Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology

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The sources of the self

The philosophical quest for the sources of the self is as controversial today as the search for the sources of the Nile once used to be, and is in danger of coming to the same swamplike end. Why is there so much recent interest in the sources of the notion of self? A lot is at stake: the notion of self belongs to a cluster of closely related concepts such as subject, author and agency, which are subsequently further qualified with epithets like autonomous, original, or authentic. The possibility of aesthetic and ethical discourse is predicated on these concepts. No moral ascription is possible without the idea of free agency. Similarly, no aesthetic creation seems possible without authentic self-expression. All the same, these crucial concepts came under fire in the second half of the twentieth century (in poststructuralism and postmodern criticism). There was provocative talk about ‘the end of the author’ (Roland Barthes) and ‘the death of the subject’ (Michel Foucault), which called into question the principles of modern ethics and aesthetics. Conservative corrections, most prominently Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self* (1989), were published to counter the dreaded loss of self.

The notion of self has also undergone drastic changes in our everyday experience. The modern notion of self is relatively recent, but has nevertheless become firmly anchored in the popular imagination. We believe that each of us has a highly particular influence on his or her own destiny. We behave as though we are free to organize our lives as we choose. Moreover, we like to believe that our lives form a constant entity that we direct with the aid of today’s media at our disposal, such as all kinds of photographic, video and audio technologies plus social networks such as Hyves, Facebook and LinkedIn. Despite all that, there is little individual about the inner worlds that we put on show. Our cherished interiors are furnished with the clichés of our era. The outside world of trendy brands and status symbols is internalized via the media, arranged to appeal to its particular target group, and then put on display as a highly individual creation. At most, the
self appears as a more or less consistent collage of consumer choices that collectively define our ‘lifestyle.’ Given this development, it is no wonder that so many fear the death of an authentic self in today’s society.

Nevertheless, the conservative philosophical approach and its celebratory consumer variant are both inadequate for addressing this issue. They both regard the self first and foremost as a story that is told or as a narrative construction. Almost all philosophers and psychologists erroneously treat the self as a narrative, as an exclusively linguistic construct, virtually excluding the body as even being a part of our self. In the mainstream view, the self is no more than a narrative grafted onto a body. Although Charles Taylor, along with some others, claims to pay attention to the material and physical aspects of the construction of self, his historical account of changes in the notion of self is confined to thinkers who discuss the body, as though they were the ones who exert the most influence on the construction of the self.

For example, in the concept of the self that Paul Ricoeur has developed in his influential hermeneutic philosophy, the self makes its appearance in three stages. First, there are all kinds of implicit motives for action at the level of everyday affairs. At the second stage, these motives are embodied in a narrative in conversations with others. That is the stage at which the actions crystallize, as though they were intended as they are put into words. Thirdly, people identify with the narrative that is being constructed in this process. Thus, the identity that functions as the source of our actions does not exist right from the start, but only takes shape through later explanation to others. The ascription of the action takes place once the self produced through narrative is itself projected backwards in time and celebrated as the source of action. This reversal is situated entirely in the medium of language. Ricoeur places strong emphasis on the narrative identity. He does, admittedly, pay attention to the tension between a corporeal self and the self constructed through narrative, but the release of this tension – in which the physical self is eventually identified with the narrated self – presupposes the mediation of talking to others (which is also the commencement and touchstone of ethics for Ricoeur), and that mediation chiefly takes place in language.

By giving priority to language or the narrated self, Ricoeur is in good company. The psychoanalytical tradition sets out from the same premise. For Freud, the body is the source of all kinds of impulses and instincts that can disturb the formation and presentation of the public person. However, if rational light is shown on the preconscious instincts by bringing them to the surface, they lose their disruptive force. One of the most prominent
followers of Freud, Jacques Lacan, gave the Freudian position an even more radical twist by claiming that the self is a linguistic construct, including the unconscious. So here, the notion of self belongs entirely to the symbolic universe, including the presumed vaults underneath it. The inherent tensions cannot be cured in therapy, but at best, be socialized. That calls not for therapy, but for political engagement with the social production of the symbolic order.

This very outline of the predominance of the narrative notion of self indicates the problem that we shall tackle in this chapter. How is a narrative view of the self linked to the body? The body grows and ages, but it still seems to be or belong to the same person. At any point in time, the identity of the person is constantly reaffirmed in the stories that are continually woven around the body. The metaphor most frequently used by philosophers and psychologists today to describe the relation between language and body is that of inscription: the narrated self is inscribed on the body, which confers physical continuity on it. The metaphor of inscription is derived from scratching resistant material with a stylus or a gouge. The body is thus supposed to offer resistance to inscription. In the following sections, I would like to use the work of Helmuth Plessner to combat this view.

Plessner developed the philosophy of human eccentricity. In his view, people are artificial by nature. They arrive at a notion of self not only by means of language and image, but above all, through technological mediation. The self-explanatory narratives form derivatives of prior material mediations. That means that the origin of our ‘inner’ life today is, to a large extent, due to the mediatory technologies by which we can conceive, store and maintain an inner world. In Plessner’s anthropology, our interiority thus depends on the technologies with which we evoke and maintain it, and the way that is done changes depending on the media in vogue.

One of the first and most important technologies of the production of self was script and the book. Those who take the book as the model for their life story, tend to narrate it in chronological order. The book format, however, can hardly do justice to the constant alternation of good intentions and regrets. The flashbacks and montages of film offer a better medium for the private inner life than the book. One could even argue that it was the technology of film that first made it possible to bring our turbulent inner selves to life. In the last few years, people have started to tell their life story on a website, which may include texts, photos and clips. This makes the self look like a ragged network and leads to a decline in private interiority. The subject or the self is no longer regarded as the driving force of history, or as the source of signification and the exercise of power that it was taken
to be for so long. We are exposed to all kinds of media influences beyond our control. There is no innate original self anymore; no one rules his or her own production of self.

Seen in this light, one might wonder where the cult of the self comes from and why it is so persistent. It is almost inconceivable that my form of self-awareness represents just one possible historical form, that I am not just ‘I’ but an internalized cluster of rules for the use of media. We have diligently practiced to make our feelings and thoughts conform to the regulations of the media culture. Yet, all of our hard-won psychological interiors will probably be a thing of the past in a century from now. People will no longer experience themselves as we do now. Under the influence of new media, they will create different kinds of selves.

Once we realize that the self is not innate, but rather a culturally malleable construct, the demand arises for research on the preconditions of such constructions. The form that the self assumes in some place and time or other depends, at least in part, on the media from which it emerges. In today’s digital media culture, a new and unprotected form of being oneself is manifested: a malleable self that can be transformed to suit the context. This self no longer expresses its pre-existing interior, but balances on the boundaries and interfaces of the media and a plurality of (sub)cultures. It slips through the cultural chinks and breaks down the historically erected partitions between them. The so called private interior is turned inside out to take part in the media flow. Today’s material conditions no longer call for singular self-expression, but pluralistically mediated productions of self.

Helmuth Plessner wrote about the scenario for the future mediated production of self with his philosophical anthropology. In this contribution, I would like to argue for the merits of this vantage point. After making the diagnosis sharper by deriving the evil of the so called loss of self from linguistic deception, I shall introduce Plessner’s material a priori as a framework in which supposed evils and their solutions can be seen more clearly. I shall then proceed to show how the modern notion of self emerged from material conditions and how a constantly changing production of self can be continued under new conditions, thereby demonstrating the applicability of Plessner’s anthropology to technological culture in the digital era.

The linguistic deception

The skin seems to form the barrier between inner and outer world. At first sight, that boundary coincides with the difference between the private and
the public domain. The inner self is located in the private quarters behind the wall, whereas the public self is our showcase to the outside world. This way of thinking, which sees the self as an entity enveloped by the body, is widespread. We talk about self-expression as if there is a self inside us that passes its feelings and thoughts through a hatch to the outside world, which then receives and interprets the linguistic signals as expressions of an inner life. The strict association of private with interior and public with exterior, however, is only a relatively recent phenomenon. It dates back to the Renaissance, on the eve of the modern era. We are still saddled with it, but by now this form of awareness of self has already shown some signs of considerable wear and tear.

Friedrich Nietzsche created a major rift in the modern notion of self. He attributed the awareness of self – the idea that there is an I inside me that is the source of my actions and also the point of reference of my experiences – to what he called the ‘phantom pain of language.’ 1 Phantom pain occurs when you have lost an arm or leg but your brain makes it appear as if you still feel an itch or pain in the absent limb. According to Nietzsche, the awareness of self is anchored in language. Every time you speak you say ‘I.’ You adapt the verb to the personal pronoun: ‘I’ do this, ‘I’ experience that. That is why you think there must be a real referent, that there must be an ‘I-core’ persisting within that remains intact even when you are silent. But this perception is an illusion. When being silent, you experience the phantom pain of language, as the presumed referent pronounced previously still itches afterwards. You might as well search for the ‘it’ of ‘it’s raining,’ as if it were to exist independently of language. Awareness of self, according to Nietzsche, exists only in language. It is a by-product of speech. So how can it be the source of linguistic utterances?

The inner self is the exclusive product of language. The self may be the product of speaking about it, but it is not its source. Let us go back to the metaphor of the hatch, but this time place it between a shop and the shop window. Suppose that the shop window is the showcase of the interior, represented by the dark shop behind it. You are standing on the pavement in front of the shop and attract the attention of by-passers to the wares on display. These are the books you have read, your favourite CDs and films, your brand-name clothes, and all kinds of electronic gadgets that function as status symbols. You claim that the items on display are only a poor sample of all the things in the shop, but unfortunately the door is

locked and the by-passers cannot go in. To give them an idea of the contents of the shop, you place a ground plan of it in the window. In your stories you relate the trophies in the window to what you claim are the laden shelves inside the shop that you have indicated on the ground plan. This double display of the interior (as self-expression in the public domain and as representation of what is on sale inside) works excellently as a strategy to arrange all your narratives about yourself. However, there is no need at all for the shop behind the showcase to really exist for this strategy to be successful. The representation as a ground plan plus your story is enough for the mutual understanding of inner and outer sides. The interior is an internalized by-product of the language of the street. The so called inner self is reproduced time and again in conversations, but there is no need to attribute an existence to it outside those conversations.

This example is not completely of my own invention. It too is the retelling of a story, based on one of the famous parables from *Philosophical Investigations* of the linguistic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951). In section 293, Wittgenstein supposes that everyone has a box with something inside it, but no one can look into anyone else’s box. It is only through discussion that they can find out what the similarities and differences are in the contents of other peoples’ boxes and ones own box. After a lot of discussion it is decided that what is in all the boxes is a beetle. Well, Wittgenstein says, there is no need for such a thing as a pre-existing beetle to be in every box in order to arrive at that conclusion. After all, it is the discussion that creates the referent of what we call a ‘beetle.’ The illusion of an inner self is created in the same way. It requires other people, and simply cannot be done with a private language. Wittgenstein wants you to suppose that you experience a certain feeling today and write that in your diary. Tomorrow you have the same feeling and you write that you had the feeling ‘E’ again. But how do you know that it is the same feeling? If you have changed since yesterday, you cannot know it. You might hold a different feeling to be the same one. If you want to catch yourself at it, you are like a man who says ‘this is how tall I am,’ while he places his own hand on his head. There is no possibility of comparison. It is akin to wanting to verify the veracity of a certain newspaper by buying another copy of the same edition. A private language is ruled out.

Wittgenstein’s aim in philosophy is ‘to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle.’ A trap to catch flies or wasps has the form of a bottle into which the insect can fly, but from which it cannot escape once it is trapped. The awareness of self is trapped in a similar way in the cocoon of language that has been spun around it. Can the self be freed from there? No, it cannot,
because it would vanish outside the bottle or outside the figments of the imagination in which it occurs. Wittgenstein tried to achieve that, but had to pay the price of silence. Silence prevails where there is no self being produced.

The inner nature of the so-called inner life may be a linguistic illusion, but we can still talk about it and refer to it as though it really does exist, and that is why it is still kept for all practical purposes. When Sigmund Freud described the inner life in terms of a basement where the unconscious id (Es) takes shelter, a ground-floor level for the ego (Ich), and an attic room for the superego (Über-Ich), was he describing an existing psychological structure, or was this an interior design proposal? He claimed to have borrowed his metaphor for the inner life from his archaeological interest in stratified excavations and the technology of pumping minerals from deep below the earth's surface. The fact that he is using metaphors makes his proposal of arranging all impulses and instincts along those lines no less useful as a social strategy for understanding, as history has proven it to be. His post-Victorian model of personality couched in industrial metaphors prevailed all way until late into the twentieth century and did not lose its validity until the emergence of digital technology.

There is in itself nothing wrong with the fact that a determinate self – whose form is necessarily bound to its era – is produced. But philosophical objections can be raised above all to the reification of the notion of self, which produces the impression that an independent agent hidden inside oneself must correspond to that notion of self. Does it really matter though? I argue that it does: this seemingly trivial mistake – that can be tremendously useful in our communication with one another – inevitably leads to misplaced motives driven by self-delusion. The notion of self that is produced solely by language gets in the way once we want to account for miscommunication and the physical unease that inevitably arises from the friction between language and body.

Compare, for instance, the way humans relate to their surroundings with the bodily way animals relate to them. If a fox hears rustling in the undergrowth, his body puts him in a state of extreme alertness. The hormones that are released in his body make him ready to fight, mate, or run away. The fox may be err and react to false alarms, but there is no doubt that his reactions are an adequate response to real stimuli whose promises can be redeemed. It is astonishing to see how differently we humans react in comparison. As long as our linguistic relation to the world around us remains pragmatically embedded in our actions, we stay close to an appropriate physical response or satisfaction, but as soon as language is reified, a dramatic separation
occurs. Our mouth waters as we leaf through a cookbook; erotic images excite us; ideological and sectarian icons enrage us. The body dangles like a puppet from the strings of language, the hopeless victim of the production of an internal secretion that no longer corresponds to a real environment but exclusively to the symbolic order. Instead of being the master of our own fate, we often feel at the mercy of the caprices of our own body as it revolts against linguistic disciplining. According to Freud, this is inevitable and cultural discontent forms a part of the human condition. According to others though, including Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, it is at least necessary to first undo the reification of notions in order to free the body from the cocoon of language. Plessner's philosophical anthropology points in this direction as well.

The material a priori of the production of self

In Plessner's anthropology, the self is not superimposed onto the body. To the contrary, the self is an emergent phenomenon. The notion of self is an indication of a certain stage in the increasing complexity of how life organizes itself. Plessner describes that process and its stages in Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch (1928).

Plessner studied and obtained his doctoral degree in biology. His main interest was in how life organizes itself. This means that the starting point of his philosophical biology was the living body. He began his analysis from the ground up and not from the observatory tower of linguistic reflection. In discussion with some of his colleagues, he found himself in the phenomenological-hermeneutic camp because it offered him the best concepts to account for the pre-reflexive relation between organism and environment. Plessner thereby anticipated the work of Merleau-Ponty. He borrowed Husserl's idea of the intentionality of consciousness, but he also recognized that intentionality at the pre-reflexive level, in every relation between an organism and its environment. The organism constitutes itself in and through its intentional relation with its environment. Equipped with only this modest toolbox at the time, he – like Husserl – engaged with the philosophy of Immanuel Kant.

In his critiques, Kant had shown that human knowledge consists of the imposition of categorical patterns on sense impressions. Sense impressions are indeed pre-sorted, since our mind supplies the conditions of space and time to every experience, but in other respects they remain undifferentiated until reason steps in. Reason, for example, imposes the category of causality
on perception. In Plessner’s first major work, *Die Einheit der Sinne* (1923), he criticized this Kantian dichotomy of categories of reason and amorphous sense impressions. Plessner declares the intentionality of Husserl to apply to the senses as well. The senses already arrange the world synthetically before reason intervenes.

Plessner’s interjection is not a frontal attack on Kant, but a proposal to extend Kant’s work to the level of the senses. In doing so, he falls in line with Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* [*Kritik der Urteilskraft*], in which Kant argued that the unity of experience is not simply given a priori, but has to be actively created. Reflection on the unity of experience belongs to the field of aesthetics, the subject of this third *Critique*. Aesthetics targets, first and foremost, the level of the senses. Plessner is in agreement with this. There is no overarching guarantee (in the idea of God or Being) for the unity of experience, nor is there a pledge for it (nature). Unity is, at most, an aesthetic regulatory idea that, according to Plessner, is already aimed at the lowest levels of organic complexity, but can never be fully attained.

In *Die Stufen* from 1928, Plessner resumes the idea that all life opposes chaos and infinity by creating unity. An organism already creates unity at an elementary level by an intentional act of boundary realization. Every form of life – albeit at different levels of complexity – actively maintains the boundary with its environment. Boundary maintenance proves to be a task of all life which is constantly under threat. In the last pages of this book, which deal with human beings, Plessner crowns his philosophical work with his ideas about the ultimate unattainability of unity. People long to return to an overarching or supporting unity, but they will never find it. They long to return to God or Nature, but can only build such a ‘home’ themselves as a temporary platform above an abyss. We have to wrest our home base from the underlying mediations that link us with the outside world and our fellow human beings and we better be satisfied with that precarious achievement.

Plessner sees self-awareness as an outcome of the growing complexity in how life is organized. He reconstructs the requisite steps leading up to it. *Die Stufen* deals with the continuity and discontinuity between plants, animals and human beings. The intentional relation with the environment is first formed in the plant. Plessner called the intentional basic act ‘boundary realization.’ The plant interacts with its environment across the boundary, or to put it more precisely, the plant distinguishes itself from its environment by means of boundary maintenance, while the environment is itself constituted by this very act. A dynamic equilibrium is sought in the interaction between the two. For example, petals open when the sun rises
and close when it sets. Plessner calls this active maintenance of interaction – at different levels of complexity, depending on whether it is a plant, animal, or human being – the positionality of any life form.

The positionality of animals differs from that of plants in terms of intentional mediation (mediation in the phenomenological sense, not to be understood as ‘deliberate or intended’ retroaction). This primal mediation gives the animal a centre from which to operate in relation to its environment. However, the animal is incapable of distancing itself from its own centre, i.e. observe or direct itself from a distance. That requires a further act of mediation, which leads to the emergence of the human from the animal as well as to the rise of the specific human world. Unlike animals, people do not coincide with themselves, but are in a position next to or above themselves. This is because of their constitutional relation to self or ‘eccentricity.’ This is also why they have no direct access to the world, which is very specifically and contextually ‘their’ world, but at most only a thoroughly mediated one that always remains incomplete. The requisite mediations take place through language, image and technology.

Plessner worked recursively. Observing a great diversity of life forms and using a limited number of categories – intentional boundary maintenance, mediation and positionality – he derived the supporting categorical framework of nature. The framework of categories makes it possible to reconstruct the world of flesh and blood in all its diversity. Plessner calls his framework of categories the ‘material a priori’ of the different life forms. He differs from Kant in that Kant traced categories that enable the ‘knowledge’ or ‘understanding’ of nature, while Plessner tracks down the conditions of possibility of a cognizant existence. What are the categorical conditions that must be met if a self-reflexive life form is to emerge from nature? Plessner was proud of having supplemented Kant's cognitive a priori with the material a priori of the human cognizant life form.

In Plessner’s system, human self-awareness is an a posteriori effect of how life organizes itself, but not its transcendental origin. Plessner does not fall into the trap of the reification of the self vis-à-vis the mediations of which it is the product. The relation to self can be culturally elaborated in many different ways. The so-called autonomous self is a historical phase of the self that depends on modern techniques of representation. First there are technical and visual relations to the world, from which a specific sense of self emerges that is narratively constituted in the modern period. That ‘self’ takes over and claims to be able to deliberately handle the underlying mediations – on which that ‘self’ depends for its own survival. In opposition to this modern self-delusion, Plessner gives priority to the mediation in its specific, material form.
He explains at the end of *Die Stufen* that human eccentricity inevitably leads to a division into an inner world, outer world, and a shared world. This is followed by the famous three primary laws of the eccentric life form: mediated immediacy, artificiality by nature, and the utopian standpoint. Taken as a whole, this means that the boundaries between inside and outside are not fixed, but they rather have to be redrawn anew in each historical period, depending on the negotiations between people and their mediatory instances. Plessner hereby anticipates philosophies of mediation that were developed much later, such as those of Bruno Latour and Don Ihde. Right from the start he defends a plurality of cultural possibilities. People should not allow themselves to be deceived by religious or philosophical promises. There is no happy end around the corner, no final oneness to be expected. Self-articulation remains a tricky enterprise. Whether we like it or not, we have to interact with the material conditions of our day and confine ourselves to that.

**The persistence of the modern subject**

‘More is thought than people think,’ Plessner wittily remarked. There is no one in your head who does the thinking. Plessner’s material a priori formally clarifies the emergence of self-awareness from how life organizes itself and goes on to demonstrate that material mediation is a necessary condition of human self-articulation. On the basis of those premises, it then becomes possible to explain – with an appeal to specific historical mediations – how the modern ‘autonomous’ subject (the ‘somebody’ who thinks in the head) could arise and maintain its currency for a while. After all, every philosophy – and in the last resort the philosophy of human eccentricity as well – derives most of its validity from the artefacts and media that are popular in its cultural context. The modern autonomous subject received philosophical expression from René Descartes, who fell back on the camera obscura that was making such a furore at the time. The elaboration of this example will serve to show the usefulness of Plessner’s material a priori and demonstrate where the representational model of knowledge that is under review comes from.

The modern era began when Descartes pronounced the autonomous status of the subject: *cogito ergo sum*. But this pronouncement was preceded by discoveries in the field of instruments. The rules of drawing by using linear perspective were developed by Filippo Brunelleschi in 1425, after which Leon Battista Alberti recorded them ten years later in *De Pictura*,...
his treatise on painting. Linear or centralized perspective is based on a one-eyed vision focused on a field of intersection – usually a pane of glass – placed at right angles to the line of vision. If you then fix your gaze, or keep your head still with one eye shut, and transfer the lines that you see to the glass, this procedure automatically results in a reconstruction of three dimensions on the plane surface. In *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (1927), the art historian and neo-Kantian Erwin Panofsky demonstrated that centralized perspective is not a faithful reproduction of what we see, but forms a specific regime of vision that is imposed on the impressions of the senses. That regime not only encapsulates the world within a specific representational form, but it also manoeuvres people into the position of becoming remote viewers. The world as a scene that can be externally calculated and the concomitant spectator have been created by this new way of viewing since 1435. It then took only a small step for Descartes in 1637, when he decked this spectator out philosophically as an autonomous subject.

The pane of glass plus the addition of a visor to keep the head still became the standard equipment of Renaissance artists. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the production of the objective world and of the corresponding spectator/observer was taken over by the camera obscura, the new mediatory instrument for viewing. This enabled the material automation of the production of the modern subject. This material view of the genesis of the subject goes further than Panofsky as a neo-Kantian could go, but it is defensible in Plessner’s terms. After all, for its articulation, the subject depends on mediations that cause that subject to interact with the material world.

The camera obscura consists of a black box with a small aperture in one of the walls that functions as a single eye or lens. An image of the outside world from a centralized perspective is projected onto the opposite wall. If the image that appears in the box, darkroom or tent is traced, the result is a representation from a centralized perspective. The camera obscura replaced the pane of glass and visor as an instrument for artists. They took it outdoors to represent landscapes in perspective. In the nineteenth century, it became possible to record the images in a small-format camera obscura on photosensitive film. This camera became the popular successor to the camera obscura. Each of the remediations in this outlined history reproduced the spectator subject.

The camera and television still reproduce the autonomous subject of the Renaissance every day, but by now of course, a number of rival technologies have emerged, each of which produces a different type of subject. In their

Regardless of all that, the roots of modernity still lie in the process of the production of self by viewing instruments such as the camera obscura, the camera and television, as I outlined above. Even though they have become outdated, their influence seems to be fairly ineradicable. In that respect we, are still faithful heirs to Descartes. He not only proclaimed the modern observing subject – as the hub in his new scientific method – but also engaged in science himself. Among his writings is a treatise on optics, in which he compares the eye with a camera obscura. The modern ideal of knowledge is based on that comparison. There lies the origin of the predominance of the representational model under scrutiny, as can be seen once we rewrite history from the perspective of underlying material mediation.

For Descartes, the camera obscura is a model for the acquisition of knowledge (Bailey 1989). The eye works like a camera obscura. The lens of the eye is the aperture in the black box. An image of the outside world is projected onto the retina, leading to the production of a representation of the outside world within the head. But who reads that image on the screen of the retina? Perhaps a homunculus, a miniature counterpart of ourselves located in the middle of our head? Descartes drew a methodological distinction between the body – that he conceives in mechanistic terms – and the soul. Still, the two domains have to be brought together and in contact with one another. Descartes claims that this takes place in the pineal gland in the middle of the head. That is the small chamber where the homunculus resides and from where it observes the world and gives names to everything. That is the cockpit where the homunculus pulls the levers to set the body in motion. Each of us has his or her own representation of the outside world in the head, depending on perspective. If we move our bodies through space an take up each other’s spatial positions, we can assume one another’s perspectives. Knowledge is thus based on reciprocally compared and corroborated representations of the world that we perceive somewhere outside ourselves, but that is duplicated inside us via words and images.

Until the late twentieth century, certain knowledge consisted in the correspondence between the object and its representation ascertained by the spectator. By now however, that ideal of knowledge has been replaced by a pragmatic approach that firmly embeds language in transactional practices and in the cultural contexts in which they take place. The representational model of the remote observer has been replaced by that of
knowledge acquisition through involvement in which language use can also develop dynamically. Plessner certainly contributed to the correction of the Cartesian anthropology, but over and against that he also developed a philosophical anthropology in its own right in which the mediated existence of human beings occupies a central position. Moreover, Plessner also shows how philosophy serves to create an equilibrium in human existence amid the constant changes of the mediatory substratum of artefacts and media. The validity of a philosophy depends partly on the media from which it borrows its problems and metaphors. This gives his philosophy an intercultural importance too. Technology is not a universal influence for Plessner, as it was for his contemporaries Jaspers and Heidegger. Plessner can culturally differentiate; he was the first to formulate a philosophical anthropology that offers insight into cultural variation on the basis of material mediation.

Material mediation in cultural plurality

The philosophical anthropology of Helmuth Plessner proves to be extremely topical in the philosophy of technology and in the discussion of cyborgs. This theme is raised for discussion by several participants of this volume. In contrast to the dualistic view, they argue that the human body is thoroughly ambivalent (laid out for mediation). Our natural alienation in our bodily relation is discussed by Maarten Coolen in this volume. Dierk Spreen argues in his chapter on the cyborg that alienation of the body is constitutive of human identity and that “attributions of agency have to be negotiated over and against the implanted brain chip.” Security policy gains new field as criminals may hack into the body. Hans Peter Krüger uses these examples to show that the boundary between the private and the public domain has to be redrawn time and again; for Plessner, the limits of the community are at stake each time we engage in this process. Although the cyborg hardly marks a radical break in the Plessnerian view, since people are artificial by nature anyway, Jos de Mul and Peter-Paul Verbeek wanted to widen that framework by adding an extra, trans-human stage to the Stufen.2

Plessner is rightly being rediscovered today and deployed as a philosopher of mediation because he emphasizes the reciprocity of body and community even more than Merleau-Ponty does with technology

2 See the chapters of Coolen, Spreen, Krüger, De Mul, and Verbeek in this volume.
as the mediatory third party. I am therefore all the more surprised that Joachim Fischer saw so many obstacles on this path. He praised Plessner’s anthropology as the navigable middle course between the biologism of Darwin and the culturalism of Foucault. He immediately placed my contribution in the rejected Foucault camp. That is probably only possible if Foucault’s work is reduced to the initial stage of *Les Mots et les Choses* (1966), in which Foucault exposes the anonymous power mechanisms that are at work in (self)disciplining through language. But later – particularly in *Surveiller et Punir* (1975) – Foucault points to the disciplinary power of material mediations with the famous Panopticon of Jeremy Bentham as the paradigm. Moreover, he focuses his attention on all kinds of insidious forms of bodily disciplining that are inherent in the appropriation of military and medical technologies. This focus on materially mediated biopolitics led him to raise the question of ‘care for oneself’ (*Le Souci de soi*) once again in the final stage of his work, starting with the second volume of his trilogy on sexuality (1984). How can autonomy be acquired in negotiation with embodied technologies? We also came across the same question in applications of Plessner’s philosophy of mediation to the example of the implanted brain chip. Autonomy is not innate, but has to be wrested from the mediatory media that drive and support the production of the subject. That is why I seek to form an alliance with Plessner and the late Foucault. In my book *Technology Art, Fairs and Theatre* (2003), I propose a reconciliation between Plessner’s anthropology and Foucault’s recommendation of practices of care for oneself vis-à-vis material mediations. But would that lead to the culturalism that Joachim Fischer fears? Which form of culturalism is he afraid of? There is something important at stake in the anthropological discussion. In the modern tradition, the notion of culture is mainly identified with the symbolic order: the superstructure of texts and art. That did not change when postmodernism came into fashion at the end of the twentieth century, because that philosophical current was nourished mainly on linguistics and semiotics. The same holds true for poststructuralism, to which Foucault is often ascribed, which was integrated in postmodernism as one of its tributaries. In that vision, cultures are taken to consist of interlocking networks of signs and texts. Those texts have abandoned the modern media of books and other printed matter and are now found dispersed in the street, in advertising, status symbols, designer clothing, and so on. Moreover, it is impossible to distinguish pure styles any more, eclecticism rules, with a complete

3 See the Fischer’s chapter in this volume.
cultural relativism as the result. This form of culturalism – Fischer seems to regard Foucault as an apologist for it, if not its founder – falls under my criticism of the exclusively linguistic view of culture, cultural identity and cultural self-awareness. My initial diagnosis of linguistic aberrations mainly targets postmodern lifestyle identities, whose production is entirely semiotic. In this respect, I share Fischer’s preoccupations, but my solution lies in a different direction.

The major philosophers of technology of the last century – the Frenchmen Jacques Ellul, the German Martin Heidegger, and the American Lewis Mumford – all propagated a monolithic and universalist view of technology. Although technology today is considerably more differentiated and available in a large variety of subcultural forms of manifestation, there is still a fear of the global levelling of cultural differences. Everywhere where Philips, Sony, McDonalds and Nike enter with their goods and services, local traditions and rituals die out and are replaced by a universal TV language. People watch *Dallas* everywhere; the world is becoming the same everywhere. I would like to deploy Plessner’s anthropology of material mediation against this incorrect view. The world is only becoming the same everywhere with regard to the semiotic field. If artefacts and media are taken to be nothing but signifiers and sign transmission stations, then everything does become the same indeed, but that is exactly what I am arguing against by using Plessner. Artefacts are embedded in the body and the senses, and in that social process, they interlock with local practices, context-bound idiom and signification. That means that the cultural production of self is also characterized by a contextual differentiation. It is not even ruled out that the embedded artefacts may in turn become involved in a culturally innovative refashioning process and undergo cultural differentiation (for example, video art in China is different from that found in Europe or the United States). Hence, the world is not becoming the same everywhere. You can only think that if you remain bogged down in semiotic culturalism.

There are few philosophical anthropologists whose work has managed to stand up to the rightly anti-essentialist critique mounted by the postmodernists. The work of Helmuth Plessner displays less existential pathos than Heidegger, for example, (which is why it eclipsed earlier), but as the ripple of semiotic postmodernism recedes, it becomes all the more topical for its sober emphasis on the cultural diversity of our mediated existence.
Bibliography


