

THE VALUE OF PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

THE PAPER is about using the philosophical anthropology of Helmuth Plessner as a basic methodological approach for a cumulative science, one unified science that would dissolve interdisciplinary boundaries and prejudices. My starting point is the thesis that there actually is only one science split into two distinct parts, natural sciences and humanities, which depend on each other to achieve their common purpose: to comprehend the entire reality.

A few decades ago the humanities plunged into a crisis, while the natural sciences astonished and amazed everyone with its findings. Over time this led to a certain scientific standard, a new ideal of the sciences which every discipline has to submit to. Findings need therefore to be verifiable by observation, measurement or test, and provided in illustrative data. However, this is not possible for the humanities, as their objects are not of the same nature as those of the natural sciences. This is precisely the foundation of the crisis in the humanities. The humanities can now choose either:

- to transform their objects into measurable standards, eliminating their qualitative characteristics and focusing on their quantitative properties (Werber 2013, 174ff.); or

- to be deprived of any sense or importance by the natural sciences, which for their part got carried away with interpretations of their findings, which are extremely arbitrary in terms of terminology and methodology.

Science, whether under the absolute leadership of the humanities or the natural sciences, is increasingly losing sight of the goal: to grasp the entire reality. Under the leadership of the natural sciences, this objective cannot succeed, for the simple reason that the natural sciences cannot explain science itself. Why is humankind raising such devious questions? How could humankind possibly understand a reality which is probably very different from its perception? Why is humankind pursuing science?

In order to make comprehensible the proposition that natural science itself cannot understand the nature of science, it is first necessary to reflect on the methods of the two branches of science, which I will hereinafter describe as measuring on the one hand, and as hermeneutics on the other. After a presentation of the two methods, the various structural elements of hermeneutics are explained, in order to reveal the significant shortcomings of natural science as a leading science.

The speech is of a programmatic nature, which is why it uses some generalizations

that require a way more distinguished definition in an in-depth discussion of the issue. Thus at this point, the distinction between natural sciences and humanities should be made in accordance with the popular understanding of their methodology. The concept of a human is drawn from the Western tradition. The human being is a subject that confronts a world of objects. I am not saying that this is an accurate definition of a human, only that it is understandable and sufficient for us to begin with. I hope you will excuse these somewhat rough generalizations.

METHODS OF THE SCIENCES

Usually, different scientific fields are distinguished by their content, by what they investigate. Thus there are natural sciences, which examine matter, and there are humanities, which investigate inner phenomena. In this understanding of science, the method derives naturally from the nature of the objects of the respective domains. I want to show that the objects are not naturally determined, but are constituted by the method. If so, the respective scientific method gains a certain precedence over the actual contents of the sciences. I want to develop the distinction between the two areas of science, starting from three points of departure:

- the scientific question;
- the procedure (method);
- the aim of the two areas.

The distinguishing feature of scientific practice is not only to ask questions, but to ask questions in a controlled manner, so that the type and formulation of the question already contains the possibility of its answer (Plessner 1981, 176ff.). A simple surprise in the form of “What’s that?” is therefore initially useless as a scientific question. In the natural sciences, the questions are designed to guarantee their answer along with their answerability. The

question is asked in such a way that only two alternatives are possible: Yes or no. The scientist asks a closed question (Plessner 1981, 175ff.).

The answer is found by a certain procedure: the experiment. In this procedure, the relevant factors are first established, and then all other factors are controlled in order to keep the examined things, phenomena or situations free from disturbance. The aim is to achieve a precise measurement. If this is ensured, and corresponds to the experimental setup of the question, the researcher obtains a guaranteed response: yes or no.

It’s ultimately about explaining causal relationships, reproducing and predicting them, and designating the operating mechanisms – that’s the aim of the natural sciences, no more, no less. For this kind of science it’s essential not to interact with the object of study in any way. It’s observed from a distance. The objects shouldn’t be perceived as pretty or ugly, desirable or repulsive, or having any other property than the predefined.

The humanities are of another nature. Keeping a proper distance from the object of study is a tough balancing act, as the objects are also of a completely different nature. We are well aware that the objects of history, sociology or economics are certainly physical as well: buildings, artefacts, and bodies in “physical” interaction, such as communication via acoustic waves or the exchange of goods or data. But something still needs to be added to those physical properties of the objects, and this is “sense”. A meaning must be attached to them. This should not be understood as if a human being would firstly perceive an object and only then attach a meaning, because those actions are not actually separate.

Thus the humanities aim to explain the meaning of objects in every dimension, preferably, which is never ultimately accomplished (Plessner 1981, 179). One link in the chain of meaningful objects is the interpreter, with his own horizon of meaning

(Plessner 1975, 301). This is the subjective factor we need to consider when doing research. This is a popular point of criticism aimed at the humanities: accusations that they are non-serious, and demands that they adapt to objective mathematical methods (Wheeler 1928, 304; Wilson 1980, 271; Werber 2013, 176ff.). But this approach would be completely senseless for the humanities. For example, studying the printed letter “A” using every possible chemical and physical procedure wouldn’t lead to a convenient result. I will try to show that the humanities can only proceed in accordance with human “nature”, not differently from it.

Hence it might be better to desist from simple entanglement in the concepts of “objective” and “true” and attach methodological processes to those concepts instead. “Objective” would then no longer mean “true”, which could be appropriate for a science which merely theorizes until it’s proven wrong or theorizes better. Therefore sciences should focus on certain methodologies which are appropriate for their objects. Which method could meet that criterion for the humanities, which have, as mentioned, a subjective factor?

Apparently there is a particular type of questioning for the humanities as well. And, likewise, the type and formulation of the question already contains the possibility of its answer. In contrast to the closed question of the natural sciences, the humanities can’t provide a guaranteed answer in terms of yes or no. The question remains open (Plessner 1981, 108f.).

To answer a question raised in the humanities it is essential to include the questioning person, namely the researcher, and therefore to reflect on his social, historical and economic state (Plessner 1981, 182). After explaining the object by making recourse to the person of the researcher, the explanation must be further elaborated with regard to every stage of the research process. This very method is what hermeneutics is all about. I’d like to pro-

pose that this is the essence of all humanistic research, as distinguished as the particular disciplines might appear: In anthropology, the researcher, even if he has been part of the examined culture, still needs to describe his findings using a certain system of categories; and in history, the researcher will always be a part of history itself.

So what is this that we call a human being? And why is this question of importance for hermeneutics? Well, apparently the subjective factor I mentioned is the human factor. That is why it is important to grasp that factor for the hermeneutic method (Lindemann 2008, 9). This is of course just one step in the infinite dance of hermeneutics. It is one possible step to start with.

THE HUMAN BEING

After having been shown that the objects of science are constituted by the sciences rather than found, one can furthermore ask what conditions make objects of apparitions. Since this construction is a human activity, a human being itself has to be examined. This should form the basis of hermeneutics, on which the findings of the humanities can be relativised and revised. Therefore the human being must be described as a structure which is sufficiently formal and dynamic not to absolutise any *modus vivendi* (Plessner 1981, 155). Nevertheless, I will begin by explicating the “Western” image of man. I would now like to introduce the structure of human beings as seen by Helmuth Plessner, which I believe to be very productive for the development of a genuinely humanistic-scientific method. A basic assumption for hermeneutics can be developed based on this structure.

Before I explain the human structure, one viewpoint needs to be clarified. Human beings, as living beings, are essentially organic bodies. Living organic bodies generally realise themselves by a particular configuration of their borders (Plessner 1975,

99ff.). A common feature of all organisms is that they have a relationship with their environment. This distinguishes them from inanimate objects, for their boundary is not only drawn virtually (for the perceiving beings), but belongs to the organism, closing it off from the environment. This limit is realised differently by different types of organisms. Plessner calls this realisation positionality (Plessner 1975, 127ff.). From this it follows that living things always exist in a dual aspect. Firstly, they are within their borders and, secondly, they reach through their borders beyond themselves. For a body this is relatively easy to imagine: The skin, for example, protects an organism against external influences and at the same time allows for a variety of ways to get in contact with the environment, either through heat sensations, sweating or oxygen uptake. However, living beings are not only physically limited. For Plessner, humans are distinguished from other animals by their specific kind of positionality (Plessner 1975, 291ff.). More highly developed animals have a brain that ensures that these animals can perceive. They can reduce themselves to a virtual point (Plessner 2002, 179). For humans there comes an "I", in addition (Plessner 1975, 304).

How can this be explained by the principles of limitation? For Plessner it is the unique property of a human being to construct another border right through itself. This does not mean a duplication (Plessner 1975, 289), but rather that the human being lives on either side of this inner border. He is aware of its limitations. Firstly, he is just like an animal, which rises from its centre to contact its environment because it lives in the here and now. Secondly, he is genuinely human, because he looks from his border at himself. Plessner calls this an eccentric positionality. More highly developed animals all possess a brain to ensure that these animals can perceive. One can be reduced to a virtual point.

I would like to clarify this by means of the three spheres of human existence: the

physical, psychological and interpersonal. In terms of a dual aspect, the human individual is able to watch the spheres of his existence from his own centre, as well as from his periphery (Plessner 2002, 185). No sphere precedes the others; each one is likewise natural. In the first two dimensions, the peripheral perspective joins the centre-based perspective of animals. Emerging from this dual aspect, there is however the problem of integrating both perspectives, for they appear to be incompatible. That is the situation of humans.

THE WORLD OF THE HUMAN BEING

The first sphere I would like to examine is the physical sphere, which Plessner calls the external world ("Außenwelt"). The external world consists of all physical phenomena. There is a dual aspect in a human's perception of its own body and, within this perception process, likewise its perception of the environment. Both aspects are denoted by two different German terms for body: "Körper" and "Leib". While being factually identical to a Leib, humans have a Körper in which they are locked, and which at the same time is their tool (Plessner 1975, 294). To the Leib, space is absolute and time passes. Space is arranged according to up, down, left, right, front and back. Once passed, time ceases to exist (Plessner 1975, 294).

To the Körper, space has a relative character; a human is situated in an arbitrary place in space, no longer necessarily in the centre. Looking at its own body from a peripheral point, the human being becomes aware of being only one object among many persistent objects which have a definite, measurable distance from each other. The human being is also not necessarily situated in the centre of its time stream (Plessner 1975, 294), so past time does not vanish irretrievably, in the sense that it can be traced back in principle. Points in time also lie within measurable distances, points in the future being computable in the present.

That being said about the physical sphere of human existence, a similar dual-aspect problem exists for the psychological sphere, which Plessner names the inner world (“Innenwelt”). Experiences and mental phenomena are the material that forms this sphere (Plessner 1975, 295f.). The two distinctive aspects are the central “to be an experience” (“Erlebnis sein”) and the peripheral “to have a soul” (“Seele haben”).

Assuming that pure experience is analogous to the experience of an animal, the human being finds itself in a new situation, being able to look at itself from its periphery and having the distance to create an image of itself. All of a sudden something like a fixed character appears, which can only be changed within certain specific rules. Furthermore, the aspect of the soul makes it clear that the world itself exists independently, instead of merely being caused by experiences. What makes the internal world differ from the external world is that humans can apply both the perspective of experience and the perspective of soul to the perception of the “I”, as well as to the perception of others. This means that the human being can look at its own state with and without distance – with thoughts and emotions on the one hand, and perceptions of, for example, images or acoustic qualities on the other.

The preceding description might create the impression of several spheres of living being split into two aspects each, but this impression would be false because these aspects are interwoven. As the internal world and external world relate strongly to each other, a real internal world would be basically inconceivable without an external world. Their depiction was selected such that it clarifies the way phenomena become objects in the peripheral aspect. If the peripheral aspect of the external world was absolutised, a complete description of the physical reality would be possible, for no object would be missing. However, one could no longer argue sensibly that the world appears as arranged around a human

individual because said individual was unable to find itself. If one accepted the interweaving of the internal and the external world but referred only to the peripheral aspects, one could even describe the principles ruling the interior of living objects, but there would still be no way of telling whether the one doing the describing was part of the world being described.

I claim that a restriction to peripheral aspects is the ideal of the natural sciences. Neither science nor any other human institution can be established that is restricted to the central aspects of the inner and outer worlds. It is a peculiarity of the peripheral aspect to shape persistent objects within its process, which is not to say that the restriction to peripheral aspects allows the process to be scientific. Despite a certain completeness, the “I” would still be missing (Nagel 1992, 27, 60).

The “I” appears in the third sphere by the name of *Mitwelt*, a compound of “with” (“mit”) and “world” (“Welt”). Every attempt to find a proper translation of *Mitwelt* into English has failed. The *Mitwelt* consists of the formed internal world and the formed external world (Plessner 1975, 302). Being the dimension of “I” and “We”, it shows up as “I” from the central aspect and as “We” from the peripheral aspect. Both aspects are necessarily mutually dependent, none stands above the other, and the distinction between having and being no longer works here. There is no “I” without a counterpart. Looking at the counterpart means looking at the other and at oneself at the same time, hence the counterpart is neither “You” nor “I” but “We” (Plessner 1975, 301). “We” does not refer to a given society, because this would mean that there was some kind of matter which the *Mitwelt* would consist of and arise from. The *Mitwelt* is humankind in the human individual – the dimension in which one human being confronts others, in which the foundation of culture is generated. “The sphere of the spirit” is an alternative name given by Plessner. What does it mean for

a human being to confront others? How it is possible?

I would again remind you that all of these dimensions and aspects thereof are inextricably intertwined. In the *Mitwelt*, humans transform the objects and processes of the internal and the external world and load them with meaning. The individual can also load its own body or the bodies of others with meaning. Besides giving meaning to solid objects, humans are able to give meaning to sounds, thereby creating languages.

Up to this point I hope to have shown that physical objects loaded with meaning are the objects of the humanities. Due to their nature, humans have no choice but to express themselves, and as they are forced to do so the possibility of analyzing oneself becomes available. Assuming that a human being can see itself in terms of external world, internal world and *Mitwelt*, it can do so only on the basis of the dimension of the spirit. Now, I can elucidate the basic principles of the hermeneutic method and proceed to the anthropological laws.

THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL LAWS

These laws follow from the structure of human existence. The anthropological laws that I am describing are divided into two categories: The first is formed on the basis of the human being as a natural being, and the other on the basis of the human being as a cultural being. Both of them represent two sides of the same coin and engage with each other; only the starting point is different. The hermeneutical principles that refer back to humans as natural beings are the law of natural artificiality and the law of mediated immediacy. The two principles of the human being as a cultural being are the law of inscrutability (*“Unergründlichkeit”*) and the principle that humans are the attributive subject of their world.

First of all I would like to explain the laws of man's emergence as a natural be-

ing. Why are humans naturally artificial? Because a human being is divided into two aspects and three dimensions that it can never integrate conclusively, but must try to again and again, and because it happens to be the case that a human being is only one thing, which has to repeatedly complete itself and also convey itself to others (Plessner 1975, 310). This is a never-ending process: barely has a human being found itself when it again becomes aware of its disunity (Plessner 1975, 341). As I pointed out in discussing the spheres, a human being is able to stand far behind itself in order to transcend itself in the future and the past, and thus to preserve the past in itself and anticipate its future needs and pleasures. Thus, the things that complete a human being include the things that complete its body (*“Körperleib”*), such as stocks and homes. Since it must also complete its inner life and take on a character, with its highs and lows anticipated due to the past, and convey itself to others, it not only makes soul arrangements but sometimes invests objects of its everyday life with interpersonal meaning, and even creates things without *“practical”* benefits. For example, religion: Over time, humans create a spiritual world which will situate them (Plessner 1975, 342). However, the time will come when they realise that they themselves were the originator of that religion and then discard it and proceed to a *“true”* spirituality. The same is true for communities that match its nature best. Humans will realize that they are much more, and can be a lot more still (Plessner 1975, 320).

The second law is that of mediated immediacy. This seemingly paradoxical notion tries to encapsulate the consequences of the twofold aspect. From this law it becomes clear why science is a current problem for human beings and how they have to resolve it. From its centre, a human being perceives everything immediately. What it sees, it sees the way it is, what it hears, it hears as it is. From the peripheral aspect it conveys to itself every phenomenon

through itself (its border). Its body intrudes between its perception and reality.

Mediated immediacy means that mediation is needed for being (Plessner 1975, 324). This is the human condition. In fact, the phenomena that seem to be immediate are actually mediate. For man is doubly separated from reality. On the one hand, he is stuck in his body, but on the other hand he can still abstract from his pure "I". Apparently, man recognizes his fundamental separation from reality, but he is just stuck too deep down in himself to ever be able to achieve that reality. This is called immanence.

However, for Plessner reality becomes tangible only by a principled separation in the immanence of man. The fact that he recognizes that he is divorced from reality gains as much importance for him as reality does. The trick seems to be that it is only by a dual separation of human beings in the world that a human being gains reality and that phenomena gain a regular and persevering character, which makes them objects of reality (Plessner 1975, 270f, 332). The phenomena lose the character of mere perceptions that have no external correspondence. As man is thus never alone, he must convey his situation of immanence to others. However, reality is only constituted through double isolation from reality, which is always questionable through double isolation by its very nature (Plessner 1975, 330).

The human being conveys its situation of immanence to itself and others through expressions. These expressions take many forms: body language, natural languages (especially metaphors), images and other models. This is the reason why I'm talking about this law. This is important for the question of science as I proposed at the outset (Plessner 1975, 330).

Before I summarise my results, I'm going to outline the two anthropological laws from the perspective of human beings as cultural beings. As the leading science for these laws, Plessner selected history. If one

goes deeper into this matter, it is questionable whether one discipline of the humanities is sufficient to understand the human being in its comprehensive cultural aspects. I want to start with the law of humans as subjects of their attribution in the world. Both laws emphasize several aspects of the human being, as it sets out to what it is.

The human being as the subject of its self-attribution means that a human being is both historically conditioned and historically conditioning (Plessner 1981, 190). This is the consequence of the fact that humans have no "natural" authority above them – neither a god nor nature nor a people, nor anything else. He himself creates those and then submits to these constructs so willingly that they become second nature to him. Man needs to understand himself from his creations, but allow them to pass him at the same time. This law expresses that humans are not simply the result of their past, but rather construe the past from their current position. Only against the background of its history can a human being be responsible to itself. That is what the subject of attribution means. This law is an expression of the critical humanities, which became aware of their own conditions. This critical awareness should, and has already, become a self-understanding of the humanities at large. However, this critical awareness must apply to all of science. As a consequence, this means that there can be no definitive progress in history. What would be the opposite?

The opposite would be that humans could be determined in their current situation, causally, by their past. This would be an exact adaptation of the classical natural sciences approach to the humanities. I don't want to say that this is demanded as a procedure for the humanities by the natural sciences. However, I would like to argue that this would be the consequence for science. Strictly speaking, if the natural sciences try to take account of this situation, in which a theory is only valid until

a better one is found, it would be consistent to assert that there will be no clear progress.

There is currently no clear rule concerning how humans conceive their presence in the future out of their past. Here I have mentioned a yet-unnamed aspect of this law. A human being indicates its past by its presence in the future.

The second law, the inscrutability of human beings, is more radical as a scientific imperative. This law summarises most extensively the intentions of this essay. It has a regulatory nature for all the sciences concerning the human being and all its activities, even science itself (Plessner 1981, 180). As already explained, the human being is never a fixed entity due to its structure, and always projects, rejects and then projects itself again. In fact, nothing is necessary and definite where human beings are concerned. There is no neutral (in the traditional sense), objective position which definitively captures the human being as a whole. However, the human being cannot help but create a picture of itself. Strictly speaking, a human being does not even need to understand itself as a human being. It could also understand itself as an animal or a rational being. It is also possible that it never questions its existence, but exists only in its habits and daily life. Therefore, what a human being is must remain an open question. For the sciences, this means that they cannot take a position from which they try to fathom what a human being is, both in the disciplines as well as in the methodological foundations. A hermeneutic, i. e. humanistic, consideration of the human being must be aware of its own boundaries.

BACK TO THE POINT: SCIENCES

How could all those general considerations of the human being, which shall provide the foundation for a new method, illuminate the question of the nature or sense of the sciences? Well, what is true for the hu-

man being as a natural and artificial being is also true for its surroundings, especially for culture. Science is part of human culture, which makes it an object of the humanities.

One topic could be the study of the history of science, which does not reveal clear progress (e.g. biology). A different topic could be the question of the meaning of sciences, which would not reveal a singular and ultimate meaning.

There are a plurality of meanings of the sciences in a society. For some, the sciences might be an ideology, the fundamentals of a worldview. For others, they are the means to subdue the world, an approach probably represented best in sociology. Another meaning of science is science as an end in itself, which could mean two things: Firstly, science satisfies the human thirst for knowledge; secondly, it's up to the sciences to evolve methods that clarify the conditions of the possibilities of knowledge about the world, and to generalize these methods. This is also the aim of this presentation.

On the other hand, it has to be possible to consider cultural aspects with a view of the natural sciences, as is done, for example, in the neurosciences. Another task of the various disciplines is to support and criticise each other, in order to produce interdisciplinary research deserving this name. Until then, for the sake of science as a whole, the humanities need to apply, develop and refine their own methods.

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