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Plessner’s Vital Turn in the Light of Kant and Bergson

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Overture: Plessner’s reception of Kant’s categories

At the beginning of the second chapter of The Levels of Organic Being and Man [Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch, 1928], Helmuth Plessner gives a brief outline of what he will later characterize as “vital categories”:

In the language of philosophy, category means a form which experience complies with but which doesn’t spring from experience; a form whose scope doesn’t come to an end with the sphere of subjective acts but rather spills over to the sphere of the objects, which is why not only the experience we have of things, but also the things themselves are subordinate to that form. Thus, categories are forms which belong neither to the subject nor to the object alone but make them come together in virtue of their neutrality. They are conditions of possibility of agreement and concord between two essentially different and independent entities so that these are neither separated by an insurmountable gap nor influence one another directly (Plessner 1975, 65).

It can hardly be doubted that the gist of Plessner’s “re-creation of philosophy” in The Levels of Organic Being and Man consists of his attempt to bring about a new Copernican revolution. Plessner’s deep bond with Kant is a well-known area of research, even though the status of his dissertation on Kant, The Crisis of Transcendental Truth in Its Origin [Die Krisis der transzendentalen Wahrheit im Anfange, 1918], has not been thoroughly explored at all. By all means, the third chapter of Plessner’s magnum opus revolves around the claim to accomplish a deduction of the so-called “constitutive qualities of the organic.” In fact, it would be difficult to fully seize the punch line of Plessner’s philosophy of the organic if one chooses to neglect the transcendental drive of his train of thought.

Strangely enough though, it seems that literally anyone who has dealt with this particular aspect in Plessner’s book is not concerned with the question of whether or not what Plessner puts forward here is justifiably called a deduction. As it is hard to picture Plessner as anything but a transcendental
thinker, it has become commonplace to take for granted that his philosophy of life is shaped from within by a philosophical operation that can lay full claim to being a deduction in the Kantian sense. However, the above quote is far from being a neat piece of evidence for the transcendentalist stance. At the very least one might be accused of overinterpretation when trying to defend the idea that Kant would have readily subscribed to a thesis such as this: “Thus, categories are forms which belong neither to the subject nor to the object alone but make them come together in virtue of their neutrality” (ibid.).

The speculation that I would like to dwell on a little in this chapter is that Plessner did achieve no such thing as a deduction of the categories of the organic. Furthermore, my impression is that Plessner had a tough time inscribing a transcendental fabric into his argument. Certainly, a transcendental turn governs the way Plessner poses the problem of life. In fact, it is key for grasping the difficulty of eccentric positionality. Nonetheless, this turn is spoiled by another project or strategy which is at work underneath the official story. As far as I can see, this project appealed to Plessner on par with the one emanating from the transcendental paradigm. His enthusiasm can be read between the lines of what Plessner explicitly says. Yet, this subtext was discarded as a systematic answer to the question how knowledge of life can be transmitted. Plessner’s vital turn indeed became a transcendental turn. However, in his theory we can catch a glimpse of an altogether different vital turn, a turn which, if Plessner had chosen to think it through to the end, would have presented itself as knowledge of life that sloughs the role of the subject.

To elucidate this context a bit further, I would first like to clarify what exactly is meant by a ‘vital turn’ in Plessner’s argument. My focus in this first step will be to show that Plessner’s effort to conceive this vital turn as a transcendental turn is unconvincing, because Plessner felt the force of a different denouement which he implied, but aborted. Secondly, I would like to disclose a similar constellation in the case of Henri Bergson. In a brief epilogue, I will raise the question of how this moment of ambiguity in Plessner’s philosophy can be assessed in the interplay between life, concept and subject.

Preliminarily, it might also be relevant to note that there is a dominating view in the literature dedicated to Plessner which claims that he actually succeeded in constructing a systematic and demanding adaptation of Kant.¹ This consensus seems to affirm the image created by Plessner himself, an

image that suggests a seamless overall project which smoothly integrates transcendentalism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, philosophy of life and the scientific scenery of the period. Slightly deviating from the main current, I would like to abet the idea that Plessner’s philosophy sometimes leaves the impression of an eclectic building that harbours quite a few heterogeneous elements without necessarily finding inner unity at all times.

Plessner’s deduction of the vital categories as his vital turn

It is interesting to call to mind why Plessner deemed it necessary to provide a deduction of the categories of the vital in the first place. Having started out with a phenomenological analysis of things as they appear, Plessner had been able to point out that a living thing looks as if it realized its own border. But looks can be deceptive, there can be false friends. It is precisely this distinction between appearance and being, between an indication and a constitution that leads Plessner henceforth to alter his philosophical procedure. If we wish to find a key to the problem of life, we must rule out the case of an entity that pretends to be alive without actually being alive. Let us note that Plessner indeed shares a very obvious motive with Kant in this respect.

Above all, it is the word “constitution” that we ought to pay close attention to. Summarizing the way that Plessner constructs his argument initially, it doesn’t seem too far-fetched to predict that Plessner might go on to use the term “constitution” in a conventional phenomenological sense. Following that trail would boil down to an investigation of the ways in which consciousness constitutes phenomena as correlatives to its own intentional acts. If Plessner championed this method, he would be able to convert his “turn towards the object” into a phenomenological exploration of consciousness.

Astonishingly, this classical direction of phenomenology is clearly not the direction Plessner pushes his own analysis towards. On the contrary, Plessner seeks to argue that the conditions of possibility for determining an object’s vital “border” are rooted in the peculiar constitution of the object itself rather than in the consciousness of a subject. Thus, the term constitution refers to a mode of composition that is inherently entrenched in life. Olivia Mitscherlich has fleshed out the twofold aim that Plessner pursued in his deduction of the vital categories. According to Mitscherlich, Plessner does not wish to deduce the biological functions of the living from his phenomenological starting point, namely the hypothesis of border realiza-
tion (Mitscherlich 2007, 106). By doing so, Plessner would only retroactively gather biological evidence for an arbitrary conception of the living. Opposed to this view, Mitscherlich believes that Plessner wanted his strategy to work in both ways: It is true that what we naively, and from the mere appearance of things, would describe as border realization begs for biological features of the living that testify to the reality of our hypothesis (ibid., 106). Yet at the same time, and inversely, we might just as well say that the capacity of the living to realize its own borders relies on certain irreducible modes of life (ibid., 105). In this light, we may conclude that Plessner implements the structure of a Kantian deduction without resorting to a unilateral point of departure for deduction.

What we have here in a nutshell, is Plessner’s conversed transcendentalism. Objects are able to appear to subjects because both these poles exhibit a correlation with one other by means of a “condition of possibility of agreement” (ibid., 65). Yet this third alternative that has both sides “come together” and guarantees their interaction is a link that eludes both sides at a time. One may illuminate this as follows: The intuition (Anschauung) of things must of course be identified as an intuition related to a subject (or a consciousness, for that matter) which, to the extent that it relates to things, indeed constitutes these things. The subject charts transcendental presuppositions, forms of order without which the distinct unity of a thing would not even set itself apart from the diversity of sensual data. But what is intuited – and this represents the very point of Plessner’s argument – is the constitution of things in themselves, a constitution that can in no way be charged to the account of the subject performing the intuition. Beyond the scope of sheer conditions of knowledge which are transcendently deduced on the part of the subject, Plessner understands categories to be object conditions, modalities that can only be elucidated if one asks what a thing constitutively is. Thus, the categories, as defined by Plessner, bring about a disjunction “between heterogeneous spheres, between thought and intuition as well as between subject and object” (ibid., 116). Subject and object are related to one another only by way of a rupture that divides them.

This means that in Plessner’s approach, the transcendental capacities to constitute things are embraced by the ontic constitution of the things themselves; the “basic issue” (ibid., 115) which had been phenomenologically isolated in a first step and suggested that vividness is a process of border realization must now, in a second step, be authenticated through “laws of connection between the living and its environment […], i.e. materially aprioric laws” (ibid., 65). What is at stake in Plessner’s approach is precisely this reciprocal relationship, this inversion between subjectively constituted
views of (living) reality and the qualitative constitution of (living) reality (cf. Grünewald 1993). If, following Jan Beaufort, one may speak of a theory of constitution (Konstitutionstheorie) to be at the heart of Plessner’s project (Beaufort 2000, 52), it has to be added that in such a theory, the conditions of the object and the conditions of the knowledge of the object intertwine.

It is indispensable to discuss a bit further the precise consequences that flow from this construction. Right from the start, any identification of objects, including living objects, is possible only within the limits of a hermeneutic relation. Plessner’s theory of the object is interlinked with a “theory of observation and a theory of interpretation” (Lindemann 2005, 85), whose a priori is not at all supplied as a matter of course. This is why the recovery of the a priori, as finally achieved by Plessner at the end of The Levels of Organic Being and Man, does not get lost on the idealistic track that would return to transcendental subjectivity. All along, one has to recall two points to keep a clear eye on the foundations of Plessner’s knowledge of life: On the one hand, this type of knowledge is antecedent to the “narrow methodical controls of the empirical sciences” (ibid.). The latter ignore the qualitative aspects of their objects, leading them to ignore the very practice that underlies their own operations. On the other hand, this knowledge eludes the rational force of an a priori that would be anchored in the subject. Plessner registered “this new standing of the a priori in its relation to the a posteriori” (Plessner 1981, 165) above all in Macht und menschliche Natur (Power and Human Nature) as the revolutionary trove of philosophical anthropology, with Dilthey as the decisive pioneer.

Let us make one thing plain: As matters stand, Plessner deviates from Kant in a crucial respect. One extraordinary point Plessner insists on all throughout is that categories can be understood as “forms of concordance between heterogeneous spheres, between thoughts and intuitions as well as between subject and object” (Plessner 1975, 116). It is a sign of Plessner’s dazzling skills as a writer that this passage presents itself not so much as a bold transformation, but rather as an immanent reading of Kant’s original text. Quite allusively and implicitly, Plessner tries to get across his statement that “the transcendental unity of self-consciousness may be the central point of all categories, but not the point of their deduction, the principle and source of their differentiation” (ibid., 113).

Having said that, we should now be able to grasp the deviance between Plessner and Kant. For Kant, it would have been unacceptable to sever the bond that links the categories with the transcendental unity of self-consciousness. Of course we are moving in the realm of the subject as a synthetic center when we have to account for the origin of the categories.
According to Kant, the categories do not float between subject and object; they depend emphatically upon the synthesis of the subject. From a strict Kantian point of view, Plessner falls short of the philosophical standards a deduction would have to embrace. Plessner, on the other hand, envisages a creative process which in itself is irreducible, but not transcendentally imprinted in self-consciousness. The a priori that makes the experience of phenomena possible for a subject: that a priori is a process that takes place in between the poles of subject and object. Moreover, it is a process that brings about the opposition between subject and object while at the same time entangling one with the other.

We are now standing at the threshold of what I would like to call the vital turn within Plessner’s mindset. This vital turn is only a turn away from both Kant and Husserl because, as mentioned above, Plessner argues that the specific feature which we ascribe to living entities does not derive from an a priori within “us,” i.e. the subjects. Instead, this feature is intrinsic to the constitution of the objects themselves. But we ought to move one step ahead: What we’d have to beware of is the fact that our ability as subjects to experience an environment of objects is the result of something which we do because we live. Whereas Kant thought that the condition of possibility that allows us to experience objects is grounded in the synthetic operations of our intellect, Plessner encourages us to trace back this condition to a vital performance that is carried out both by ourselves and by the objects we experience. If we as human beings are able to conceive of living things as living things, then this is not due to a unique cognitive performance, but to a performance we share with the very objects we are confronted with. And this performance is the performance of life in its own right – the realization of the boundary.

Thus, the shift conducted by Plessner is a vital turn because we have already performed the movement of life ourselves when we describe things as living things. And as we have just seen, Plessner develops this argument in view of the constitution, i.e. the reality of the living. However, it would be a severe misapprehension of Plessner’s intentions to abandon the interpretation at this juncture. It is not the be all and end all of Plessner’s philosophical anthropology to tell us that human subjectivity can be fully dissolved into and rewritten under the conditions of life. What makes Plessner’s approach so complex is the fact that even though that may very well be his main discovery, the transcendental perspective is still built into his conception of life.

The important thing is that the transcendental question takes on a new shape in Plessner’s framework. He clings on to it and keeps it alive instead
of simply inscribing it into life. To my mind, this particular twist reveals itself when we investigate the relationship between man and life under the circumstances of eccentric positionality. Couldn’t we say that the tension that occurs in eccentric positionality hints at a point of view, a perspective or a look at the world that is no longer attached to any specific organic shape? The categories in which man’s knowledge of life proceeds do indeed turn out to be the constituents of the objects themselves. But a living being that is able to objectify its proper constitution is “once more related” (ibid., 288) to that very constitution and hence “no longer bound by it” (ibid., 291). If the structure which carries and characterizes the living becomes transparent, it does so only from a point of view that breaks away from the immanence of life: “Man is placed into his own border and hence way beyond it, which confines him, the living thing” (ibid., 292). We might even put it like this: Man does not only perform the movement of life, he is confronted with the fact and the results of and the alternatives to his performance. If an animal realizes its border, it spontaneously generates the horizon under which things can appear to and vanish from its eyes. In sharp contrast, man is driven into the experience that his horizon can only be socially construed. It changes historically and it is continuously open for interpretation.

In other words, Plessner finally surpasses his own vital turn by arguing that our ability to understand the constitution of life cannot, for once, be traced back to having the constitution of life. Plessner’s philosophy, as we see it, wavers between the discovery of life as an a priori and a transcendental motive, which rejects the idea of an aprioric constitution within the material reality of objects. In the following section of my argument, I would like to zero in on a quite similar rupture conveyed by Henri Bergson’s philosophy of life. Just like Plessner, Bergson was caught in the struggle between a transcendental analysis and the insight into the material a priori of life.

From *Matière et Mémoire* to *La Pensée et Le Mouvant*: Henri Bergson’s vital turn

Bergson’s early work *Matter and Memory* (*Matière et Mémoire*, 1896) (translated into English in 1911), tackles the question on how it is possible that we

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2 It needs to be underscored that the reading of Bergson proposed in this paper is essentially inspired by Georges Canguilhem’s critique of Bergson in his 1994 essay “Le concept et la vie.” (Canguilhem 1994). In an attempt to reveal the relationship between life and concept as a recurrent motif in the history of philosophy, Canguilhem juxtaposes Hegel and Aristotle on one side.
For our present purpose, it is paramount to state that Bergson develops his solution of the problem of generality by objecting, first and foremost, to a classical postulate harboured by nominalists and conceptualists alike. Strongly opposed to these two paradigms, Bergson dismisses the assumption that our sensual perception immediately brings us into touch with individualities. Our senses do not refer to distinct and delimited objects. If anything, we find our way through our environment with the help of a vague feeling rather than a sharp sense of difference. I would like to quote Bergson on this subject:

But this will be more clearly evident if we go back to the purely utilitarian origins of our perception of things. That which interests us in a given situation, that which we are likely to rasp in it first, is the side by which it can respond to a tendency or a need. But a need goes straight to the resemblance or quality; it cares little for individual differences. To this discernment of the useful we may surmise that the perception of animals is, in most cases, confined. It is grass in general which attracts the herbivorous animal: the color and the smell of grass, felt and experienced as forces [...] are the sole immediate data of its external perception (Bergson 1911, 206).

of the dividing line with Kant and Bergson on the other side. From Canguilhem's point of view, Hegel and Aristotle came closer to the solution of this crucial relationship because they went beyond the idea of the subject as the origin of conceptual knowledge. Aristotle argued that the soul (psyche) of the living is precisely that principle which renders the living its definite being (ousia) while at the same time representing the reference point for our conceptual knowledge (logos) of the living. Hegel defined life as the immediate unity of a concept with its own reality, i.e. as a phenomenon which, in everything it produces, reproduces itself. Differing from this type of theory, as represented by Aristotle and Hegel, Canguilhem stages Kant and Bergson as thinkers who could not accept the idea of a substantiality of life that would no longer depend on a transcendental perspective. However, both in Kant's and Bergson's writings Canguilhem finds the traces of an implicit “material a priori.” Both were on the verge of acknowledging the objective unity of life and concept, but failed to express this unity as both remained loyal to a philosophy centered on the subject. My suggestion in this paper is to inscribe Plessner's philosophy of life into the pattern and the divisions mentioned by Canguilhem in “Le concept et la vie.”
A few paragraphs later, Bergson draws the following conclusion:

In short, we can follow from the mineral to the plant, from the plant to the simplest conscious beings, from the animal to man the progress of the operation by which things and beings seize from out their surroundings that which attracts them, that which interests them practically, without needing any effort of abstraction, simply because the rest of their surroundings takes no hold upon them: this similarity of reaction following actions superficially different is the germ which the human consciousness develops into general ideas (Ibid., 207f.).

All we need to know for that matter is that Bergson employs a utilitarian theory of perception to explain the formation of general concepts. Humans, just like any other living beings, perceive and treat objects in the light of their organic needs. The stimuli that stream in on us from the environment may be varied and diffuse. However, they produce identical reactions on our part, reactions that gradually become a habit. In this vein, the process of generalizing, of dealing with objects as exemplars of a species is a vital habit that panders to our survival. I would like to underscore that Bergson, arguing as he does, links the knowledge of life to a philosophy of the subject. Even though the problem of knowledge is no longer bound to Kant’s transcendental subjectivity, it is indicative of a vital subjectivity that desires to know in order to live more successfully.

However, there are two faces of Bergson as a philosopher of life. While it is sound to say that he remained within the paradigm of the subject as far as *Matter and Memory* is concerned, it is equally true that Bergson altered his approach in *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics* [La Pensée et Le Mouvant, 1934; English translation 1946; quotes here are taken from the 1992 edition]. In this text we find to use the phrase that has been guiding us so far – his ‘vital turn.’

In the context we are presently occupied with, we can only pinpoint out the most evident divergence that opposes Bergson’s new attitude to the one he had expressed in *Matière et Mémoire*. It is true that Bergson arrives at his new argument by repeating the point he had made previously. Our use of general concepts for phenomena that are in themselves contingent and sensual goes back to the fact that we isolate features which matter to us in a vital and immediate way. According to Bergson, this interpretation implies an idea that needs to be taken seriously – the idea that similarities are not at all arbitrarily construed, but already suggested to us by experience. What remains to be analyzed is “why experience presents us with
resembles which we have only to translate into generalities. Among these resemblances there are some, naturally, which go the fundamental root of things" (Bergson 1992, 56). The concepts of life habitually used by an organic subject refer to objects that already display a conceptual order. In this situation, Bergson points out that the important issue to consider is "what one might call objective generalities, inherent in reality itself" (ibid.). As a matter of fact, one might say, life is subdivided, diversified, dispersed and specified in its material manifestations. There are inherently rational differences in life that are in no way invented by man, but antecedent to him.

In an interesting reversal of Kant, Bergson goes on to say that there is a specific class of

resembles [which] are biological in essence: they would have it that life should work as if life itself had general ideas, those of genus and species, as if it followed a certain limited number of structural plans, as if it had instituted general properties of life, finally and above all as if [...] it had wished to arrange the living in a hierarchical series, along a scale where the resemblences between individuals are more numerous the higher one goes. [...] In principle it is always in reality itself that our subdivisions into species, genera, etc. – generalities which we translate into general ideas – will be based (Ibid., 56f.).

Kant advised us to look at nature as if it followed concepts that we as humans are able to think of, but he emphasized that this is only a subjective maxim regulating our knowledge. Bergson on the other hand, seems to say that life operates as if reproducing an objective conceptual order, a universal kind of information that communicates itself to us at any moment. Hence, Bergson’s vital turn is a turn away from the transcendental position of the subject towards a material a priori: To know life is to be capable of reading the code that is inherent to life. With this image in mind, I would now like to close the loop with a little epilogue that will carry us back to Plessner.

Epilogue

My brief digression from Plessner to Bergson was supposed to show that both thinkers have incorporated something into their philosophies, which I would like to describe as a vital turn. In a nutshell, this turn implies that life itself dictates the concepts we employ to understand what life is. This
is the crucial discovery that emerges as a subtext in both Bergson's and Plessner's conceptions. As a subtext, this insight necessarily runs up against other intentions that are equally at work, both in Plessner's and in Bergson's case. However, it is not just a coincidence that Bergson's philosophical route seems to be an exact inversion of the trajectory taken by Plessner. Plessner comes to the realization that our capacity to know life is a capacity that springs from life. Yet, he plays out this idea against a transcendental mindset. The condition of possibility which allows us to experience life as a whole is not our immanence in life, but the hiatus which sets us apart from it. Compared to that, Bergson begins, in *Matière et Mémoire*, with an understanding of life as seen from the utilitarian perspective of an organic subject. In *La Pensée et Le Mouvant*, he goes on to revise this philosophy of the subject in favour of a biological structuralism. By doing so, Bergson pays tribute to the idea that the knowledge of life needs to be devised irrespective of a transcendental or phenomenological agent.

Would it be unfair to think that Plessner detected the very conclusion that Bergson had exposed himself to, albeit in a different type of philosophy? If we reconsider Plessner's strange definition of transcendentalism while also bearing in mind that eccentric positionality evokes the paradox of a subjectivity without a subject, can one easily get the impression that Plessner tacitly acknowledged the immanence of life? Furthermore, does it seem like he refused to work out this problem to cover all its implications? After all, Plessner’s approach brings forward two lines at a time, two disparate projects that just cannot have evolved simultaneously and that cannot coexist side by side. One is certainly not wrong in thinking that Bergson amplified something we usually call vitalism when he obliterated the agency of the subject from the conceptualization of life. And one is certainly entitled to ask if Plessner seriously left no stone unturned to silence the voice of the vitalism inside his own project.

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