Foreword

The works of the German biologist, philosopher and sociologist Helmuth Plessner (1892-1985) have remained relatively unknown to the English-speaking world until now. Without doubt, one of the most important reasons for this is the fact that so far only a few of his works has been translated into English. Moreover, the majority of the large corpus of secondary literature is also in German. For these reasons, the “Plessner Renaissance” that took place in the past decades went largely unnoticed among English scholars in the humanities and in the natural and social sciences. In order to widen the audience, the organizers of the IVth International Plessner Conference at the Erasmus University Rotterdam in 2009, which was devoted to Plessner’s magnum opus, The Levels of the Organic and Man: An Introduction to Philosophical Anthropology [Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch. Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie, originally published in 1928], decided to hold the entire conference in English. Although the conference did not attract a large group of participants from English-speaking countries, it resulted, for the first time in the history of Plessner scholarship, in a substantive collection of papers on Plessner’s philosophical anthropology written in English.¹ The present volume contains a selection of the papers presented at that conference, offering an excellent introduction to a philosopher whose work has proven to be inspiring for several generations of scholars.

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¹ As only some of Plessner’s works have been translated so far, the papers presented at the Rotterdam Plessner conference lacked a uniform translation of Plessner’s key terms. In some cases it was just a matter of different spelling. For example, whereas in some contributions the German exzentrisch was translated as “eccentric”, in other papers “excentric” was used. In other cases the differences concerned the entire word. The German Grenze for example, was translated as “boundary” by some authors and as “border” by others. In order to avoid conceptual confusion, in almost all cases the editorial choice has been a uniform translation. For that reason, the word exzentrisch is consistently translated as eccentric (a motivation for this particular choice is given in footnote 2 on page 12). However, in a few cases where different translations were caused by differences in context, for which the English language has different words, the choice has been made to keep the different translations. For that reason the German Grenze is translated with “boundary”, but in some cases as “border”. When an author used synonyms for stylistic reasons (for example by alternatively using “corporeality” and “corporeity”), the different translations have also been maintained.
with the selection of the papers for this volume. I would also like to thank Laurens van den Berg and Marjolein Wegman for their encouraging support while organizing the conference, and my research assistants Sassan Sangsari and Julien Kloeg for their help during the editing of the text. I also wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for their critical comments that have helped us to improve the book. Last but not least I would like to thank Inge van der Bijl, Ed Hatton, and Jaap Wagenaar of Amsterdam University Press for their first-rate assistance during the final editing and production of this book.

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Last but not least, I would like to thank the authors of this volume. Hopefully, their contributions mark the beginning of a fruitful reception and application of Helmuth Plessner’s work by the English-speaking community of scholars.

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*Jos de Mul*