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6 Plessner and the Mathematical-Physical Perspective

The Prescientific Objectivity of the Human Body

Jasper van Buuren

Two interpretations of Plessner's concept of the physical body

One of the aims of Plessner's *The Levels of the Organic and Man [Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch, 1928]* is to base natural science on a concept of human life. Plessner considers man's bodily existence as both the foundation and origin of the perspectives of physics and biology, but the human body can only play this role if it is itself understood primarily in a non-scientific way. However, some passages in Plessner's *Levels* seem to conflict with this primacy of everyday experience: the human body seems to be defined from a mathematical-physical point of view.

In one of the crucial passages in the *Levels* (GS IV, 365-368), Plessner bases the mathematical-physical perspective on his concept of the human body as physical body (*Körper*) as opposed to the living body (*Leib*). The passage raises suspicions about the concept of the physical body not merely “lead[ing] to” the mathematical-physical perspective (GS IV, 367), but is rather defined by that perspective from the outset. Plessner describes the physical body as “a thing among things,” in a “continuum in which directions are relative (*ein richtungsrelatives Kontinuum*)” (GS IV, 367). In the space of physical bodies, according to Plessner, there are no orientations like above, below, left and right. When interpreting this passage, we have to take into account that in everyday life, we always experience space as organized by directions, like above and below. From a mathematical-physical perspective, orientations like above, below, left and right, are merely relative. So Plessner’s concept of the physical body refers to an object in the mathematical-physical rather than to bodily experience in of everyday life sense. The scientific objectivity of our bodies seems to acquire a fundamental status within the concept of

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1 Plessner 1981; hereafter referred to as *Levels*.
2 The translations of these terms, *Körper* and *Leib*, are borrowed from James Spencer Churchill and Marjorie Grene’s translation of Plessner’s *Lachen und Weinen* (Plessner 1970), e.g. 34. Unless specified, translations in this article are mine.
man, which would mean that Plessner undercuts his own aim of descending to a prescientific level of human existence, so that it may constitute a ground for scientific perspective.

However, the following alternative on how to interpret Plessner is more attractive for several reasons. Here, man’s physical body is indeed an object, but not primarily in the mathematical-physical sense. The objectivity of the body is primarily prescientific. As such, it is not defined from within the mathematical-physical perspective. It renders possible this perspective in the first place. Mathematics and physics are then secondary to everyday experience. In this chapter, I develop the second interpretation of Plessner by using the first as a stepping-stone. I take this detour in order to further our understanding of the passages mentioned, as their degree of difficulty may easily lead to misunderstandings.

Before I start, let me say something about how I use the words “subject” and “object.” When interpreting Plessner, in what sense can we legitimately speak of human beings as subjects? Although Plessner uses “personhood” to describe the eccentric position, this notion does not make the concept of subjectivity superfluous. In the section on the second anthropological principle (GS IV, 396-418), Plessner frequently uses the terms “subject” and “subjectivity” to express his own thought. When applied to human beings, these notions should not be confused with the “centric positionality” of the animal: contrary to animal subjectivity, human subjectivity has an eccentric structure, viz. a form of “mediated immediacy” that gives man’s world the double structure of immanence and transcendence. Subjectivity is man’s first distance to his body, which is modified by the second distance (the eccentric position). This is also the position from which man has his body. All these concepts will be further clarified below.

Plessner uses the word “object,” both in reference to the scientific subject-object opposition and in a prescientific sense (e.g. GS IV, 405). I will follow Plessner in this. At the same time, I will deviate slightly from Plessner’s usage of this term. Although Plessner speaks of the human body (Körper) as a thing (Ding), he does not call it an “object.” In order to highlight a certain dialectic between objectivity and subjectivity, I prefer the word “object” to “thing” as a signifier of the human body as Ding – even when the body is not the object of perception, consciousness or action. The systematic argument for this choice is that something that can, in principle, appear

3 The second reading is influenced by Coolen’s contribution to this volume.
4 In fact, I leaned towards the first interpretation myself for some time and presented this as a hypothesis at the IVth International Plessner Conference, to which this book is dedicated.
as an object to a subject, must in some sense already be an object before it appears as such. This principle also holds for the human body. The fact that in the English language, the words “object” and “objectivity” have a broader meaning than their German equivalents – object is also *Gegenstand* – may allow me to swerve away a little from Plessner’s vocabulary.

In the next section I will situate “physical body” and “lived body” within Plessner’s anthropology. This is a preparation for the more elaborate description of the problem in the third section. With the term “physical body” (*Körper*), Plessner tries to capture an aspect of our body that encompasses the properties it has in common with non-living things. For example, a bag of cement weighing 75 kilograms has the same effect on a scale as my own body does. My body is also subordinate to gravitation in the same fashion as is the bag of cement. This trivial example illustrates that man’s physical body concerns his body’s objectivity or “thingness” in the strong sense of interchangeability with non-living things. For this reason it is interesting to compare Plessner’s conception of the physical body with his phenomenology of the thing at the beginning of the *Levels*. I shall discuss this further in the subsequent section.

The phenomenology of the thing departs from a criticism of the Cartesian *res extensa*. In Plessner’s view, the essential difference between phenomenal thing and *res extensa* is that the former is given to a subject of experience, whereas the latter remains divorced from the *res cogitans*. I argue that this difference implies another difference concerning space: while phenomenal space is structured by directions like above and below, the space of *res extensa* cannot be assigned such directions. This inference, which I hold to be valid, can cause us to suspect a contradiction between Plessner’s conception of the physical body and his understanding of the phenomenal thing. The physical body that exists in the continuum “in which directions are relative,” one might reason, resembles not so much the phenomenal thing, but rather Descartes’s *res extensa*. In the last section, I will show that, upon closer inspection, there is no such contradiction within Plessner’s view. Although it is true that my own physical body is not phenomenal, we have to acknowledge that it does not fit in the concept of *res extensa* either.

**Physical body and living body**

In order to situate the body as both physical body (*Körper*) and living body (*Leib*) within Plessner’s anthropology, we need to understand Plessner’s three-step approach. Firstly, the distinction Plessner makes between the
organic and the inorganic prepares his conception of human life as emerging from the organic. Secondly, his comparison within the realm of the organic between man and animal guides us to the place of the body within human existence. Thirdly, we need to understand Plessner’s division of the concept of world into three worlds – external, inner and social world – in order to see where the distinction between physical body and living body fits in. Let us first turn to the distinction between the organic and the inorganic.

Plessner bases his concept of human life on a philosophy of organic life. This philosophy, in turn, is based on the distinction between living and non-living things. Living beings, according to Plessner, are characterized by the fact that the boundary separating them from their surrounding belongs to the living being itself. In other words, the living thing autonomously realizes this boundary. Living things not only have a place, Plessner says, they take the place they have. This is called “positionality.” Contrary to plants, animals are characterized by “centric positionality.” The “centre” in “centric positionality” refers to the distance the animal has to its own body, which means that it not only is, but also has its body. This renders possible that the animal can use its body as an instrument, for instance to hunt for prey. Man also is and has his body, but, in addition, he relates to both this being and having the body. He not only operates from the centre that is at a distance from the body: he is “eccentric” in that he lives at a distance even to this distance itself, so that a double distance to the body is realized. This is man’s “eccentric positionality”: “the living is body, in the body (as inner life or soul) and exterior to the body as the point of view from which he is both. An individual that is positionally characterized in these three ways is called person” (GS IV, 365).

According to Plessner, the world we live in has a triple structure (GS IV, 365-382). Plessner regards what we generally refer to as “world” as a constellation of three worlds: the external world (Außenwelt), the inner world (Innenwelt) and the sociocultural world (Mitwelt). Each of these worlds is the correlate of one of the three moments of our being. The external world correlates with us being our body, the inner world with us having our body (the “soul” that is also the subject of having the body), and the social world with our eccentric position. Plessner uses the word “double aspect” to denote the relationship between body and soul, i.e. between external and inner world. However, “double aspect” is used differently on other occasions. When Plessner focuses solely on the external world and the way our bodies are part of it, the double aspect at stake is that between physical body (Körper) and living body (Leib). Consequently, we should regard this double aspect as a further differentiation within the more general double aspect of body and soul. Let us look at this differentiation a bit closer.
According to Plessner, we are both “[i]n the world and against the world ([i]n der Welt und gegen die Welt)” (GS IV, 379). With a slight variation on that formulation, we can clarify the double aspect of body and soul by distinguishing between two meanings of “being in the world.” On the one hand, man is in the world in the sense of placed or positioned in that world – as body or “object” in the broad meaning of the word. On the other hand, he is in the world in the sense of being open to the world: as a subject. Since subjectivity can only be realized in a living body, we are dealing with a “living-body-subject” (Leibsubjekt), or, to use a more ordinary term, an embodied subject. In addition, man relates to both these aspects of his situation. The standpoint from which he does this is the eccentric position. In the critical passage regarding this topic (GS IV, 365-368), the difference between physical body and living body is a double aspect within the aspect of the objective human body in its entirety. The soul-aspect is only addressed after that passage (GS IV, 368-373), which is not until the section on mediated immediacy (GS IV, 396-418), the soul-aspect is transformed into the concept of subjectivity, i.e. of true openness to the world. Consequently, Plessner must be using “living body” (Leib) in two ways. When the double aspect of physical body and lived body is discussed, the notion “living body” cannot yet refer to the embodied subject.

Let us broaden our perspective to Plessner’s Laughing and Crying: Inquiries to the Boundaries of Human Behavior [Lachen und Weinen. Eine Untersuchung nach den Grenzen menschlichen Verhaltens, 1941]. Here (GS VII, 239-242), the emphasis lies on the double aspect of being a living body (Leib-sein) and having a physical body (Körper-haben). This distinction suggests that our body, insofar as we have it, is only the physical body, whereas the same body, insofar as we are it, is the living body and nothing else. The living body, then, is the embodied subject (Leibsubjekt) that has the physical body. As noted, the physical aspect of the body refers mainly to the possibility of its being used as an instrument. However, the instrumentalized body cannot always be identified only with the human body insofar as it is interchangeable with non-living things. When I use my hand to grab a pencil, I am using my body as an organic unity. The point is that Plessner’s use of words should not be taken as placing the physical body univocally on the object-side, and the living body on the subject-side of having the body.

Instead, Plessner’s terminology points to a dialectic between subjectivity and objectivity, whereby “higher” forms of objectivity (here: the body as instrument) include “lower” forms of subjectivity (here: the living body, not the embodied subject). In other words, physical body and living body are used in both a narrow and wide sense. In both Laughing and Crying and in
the final part of the Levels (i.e. after the discussion of the external world), the term “physical body” (Körper) can be understood broadly or narrowly. In the narrow sense, it is used to signify the body that we have. But as the example of grabbing a pencil shows, the organic aspect is already part of the body that is used in instrumental action. So the body that we have, is the Körper in the broad sense of the word: the unity of both the physical body (in the narrow sense) and the living body (in the narrow sense). Therefore, Plessner calls the body that we have not only “physical body” (Körper) but also “physical lived body” (Körperleib). The same holds for the body that we are: the embodied subject that has the physical lived body is itself a living body (Leib) in the broad sense, i.e. not the organic aspect as distinct from the physical aspect, but the unity of both. It includes the physical body insofar as this renders possible subjectivity. This is why Plessner also uses the term “physical lived body” (Körperleib) for the body that we are. Consequently, it is the physical lived body that has the physical lived body. Plessner uses spatial terms to express this: “as physical lived body – in the physical lived body” (Plessner 1970, 36; in the original: “als Körperleib – im Körperleib” [GS VII, 240]).

Is the organic aspect of the human body not already some kind of subject? After all, the living body is distinguished from the physical body because it is not merely a thing among other things, but rather an organism in a surrounding (Umfeld) which is organized in terms of directions like above and below. If the living body would be a subject of some sort, how can we insist that it differs from the embodied subject? Plessner wants to arrive at the double aspect of body and soul, which is mediated by the eccentric position. He starts from the way the human body is part of the external world. This means that, in this phase, he prepares the concept of the embodied subject without explicitly thematizing subjectivity in its fully developed form. Within the framework of a philosophy of nature, discussing subjectivity straight away would amount to neglecting it being rooted in the objectivity of the body. In other words, the question Plessner answers at this point is: how does the double aspect of being “positioned in the world” (object) and being “open to the world” (subject) announce itself within the sole aspect of being “positioned in the world” (object)?

When Plessner discusses the organic aspect of the body, he refers to “man” as a “lived body (Leib) in the middle of a sphere, that, in accordance with his empirical form, has an absolute above, below” (GS IV, 367). At this stage of thought, the “sphere” is not yet described as a “world,” and the “above” and “below” of the sphere are not yet conceived of as projections by a subject, but as the mere correlates of the “empirical form” of the subject’s body. By
“empirical form,” Plessner does not mean an appearance only accessible to empirical science. Rather, he is referring to properties which are relatively contingent albeit pointing to an entity’s essential way of being.5 Let us look at a situation in which man seems almost completely reduced to his empirical form: a patient who is under narcosis before an operation. The doctor who operates on the patient is, at that very moment, not concerned with him as a subject (or person) but rather with the body as an organic thing. Nonetheless, the distinctively human appearance of the body alludes to the subjectivity for which it is the natural precondition. In this situation, the patient’s face is not the boundary through which he is directed at his world, but to the doctor it remains a tacit empirical indication that the “thing” on the table is a human subject. The human body has a top and a bottom, regardless of the position of the body in space. (Think of the expression “He looked at me from head to toe.”) The fact that a human body has an “above” and “below” differs essentially from the fact that a non-living object has, for us, such directions. In the case of the human body, these directions point to the possibility of projecting such orientations into the world from within the body itself. They refer to subjectivity. But when we focus on the technical manipulation of organic tissue, we do not see this subjectivity at work. We see a living body and the way its empirical form prefigures subjectivity. Only later, when the patient awakes from his narcosis, do we see the projection of spatial orientations being realized: following the patient’s gaze through the room, we experience his presence as an openness to the world to which we can immediately relate. We no longer see his face as a mere token of subjectivity; we see perception and expression at work. We have thus made a change of perspective: we have moved from the experience of the lived body (Leib) to that of the embodied subject (Leibsubjekt).

In other words, the specific “empirical form” of the human body – it having a face and an above and below – is the objective-organic prefiguration of subjectivity. This is how subjectivity announces itself within the aspect of the objectivity of human existence. So the notion “body as object” can refer to two things: a) the physical aspect of the human body, i.e. its thingness in the sense of interchangeability with non-living objects, and b) the organic aspect, i.e. the thingness of the body as the objective-organic prefiguration of subjectivity. The “pre-” in “prefiguration” has of course a logical, not a temporal, meaning.

5 I interpret the “empirical form” of the human body in terms of “indicatory essential properties” (indikatorische Wesensmerkmale) (GS IV, 166-171).
The problem

According to Plessner, physical body and lived body (each taken in the narrow sense discussed above) constitute a “double aspect,” which forms the basis for two scientific world views: the mathematical-physical and the organological world view. The problem I want to address concerns the relationship between physical body and the mathematical-physical perspective.

Let us look a bit closer at this double aspect. In general, the term “double aspect” means that two poles of a being are united, not through synthesis, but through being both connected to the eccentric position. With regard to physical body and lived body, Plessner puts it as follows: “With the eccentricity of the structure of the living being corresponds the eccentricity of the situation, or the irreconcilable double aspect of his existence as physical body [Körper] and lived body [Leib], as thing among things in arbitrary places within the one spatiotemporal continuum and as a system that is concentrically closed around an absolute middle in a space and in a time of absolute directions” (GS IV, 367).

The “spatiotemporal continuum” is the “emptiness” in which objects appear to us, i.e. their being surrounded by “nothing” (GS IV, 367). The human physical body is our body insofar as this is part of that same continuum. In other words, the human body is physical insofar as it is interchangeable with non-living things. Contrary to non-living things, the human physical body is “materially” (GS IV, 367) at the same time a living body in a “surrounding field” (Umfeld) which is structured by an above, below et cetera. We cannot separate physical and living body from another, as they constitute one and the same entity. And yet we can never entirely make sense of this, because there is no transition between the two aspects: they are “nicht überführbar” (GS IV, 367). “Both aspects exist next to one another, mediated merely in the point of eccentricity, in the unobjectifiable I” (GS IV, 368). In the following passage (partly quoted above), Plessner states that the division into two aspects leads to two separate world views:

This is why both aspects of the world are necessary, man as lived body [Leib] in the middle of a sphere, that, in accordance with its empirical form, has an absolute above, below, before, behind, right, left, earlier and later, an aspect that serves as the basis of the organological world view, and man as a physical thing [Körperding] in an arbitrary place within a continuum of possible events, in which directions are relative, an aspect that leads to the mathematical-physical conception (GS IV, 367).
While the organic aspect of the body forms the basis for the organological world view, its physical aspect “leads to” the mathematical-physical perspective. The problem we need to address concerns the latter relationship. Plessner suggests that the physical aspect of our body has the fundamental status of a foundation for the mathematical-physical perspective, but he also describes the physical body as already part of “a continuum of possible events, in which directions are relative.” The form of the lived body mirrors spatial directions. In the space of the physical body as such, there are no orientations like above, below, left and right, or these orientations are interchangeable. I think that, in everyday life we always experience space as organized by directions such as above and below, whereas in mathematical space, these directions are relative and interchangeable. So the physical body, the way Plessner conceives it, appears to be an object in mathematical-physical space rather than a thing as we experience it. Is Plessner’s description of the human physical body fundamentally determined by the mathematical-physical perspective? If it is, how can it constitute the foundation of that perspective?

These questions give cause to a comparison between Plessner’s description of the physical body and his phenomenology of the thing at the beginning of the Levels (GS IV, 128-133). Here, Plessner develops his concept of the phenomenal thing as an alternative to Descartes’s res extensa. In Plessner’s view, the difference between phenomenal thing and res extensa is that the first is given to a subject who is positioned in the same space as the thing, whereas the second – according to its idea – fills a purely objective space. I argue that this difference implies a second disparity: while phenomenal space is structured by directions like above and below and left and right, the res extensa is without any such directions. This difference forms the basis of the comparison of man’s physical body with both phenomenon and res extensa: why does the physical body, the way Plessner understands it, seem to show greater similarity with the res extensa than with the phenomenal thing?

**Physical body and res extensa**

Plessner’s phenomenology of the thing fulfils the aim of recovering the thing, and through the thing the external, natural world as a whole, from Cartesian dualism. What is at stake is the precedence of philosophy of nature over natural science: “In the identification of physicality (Körperlichkeit) and extension, and the equation of extension and measurability implied
therein, the alternative-principle *res cogitans* — *res extensa* certainly entails
the postulation of mathematical natural science as fundamental" (GS IV, 79).

Plessner’s criticism of Descartes addresses certain discrepancies between
our everyday experience of the thing and the Cartesian, mathematical-
physical approach. The *res extensa* is extended matter in a mathematical
space, abiding to laws of nature. The properties that according to our
perceptual experience are qualities of the thing, can only be understood
“mechanically,” by “dissolving” them “into quantities” (GS IV, 80). The
Cartesian alternative to treating qualities as “objective” quantities, is to
consider them as “contents and products of our interiority” (GS IV, 80). The
attempt to make properties objective by quantifying them, turns into its
subjectivist counterpart. As a result, the properties of a thing are located
either in the *res extensa* or in the *res cogitans*, and “appearance as such
remains inconceivable” (GS IV, 81).

Plessner’s answer to Cartesian dualism is his phenomenology of the thing.
The properties of a thing can neither be the product of the *res cogitans*, nor
can they be mere quantities, says Plessner: they are given as properties in
their unity with the thing as a whole. “Every thing that is perceived in its
full nature as thing, appears, according to its spatial limitation, as a unity
of properties organized around a core” (GS IV, 128). Only some of these
properties appear, while others remain hidden. The properties that appear
are called “aspects” (in a different sense than above) and “adumbrations.”
Despite only some properties appearing, the ‘thing’ appears as a unity, so
there must be intrinsic, immediate relationships between all the properties
of the thing. Furthermore, this coherence logically presupposes a core-
substance, i.e. the core of the thing, which is the “bearer” of all its properties.
The given properties not only refer to each other and to the hidden proper-
ties, but also to the core-substance of the thing. This multidimensional
“referring to,” Plessner calls “transgredience” (GS IV, 130).

The language in this section of the *Levels* is reminiscent of Husserl. Pless-
ner indeed draws on Husserl’s phenomenology, but he rejects the idealistic
tendencies in it, as well as later idealistic interpretations of Husserl’s phi-
losophy (GS IV, 131; cf. Krüger 2006, 204-206). An idealistic phenomenology of
perception will equate aspectivity with subjectivity: the sides of the object
that appear are considered contents within my own consciousness. Pless-
ner does not accept such immanentization of the perceived: “Aspectivity,
therefore, is not yet subjectivity at all; it is only the possibility, guaranteed
from the part of the appearance, of its being opposed to a subject” (GS
IV, 131). Plessner’s point is not that the nature of the thing be conceivable
without the tacit assumption of subjectivity. Some of the thing’s properties
show themselves while others remain hidden. This is due to the fact that the thing appears to “something” which occupies a specific position within the same space. This something is man as the subject of perception. In other words, aspectivity is the objective correlate of subjective perception. The very concept of aspectivity evokes the idea of subjectivity, its counterpart.

On the basis of this interpretation of Plessner, we can draw certain conclusions with regard to the nature of the space in which the phenomenon appears. The question of which properties show themselves and which remain hidden depends on the position of the subject. For example, if I stand in front of an object rather than behind it, certain properties are revealed and others are hidden from my perspective. I am not hovering above it, nor am I looking up to it. The presence of the subject within the same space as the thing is what defines the space as one with fixed directions, like above, below, left, right, et cetera. Since the notion of phenomenal space implies a subject that is positioned in it, that space is inconceivable without spatial orientations. The space in which a thing appears is by definition organized in terms of directions like above and below.

Now let us return to the human body as a unity of physical and living body, and focus on these aspects in terms of space. Insofar as the body is living, it is positioned in a surrounding field (Umfeld) that is characterized by “an absolute above, below, before, behind, right, left, earlier and later” (GS IV, 367). Insofar as the body is physical, it is part of “the spatiotemporal totality in which directions are relative” (GS IV, 366). The latter definition of space seems to apply to space as an absolute objectivity, i.e. the mathematical space from which the subject is expelled. That is the space of the res extensa, in which there are no blind spots because there is literally nobody that would bring these along. Since there is no subject in this space, the object has neither front nor back; it is solely characterized by absolute transparency and absolute relativity of directions. Comparing the physical aspect of the human body with either the phenomenal, as signified by the spatiotemporal totality in which directions are relative, determine a situation that answers strictly to the position of the eccentric organism. Just as this is outside of its natural place, outside of itself, object or the res extensa, the physical body appears to have more in common with the res extensa than with the appearing thing. How can Plessner define the space of the physical body as “the spatiotemporal totality in which directions are relative” and at the same time reject Descartes’s res extensa? Is this a contradiction in Plessner, or is it a faulty interpretation?

In the very passage where the description of the physical body resembles Descartes’s res extensa, the eccentric position is thematized in a way
that reminds us of the *res cogitans*: “Things in a homogeneous sphere of movements which are arbitrarily possible non-spatial, atemporal, placed nowhere, placed in nothing, in the nothing of its boundary, the physical thing [Körperding] of the environment is ‘in’ the ‘emptiness’ of relative places and moments in time. And the organism, in virtue of its eccentricity, is to itself merely such a physical thing” (GS IV, 366f.).

The eccentric organism, which is “outside of its natural place, outside of itself, non-spatial, atemporal, placed nowhere, placed in nothing” seems to be a “subject” that does not participate in the world. It seems to stand above objective space, without creating any blind spots in it that would render its gaze a finite one. This appears to make it very similar to Descartes's *res cogitans*.

We should, of course, always keep in mind that the physical body is only one of two aspects of the human body, with the other aspect being the living body, which is the objective-organic prefiguration of man's openness to the world from within. The correlation between physical body and eccentric position is part of something much richer. Therefore, there is no reason to claim – not even hypothetically – that Plessner remains within the Cartesian framework. If criticism would be justified, then it would concern the way Plessner transcends the framework created by Descartes. The crux would be that Plessner tries to overcome Cartesian dualism by *integrating* it into a larger whole. This is the hypothesis we have been exploring: Plessner's concept of the physical body answers to Descartes's definition of the *res extensa*, and the mathematical-physical definition of reality is thus given fundamental anthropological status.

**Physical body and object**

One of the premises of the hypothesis is that Plessner defines the eccentric position as a position in “nothing.” Plessner thus seems to envisage a Cartesian pure mind, divorced from the external world. However, upon closer inspection, Plessner’s description of the eccentric position suggests a different reading. In the passage being discussed here, Plessner indeed states that the “eccentric organism […] stands in nothing,” but he adds that it is placed “in the nothing of its *boundary*” (italics mine). Hereafter, the boundary is specified as one “which can only be approximated asymptotically” (GS IV, 368). This addition implies that according to Plessner, we, as eccentric beings, do not fall together with “nothing”; our position is always at some distance from this negativity. In Plessner’s view, the double distance that
man has to his own body never enables him to fully detach himself from it. The distance is always also an achievement of the body itself that he is. If we zoom in on the two aspects of that body again, we see that in this regard the relationship between the physical and the organic aspect is not symmetrical. The passage quoted in the previous section purported that, just as the eccentric organism is “placed in nothing,” the physical things, among which our own bodies, are placed “in the ‘emptiness’ of relative places and moments in time.” Plessner considers these physical bodies the most radical antipole of the eccentric position. It is not man’s organic body that fulfils this role. We could say that the organic aspect is a Zwischen-schicht: an intermediate layer in between, on the one hand, the eccentric position with its boundary in nothing, and on the other hand, the reality of physical things. The soul, the embodied subject who has the physical lived body, and even the eccentric position itself insofar as it is an organism or a constellation of subjectivity and objectivity, are all intermediate layers between the interior boundary of eccentricity and the human physical body as a thing among things in directionless space. As living human beings, we are always in between these two poles; philosophical reflection springs from this intermediate position as well.

Precisely because the physical body and the boundary of eccentricity are each other’s antipoles, they have something important in common. The passage that introduces the concept of an asymptotic approximation makes this clear. The “aspects” mentioned are still physical body and living body: “Both aspects exist next to one another, mediated merely in the point of eccentricity, in the unobjectifiable I. Just as this [unobjectifiable I], ‘behind’ physical body and lived body, constitutes the vanishing point of one’s own interiority, of one’s own being oneself, i.e. the boundary which can only be approximated asymptotically, the thing in the external world, as the appearance of an inexhaustible being, as the constellation of rind and core, shows the very same structure” (GS IV, 368).

The idea of an asymptotic approximation applies to the boundary of the eccentric position, which here is called the “vanishing point of our own interiority.” Regarding the reality of physical bodies, we read that “the thing in the external world […] shows the very same structure.” The “same structure” refers to the principle of asymptotic approximation. So this principle also holds for the objective correlate of interiority: the physical body in the external world – be it my own body or an object simple – can also only be approximated asymptotically.

My interpretation scrutinizes every element in Plessner’s formulations, since Plessner himself does not go any deeper into the matter. He does not
explicitly argue why we are unable to get a full grasp of either boundary. I think the reasons slightly differ depending on which boundary we focus on. The boundary of interiority is the negativity of the eccentric position, the “nothing” in which we stand. According to my interpretation, this “nothing” can be approximated merely asymptotically, because we remain bound to the external world, the extreme limit constituted by the world of interchangeable, non-living things. We are never univocally nothing; we are always in between the negativity of a pure mind and radical externality. Life, subjectivity and interiority are the modes of this “between.” Logic suggests that any movement in the opposite direction, from “nothing” towards physical bodies, can be specified analogically: our approximation of the objective world of non-living things is necessarily asymptotic, because we remain bound to the limit of interiority, the “nothing” of our eccentric position.  

How do we approximate the reality of physical bodies? I think we first need to differentiate between the physical body that is my own body (which, materially, falls together with the living body) and the physical bodies as simply all non-living things surrounding me. For the sake of simplicity, I leave out the physical aspect of the bodies of other subjects than myself and only deal with the non-living things surrounding my own body. How, and to what extent, are they accessible to me?

There appears to be a tension between two elements in the passage quoted above. Although Plessner is still concerned with the physical reality of non-living things – “the thing in the external world” – he also describes the thing as a phenomenon with a “rind” of appearing properties and a “core.” My comparison between physical body and phenomenal thing led to the conclusion that the physical body cannot be a phenomenon, because this assumption produces a contradiction between the two concepts of space involved: the space of the physical body is without directions like left and right whereas the space of the phenomenon is organized by such directions. However, there must be a connection between the phenomenal world and the non-living things that surround my own body within physical reality.

I think the quoted passage actually helps us understand this relationship. Plessner suggests that the thing’s “rind” is the same as its “appearance,” and that the “core” is equal to its “inexhaustible being.” I interpret this as follows. The inexhaustible being of the thing is the thing itself, which precedes its

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6 I am leaving out that, in the final sections of the *Stufen*, Plessner explains the eccentric position in terms of the social world. My perspective here is limited to the relationship between the human body and the external world.
own appearance to a subject: this is the thing as part of physical reality. We can only speak of the transcendence of a thing, which is nonetheless somehow given to us; we cannot separate appearance from being itself. Such ambiguity is what generally characterizes Plessner’s use of the word “double aspect.” Therefore, I propose that we interpret the relationship between physical reality and phenomenal world as itself a double aspect: the thing is part of physical reality insofar as it precedes and transcends its appearance to a subject. To that extent, space is not organized in terms of an above, below, left or right.

I want to introduce another notion in order to clarify the relationship between thing in itself and appearance: I propose that the thing itself is the transcendent condition for the possibility of the phenomenon. The notion of a transcendent possibility condition complements that of transcendental conditions: a subject is needed for the thing to appear, but at the same time appearing to a subject is also a possibility of the thing itself. Moreover, we need the thing itself for the appearance to occur. The thing in itself is the transcendent condition for the possibility of the experience of the external world. In terms of space: although the objective space of non-living objects, insofar as it precedes our experience, is in itself not organized by fixed directions, its nature does render possible the experience of directions. The interdependency between subject and object is not symmetrical, but it is reciprocal. Whenever appearance is realized, the thing shows some of its properties while others remain hidden: aspectivity implies subjectivity and a space in which directions are unavoidably given, because they are relative to a positioned subject.

Consequently, if we want to conceive of the physical “world” as such, we need to bracket off asceptivity, subjectivity and the space that is organized by an above, below, left and right. Then, it occurs to us that physical reality is not a world in any familiar sense: “Strictly speaking, the term ‘external’ is not applicable to the world of physical things (Körperdinge) as such. Only the surrounding field (Umfeld), that has become a world, that has integrated itself into it, the environment (Umwelt), is external world” (GS IV, 368).

According to Plessner, the physical world is not external until the lived world, the environment of the organism, is integrated into it. However, if the predicate “external” does not apply to the world of physical things, then the term “world” itself becomes problematic as well. It is for this reason why I think we should refrain from saying “physical world,” but rather limit ourselves to “physical aspect of the external world” or “physical reality.” Plessner calls into question the externality of this reality, because he has bracketed off living body, subjectivity, aspectivity, and phenomenality. Only
a thing that *appears* can be external as opposed to internal. Consequently, it is impossible to experience, imagine or depict physical reality as such. We could, for instance, imagine a landscape that consists exclusively of non-living matter: sand, rocks, water and air, but this conception would not be true to the nature of physical reality. Imagination shares with perception the phenomenological principle that aspecitivity implies subjectivity. Although nothing in the imagined landscape is alive, it does appear as “something” which occupies a specific position in the same imagined space. This living being, the subject, projects an above, below, left and right into that space.

Nonetheless, our own body must be part of this reality of non-living things. This is precisely what we have been calling the physical aspect of the human body. Plessner’s formulation that, within physical reality, “directions are relative” should not be taken as saying that a space without directions simply exists. This proposition would amount to a univocal affirmation of absolute objectivity, of the *res extensa*. Instead, the physical aspect of our bodies purports that they “already” occupy space “before” they organize that space: directions are as yet inconceivable and irrelevant. This is how we should understand Plessner’s formulation that the physical aspect “leads to” the mathematical-physical perspective. The physical aspect of our being in the world is not defined by that perspective from the outset. The physical body primarily renders possible everyday experience, and secondarily the various scientific perspectives that spring from such experiences. It is our body insofar as it is not yet subject and insofar as it does not yet reach out for a world that transcends it, even insofar as it is not yet organic. This “not yet” is not temporal; it refers to an a priori logic.7 We deduce the necessity of physical reality from the transcendental structures of experience, but we have no experiential access to it. This is the reason why our approximation of physical reality is at best asymptotic.

In everyday life, we know about certain properties of our bodies, which it shares with non-living things. We constantly take these properties into account, for instance when we decide that we are too heavy to get into the elevator together, or simply when we make room for each other on the sidewalk. This always concerns a “technical” moment of our behavior: we try to avoid doing something that goes against the limitations of what is technically possible, according to the mechanical constitution of reality.

7 This is not an *idealistic* a priori logic, but rather a hermeneutic approach which springs from experience itself and explores, from within, the preconditions that render that experience possible.
This is how our knowledge connects with the mechanical nature of non-living things. At the same time, our knowledge of the causality of everyday life is embedded in that life. For example, the information about my weight and spatial dimensions constitute a reason (not a cause) for me not to enter the elevator. The information is thereby integrated in my experience of the space in which I recognize an above, below, left and right. A direct experience of matter in directionless space is impossible.

At the same time, I can only be open to the external world because my own organism and subjectivity are rooted in the same physical reality as the appearing thing. The physical aspect of my body is a condition that renders possible my experience of the world, but the condition is neither transcendental nor transcendent. It is not transcendent because I am this physical body. Only the physical reality of the non-living things surrounding me could constitute a transcendent condition. However, the physical aspect of my body cannot be a transcendental condition for my openness to the world either, because only a condition that is immanent to experience, that can be analyzed from within this openness, can be called transcendental.\(^8\) We are rather concerned with a condition that can only be established by logical deduction from such transcendental conditions – a sub-immanent condition for the possibility of experience.

What does this mean for the mathematical-physical perspective, and the way it is based on the physical aspect of the human body? There is much to say about this. I will limit myself to a few remarks, referring only to mechanics and three-dimensional space. Insofar as mathematics and physics include living things in their field of research, they carry out a phenomenological reduction of the living to the non-living (and of artifacts to natural objects). Physics always has one foot in the everyday world of phenomenal experience, if only because the first step of reduction is carried

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8 I mean “transcendental” not exactly in a Kantian but rather in a hermeneutical sense. The hermeneutical exploration of conditions for the possibility of experience not only focuses on our factual, finite experience of the world but also springs from that experience. Although it takes a step back from experience, it always remains bound to its natural and historical determinations. (I cannot go into the discussion here about whether this makes all transcendental truth merely relative; I think it does not.) Transcendental philosophy is thus part of a hermeneutical circle (cf. De Boer 1983, xi-xii and 32). The phenomenological moment of philosophy renders the circle an open rather than a closed one, since phenomenology gives it a content that is not merely produced in the process of interpretation (Ricoeur 1975). I think this is in accordance with Plessner’s understanding of philosophy. I agree with Krüger, who explains that Plessner explores the conditions for the possibility of experience but he does not locate these conditions in “an original self-conception” (Krüger 2001, 93).
out within the phenomenal world.\textsuperscript{9} I want to focus on the position of the other foot: the abstract reconstruction of that phenomenal world, which really marks the difference between exact science and everyday experience and knowledge.

That other foot steps into an even more radical reduction of the living to the non-living. As noted above, the phenomenal world implicitly refers to the subject, which is a living thing. Physics therefore seeks to reconstruct the physical aspect of reality by separating it completely from its possibility of appearing to a subject. The reconstruction of the world is not its phenomenal recreation but rather a world picture in which things just are, objectively, without appearing to a subject. Although this view derives its truth value from the fact that it is based on data from the phenomenal world, it negates the essential conditions for the possibility of the appearance of that world to a subject. The mathematical-physical perspective is secondary to everyday phenomenal experience of the external world. It starts from that experience, only to bracket off subjectivity as it proceeds. This is not a strategy for an asymptotic approximation of physical reality; rather it is done in the confidence that, within the domain of its abstract models, this parenthesization can be carried out in full. This relative alienation from the phenomenal world renders necessary that the formal laws and quantitative data are constantly reintegrated into that world. This task is partly fulfilled by physics itself, insofar as it still refers to things and events we know from our prescientific, everyday lives.

The falling of an object, for instance, is explained on the basis of the theory of gravitational force, which remains unspecified with respect to our normal experience of above and below. A drawing of the earth and the falling object held up side down, so that the object seems to fall upward towards the earth, works just as well for the physicist as the same picture without flipping it. While everyday perception takes into account that the experience of an object, in virtue of the aspecity of the phenomenon, implies subjectivity, physics reconstructs space as a \textit{res extensa} in which the subject has no place. The reconstructed object is in principle fully transparent: it has neither core nor inner depth. Everyday reflection immediately integrates knowledge of physical bodies into phenomenal space with its fixed directions like above and below. By contrast, scientific models \textit{preserve} the relativity of directions that characterizes the primordial space of physical bodies. Insofar as we use representations of this reconstructed space,

\textsuperscript{9} For the sake of simplicity, I am leaving out social interaction as also constitutive of scientific practice.
we project directions like above and below into the representations, but this projection is scientifically irrelevant. Insofar as such representations of space contain data about objects and formal relations between them, we might feel inclined to say this space is “directionless,” but in fact it is, to this extent, not a space at all. This illustrates that the bracketing off of subjectivity can never be carried out fully.

Direct experience of physical reality is impossible, because experience belongs to the intermediate layers of the organic, the living body and subjectivity. The concept of physical reality is not empty: knowledge about it is possible, but this knowledge is either abstract, as in the case of science, or it is deduced from the transcendental structures of the experience we analyze from within that experience. Our knowledge of physical reality is of a kind that cannot be “internalized”: although I know that it exists and that its space is without directions, I cannot teach myself to experience or imagine such space. Nonetheless, perceptive experience remains essential to our understanding of physical reality. Whenever we think of reality “itself,” we mean that reality out there, unfolding before our eyes, of which we are part of and to which we are open towards. That is why the attempt to conceive of it is not like a game of chess the mind plays with itself. It is a double movement: by bracketing off all of its worldly aspects, approximating the boundary of interior “nothing,” ‘the thinking I’ reaches out to reality beyond appearance.

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