The central topic of this paper concerns personal identity, understood broadly as the identity of a person through its changes over time. I wish to show that approaching this issue requires a special focus on the relationship between personal and collective identity. I will not, however, deal with the epistemological or psychological issues of personal continuity or the mind-body problem. I also do not intend to develop a systematic theory of the self or of self-consciousness. Instead, my starting point is the simple statement that everyone experiences himself or herself consciously as “someone,” as a person, as an “I,” no matter how this is defined or understood ontologically. In particular, I will refrain from dealing with the general criticism against identity, advanced by postmodern “difference”-thinkers as a critical trend against modern (especially idealistic) conceptions of identity. The identity I wish to describe is not a totality that swallows and annihilates every difference, but rather a “relative identity,” an intersection made up of both identity and difference as its constitutive dimensions. Although I will not go any further into this topic, I would like to stress the fact that this is not an attempt of relaunching an old concept of absolute identity. In fact, postmodern philosophy has concentrated upon difference as opposed to identity, since the latter has been seen as a kind of metaphysical remainder of modernity. It is possible to agree with the need of refusing a static or essentialistic concept of identity, but this does not imply that the idea of personal identity as such has to be refused. As I will try to show, identity can be conceived as an open and dynamic structure where difference is also involved in the form of change and openness to self-correction and re-orientation.

The following reflections intend to apply to the individual human being in general, i.e. to everyone independently from his or her geographic and historical context. Of course I do not want to deny that there are cultural differences in the general understanding of personal identity and in the way it is affected by the social or cultural context. Nevertheless, I presuppose here that it is generally possible to deal with the issue of personal identity without
having to focus on a specific culture. However, the issue comes to have a special interest in the context of contemporary society, in which the general anthropological duty of understanding and shaping one's personal identity is somewhat sharpened. While the emerging phenomenon of globalization opens up individuals to new views and perspectives, it also makes it more difficult to let one's personal identity be shaped by traditional models and paradigms. Despite the weakening of some cultural bounds, it is still possible to react by observing substantial attempts to strengthen particular cultural or religious collective identities. These circumstances create a confusing tension between modernity and tradition, so that individuals feel more strongly about the challenge given by the need of an orientation in their own lives and by the interpretation and design of their own personal identity. Even if there are many conservative and reactionary cultural movements, people become increasingly more aware of the plurality of cultural options and paradigms. Living in multicultural societies, travelling and moving to other countries, contact with people from all over the world enabled by social media; all this makes it difficult, especially for new generations, to simply accept traditionally conveyed ways of life and sets of values. To put it very simply, the more freedom one has from social constraints and traditional religious or cultural influences, the more difficult it can be to find one's way and to understand, define and plan one's personal identity. From this point of view, the present situation represents a challenge, while at the same time enabling unexpected chances of personal self-planning and of self-determination of one's own identity. Reactions to this situation vary. Some might say that the present age is marked by the overcoming of closed cultural identities, while others identify it as the age of the return to strong collective identities. Both views are intertwined and characterize the present historical situation with its internal tensions and contradictions.

From this point of view, it is easy to see how the issue of personal identity is connected with the theme of collective or cultural identity. The problem is most clearly dealt with in the debate about the self between communitarians and liberals in Anglo-American philosophy. Against an oversimplified basic liberal point of view, which would see the individual as a solipsist determining itself independently from social context and historical rooting, communitarians claim that personal identity is tightly linked with collective identity assigned by a group or community: the “sources of the self” (Taylor 1989) are said to be found in the respective tradition and shared values.

Now of course it cannot be denied that each individual is born and bred in a social context which somehow affects their self-perception and view
of life. However, in my opinion it is necessary to point out that the very fundamental constitution of the human being makes it possible to critically distance oneself to some extent, from one's cultural and traditional origins. As a result, I would principally argue in favor of the openness of personal identity.

However, I will not simply accept the methodical solipsism or the unhistorical tabula rasa conception of a standard liberal theory of the human being. In order to advance my argument about personal identity, I would like to take the point of view of Helmuth Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology, as it gives an interesting insight into the constitution of human nature, by taking into account both the embeddedness of the individual in a sociocultural context and the possibility of an emancipation from it.

Plessner's contribution to personal identity

In his writings on social theory, Plessner deals with questions concerning the relation between individual and social context. In his early work from 1924, The Limits of Community: A Critique of Social Radicalism [Die Grenzen der Gemeinschaft. Eine Kritik des sozialen Radikalismus (GS V, 7-133)], Plessner distances himself from any radical notion of "community" by distinguishing between an untouchable sphere of intimacy and a public mask that is required in order to let individuals meet on a common ground of "social" relationships. In his later works on sociology and social philosophy he often comes back to this theme by taking into account new theoretical elements and by deepening the divide between private and public through a theory of social roles. The dimension of the individuum ineffabile, i.e. the ineffable individual, is assured then by the distinction between social role and inviolable sphere of personal freedom. This means that individuals should not understand their own personal identity as if it would coincide with their social role: everyone is a "Doppelgänger" ("double"), i.e. everyone has both a private and a public dimension.1 Concerning the relationship between individuals and their social context, Plessner uses the same viewpoint in order to criticize what he calls the "alienation theorem," which is based on the romantic idea that individuals have to be completely integrated in their own community. In this respect, Plessner claims that because of the fundamentally "broken" constitution of the human being, individuals are

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1 See the essay from 1960: “Social Role and Human Nature” [„Soziale Rolle und menschliche Natur“, (GS X, 227-240)].
more than just their social mask or social role. Here, the double structure is said to be a specific human feature rather than a sign of alienation caused by a particular form of society and its labour conditions.\(^2\) Of course, such a polemic opinion against the Marxist-based social criticism of the Frankfurt School does not allow us to simply understand Plessner as an apologist of the political and social system or as a conservative thinker, though it is clear that he supports a liberal point of view. His approach can seen as a critical theory of society, though not explicitly leftist.\(^3\)

With this in mind, I would now like to focus more closely on Plessner’s anthropological work, rather than on his social theories. In his philosophical anthropology, Plessner investigates the definition of the human being in general instead of focusing on the definition of the individual. Therefore I will analyze some of his central notions and will then shift from the general anthropological dimension to the individual level. In Plessner’s work, it is possible to find many important concepts and theories which can contribute in a fecund way to the issue, but in the following sections I will focus only on two main aspects, namely the inscrutability of human beings (§ 3) and their natural artificiality (§ 4).

In this regard, it is necessary to mention at least one very important distinction made by Plessner, especially in his later works. However, it is not possible to deal extensively with the distinction between world and environment (“Welt” and “Umwelt”), openness to the world and environmental attachment (“Weltoffenheit” and “Umweltgebundenheit”). This theme, which is already anticipated from a different angle in the early works, was developed more explicitly in the 1950s and 60s, where Plessner shows a larger interest for the biological constitution of man. Taking into account the theories of Jakob von Uexküll, Plessner deals with the relation of the human being to its environment and tries to develop an approach that bridges both the environmental bounds and the openness to the objective dimension of the “world.”\(^4\) Here it is important to note that Plessner criticizes Erich Rothacker’s view, which conceives the different cultures in the same way as the closed and somewhat separated “environments” of the different species.

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\(^3\) For a “progressive” interpretation of Plessner’s philosophy and social theory, see, for example, Dallmayr 1974 and Ehrl 2004.

\(^4\) See the section concerning this theme in The Question of the Conditio Humana [Die Frage nach der Conditio humana (GS VIII, 180-189)] from 1961.
of living beings. Plessner states that “cultures do come in touch with each other and they do not always simply decay, for example, through the contact of a primitive culture with a higher one. There rules also the relation of reciprocal fecundation and enrichment, of the continuity in the exchange of understanding, and this happens by virtue of a [shared, M.B.] human root which asserts itself again and again” (GS VIII, 189).

With regards to the question of personal identity, this means that individuals are not confined in their own cultural environment. On the contrary, they can participate and contribute to the intercultural discourse and mutual understanding. This circumstance constitutes a big chance for the personal development and cultural “enhancement” of every individual. Plessner’s late view on the possibility of mutual fertilization between different cultures can be read as a strong and exciting intercultural approach ante litteram (see Dejung 2005).

Inscrutability: Homo absconditus

In many of his works, especially in the “political anthropology” exposed in his work from 1931, Power and Human Nature: An Attempt at the Anthropology of the Historical Worldview [Macht und menschliche Natur. Ein Versuch zur Anthropologie der geschichtlichen Weltansicht (GS V, 135-234)], Plessner points out that man is necessarily inscrutable (unergründlich). By means of reflections about Wilhelm Dilthey’s philosophy of life and history, Plessner explains his principle of “inscrutability,” by which human nature is necessarily indefinable: the human being is opaque, it cannot be thoroughly known, it is somehow hidden from itself and has to remain an open question. This very basic principle justifies the conception of man as a power that acts within the open historical process – or better: man is conceived as a power which “opens” history as such and it is therefore essentially a political being (GS V, 185-191). In some of his later works, Plessner refers to the hidden nature of the human being as using an expression, which was originally related to God from the point of view of a negative theology (Deus absconditus). In the essay “Homo absconditus” from 1969, Plessner states: “The boundlessness of the human being, which we can anchor anyhow in its specific life-structure, entitles one to speak of Homo absconditus [...]. Being open to itself and to the world, it is aware of its own concealment” (GS VIII, 357).

Now my point is that this general anthropological thesis also implies the inscrutability and opacity of personal identity on the level of the in-
dividual human being. The task of self-knowledge and self-interpretation, as expressed by the Delphic Motto “Know Thyself,” has to face the limits given by the eccentric constitution of man. Human beings cannot see their personal identity isolated from their environment.

It is important to emphasize that, in Plessner’s view, the principle of inscrutability does not just constitute a cognitive deficit, as if the “true” identity were just too difficult to grasp for our cognitive faculties, but is principally accessible through a sort of intellectus archetypus. Indeed, the inscrutability of both human nature and personal identity are both due to the fundamental structure of the human being, which is never completely fixed. As Plessner argues by examining the relationship humans have with their bodies, the specifically human “positional form” implies a fundamental brokenness as well as a constitutive indetermination.\(^5\) Now these are not merely limiting conditions of human beings, because they also imply their special openness and potentiality when compared to other living beings. On the level of the individual, this means that there is never a given and fixed identity: the construction of personal identity represents a difficult challenge and is a never-ending task. Thus, the Motto “Know Thyself” does not simply represent the theoretical task of exploring one’s personal nature, but it also has a practical meaning, as it implies the task of shaping one’s individual identity.\(^6\)

Artificiality: *Natürliche Künstlichkeit*

In order to strengthen the link between the theoretical and practical aspects of self-knowledge and self-design respectively, I will focus here on the “fundamental anthropological law” of natural artificiality, as developed by Plessner in his masterpiece, *The Levels of the Organic and Man* [Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch, 1928].

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\(^5\) Here it is neither possible nor necessary to explain in detail Plessner’s attempt to a foundation of philosophical anthropology. See the next section for some short remarks about the specific positional form of the human being.

\(^6\) In the context of the relation between philosophical anthropology and politics Dallmayr makes some interesting reflections about theory and praxis which can be applied to the present issue as well: “human existence is not simply a fixed or pre-ordained destiny, but embedded in man’s ongoing self-interrogation and self-interpretation; as an ‘open question’ human nature remains in principle inexhaustible. Self-interpretation, however, is not merely a theoretical or speculative but a practical undertaking” (Dallmayr 1974, 57).
By thoroughly analyzing the different “positional forms” of the various living beings, his work highlights human eccentricity as it represents a further development of the structural centrality of other animals. Indeed, in the special case of the human being, the centre of positionality has reached a distance from itself, so that the whole living system has become reflexive (GS IV, 362). At this level, the living being knows about itself and it has become an “I” (GS IV, 363). Now this means that the human being is both “in” its body (as it is the centre of the organism) and “outside” of it (as it is also the subjective perspective which allows the reflection process); it “is” its body and at the same time it “has” its body. It is broken and equivocal, it has a different relation to its own life and to its own body than other animals do; its particular structure can be described as a “fracture.” The relation between “being a body” and “having a body” is more precisely examined in Plessner’s popular book “Laughing and Crying: A Study of the Limits of Human Behavior [Lachen und Weinen. Eine Untersuchung der Grenzen menschlichen Verhaltens, 1941], in which Plessner develops a theory of human expression based on the structural fracture present in the relation of the human being to its body.

Because of this particular complication in the existence of the human being, which experiences itself as an object as well as a subject, its form of life is not just given by nature: it has to be made (GS IV, 383). As Plessner says, “The human being lives only by leading a life” (GS IV, 384). Of course, every form of life is a performance, an execution (Vollzug), but the specifically human form of life has to be understood as a special form of realization which has to be “lead” and “done” from the (eccentric) centre of its positionality. Because of this, it always remains an open-ended process: it cannot be the simple development of a preprogrammed core conceived as its nature or quintessence. Moreover, by virtue of their peculiar subjective dimension, humans are also aware of the impossibility of a direct and natural life, such as that of other animals.

Given this form of existence, man is said to be “artificial by nature”: “natural artificiality” is the name of the first of the three fundamental anthropological laws formulated by Plessner in the last chapter of Stages. The eccentric being lacks balance. It is without place and time, stays on nothing, and is constitutively homeless. Thus, it has to “become something” in order to produce its own equilibrium (GS IV, 385). The law of natural artificiality, i.e. the fundamental need for compensation given by human eccentricity, is the theoretical basis, which allows us to explain the necessity of culture.

7 In German: “Der Mensch lebt nur, indem er ein Leben führt.”
The artificial dimension of culture is a kind of “second nature”: Plessner says that this artificial ground represents a second ‘fatherland,’ where man finds its homeland (Heimat) and its absolute rootedness (Verwurzelung), both of which are not provided by its ‘first’ nature (GS IV, 391). Here, man is said to be the “apostate of nature,” since it must exit the natural condition by creating and setting up a new cultural world (GS IV, 395). 8

Up to this point, Plessner’s analysis indicates that the artificial roots given by the cultural ‘second nature’ allow the human being to nullify and overcome the void of natural rootedness due to eccentricity. He says, for example: “Artificiality in acting, thinking and dreaming is the inner medium through which the human being as a living natural being stays in harmony with itself” (GS IV, 391). Yet, Plessner points out that this compulsion to perform (Vollzugszwang) does not operate within a single stroke. This cannot simply happen once and for all, as if after reaching the balance of a second nature eccentricity were definitively overcome: human beings have to perform recklessly and develop continuously towards new horizons and achievements. In order to reach their (temporary) balance, they will always have to strive for something new, surpassing their own deeds in an eternal process (GS IV, 395). My interpretation here is that man is not only the apostate of nature, but also the apostate of culture. What I mean is not the apostate of culture as such, since humans have to live in an artificial cultural environment, but rather the apostate of every particular culture that was provisorily established in history as a second nature or absolute ground for human existence. Due to their natural artificiality, human beings have to perpetually redesign themselves into new forms within an open and unpredictable historical process.

The openness of the historical situation and its connection with the political dimension of the human being are most extensively dealt with in Power and Human Nature. In my opinion, though, the political theory exposed in this work is not satisfactory and it represents a sort of conservative slip in Plessner’s thinking, since it strongly links the individual to the collective identity it is meant to belong to, i.e. to a given cultural, political and historical situation. Curiously enough, the very work in which he develops his concept of inscrutability and openness of the human nature ends with the thesis that ties the individual to its nation or Volk (GS V, 228-234). Here the openness of the human nature somehow turns out to be the justification of its opposite for what concerns the individual, which is

8 In the essay “Mensch und Tier” (“Man and Animal”) from 1946 Plessner uses the effective expression “emigrant of nature” (GS VIII, 64).
closed and confined into the contingent political horizon of its particular
country, seen as a homogeneous cultural unity. In other words, in this work
the critical potential of the principle of inscrutability is inverted, meaning
the conservative acceptance of the contingent political situation. This is
particularly striking because he wrote it in Germany just two years before
the takeover of the Nazi Party (NSDAP). For biographical and political
reasons, Plessner develops some critical analysis about the political and
moral responsibility of philosophical anthropology in his later works and
expresses a far more sceptical position towards the contingent political
situation. There he does not show any rhetoric of ‘power’ or ‘belonging,’
but rather points out the need of protecting human dignity in every single
individual from social and political oppression.9

Returning to the idea of human openness, I would like to shift from the
general anthropological perspective to the level of individual human beings
who have to cope with their own lives. In my opinion, the fundamental
openness and rootlessness of the human being generally applies to the
individuals as well, who have to lead and perform their lives in their own
personal way. Just like human nature cannot be rigidly determined once
and for all, but individual identity is not a “thing” or static essence either.
It is a rather open project, a work in progress and at the same time the
most comprehensive and difficult duty of every single human being, since
it comprehends habits, beliefs, moral principles, axiological standards,
long-term plans and existential goals, as well as single decisions in difficult
isolated situations. Also due to the fundamental human openness and
rootlessness, the individual identity is neither fixed by nature nor com-
pletely determined by its social or cultural context (in other words, by its
particular and contingent “second nature”). The law of natural artificiality,
i.e. the principle of “performance” and “agency,” the reckless need for always
achieving new accomplishments, the nomadic compulsion to surpass every
balance towards new horizons: all of this also applies to each single personal
individuality; even a “conservative” lifestyle based on repetitive actions
and on closed and static opinions needs the continuous affirmation and
endorsement of some basic behavioral patterns vis-à-vis new situations.

9 See, for example, the essays “Die Aufgabe der Philosophischen Anthropologie” (“The Task
of Philosophical Anthropology,” GS VIII, 33-51) from 1937 and “Über einige Motive der Philoso-
phischen Anthropologie” (“About Some Motives of Philosophical Anthropology,” GS VIII, 117-135)
from 1956. For a study of the critical and normative potential of the human inscrutability, see
Kämpf 2005.
One may compare personal identity to an inimitable musical performance that was spontaneously composed while playing. Personal identity is a sort of lifelong improvisation, sometimes as a solo, sometimes in a more or less consonant jam session within a social context. It may be possible to determine the key or the tonality and the instruments the piece begins with, but it is not possible to foresee whether it is going to change key, how it develops, if some other instruments and clang colours coming from different cultural landscapes will enrich the sound, if it will often change in tempo or not, if there will be a harmony between the parts or if it is going to be completely experimental with noises and cacophonies, and—finally—when and how it is going to come to an end. Both a highly experimental piece and a rigorous contrapuntal work will require a continuous composition and simultaneous performance. I have deliberately chosen the metaphor of music for three reasons. First of all, the musical world is a perfect example for the mutual influences which have been taking place and which are still taking place nowadays between the different cultures (for what concerns composition rules, expressive forms, instruments, etc.). Secondly, a piece of music, even if composed, must be performed with proper timing and is an artificial process which develops by continuously exploring new ways of combining acoustic sounds. Finally, a piece of music is a continuum made up of all of its parts, even if they cannot be simultaneously present because of its processual character; the preceding parts may influence the following ones, but they do not determine them completely. The coherence of the parts among themselves and the iteration of variations based on a fundamental theme is only one out of many possibilities for the composition of the “whole,” which as such is actually never given.

The artificiality of personal identity is opposed to both the naturality of animal instinctive life and the implicitness of cultural views or traditional sets of rules. Here I would especially like to highlight the second opposition, which grants the individual a certain emancipation from the collective identity it supposedly belongs to. In fact, the distance from oneself enables a critical position towards one’s cultural background and allows a positive approach to other cultures and even the exploration of new possibilities of personal self-design. This can happen in a solitary way or within a collective movement searching for new social forms of life: the openness of the individual personal identity should not be interpreted as individualistic or anti-communitarian. Here I would like to point out in particular the possibility to link this kind of analysis with the reflections of the intercultural philosophy (Wimmer 2004). Intercultural philosophy aims at a process of reciprocal knowledge, communication and enhancement between the
various cultures in the particular field of philosophy, which of course is much more specific than the general aspect of individual self-interpretation and self-design. Either way, intercultural communication, in contrast with the emphasis on collective identity, can contribute to a broader variety of possibilities for the individual self-design, while at the same time fostering the development of a common ethical basis for human coexistence.10

Authenticity and irony

So far I have tried to show how Plessner’s theories on human being, especially the fundamental anthropological law of natural artificiality, contribute to the idea of personal identity as an indefinite and essentially open process. While on the one hand individuals who are trying to know or discover themselves, meet a sort of opacity and inscrutability, they also have to design and create themselves through ‘performance.’ Every single human being has to be conceived as a non-transparent process, an open ‘construction area’ or an ongoing ‘execution’ of a piece that is being composed as we go. The indeterminate character of its agency means the possibility of a relative emancipation from both natural and cultural environments and their constraints. From this point of view, natural artificiality is not just a negative divergence or aberration from the naturality of other living beings, but it is also the basis for individual freedom and self-determination. To a certain extent, it is the ground for individual responsibility.

Here I would like to add some short reflections on one’s attitude towards one’s own personal identity. In particular, I claim that a too naïve romantic conception of authenticity becomes problematic if we try to get to the bottom of its anthropological presuppositions. Indeed, it is impossible to recognize one’s ‘true’ and ‘authentic’ identity as a static essence: this means that the individual actually does not have any objective reference point which would allow him to determine his own ‘real’ self. From this point of view, it is not possible to take the decision to be ‘faithful’ to one’s ‘authentic’ self: this is just a rhetorical expression which can be used to justify certain decisions and behaviors as well as their opposites.

Obviously this is meant to be a critical thesis opposed to the existential pathos of the concept of ‘authenticity,’ since this concept presupposes the determination of the “most authentic possibility of one’s existence” (Heidegger 1927, § 58). Referring to one’s true self is as speculative as referring to

10 See, for example, Erpenbeck 1996.
the constitution of one’s ‘soul,’ understood as an essence precisely defined in its particular and individual qualities. Both the decision of affirming one’s habits and the opposite decision to change them radically can be justified by adopting one’s supposed true identity. In the first case, the individual may think that it has always been faithful to itself and that it has to keep on following the same track, while in the second case the individual may think that it has always misunderstood itself and that it has to change in order to ‘return’ to its own real being. In both cases, the justification is nothing but speculative and rhetorical, misconceiving the principles of inscrutability and of natural artificiality, by which identity is not a monolithic reality. Rather, identity is always temporary, it is a continuous event which ‘is’ what it ‘becomes.’ Personal identity is never finished, it simultaneously ‘is’ and ‘becomes’ through a process which always balances in new forms of difference and repetition of sameness.

Concerning ‘collective’ identity, another notion of authenticity as faithfulness, congruence or belonging to a given tradition or cultural identity is not devoid of problems. Firstly, it is theoretically weak, as it presupposes collective identities intended as well-defined and static entities, as holistic things clearly separated from each other by absolute boundaries, denying the historical process of mutual contamination between cultures and traditions. Secondly, the request for authenticity can often have an ideological ground, as its purpose is the simple reproduction of the given situation. The reference to a given identity prevents the possibility of free decision by individual self-design. On another level, a fixed ideological image of what a collectivity is supposed to be can be used by some elites as a means to prevent or deny the internal development and differentiation of the collectivity itself: the identity-formula sounds like “Don’t forget what you are: this is what you are and what you have to be.” Of course this way of thinking can be the theoretical basis for different kinds of discrimination, since it makes it possible to identify and possibly reject other individuals as foreign and different. On the other hand, this is a major ideological instrument for conservative political decisions.11

11 A particularly striking and embarrassing example of this kind of thinking is given by the decision of Italy’s conservative Berlusconi government not to accept the recent ruling of the ECHR (European Court of Human Rights) about the presence of the crucifix in Italian public schools (Judgment 819, 3 November 2009). After discussions involving the UAAR (Unione Atei Agnostici Razionalisti), the case arrived at the ECHR, which eventually declared the crucifix in the classrooms in public schools as “contrary to parents’ right to educate their children in line with their convictions and to children’s right to freedom of religion” (ECHR 2009). The sentence was very negatively commented on by the CEI (Conferenza Episcopale Italiana), by the
I think that the appropriate attitude to one's personal identity is a sober, relaxed and confident irony. It has to be said that the concept of irony has come to have many different meanings during its long history, thus it can sound somehow confusing. At the same time, it should be clear that this is not the romantic concept of irony, but rather a sort of sceptical irony oriented against the pathos of authenticity. Plessner himself, referring to the right attitude to one's philosophical standpoint mentioned in a letter to Josef König on 22 February 1928 that he chooses irony as a non absolutistic approach, as an approach between earnestness and its contrary (Lessing and Mutzenbecher 1994, 179-180; see also Schürmann 1997). In my view, irony means the quiet awareness of the relativity of every determination, an awareness which does not lead to despair but rather to a peaceful balance between acceptance of what is necessary one the one hand, and a practical engagement and openness to what is possible on the other hand. As an attitude towards life, it may be understood as a hybrid of responsibility and serenity, involvement and distance, critical reflection and spontaneity, earnestness and joy of playing, engagement and composure.

The recognition of the indetermination and openness of the self allows one to take a critical distance from oneself as well as from one's tradition of belonging. This irony does not mean at all a loss of earnestness and sense of responsibility, but rather implies a conscious acceptance of one's freedom and of the duty of performing one's very personal and unique life through changing situations and challenges. The ironic self accepts the possibility of even setting itself into the indefinite spaces between cultures and may operate with creativity in order to achieve new forms of cultural synthesis.

As I already mentioned of course, this does not deny the fact that every human being is always set in a determinate situation which gives him a particular starting point. Instead, it means that, beyond the ‘fact’ given by the context, the individual always has a dimension in progress. I would like to add here that self-interpretation and comprehension of one's cultural origin can be important tools for approaching other people and cultures as well as for creatively shaping new ways of life and new cultural options. In this regard, it is possible to make an example by referring to the musical metaphor I used: a musician who is educated in his or her own musical

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tradition can at best acquire some new competencies in other musical traditions or in other musical instruments, which give him or her a broader spectrum of expressive possibilities. At the same time, instruments and musical forms undergo changes and continuously develop because of their different uses and new receptions.

Ironic self-interpretation and self-design of the individual becomes necessary and possible, especially in the modern globalized world. On the one hand, the process of modernization and globalization causes a sort of loss or weakening of the cultural and traditional bounds in the individuals, who experience a sense of bewildered rootlessness, since an ingenuous cultural self-identification has become more difficult and may collide with the framework of the modern liberal state or more generally with the context given by modern homogenized and functionally organized societies. On the other hand, the broad offer of cultural patterns and paradigms given by pluralistic multicultural societies and by the global intercommunication gives individuals the instruments to develop intercultural competencies which enable a more open self-design. The ironic approach to the self allows one to interpret and comprehend the coexistence of both human aspects, the need for belonging and self-identification due to the sense of rootlessness, and the possibility of a free individual development of one’s personhood. Particularly the contact between different cultures provides the basis for a multilateral development and cross-cultural adaptation of individuals, who may open themselves for “intercultural personhood” (Kim 2001; Kim 2008).

Far from being a plea for a form of radical individualism, my reflections intend to give a theoretical justification of a conscious, responsible, and open approach between individuals in contemporary society that is characterized by growing multicultural complexities, religious plurality, huge global migrations, and a widespread sense of cultural uprootedness. The ironic attitude to oneself and to one’s origin represents an emancipated form of self-understanding, which is ready for intercultural recognition of diversity, self-correction and possibly self-reorientation. The ironic self can be seen as an equilibrist, always trying to keep a difficult balance between lack of a homeland and cosmopolitanism (Heimatlosigkeit and Weltbürgertum).

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