992. Yet Hegel applies these terms in a bafflingly wide variety of contexts – to the middle term of a syllogism "mediating" between the major and minor terms, for instance, or to

the term signifies the presence and functioning of a factor that, by its presence and functioning, changes the character and results of a process. The factor responsible for the changes I call the "mediating factor," while the process or entity changed I call the "mediated factor." The concept of a mediating factor is like that of a catalyst in chemistry: it picks out one relevant substance or force from a complex process and highlights how the process would be affected by the introduction or deletion of that single substance or force. The presence or absence of such factors results in changes of various sorts depending upon other details of the state of the system studied.[263]

Discrimination, labeling, and analysis of mediating factors relevant to the constitution of, origination of, or change in human systems are already familiar practices within the human sciences: as, for instance, in attempts to evaluate the influence that a change in genetic code would have on an action of a certain type, the differential effects of types of linguistic categorization on perception, or the way in which a change of price affects effective consumer demand. The framework developed here is intended, in part, to provide methodological support for, and to lend consistency of self-understanding to, such already common practices of studying, modeling, and analyzing human systems.

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negotiation or exchange between two independent forces or elements. I hope to be less baffling in my present treatment, though my use of the term retains some connection to Hegel.

[263] Whether a mediating factor is to be counted a "cause" or not, and whether mediating factors are or are not the only sorts of things that causes are, are legitimate questions, but not ones I'll try to address here. My intuition is that mediating factors are one kind of cause. It might be interesting to compare the account of mediation developed here with Woodward's "interventionist" theory of causation: see Woodward 2003.

Schacht's "transcendental mediation"

In an article devoted to making methodological suggestions for philosophical anthropology, Richard Schacht describes a task he calls "transcendental mediation."[264] This task, first of all, involves a reflective estimation of the scope, limits, and mutual consistency of various disciplinary perspectives on human beings: for instance, those associated with sociology, history, evolutionary biology, neuroscience, and so on. Secondly, it involves an inquiry into the conditions of possibility of each of these disciplinary perspectives themselves. The first of these Schacht calls the Hegelian, "mediation" component of philosophical anthropology; the second he calls the Kantian, "transcendental" component.

I take Schacht's "transcendental mediation" to describe an inquiry that would concern itself primarily with the question of the conditions of applicability of various modes of interpretation to human life.[265] Yet this task includes, as one of the many subtasks that could be collected under its general description, an inquiry into the conditions of possibility of particular states or attributes of particular forms of human life.

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[264] Schacht 1990, especially pp. 171-2. Schacht construes "philosophical anthropology" as the philosophy of human nature – that is, a conceptually sophisticated inquiry into human nature – and notes its continuity with the 20th century continental European tradition of philosophical anthropology, that is, the work of Scheler, Plessner, Gehlen, and related figures.

[265] In this regard, Schacht's approach is perhaps more similar to Cassirer's "anthropogeny" – as proposed in Cassirer 1928 – or even to Cassirer's "philosophy of symbolic forms" as a whole, as in Cassirer 1923-9 [1955-7], than it is to the programs of Scheler, Plessner, or Gehlen. Cassirer's anthropogeny sought to order the various perspectives on human beings provided by humanly-applicable scientific disciplines in terms of their greater or lesser distance from "organic life." Cassirer's preference for "anthropogeny" might be described as a middle-ground position between his idealistic philosophy of symbolic forms and the organically-grounded perspective of Scheler and Plessner.

In other words: it allows for the question to be posed of what must be the case in order for humans to have (say) language, history, art, religion, a plastic technological culture, a relatively highly plastic social organization, "rational" thought, "morality," and so on, at the same time it asks after the conditions of possibility of the applicability to human life of the modes of interpretation roughly associated with various scientific disciplines. Thus, while Schacht's description of the task of "transcendental mediation" focuses on mediation of disciplines, I believe should not ultimately be divorced from the question of the various ways in which human life itself, considered as an interpreted unity, is mediated, and how these various mediating conditions are to be theoretically integrated into our models of human perception and action. Here I believe the selection of organism-environment interaction as a starting point for a philosophical anthropological interpretive framework provides a needed supplement to – or, at the very least, a valid subsidiary task of – Schacht's "transcendental mediation" project. Furthermore, adoption of such a framework not only suggests the possibility of a more concrete and thorough analysis of other issues with which Schacht believes philosophical anthropology should be concerned (such as embodiment and historicity[266]) but also provides further support for the value and validity of the project of "transcendental mediation" itself.

It might be objected here that this move unjustifiably assigns privilege to biological or biologistic models of human beings, such as the model of organism-environment interaction, and thus restricts the full scope of philosophical anthropology in

[266] Schacht 1990, pp. 167-175.

a naturalist (and just one sort of naturalist) direction. If the various disciplinary perspectives recognized in Schacht's "transcendental mediation" project do not always conform to such models, then why suppose these models have privileged explanatory status?

In answer to this point, a defender of commitment (i) – that is, that human beings and human systems be treated primarily as complex interactions between organisms and environments – might fall back on the reasons given for this commitment (defended by pragmatists, developmentalist biological thinkers, and the classical philosophical anthropologists) in previous sections. It might further be pointed out that the framework as a whole recognizes the ubiquity of "interpretive" mediation of the organism-environment interactions it describes, which would be understood as one of the conditions of possibility of the emergence both of the organism-environment models and of perspectives that contradict the assumptions of those models.[267] This means that adherents of the framework developed here can consistently accept and integrate the existence and even legitimacy of alternative "metaphysical" or "ontological" or "grounding" frameworks for "transcendental mediation" projects within the organism-environment framework itself.[268] Finally, the defender may restrict the claimed privilege of the framework to those discursive contexts wherein biological factors are in play and

[267] This ubiquity of "interpretive" mediation is commitment (iv) above, discussed further in the next section.

[268] But this is a non-answer, in a way, since the potential inclusiveness of the view does not speak to the truth of its basic assumptions.

reductionism is at issue. In these contexts, adoption of the framework "immunizes" even idealistic, hermeneutic, and non-naturalistic perspectives against reductive naturalization by elucidating the consistency of these perspectives with all of the evidence reductive naturalism supposes to be in its favor.[269] I take it that none of these arguments are decisive, but they do help to motivate commitment (i) as a founding assumption in taking up Schacht's project of "transcendental mediation."

"Mediation" in Moss's philosophy of biology

In literature at the intersection of biology, philosophy, and the human sciences, the term "mediation" is already often used to refer to ways in which processes can have effects upon one another without assuming that these effects are "caused" by one another in any of the philosophically canonical ways, nor that they constitute entirely new processes.[270] In most of these uses, the mediating process makes a difference to the character or the history of the mediated process, even while the identity of the mediated process is neither constituted nor compromised by the mediating process. In some cases, the mediating process may in fact "constitute" or lead to the dissolution of the mediated

[269] Plessner 1928 suggests this as a primary motivation for his turn to "philosophy of nature" as a supplement to "philosophical anthropology." He writes: "If, therefore, [in the wake of modern biological science,] the cultural [*Geistige*] is not to turn out, according to well-known prescriptions, to be a simple superstructure of a determined kind of animal being, and thereby only be a biological form helping the old naturalism to victory, then it seems valuable to fix the ties of nature and culture [*Geist*] and the position of human beings from a new perspective." Plessner 1928, p. 4; SOBM, pp. 4-5, translation modified

[270] The relation between the concepts of "mediation," "causation," and "constitution" is discussed further in the subsection "Causation, constitution, and mediation" below.

process; but, in most, the unity of the mediated process is an assumption of the analysis, and the mediating process is interpreted as making a difference to the character or history of the mediated process, but not otherwise being responsible for its identity (i.e. "constituting it") or its happening (i.e. "causing it").

In Lenny Moss's recent work on the philosophy of human genetics, for example, the life-histories and agency of organisms are described as mediating factors in processes of gene-expression.[271] There is no reason not to speak in a similar way about the mediation of any system or process by any other system or process (say, gene-expression in an individual organism's physiology or behavior mediated by the social organization of a population; or the life-history or agency of the organism mediated by genes or gene-expressions; or a population's social structure mediated by the action of influential individuals). In general, such "mediating" factors must be influential enough upon the mediated system to really make a difference to the character or history of the system, without being so influential as to change the classification of the system or destroy it.

Plessner on mediation [*Vermittlung*]

In *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* (1928), Helmuth Plessner employed a concept of mediation [*Vermittlung*] in his analysis of the various ways in which human and non-human organisms are dynamically related to their environments.[272]

[271] Moss 2001, 2005, 2006, and Moss and Pavesich 2011

[272] Plessner 1928

Plessner argued that each "higher" stage of organic existence involves an additional level of reflexivity in comparison with the stage below it, with humans occupying the point of maximum possible reflexivity in this sequence.[273] The degree of reflexivity correlates to, and, in a way, is measured by, the complexity of the mediation [*Vermittlung*] between organism and environment.[274] In terms of this Plessnerian concept of mediation [*Vermittlung*], plants generally have a less complexly mediated relation to their environments than animals insofar as their growth, development and reproduction run parallel to the flows of energy and matter necessary for these processes.[275] Animals exhibit a more complexly mediated relation to their environments than do plants insofar as animals' greater internal differentiation through formation of organs, and their greater power of movement, entail greater opposition between the flows of energy and matter in the environment and their bodily growth and development than in the case of plants.[276] "Higher" animals – roughly, those with a central nervous system – exhibit even more complex forms of environmental mediacy than "lower" animals insofar as the higher animals can form responses to changes in the environment in more nuanced ways through the mediating influence of a unified field of perception or "consciousness" as well as

[273] See Grene 1974 and Ch. 2 above for a more detailed review of Plessner's argument.

[274] Plessner 1928. See also Grene 1974

[275] Plessner 1928, Ch. 5, sect. 5

[276] Plessner 1928, Ch. 5, sect. 6

memory and learning.[277] The behavior of higher animals may be said to be mediated by their prior experiences and their future anticipations; thus they break with their environment along the dimension of time.[278] Finally, in comparing human beings to non-human animals, we may be said to see an increase in mediacy analogous to what appears in the comparison of animals and plants, or higher animals and lower animals. The additional mediation is between the bodily form, on the one hand, and the organism's identity, on the other, and Plessner writes, provocatively, that this is only possible if the "center" of the organism is situated not only in its body but also outside of it. This is Plessner's thesis of the "ex-centric position" of human beings: a suggestive restatement of the thesis that human beings are distinguished from non-human animals in the type and degree of their awareness of themselves.[279]

Varieties of Mediation

According to the framework developed here, informed as it is by Schacht's,

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[277] The common feature of unconscious habit and conscious memory – namely, that these are ways in which organism behavior can be mediated by its past states – is captured by Plessner's teacher Hans Driesch's notion of the "historical reaction-basis" [*historischen Reaktion-basis*]. See Driesch 1908. The notion is used in Plessner 1928 for the same purpose.

[278] For the distinction between higher and lower animals, see Plessner 1928, Ch. 6 (DM, pp. 237-287; SOBM, pp. 187-224)

[279] Plessner 1928, Ch. 7 (DS, pp. 288-293; SOBM, pp. 225-228). Though I won't argue directly for the thesis here (but see Chs. 2-3 above), it seems to me that a more compelling account of the enabling mechanisms of the "ex-centric position" and of its various concrete manifestations than Plessner's own would appeal to another form of mediation – namely, what I call "historically-contingent, artifactual mediation." See Grene 1974, pp. 346-360 for a move in this direction, which was nonetheless inexplicitly prefigured in Plessner's own notions of "natural artificiality" and "mediated immediacy," in Plessner 1928, Ch. 7 (DS, pp. 300-341; SOBM, pp. 234-264).

Moss's, and Plessner's notions of mediation, the human being – whether viewed as a thinking and experiencing subject, an agent, an organism, or a self – is the center-point of a variety of forms of mediation that are constitutive of its mode of being and of its phenomenological appearing. Such mediations include those that may broadly be collected under the headings of the historical, linguistic, experiential, social, technological, and more, where instances of mediation that fall under such headings are often themselves mediated by factors that fall under other headings. The framework thereby captures the complex, dynamic, and reflexive quality of human action, thought, and experience, and emphasizes the variety of events or conditions to which one might fruitfully appeal in interpreting this action, thought, and experience. According to this perspective, to understand human beings (and, by extension, human systems) is to understand the variety of dynamically-interacting mediating forces of which their form of life is a (temporary) manifestation.[280]

From here on, I break with the previous linear organization of the chapter to share some theoretical applications of the framework. These include both an analysis of a variety of types of mediating factors – interpretive, historical, constitutive, causal, and "concrete" mediating factors – as well as an initial application of the framework to a few outstanding questions at the intersection of philosophy, biology, and the human sciences, such as the relation between "facts" and "interpretations," the relation between "nature"

[280] It also suggests a useful initial perspective for models that highlight human organisms' roles as mediating elements or producers of mediating elements within other, larger systems (such as societies, cultures, histories, and ecologies), though my focus here is on analysis of the mediation of individual organisms' behavior.

and "culture," and the scope and explanation of the diversity of human forms of life.

Interpretive mediation

"Interpretive" mediating factors may be defined as those that make a difference to the perspective or interpretive "lens" through which an interpreting being (such as a human being) perceives, understands, or expresses whatever he or she perceives, understands, or expresses. Interpretive mediation is important in the human sciences for two basic reasons: because of its ubiquity within (and thus ubiquitous relevance to) all practices of inquiry conducted by human beings, including the human sciences themselves; and because the defining "objects" of the human sciences – human beings and the systems they are a part of – are (characteristically) interpreting beings.[281] An especially important kind of mediating factor for the framework developed here is the interpretative standpoint of the theorist – that is, the one who is, per commitment (i) of the framework, mapping or modeling the dynamic relationships between organisms and environments. The perspective of the one conducting investigations into organism-environment interactions is itself a kind of interpretation and thus interpretively mediated. In studying the social behavior of bees, for instance, one will have made certain assumptions or interpretive decisions – partly reflectively, but certainly also partly unreflectively – about how to model the systems that one is studying.[282] What makes

[281] See Taylor, "Self-interpreting animals," in Taylor 1985a, pp. 45-76.

[282] For a classic discussion of the way reflective and pre-reflective "prejudices" shape the standpoint of the researcher, see Gadamer 1960.

every stance "interpretive" is just that it could have been made otherwise. The assumptions or decisions (again, reflective or pre-reflective) that, if different, would have led to a different interpretation, are the interpretively mediating factors in such a case.

This partly explains the special value of philosophical and historical reflection regarding any special science: such reflection helps to achieve a greater freedom of interpretive perspective relative to conditions of entrenchment of one or another "prejudice." On the other hand, the possibility should not be ignored that some prejudices are constitutive of the forms of action or inquiry that they mediate. In these cases, philosophical or historical reflection may disrupt the conditions of possibility of a way of life or thought – which may in many cases intuitively be thought an undesirable consequence.[283]

Application #1: "Fact" and "Interpretation"

The notion of "interpretive mediation" might be suspected of incompatibility with realism or naturalism. The understanding of the relation between interpretive mediating factors and the objective or real systems and conditions they describe is bound to be complex and controversial in its details, but an account of the relation that is consistently naturalist, realist, and interpretively relativist can be given in the form of the following assumptions. First, we assume that there do exist "real" or "objective" entities, states,

[283] On this point, see Nietzsche 1886 [1996], Book 1; Gadamer 1967 [1976], pp. 42-68; and Lévi-Strauss 1955 [1961], pp. 393-398

conditions, or attributes in the manner of familiar realisms or naturalisms.[284] Secondly, let us assume the ubiquity of interpretive mediation within human inquiry and understanding. Third, interpreters only succeed more or less well in relating themselves – cognitively or performatively – to these objective or real states through their interpretations. To the extent that they succeed, their interpretations accurately characterize the objective or real systems or conditions. To the extent that they fail, their interpretations describe non-objective entities or conditions, or don't describe any actual conditions at all.[285] Fourthly, not all interpretations of an object or situation that only describe objective features of the object or situation (including objective mediations) will be identical. It is possible for two interpreters to see or describe a situation differently, and to both be correct. But it is also possible for one or the other to be incorrect. A plurality of possible true interpretations or perspectives does not entail the absence of standards of accuracy of such interpretations.

The revelatory apparatus of an inquiry or description always includes some interpretively mediating factors. These, however, rather than being barriers to revelation of information about the world, are the means by which various features of the world become accessible to human beings. These means range from spoken language, to

[284] I say "assume" here because I don't want to beg the question *for* naturalism or realism, but simply to show its compatibility with the notion of "interpretive mediation" just outlined.

[285] I might be charged with circularity here, insofar as truth is defined by "accuracy of correspondence," and "accuracy of correspondence" is defined by an implicit reference to truth. But I am not trying to work out a theory of truth here, or choose among the many theories currently on offer; nor am I attempting to respond to skepticism. I only want to demonstrate the consistency of a correspondentist realism and interpretive relativism.

mythology, to scientific instrumentation (microscopes, compasses, particle accelerators, mathematical models), to the testimony of other people, to the senses of sight, touch, and so on. There is no such thing as "unmediated" epistemic contact with the world; yet the mediate character of our epistemic contact does not entail the absence of true contact.[286]

Historical mediation

Another category of special importance is that of historically mediating factors. History, considered in such a way as to include both natural and "cultural" events and processes, is something like the repository of all real events. The category of "historically mediating factors" thus includes all other mediating and mediated factors. It thereby provides, at least in principle, a single, linear framework within which each system or process, including instances of each sort of mediation, may be ordered, and each type of system, process, or mediation may be compared. At the same time, particular historical mediations, as well as the sum total of historical mediations, and even some aspects of the overall structure of historical mediation, are only accessible to an interpreter through one or another kind of interpretive mediation. By our best contemporary guess, history includes everything that has happened, and it will eventually include everything that will happen; but history itself is only available to us through one or another perspective that could itself be otherwise than what it is for us.

[286] The epistemological analysis just given draws its inspiration from Plessner's notion of "mediated immediacy," discussed in Plessner 1928, Ch. 7, and Grene 1974.

Concrete mediations

In addition to the large-scale categories of *interpretive* and *historical* mediation, there are a variety of forms of mediation that apply in particular cases of biological and human systems – for instance, in interactions between organisms and environments. For the sake of distinction, let us call these "concrete" mediating factors. A heuristic typology here might include *artifactual and technological*, *symbolic and linguistic*, *experiential*, *social*, *physiological*, *genetic*, *evolutionary-historical*, and *ecological* mediating factors.[287] The advantage of these "concrete mediation" concepts derives largely from the precision of analysis that can be attained, in regards to a number of open questions in philosophy, biology, and the human sciences, through a description of, comparison of, and causal, constitutive, temporal, or other ordering of, these factors insofar as they mediate various human interactions with environments. I take it these concepts may sometimes also be useful in modeling non-human organisms' interactions with environments as well as the operation of human, living, and non-living systems more generally.

In the analysis of these factors, of their contributions to the events and features we want to explain and interpret on their basis, and of their causal and constitutive interdependence, we want to be especially careful to note the ways in which such factors, as variously described, are in fact constitutively dependent or independent of one another. For instance: in the most common understandings of each, "social mediation" includes

[287] These categories will be familiar to anyone with even a passing acquaintance with major debates of the 19th and 20th century human sciences.

"linguistic mediation." Thus we would want to use the terms carefully without presuming independences that don't apply. Above all we do not want the analysis to obscure the concrete mechanisms supportive of various human actions and experiences, but rather to more clearly and precisely illuminate them. The primary analytical advantage of the framework derives from the combination of specificity and systematicity (or, generalization). At the same time, I would argue that this project of illumination should be understood *hermeneutically* – that is, it should be understood to always proceeds in accordance with one or another *interpretive mediation* of the events or processes to be explained.

Causation, constitution, and mediation

The concepts of "mediation," and of "mediating" and "mediated" factors, can be clarified by comparison and contrast with the more traditional philosophical concepts of "constitution" and "causation."[288] Sometimes causal or constitutive factors are intuitively construed as mediating factors. It is thus sometimes useful to refer to "constitutively-mediating factors" or "causally-mediating factors." Other times, causal factors destroy (or

[288] Obviously, there are long-standing philosophical controversies about causation (among counterfactualists, interventionists, Humeans, etc.) and constitution (in phenomenology as well as recent analytic ontology). I don't want to enter into these controversies here, but only say something about how the concept of mediation, as defined and elucidated here, is related to the most common notions of causation and constitution and to note the way in which mediating factors can themselves be causal or constitutive factors in some cases. A study of the connections between this view and the similar views characteristic of thinkers central to the "philosophical anthropological" tradition, on the one hand, and the views espoused within these more widely recognized debates, on the other, would be an interesting project in its own right.

change to the point of non-identity) the systems they affect. And sometimes constitutive factors cannot be said to "make a difference" to the character or history of a process because their presence is a condition of possibility of the process itself. These distinctions suggest that "mediation" is a narrower concept than that of causation or constitution. On the other hand, if the analyst of the system described in causal terms expands the scope of his or her description, so that the system is taken to be not just, say, *intra*cellular gene-expression, but also the *inter*cellular system in a particular organ, then what were previously classified as non-mediative "causal" factors may be reclassified as mediating factors of the larger system. Likewise, factors that are originally classified as non-mediative yet constitutive – that is, features that define or establish the identity of the system itself – may be reclassified as "mediative" if the identity-conditions for the system itself are loosened. What this analysis suggests is that the applicability of mediation concepts, in comparison, contrast, and relation to the more familiar "causation" and "constitution" concepts, depends on interpretive decisions or assumptions in isolating a system for study: what is the size and shape (that is, what are the spatial boundaries) of the system studied, and what are the "degrees of freedom" allowed to the system, or to various system components, before the system must be reclassified.

One advantage of adopting the concept of mediation rather than that of causation or constitution as the main tool for analyzing processes within human systems is that the role of such interpretive assumptions and decisions is thereby placed closer to the analytical foreground. Another, related advantage is that it avoids long-standing positivist and transcendental-phenomenological legacies attaching to causation and constitution,

respectively. Perhaps it is the intuitive grasp of these advantages that has made "mediation" a term with special resonance in biology and the social sciences, disciplines that might themselves be construed as "mediate" between physics, on the one hand, and theology and idealistic philosophy, on the other.

Application #2: "Nature and Culture"

The framework developed here suggests that there is no necessary contradiction or incompatibility between explanations of human systems that appeal to culturally- and historically-contingent factors, on the one hand, and descriptions and explanations of human systems that appeal to biological (or "natural") factors, on the other. Some accounts appealing to items intuitively placed in one or the other category may indeed contradict some accounts appealing to items intuitively placed in the other, but there is no generalized "nature-culture," "nature-nurture," or "biology-culture" problem.[289] Indeed, neither term in these artificial oppositions (neither "nature" nor "nurture," etc.) collects a single, homogeneous set of forces, but rather each (in popular understanding) includes many constitutively-overlapping and causally-interactive forces or factors, such as (under "nature") genetics, physiology, morphological development, evolutionary history, ecology, (and, under "culture,") social structure, language, symbolic systems, artifacts and technology, and cultural and political history.[290]

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[289] This point has been well-made by thinkers in the "developmental systems" tradition of biological theory. For instance, see Keller 2010 and the essays in Oyama, Griffiths, and Gray 2001.

[290] Again, this profound point is excellently made by the developmental systems school. See Oyama 1985, 2000; and Oyama, Griffiths, and Gray 2000.

It is well-known that the factors typically classified as "natural" or "cultural" often causally interact with factors typically classified under the putatively opposed category; that is, natural factors are often causally generative of changes in "cultural" ones; and cultural factors are often causally generative of changes in natural ones. There is a dense and ongoing mutual mediation between factors and systems usually classified as "natural," on the one hand, and those usually classified as "cultural," on the other.

But these factors also often constitutively overlap. This means that some "natural" factors are partly constituted by "cultural" factors (either interpretively or materially or both), and some "cultural" factors are partly constituted by "natural" factors. For example, a study of human ecology cannot avoid discussion of human artifacts and technology; human evolutionary history must include discussion of language, symbolic systems, and social structure; the articulation of "facts" of human physiology are incoherent or pointless apart from reference to environmentally-situated human behavior, since even the "parts" of the body cannot be identified and distinguished independently of some sense of their environmentally-situated functions[291]; and the investigation of genetic causes in such fields as behavioral genetics must make reference to a behaviorally (and thus, in the human case, culturally) "wide" or "extended" phenotype. Furthermore, human social structure, language, symbolic systems, and artifacts are all of them

[291] This is a point nicely made by Plessner: "[W]hat is the significance of such characteristics as shape of the teeth, angle of vision, development of the cerebrum, differentiation of hands and feet, sparseness of body hair, or late puberty, irrespective of what a being so constituted does with these characteristics, irrespective, that is, of his behavior in the world? Only behavior explains the body, and only modes of behavior such as speaking, acting, shaping, and laughing and crying, all of which are peculiar to man in conformity with his apprehension and positing of goals, make the human body intelligible, complete its anatomy." Plessner 1941 [1970], p. 8.

undergirded and supported by genetic, physiological, and evolutionary-historical conditions; and, as modern historians have recognized more and more clearly in the course of their labors, the concrete events of human history are profoundly interwoven with, and often understandable only in conjunction with reference to, geographical, geological, and ecological conditions.

A "mediating factor," as we've used that term, is just a condition, entity, or process that makes a difference to the course of another process. If we take an organism's interaction with its environment – that is, its action, or form of life – to be a *process*, and one that can be mediated in a variety of different ways, we have a single framework that allows us to analyze and compare language, social relations, past and present experience, history, and artifactual objects and processes in terms of what they contribute to and what they make possible within that process. This framework also allows – perhaps surprisingly – the treatment of "natural" factors – whether evolutionary-historical (that is, phylogenetic ancestry), physiological, genetic, or ecological – as mediating factors of organism-environment interactions alongside language, society, experience, history, and technology.[292] In other words, we become able to more clearly address a problem that has puzzled the legions of contributors to the so-called "nature-nurture" debate, namely, what are the relative contributions of *natural* and *non-natural* factors within the behavior of an organism?[293]

[292] Here, as elsewhere, we must be wary of assuming the constitutional independence of the isolated factors. For instance: ecological mediating factors might compositionally or constitutively include artifactual mediating factors.

[293] Compare this proposal with the more deflationary view of Keller 2010

Such factors as *evolutionary history*, *physiology*, *genetics*, *ecology* (all of which might intuitively be classified as "natural"), *technology*, *history*, *experience*, *sociality*, and *symbolization* (all of which might intuitively be classified as "cultural") do not operate in a vacuum, and they rarely operate in a linear, external-causal sort of way. They are mediating conditions, which *make a difference to* processes and outcomes; sometimes *enabling* conditions, which *make possible* some type of process or outcome; but rarely, if ever, *determining* conditions: that is, they do not *necessitate* the occurrence of specific processes or outcomes independently of other factors. We need always investigate, analyze, and interpret them "in context" of the total mediated process, including other mediating factors.

From this standpoint it becomes possible to see that something like the modules and instincts putatively described by sociobiology and evolutionary psychology could be mediating factors within the larger processes of human life and action without this entailing strong determinism or the insignificance of so-called "cultural factors" to the explanation and interpretation of these processes.[294] It is likely that none of the "natural" mediating factors are powerful enough to *causally determine* anything about human life;

[294] The possibility that "nature" and "culture" may interact in this way is seldom recognized, but I believe processes of this sort must be extremely common. The source of the obscurity is probably the characteristically dualistic formulation of the "nature-nurture" debate, coupled with the idea that, if "nurture" or "culture" is a decisive factor, such a factor must lift all description of human conduct out of the realm where human "biological" nature can have any relevance to the explanation. The inference is invalid. However, a few late-modern philosophers – Nietzsche, Dewey, and the German philosophical anthropologists Plessner and Arnold Gehlen, for instance – leave themselves room to simultaneously ascribe some "natural human tendency" or "impulse" or "instinct" to human beings generally, and to recognize the possibility of a redirection, contradiction, or even annulment of such a "natural" factor in the course of human ontogenesis. See Nietzsche 1886 [1996], Dewey 1922 [1957], Plessner 1928, and Gehlen 1940 [1988].

their contribution is merely a mediating one, made within a complex of frequently shifting conditions themselves mediated by a variety of other factors. According to this view, the presence or absence of a coding section of DNA in an organism's cells mediates the organism's behavior, but it does not determine or straightforwardly "cause" it. And we now know that the expression of that code is a process – taking place within the larger process of the life-history of the organism – that is itself mediated by a variety of events and situations through which the organism passes; modeling such complex processes of mediation is a central concern of contemporary research in epigenetics.[295] Likewise, the physiology of an organism might better be said to mediate its action rather than constrain or determine or cause it. Rather, it makes possible certain processes – as in the case of highly developed musculature and reflexes – or it makes these impossible – as in the case of, say, very short limbs – and its character is mediated both by the evolutionary-historically inherited capacities of species-typical members of the species, as well as by the concrete development of these capacities within the organism's experience, broadly construed.

Application #3: The diversity of human forms of life

There are a number of open questions regarding the diversity of human forms of life. Foremost among these are the following: (1) How diverse *are* human forms of life? More precisely, how diverse are they in some regard or other: say, in sexual and marriage

[295] For similar views, see Moss 2001, 2005

practices, beliefs, laws, linguistic grammar, or social structure? (2) How diverse could they potentially be – that is, how different can two human forms of life *possibly* be from one another? (3) What are the logical and causal structures of universal, general, or particular features of human forms of life? Do they have a logical and causal structure similar to that which appears in micro- or macro-level physical systems, for instance? Or in biology? Or do they have a unique logical and causal structure, or even a variety of logical and causal structures? (4) Finally, what *explains* the universality, generality, and particularity of human forms of life? Why do human practices differ in some regards, and run in parallel in others? What kind of model can explain the congruence and divergence of human forms of life?

(1) The question of the historically *actual* scope of diversity in human forms of life is itself largely an empirical question. This question has been part of the motivation of 20th century ethnographic research and partly explains the educative value of that research. The largely empirical question of the scope of diversity in human forms of life might be compared to the largely empirical question of the scope of biological diversity that concerned 18th biological taxonomists. The answer given depends at least in part on the questioner's interpretive response to what is available in the way of ethnographic and historical information. Thus, there are conceptual issues here too, mostly concerning the legitimacy of the categories employed in analysis (that is, the models and theories and general "rules" that the historian or ethnographer employs in his or her inquiries – roughly what Weber famously called "ideal types"). The theoretical categories we employ and the way that we employ them affects what we take to be the same or different

in a comparison of two societies or two individuals. Whether (and to whatever extent) we are realists or constructivists about the distinctions themselves, we must recognize that they cannot be simply non-controversially assumed, and that they play a role in our understanding and interpretation of the forms of life that we compare.

(2) The question of the *possible* scope of diversity is more difficult. Here we are asking how different one human way of life can be from another. Is the scope of diversity infinite or finite? If finite, what precisely are its limits, and why? Let us call the position that supposes the scope of diversity is unlimited "infinitism" and that which supposes it is limited "finitism."[296] Putative restrictions to the infinitist thesis may be physical (physical law); biological; psychological – as exhibited in the division of personality types, or "normal" and "pathological" sequences of stages of development; or sociological – in the "natural" or "regular" patterns of human society itself, say, economic or sociological "laws"; historical – that is, based on the irreversible necessities or contingencies of actual history; or metaphysical or ontological – that is, concerned with metaphysical essences. Hobbes, Darwin, Uexküll, Durkheim, Weber, Marx, Heidegger, E. O. Wilson, all posit "finitisms" that may be interpreted in terms of one or another of these different types of restriction. They may be strict ("all human beings die") or dispositional ("human beings tend to care about sex, minimization of pain, their kin," etc.).

Infinitist positions may be either conditioned or unconditioned. A *conditioned*

[296] There may be a parallel here to Heidegger and Cassirer's debate at Davos 1929, where Cassirer defended the claim that human beings have access to the infinite, while Heidegger defended the claim that human existence is radically finite. See the appendices to the English edition of Heidegger 1929 [1997], pp. 191-207.

infinitism holds that there is no restriction on the end-state of humanity, but there is a restriction on the means that would be sufficient to arrive at any end-state: in other words, that each possible end-state (within an infinite and limitless range of possible states) has its own conditions of possibility. These conditions of possibility could then, for instance, be articulated in terms of the mediating factors differentiated above. An *unconditioned infinitism* holds that there are no necessary conditions, causally or constitutively, of these end-states within the infinite range of human end-states.[297]

(3) Connected to both the question of the possible and of the actual scope of diversity, there is a question about how commonalities and differences between human forms of life are to be understood at all. What is the logical status of claims of "universality," "generality," and "particularity" (or, sameness and difference) as far as human practice is concerned? What makes two practices (in geographically and historically distinct contexts) instances of one *kind* of practice, or instructive instances of two different kinds of practices?

Lévi-Strauss's structuralism (and anthropological structuralism more generally) is especially concerned with this problem. Lévi-Strauss envisions the comparative judgment of the ethnographer as a kind of classifying of practices within a table of all distinguishable possibilities.[298] But what guarantees that the categories the ethnographer

[297] I would favor infinitism over finitism, and a conditioned infinitism over an unconditioned one, but I won't argue the point here.

[298] Lévi-Strauss [1955] 1961, p. 160: "The ensemble of a people's customs has always its particular style; they form into systems. I am convinced that the number of these systems is not unlimited and that human societies, like individual human beings (at play, in their dreams, or in moments of delirium), never create *absolutely*: all they can do is to choose certain combinations from a repertory of ideas which it should be

employs in making the comparisons are the right ones, the ones that will reveal the comprehensive range of possible human practices? Confronted with this question, and recognizing the contingently-historically-mediated character of any such tables of categories, we may suspect that there is no "right" or "complete" table of categories for such comparisons between human forms of life. The symbolic-interpretive approach associated with the work of Clifford Geertz issues from a critique of the structuralist project along these lines.[299] Geertz can be understood to take up the question of how commonalities and differences are to be construed and to answer it by returning to the issue of what we have called *interpretive mediation*. This places a new focus on the role of the ethnographic interpreter in theoretically constituting the objects to be compared and the comparison itself. For the latter approach, there is a potentially infinite diversity of comparators in terms of which two human forms of life can be judged "the same" or "different." Theses about the universality, generality, and particularity of cultures must be understood in these terms. Today theses about these issues are typically unconsciously interpretively mediated by the foundational assumptions of Aristotelian logic or modern set theory. But these may be only two planets in a largely unexplored universe of logical options.

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possible to reconstitute. For this one must make an inventory of all customs which have been observed by oneself or others, the customs pictured in mythology, and the customs evoked by both children and grownups in their games. The dreams of individuals, whether healthy or sick, and psycho-pathological behavior should also be taken into account. With all this one could eventually establish a sort of periodic chart of chemical elements, analogous to that devised by Mendeleier. In this, all customs, whether real or merely possible, would be grouped by families, and all that would remain for us to do would be to recognize those which societies had, in point of fact, adopted."

[299] Geertz 1977

(4) Finally, there is the question of what explains commonalities and differences among human forms of life. Assuming for a moment that explanation is causal explanation, the history of anthropological theory offers roughly three strategies of explanation of the *differences* among human forms of life: diffusionist, as in Frans Boas and Ruth Benedict; biological functionalist, as in Bronislaw Malinowski and, arguably, sociobiological anthropology; and social functionalist, as in Radcliffe-Browne and, again, Malinowski. If we expand the scope of the term "explanation" to cover all forms of interpretation aimed at enhancing the interpreter's understanding of the object, however, then structuralist and symbolic-interpretive approaches will count as explanations of human commonalities and differences as well.[300] To these explanatory frameworks, modern biology adds the partial explanatory frameworks of physiology, population genetics, and developmental biology, among others. The framework offered here helps us to see what is at stake in preferring one or another such approach, as well as to evaluate the extent to which they are compatible and to suggest coherent ways of selecting or combining them to shed light on what sends human forms of life down divergent or convergent historical paths.

[300] These might be construed as complex counterfactual explanations, since they seek to articulate the conditions-of-possibility of features of a form of life through comparison and contrast with possible or actual forms of life that either share or lack those features.

CONCLUSION

The classical philosophical anthropologists sought a perspective that kept in view what is common, as well as what distinguishes, human and non-human animal forms of life. But the philosophical-anthropological model is not merely an answer to the question of human distinctiveness, and certainly not an answer to that question in abstraction from an answer to other questions. Rather, the problem of human distinctiveness was deemed significant for the illumination it provided to all of the central themes of philosophy, including the theory of the human self, the human place in the world, and the closely related notions of truth, knowledge, objectivity, rationality, freedom, responsibility, morality, society, and linguistic meaning. By this measure, the main works of the philosophical anthropologists are comparable to the most ambitious philosophical treatises of the early 20th century, including Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* and Cassirer's *Philosophie der Symbolischen Formen*. But the philosophical anthropologists have an unusual advantage in regards to a problem that Cassirer and Heidegger treated only in passing and unconvincingly: namely, the problem of the altered terms of interpretation and understanding of all aspects of human forms of life in the wake of 19th century biological science.

Biological theorists such as T. H. Huxley, Ernst Haeckel, Hans Driesch, and Jakob von Uexküll, on the other hand, were certainly aware of the great relevance of modern biological science to the understanding of human beings. But, as with other biologists who have since written about that large issue, such as Theodosius Dobzhansky,

Francis Crick, C. H. Waddington, and E.O. Wilson, what they say about both the biological and superbiological [*übervitaler*] aspects of human life generally overestimates the significance of the biological and shows a dearth of hermeneutic, ontological, and historical subtlety. Thirdly, Frans Boas and the cultural anthropologists of the late 19th and early 20th century were also aware of biology's relevance, but their focus (like that of Cassirer) quickly shifted to "culture," which, though they rightly estimated was not under the control of narrowly biological factors alone, they failed to clearly theoretically link to those aspects of biological science relevant to its interpretation.[301] A great many cultural anthropologists both then and since tend to either acquiesce in the standard division of academic labor into *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften* and leave the details of human "biology" to those on the other side of the aisle, or, in a parallel but opposite failure to that of many biologists, claim a significance for their own specialty ("culture") that outruns any solid arguments they can offer in defense of that self-privileging. Or, thirdly, such theorists may offer trivialities and banalities as "analysis" of factors on the other side of the aisle, factors they rightly recognize as important yet prove themselves unprepared to analyze.

In short, if we take leave of philosophers such as Heidegger and Cassirer – not to mention Carnap and Quine – out of disgust for the inadequacies of their treatment of the

[301] See again Oyama on "inclusive" and "exclusive" concepts of biology: Oyama 2000, pp. 171, 185. In Boas's case in particular, the problem arises not from a lack of engagement with relevant biological facts – since Boas's experiments in physical anthropology prove him among the ablest workers in that discipline at that time – but rather from a humble empirical researcher's reluctance to draw large-scale philosophical conclusions. See Stocking 1968, for instance, for a sketch of Boas's personality as a scientist.

obvious yet unfathomed dual status of the human being as "animal" and "more than animal" (that is: rational, moral, cultural, and historical), and turn instead to empirical scientific accounts of the human being, we find there just as much conceptual failure (whatever the successes of particular empirical discoveries, such as T. H. Morgan's laboratory's work on *drosophilia*, or Boas's students' ethnographies of North American and South Sea Indian tribes) when it comes to the construal of the *complete human being* as in philosophy. The result is that – as Max Scheler put it nearly 100 years ago – *we today still have no well-defined or well-defended theory of the human being: what a human being is, does, or can possibly do*; nor of how these things should be studied. We certainly do not, in any case, have a comprehensive, unified, and self-consistent research framework for studying the human being (and human systems more generally) that is open to reflection and revision yet catches up with what has been gathered piecemeal by the biological and cultural sciences of the past 200 years. Contrary to Foucault's famous dictum, the era of the human has not yet arrived or is just beginning.[302]

If we have become convinced that standard accounts – whether empiricist, rationalist, Kantian, Darwinian, Heideggerian, Meadian-pragmatist, or post-modern – fail to satisfactorily articulate the mediation of biological and cultural dimensions of human life and action within their own accounts of the human form of life, then we may conclude that, on the main questions of philosophical anthropology itself – the complexities of the causal and constitutive relationships between human animality,

[302] Foucault 1966 [1996], pp. 386-7: "[M]an is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end."

human language, human personality, and human culture – the basic strategy of the classical philosophical anthropologists fares better than nearly every known alternative of the 20th and now 21st century.[303] The defining theses of that strategy, shared in some way by Scheler, Plessner, and Gehlen, is that the human being is both a biological (animal) and a cultural (historical) being, a dual status that calls for further inquiry from philosophy and the human sciences; that human biology and human culture (and history) are deeply (constitutively, causally, and historically) intertwined, as well as conceptually and evaluatively inseparable; that human culture penetrates and transforms human biology (whether genetically, natural-historically, physiologically, ecologically, or otherwise), and *vice versa*: that is, that evolutionarily-contingent, biologically-describable physiological constitutions and ecological situations also penetrate and affect (mediate, enable, prepare, facilitate, and constrain) what we call human "culture" itself; and that some of these evolutionary-contingent, biologically-describable conditions may themselves be species-typical for human beings, though not for that reason necessarily unalterable.

This entails that the only "science" of human beings that can possibly be adequate to explain much of what philosophers have long been concerned to explain about human beings – the nature of the human self and its place in the world; the nature of the world;

[303] The exceptions here may be Nietzsche and Nietzscheanism, for one, and pragmatism – particularly Dewey – for another. Interestingly, Hans Joas draws a similar conclusion, insofar as he holds that pragmatism and those traditions that integrate *Lebensphilosophie* or a biologically-based naturalism, on the one hand, with hermeneutics, on the other – which include Dilthey, Nietzsche, and the philosophical anthropologists – are the strongest contenders within contemporary philosophy of social science. See Joas 1996, pp. 252, 258.

and the possibility, character, and content of knowledge, of objectivity, and of the standards of morality – is one which is firmly focused on (a) the *situated* character of human life and action, i.e. that such things and questions appear only *in an environment* with "natural" and "social" (as well as "historical" and "symbolic") features, (b) the *embodied* character of the human being and of human thought, choice, experience, and social action, (c) the *linguistically*- and *symbolically-penetrated* character of inquiry itself, including philosophical inquiries, and the significance of the historical and cultural conditions of possibility supporting particular linguistic, symbolic, and interpretive systems, (d) the prima facie success and plausibility of natural-scientific explanations of the origins of the world, of life, and of the human organism and many of its typical attributes, (e) the undeniable *relevance of historically-particular* (and, importantly, thus contingent) *local and global changes of environment* (natural, social, and symbolic) to the actual history of human lives and societies, and the actual present-day lives and societies of human beings worldwide; and thus (f) the potentially infinite scope for variability of the human form of life in coming centuries, including wildly more powerful though inevitably less than omniscient forms of control (of human beings, by human beings), despite (g) the sometimes insurmountable constraints on that scope of possibility within particular (historically and geographically local) contexts.

In short, what's required is an inquiry responsive to the multiply mediated character of human life, action, experience, and interpretation. This inquiry ought to address, in detail, the various ways in which the human processes with which it is concerned are mediated. The argument of this text is oriented towards a preliminary

analysis of these mediating factors. I hope to have thereby contributed means for a more precise treatment of the themes that have traditionally defined classical philosophical anthropology. More ambitiously, I hope to have encouraged construction and reconstruction of a multitude of new and more insightful images and models, portraits and narratives of human beings and human systems – refracted by history, collected by philosophy, oriented by the ongoing, variously mediated and thereby conditioned and constrained but also potentially novel and unusual interpretations human beings can offer of themselves and their world. In the details I've suggested a way of understanding the issue of human distinctiveness, including human and non-human animal social and communicative behavior, and a theory of human persons or human selves on the basis of the foregoing. I've also offered an analytic framework that gets inside some of the most difficult conceptual and empirical issues of philosophy and the human sciences today. It involves a sustained analysis of the terms and concepts "biology" and "culture," as well as "animal," "nature," "mind," "self," and "person." It is an analysis that arrives at surprising and unusual results. Methodologically, such a philosophical anthropology requires being careful about distinctions, but it is not itself primarily about the distinctions. Rather, it is about its subject matter: human beings and human forms of life; relatedly, the human place in larger, variously known and unknown worlds. The terms and distinctions developed here are intended as no more than a historically-contingent conceptual architecture; a bit of mediation; the scaffolding that allows a more prepared release into the voluminous caverns and galaxies of human possibility.

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I try to give page numbers to both German-language and English-language editions of these texts throughout.

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HPC = Max Scheler, *The Human Place in the Cosmos*

PA = Max Scheler, *Philosophische Anthropologie* (1922-1928)
CHB = Max Scheler, *The Constitution of the Human Being* (2008)

DS = Helmuth Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* (1928)
SOBM = Helmuth Plessner, *The Stages of Organic Being and Man*

DM = Arnold Gehlen, *Der Mensch: Seine Natur und Seine Stellung in der Welt* (1940)
MNP = Arnold Gehlen, *Man: His Nature and Place in the World*

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