Chapter 5
Plessner's Philosophy of Eccentric Positionality

5.1 Form of Positionality and Form of Organization of Plants and Animals

On the basis of Merleau-Ponty it is hard to understand what form of embodiment renders possible that we have a certain disengagement with regard to our own body as both subject and object. Symbolic behavior allows us to establish a "structure of structures",[1] but what is the structure of the human being's distance as such to these structures and meta-structures? What kind of embodiment is required in order that an entity coincides with its being in the world *and* is at the same time disengaged from it?

We have seen that Merleau-Ponty's *La structure du comportement* (1942) situates human existence in relation to nature as a coherent unity of lower and higher structures. Within Plessner's oeuvre, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* (1928) fulfills a similar role. In the current chapter I argue that the central concept of this work, "eccentric positionality" (*exzentrische Positionalität*), answers the questions we are facing. It is from our eccentric position that we relate to both the subjective and the objective aspect of our being in the world. Plessner bases his philosophical anthropology on a philosophy of organic life, which in turn departs from an account of the difference between living and non-living things. I will first introduce Plessner's view of nature and then his concept of eccentric positionality.

1 Merleau-Ponty, *La structure du comportement*, 133/122.

According to Plessner, the criterion for the distinction between the animate and the inanimate has to do with the *boundary* (*Grenze*) between a thing and the medium in which it is placed. In the case of non-living things, the boundary between the thing and what is external to it belongs neither to the thing nor to the medium. The boundary is simply the transition from one matter into another. It does not exist as such and, in this sense, it is "virtual".[2] In living things this is different. Here, the boundary is "real" because it belongs to the thing itself: "The boundary really belongs to the body, which as a consequence not only . . . guarantees, at its contours, the transition to the contiguous medium but rather *carries through* this limitation and *is* this transition."[3]

Insofar as living things are concerned, the boundary belongs to the thing itself because, in contrast with non-living entities, living beings themselves *realize* their boundary to the medium. The medium, thus specified in relation to the living thing, is called the "surrounding field" (*Umfeld*). The living thing is dependent on this surrounding field, for instance on the substances available in it, but this dependency does not detract from the organism's "autonomy" (*Selbständigkeit*).[4] Autonomy and dependence are here not mutually exclusive. The living thing's own organization is the *mode* of its dependence on what is other to it. Since living things realize their boundary to the surrounding field, they *take* the place which is given to them. This Plessner calls "positionality". Positionality is the essential property of all life.

At this point an epistemological problem presents itself. Positionality is not a directly visible or audible feature. We do not literally perceive this essential property. But we do immediately recognize living things around us, which in Plessner's view means that we see beings which possess the essential property of positionality. This is where "essence indicating characteristics" (*indikatorische Wesensmerkmale*)[5] come into the picture. These features play a mediating role in making the essence perceivable: they indicate the essence of the being we are faced with. It is usually not one but a combination of such characteristics that enables us to recognize a thing as living.

I restrict myself to two such characteristics discussed by Plessner. The first is "plasticity" (*Plastizität*)[6]: all living things can be stretched, pushed together or bended. This plasticity shows itself more concretely in development, growth, re-

2 Plessner, *Stufen*, 103/154

3 Ibid. (I have added extra italics to increase readability).

4 Ibid., XX/30 and 104/155.

5 Ibid., 115/168.

6 Ibid., 124/178.

generation, and movement which are essential to all life. Secondly, all living things show the characteristic of "regular irregularity" (*regelmäßige Unregelmäßigkeit*).[7] Plessner refers to Buytendijk's illustration of the principle at hand. Buytendijk observes that, if we subsequently look at the contours of a circle, an ellipse, an egg, and a lime leaf, we attain an increasingly strong impression of life. The reason we regard the contour of a lime leaf as more alive than, e.g., the ellipse, is that the degree of irregularity increases, although the appearance of a kind of regularity and organization of the gestalt remains intact. Plessner refers to this as an example of a *static* expression of regular irregularity. Dynamically, we encounter the principle of regular irregularity in the *rythms* characteristic of various expressions of life. The organism's attunement to day and night or to the change of seasons does not follow a mechanical pattern: it is determined by a periodization, i.e. by regularity, but at the same time by a certain irregularity.

The properties mentioned in the previous paragraph do not belong to the essence of living things (positionality or autonomous realization of the boundary), but they are not merely coincidental properties either.[8] They are essence indicating characteristics. They indicate whether we are dealing with a thing which possesses its own boundary and thus has positionality, or with a thing which does not possess its boundary and does not emphatically take the place which it happens to have. Plessner also calls these characteristics "empirical characteristics of the essence" (*empirische Wesensmerkmale*).[9] By "empirical", Plessner does not mean that these properties show themselves only to empirical science, but rather that they are a relatively contingent, a posteriori given of perception. However, because at the same time they indicate the inner essence of the thing which appears, essence indicating characteristics constitute the divide between what is a posteriori and what is a priori, i.e., between what is contingently given in perception and the a priori category of being which shows itself in and through that appearance. In addition, it is important to note that the term "a priori" has a double meaning here. A priori conditions on the one hand constitute a framework for experience, and on the other hand they constitute the mode of being (life, positionality) of the thing that we encounter in the word. They define

7 Ibid.

8 For this reason Plessner's choice of the term *indikatorische Wesensmerkmale* is less than perfect, because it suggests that they are univocally characteristics which belong to the essence of the thing. Better would have been *wesensindikatorische Merkmale*. Accordingly I have translated the term into "essence indicating characteristics".

9 Ibid., 117/170.

the ground structure of the being over against us and our relationship to it, which adjusts to its structure.[10]

It might be objected that Plessner's account does not do justice to the immediate nature of our recognition of living things. Essence indicating characteristics seem to stand in between the perceiving subject and the object, so that the subject would have to infer the essence from the appearance. But we can remove this objection by appealing to Plessner's concept of "mediated immediacy" (*vermittelte Unmittelbarkeit*).[11] Our intuition of something living as opposed to something inanimate is immediate in the sense that we do not actively have to do anything to know that we are dealing with something living, but nonetheless this recognition is mediated by the perception of certain characteristics which all living entities share.

The explanation for this is that, when we learn categories, the relationship between indicating characteristics and essences sediments into habits. It becomes part of our familiarity with the world. In virtue of this familiarity we immediately recognize something as alive through its appearance.[12] Essence indicating characteristics are the "appearances of another sphere of being".[13] We see life in the plasticity and regular irregularity of the gestalt facing us. The relationship between indicating characteristics and the essence is, as it were, compressed into one single presence. The relationship itself can again come to the fore when we are not sure whether we are dealing with a living or a non-living thing. At first the flower on the table of the restaurant looks real, but then we get suspicious. On closer observation of its characteristics we decide that it is not a real flower after all. Only if we do not know for sure what category of being we are dealing with does the relationship itself as it were unfold and does the distance between the empirical characteristics and the essence which they (seem to) indicate make itself felt.

Before I turn to the different levels of the organic in Plessner, I want to point out an important difference between Plessner and Merleau-Ponty. Interest-

10 See also my explanation of Plessner's concept of categories in Section 2.1.

11 Plessner, *Stufen*, 48-49/90. The principle is here still formulated hypothetically. To my knowledge, Plessner does not explicitly apply it to the relationship between essence indicating characteristics and essences. Below we will see how Plessner applies it in his analysis of the different forms of life.

12 In fact, we unlearn to see non-living things as personal, living things, Plessner says, because the starting point of experience is the assumption that our world is animated: ibid., 301/374.

13 Ibid., 117-118/170.

ingly, both have developed their views partly in response to Köhler's gestalt theory. On the one hand, they agree with Köhler that physical systems are more than the sum of their parts and they accept the term "gestalt" for such systems. On the other hand, both Plessner and Merleau-Ponty criticize Köhler for not recognizing the distinction between physical systems and organisms.

As we saw in Section 4.1, Merleau-Ponty wants to go beyond Köhler's theory of physical systems by showing that animal behavior is not an effect of a cause in the external world, but a response of the organism to a situation. Stimuli constitute a vital signification for the animal itself; they are not causes but rather occasions for the animal to respond in a certain way. Merleau-Ponty defines "life" immediately in terms of "behavior". This makes it extremely hard to give plant life a place within one's philosophy of life, and, indeed, *The Structure of Behavior* simply ignores plant life.

Plessner's view does not have this shortcoming. Plessner criticizes Köhler by connecting with Hans Driesch's objection to Köhler's view. According to Driesch, the unity of the parts of the organism does not depend merely on the coincidental location within the "topography" of the parts, as Köhler assumes. Contrary to the physical system, the organism is an *essential* unity.[14] Driesch calls this kind of unity a "whole" (*Ganzheit*).[15] Plessner adopts this distinction between gestalt and whole, but he does not accept Driesch's vitalistic concept of an *entelechy*, instead founding the wholeness of the organism on the principle of autonomous boundary realization, as described above.

In Plessner's view, there are basically three levels of living things: plants, animals and human beings.[16] On each of these levels, positionality is realized in

14 Ibid., 95/144.

15 Ibid., 94/144.

16 Although more differentiated than Merleau-Ponty's view in *The Structure of Behavior*, this division still raises important questions. Since Plessner simply speaks of plants, where does he leave fungi and unicellular organisms? As a biologist, Plessner is aware of the rich diversity of existing life forms. At least one passage (*Stufen*, 235/301), implies that, according to Plessner, fungi have the same kind of positionality as plants. As regards life on a microscale, Plessner's phenomenological perspective leads him to start rather from life forms which we are familiar with because they exist at the same scale as we, human beings, do. Nonetheless, Plessner also discusses microorganisms, some of which, viz. viruses, are not organisms in the full sense but borderline cases which require careful examination: ibid., 356-359/435-439. It is important to note that Plessner's view of life, notably in the *Stufen*, is much more detailed and differentiated than I can represent here.

a different way. On the level of vegetable life, positionality is realized in the passive mode of simply *being* organized. The parts of the plant are organs, whose function refers to the organism as a whole and its vital needs. In this way the whole is mediated through the parts. This internal mediation renders possible the *immediate* integration of the organism into what is other to itself. To make this more concrete: the plant's outer surfaces are open to substances and energy from the surrounding field, and the plant is thus liable to the chemical-physical forces which are part of its biocycle (*Lebenskreis*). The plant does not exert these forces itself, but it *does* organize them, or better put: it *is* the organization which gives these forces an aim beyond the realm of the physical-chemical, viz. its own life and the life of the species. Insofar as the plant is subject to the forces of the surrounding field, this relationship is an *immediate* one. Insofar as the forces receive a function through the plant's internal organization, the relationship is at the same time *mediated* by that organization. This going together of mediation and immediacy is an instantiation of the principle of "mediated immediacy" mentioned above. It recurs in different forms on all levels of the organic.

Some passages in the *Stufen* seem to suggest that the plant is only characterized by immediacy and not at the same time by mediacy. Plessner says: "Open is that form [of organization], which *immediately* integrates the organism, in all its expressions of life, into its environment and makes it a heteronomous part of the biocycle which corresponds with it."[17] This creates the impression that plant life is not characterized by mediation but only by an immediate relationship to the environment—period. It is true that Plessner in his discussion of plant life emphasizes the directness of the relationship to the medium and that, in his discussion of animal life, he emphasizes the indirect character of the relationship to the environment. But Plessner recognizes that, on a more fundamental level, mediation and immediacy always go together: "The above analyses were meant to make clear that the living as such possesses the structure of mediated immediacy. This structure arises from the nature of the boundary posited as real."[18] This also means that, since any form of organization is the organism's "compromise" between autonomy and heteronomy, the description of plants as "heteronomous" should not be taken as absolute. The plant's form of organiza-

17 Ibid., 219/284 (italics mine).

18 Ibid., 324/400. Cf. ibid., 260/329, where Plessner speaks of "[t]his peculiar relationship of an indirect directness, a mediated immediacy between organism and world . . . which is in the deepest sense founded on the ontic structure of life".

tion is heteronomous not in absolute terms, but compared to the form of organization that belongs to the animal.

Before I turn to the form of positionality of the animal and show how the principle of mediated immediacy is specified there, let me remark on Plessner's terminology. There is a subtle but important difference between the terms "form of organization" and "form of positionality". The form of organization defines the relationship between the whole and the parts (the organs) of the objective-organic body, and, in addition, the relative openness or closedness of the body to the medium. In other words, the form of organization is the "answer" of the organism to the problem that, on the one hand, it needs to be open in order to sustain itself, and on the other hand, it needs to be closed in order to protect the integrity of its body.[19] The form of *positionality* of the plant is tightly interconnected with this form of organization but it is not the same thing. "Positionality" designates the level of ideality realized in this real being, and the specific *mode* in which the organism, in virtue of this ideality, occupies its position in relation to the environment. Whereas the form of organization pertains to the objective-organic body, the form of positionality pertains to the question of whether subjectivity is realized in the living thing and, if it *is* realized, in what form: centric or eccentric. The mode of positionality which corresponds with the plant's form of organization can be defined as passive and as lacking subjectivity, i.e., lacking a sensorimotor center.

This characterization already implies the comparison with animal life, so let us indeed turn to the animal. I will first focus on its form of positionality, and then remark on the form of organization which makes this form of positionality possible. On the level of animals, the principle of mediated immediacy returns in a different form than in vegetable life.[20] The animal has an *active* mode of realizing the boundary between itself and the medium—which is then called its "environment" (*Umwelt*).[21] Animals have "centric"[22] positionality: they live from and

19 Ibid., 218-219/283.

20 I restrict myself to Plessner's account of *higher* animals.

21 So Plessner distinguishes between "medium" (*Medium*), a term that is applicable to both the non-living and the living thing, "surrounding field" (*Umfeld*), applicable only to the living, "environment" (*Umwelt*), applicable only to animals and human beings, and, as we will see, "world" (*Welt*), applicable only to human beings. The word "surroundings" (*Umgebung*) Plessner uses quite freely in different situations. As regard the other terms, Plessner is not always consistent. Cf., e.g., ibid., 201/264, where Plessner speaks of the environment (*Umwelt*) in relation to the organism in general, regardless of the question whether it concerns a plant or an animal: "between organ-

towards an ideal center of perception and action. According to Plessner, animals *are* their body and *have* their body. They "have" their body in the sense that they use the body to fulfill their needs. The animal's body is both a subject and an object. This structure renders possible that the animal uses its body as an instrument.

We have to be careful about how we understand this. According to Plessner, the relationship between the subjectivity and the objectivity of the body is "interlaced" (*verschränkt*). The word interlacement (*Verschränkung*), in Plessner, means that two aspects are fundamentally different—Plessner says: "divergent"[23]—and yet inextricably intertwined.[24] In the case of the animal this means: the body-as-subject differs essentially from the body-as-object but both aspects belong to one and the same body, and one aspect is unthinkable without the other—unless we give up altogether the phenomenon of the animal.

This mutual determination between aspects has a dialectical structure. The body *used* by the animal to perceive or perform an action is always at the same time the body that the animal *is*: an organic unity with a sensorimotor relationship to the surrounding field. The body that the animal uses is an "object", but it is not a non-living thing. Its objectivity is of a higher order than that: the objective body is "already" an organism. Only an objective-*organic* body can be wounded, grows, grows old, dies. This should determine our reading of the word "instrument". According to Plessner, the animal indeed uses its body as an instrument but, of course, this is not to be taken in the sense of the man-made tool. The body is a "thing" but not an inanimate thing. The relationship between subjective body and objective body comes to expression when we say, for instance, that an animal "turns *its* body around", "licks *its* wounds", or "throws *itself* on a prey". The animal has a reflexive relationship to itself. It has "ein Sich", Plessner says: "an itself".[25]

According to Plessner, the animal realizes its relationship to the environment *through* its body. There is an inhibited transition from perception to action,

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ism and environment". And ibid., 260/329 (quoted in footnote 4 above): "between organism and world", where "organism" refers to all levels of living being.

22 Ibid., 291/364.

23 Ibid., 80/127 and passim. This is in accordance with the general meaning of *Verschränkung* in science and philosophy. Cf. Steizinger: *Verschränkung* is "the connection of heterogeneous spheres" ("Verschränkung. Exempel und Paradigma interdisziplinairer Begriffsgeschichte", 123).

24 Cf. Ingerslev, "My Body as Object: Self-Distance and Social Experience", 165.

25 Plessner, *Stufen*, 288/360.

which gives the animal a certain play of responses to a situation. Animals thus have a certain distance to the objects of need-fulfillment, which shows itself clearly in hoarding or altruistic behavior but also in the search for, and finding of, solutions to simple practical problems like those described in the previous chapter. This is the way *mediation* comes in. But the animal lacks the "sense of the negative". Consequently, it has no intuition of the ambiguity of immanence and transcendence of the things surrounding it. It cannot call into question the way in which a thing appears to it and it does not regard the appearance as one among many appearances (or meanings, or functions, etc.), presenting themselves over a period of time, of one and the same object.[26] The reason of this limitation is that the animal cannot distance itself from its relationship to the environment. "Inasmuch as the animal is itself, it is absorbed in the here and now."[27] In this sense its relationship to the surroundings is, although mediated, at the same time an immediate one.

Insofar as the animal *has* its body, it not only realizes itself as a subject but it also relates to the thingness of the body. Does this imply that the animal is at a distance to the body-as-subject and to the body-as-object? And if so, does this not undercut the presupposition of my reading of both Plessner and Merleau-Ponty, according to which only human beings have a distance to the subjectivity and the objectivity of their bodies? It is true that, in Plessner's view, the animal *is* its subjective body and *uses* its objective body, but this only implies a distance to the objective body. It does not imply that the animal is also at a distance to itself as a body-subject. In Plessner's view, the animal does not have this distance from itself. There is, *for* the animal, no interspace and therefore no emphatic mediation between the two aspects. For this reason, Plessner in regard to the animal speaks of an "oscillation" (*Oszillation*)[28] between being the body and having the body.

Being the body and having it from a sensorimotor center characterizes the positionality of animals. But what form of *organization* renders possible centric positionality? Whereas the plant's form of organization is open, Plessner says, the organization of the animal body is closed. This means that the emphasis is now on mediation and on the autonomy of the organism. Whereas the physical-chemical processes in the plant are integrated immediately in the lifecycle so that these processes, as it were, have the same direction as that cycle, the processes in the animal belong to organs which stand in antagonistic relationships to

26 Ibid., 329/405.

27 Ibid., 288/360.

28 Ibid., 237/303.

one another, which cooperate by working "against" each other, thus integrating the animal indirectly into the environment.[29] This may sound abstract, but Plessner mentions a number of more specific essential properties to illustrate this point. Let me sum up a number of them. Note that some of these characteristics allow exceptions.[30]

Due to their direct, relatively unmediated dependence on the medium, plants generally do not move themselves; animals have greater autonomy, are active, and movement is part of their way of realizing their boundary to the environment. In plants, the development of tissue happens predominantly on the outside of the body; in animals this growth is a process internal to the body. Animals depend on organic nourishment; plants can make proteins, carbohydrates and fat out of inorganic substances. (However, here fungi are the exception.) In the plant, the parts have a low level of specialization and can therefore easily be detached from the whole. We see this when we take cuttings from a plant. The plant is a "dividuum", Plessner says.[31] Animals, in contrast, are literally *in*dividuals: the unity and integrity of their bodies is absolute. Even if amputation of a member does not necessarily kill the animal, it is not possible to grow a new specimen from the amputated part.[32] Whereas animals have a final stage of development, after which they only grow old, plants are never really finished. Conditions permitting, they will keep growing—a process which is crossed by the gradual decay towards the end of their life.

It is not possible for me to do justice to the sophistication of Plessner's differentiated descriptions of plants and animals, or of lower and higher animals. So this introduction must remain somewhat sketchy. Let me finish by adding just one further differentiation which is relevant to the discussion of the brain. Plessner, within the sphere of animals, distinguishes between two types of closed or-

29 Ibid., 218-221/282-286.

30 However, the fact that there are exceptions does not imply that the general description falls short. The decisive criterion for determining that a description of the essential properties defining a category is adequate or not is rather the question whether we need the general principle as a *basis* for describing the exception. If we emphatically understand the exceptional form of life as a deviation from a category, or an intermediate form in between two categories, then this understanding affirms that the categories make sense. Alternative approaches quickly lead to scepticism.

31 Ibid., 220/285.

32 The cloning of animals in our time seems to qualify this claim. I do not think it proves Plessner wrong, but these new techniques do challenge us to rethink the "individuality" or "dividuality" of plants and animals—something which cannot be pursued here.

ganization: the centralized and the decentralized type. It is important to note that "centralized" (organization) is not the same as "centric" (positionality). According to Plessner, higher animals have a centralized organization which means that they have a *central nervous system*. This renders possible the interruption between stimulus and response, i.e., the hiatus between noticing (*Merken*) and working (*Wirken*) which defines the structure of *consciousness*. "Noticing is equivalent to inhibited excitation, working to uninhibited excitation. The sphere of consciousness stretches between these two; the transition from noticing to working takes place through consciousness."[33]

Subjective consciousness is the relatively strong realization of centric positionality which is reserved for higher animals. Lower animals like jellyfish and sea urchins only have a neural net and a nerve ring, no brain and therefore no consciousness. Their consciousness is, metaphorically speaking, "turned off" (*ausgeschaltet*).[34] We are here concerned with a relatively weak realization of centric positionality: the meanings of things correlate *directly* with the animal's drives, i.e., without the pause of consciousness. This distinction is a further illustration of the relationship between organization and positionality. The nervous system belongs to the form of *organization* of the animal, because it is part of the objective-organic body. But this form of organization renders possible the animal's subjectivity, which is its form of *positionality*.[35]

5.2 THE PARTICULARITY OF THE HUMAN BODY AND ITS ONTOGENESIS

The previous section has prepared us for Plessner's view of human beings. Plessner says that, insofar as their form of organization is concerned, human beings are still animals. Both animal and human bodies have a closed organization, and the organization of the human body is "centralized" like that of higher ani-

33 Ibid., 245/312.

34 Ibid.

35 Perhaps the distinction between form of organization and form of positionality becomes clearer the higher we climb up the levels of the organic. This might be due to the fact that the form of organization refers to the objective-organic being of the organism, which in the case of the plant is about all there is to it: there is here no subjectivity (i.e., centric positionality), let alone a being-at-a-distance to this subjectivity (i.e., eccentric positionality). In other words, the difference between form of organization and form of positionality is increasingly realized on higher levels of life.

mals. However, according to Plessner, human consciousness is of an essentially different kind than animal consciousness. Although the organization of the human body is the same as in animals, human beings have a different form of *positionality*. Whereas animals are centrically positioned, human beings are eccentrically positioned. Humans are at a distance from their sensorimotor center and this renders possible that the world shows the double structure of immanence and transcendence. It also renders possible symbolic communication, advanced technology, institutions, and the performing of social roles within this institutional environment.

Before I discuss Plessner's concept of eccentric positionality in greater detail, let us dwell for a while on the relationship between this form of positionality and the form of organization which characterizes the human body. The simplest interpretation of Plessner purports that the human body, as an organism, is no different than that of animals. This interpretation emphasizes that the human body has a closed form of organization and a nervous system just like all (other) animal bodies. As Plessner puts it: "If the character of being-outside-itself turns the animal into a human being then it is clear, since eccentricity does not render possible a new form of organization, that the human being must physically remain an animal."[36] Plessner suggests that all further differences, such as the human being's upright position and his relatively big brain are *empirical* differences, which means that they are gradual and they do not *essentially* change the organism's form of organization. Plessner continues in this vein that "[b]eing human is not tied to a particular gestalt and (to recall an imaginative conjecture by the paleontologist Dacqué) could just as well occur under a variety of gestalts that do not correspond with the one we know. The character of the human being is tied only to the centralized form of organization, which forms the basis of his eccentricity."[37]

Interestingly, Plessner himself seems to have changed his mind about the finer points of the problem. In *Die Frage nach der Conditio humana*, where Plessner returns to this issue (without, however, referring to the passage from the *Stufen*), he arrives at a slightly different conclusion. Let us take a closer look at this text.

Plessner is here concerned with the question of how the human being's "physical constitution and behavior . . . are intertwined".[38] He discusses a number of distinctions between human beings and animals which have more than

36 Plessner, *Stufen*, 293/365.

37 Ibid., 293/365-366.

38 Plessner, *Die Frage nach der Conditio humana*, 169.

merely empirical value. The basis of these considerations is Portmann's interpretation of the distinction between altricial and precocial animals, or more precisely: between nidicolous animals (*Nesthocker*) and nidifugous animals (*Nestflüchter*).[39] Altricial animals, like many birds and most rodents, remain highly dependent on the care from their parents for a long time after their birth. In contrast, precocial animals, like most higher mammals, are soon physiologically fit to independently find their way in the environment. A newborn elephant or horse, for instance, can walk and follow the herd within hours after birth.

Human beings share some important characteristics with these higher mammals: a long gestation period, a relatively small litter, thermal homeostasis, more or less fully functioning sense-organs at birth, and the phenomenon of *youth*: a period in which the animal/human being can play, and thus learn patterns of behavior which are not purely instinctive (not purely "syncretic", in Merleau-Ponty's terms). Theoretically this would lead us to conclude that, like these other mammals, human beings are precocial animals. But, of course, human beings remain highly dependent on the care of their parents for a long time after their birth. They are therefore regarded as altricial animals. Portmann emphasized their exceptional properties by calling them "secondary nidicolous animals" (*sekundäre Nesthocker*).[40] Plessner argues that this peculiar combination of properties already points to the essential difference between human beings and animals. Whereas higher animals have consciousness but are not aware of their consciousness because they cannot distance themselves from it, human beings are eccentrically positioned: they stand both *in* and *above* their conscious relationship to the world.

The latter statement is clearly *phenomenological* and not *empirical*, but the relationship between the essential and the empirical properties of human beings is not arbitrary. On the one hand human beings share with higher mammals the

39 Stricly speaking, "Nesthocker" should be translated by "nidicolous animal", because it literally refers to animals that stay at their nest, which is reflected in the latin origin of "nidicolous": nidus (nest) + colere (to inhabit). For similar reasons, "Nestflüchter" should be translated with "nidifugous animal": the animal which flees the nest (at an early stage after birth). However, the words "altricial" and "precocial" are more common. They refer to the physiological *stage of development* which renders necessary that the animal stays at the nest for a long time after birth or renders possible that it flees the nest (or place of birth) soon after birth. Although both distinctions are not the same, it is clear that they are narrowly interconnected, and both Plessner and Portmann describe these characteristics as part of one single phenomenon.

40 Portmann, *Einführung in die vergleichende Morphologie der Wirbeltiere*, 290.

characteristics which make these animals intelligent and relatively independent from their surroundings. According to Plessner, warm-bloodedness (as a form of homeostasis) facilitates, on an organic level, a higher form of autonomy with regard to the climate of the environment. Playing and learning render possible an interaction with the surroundings which is not restricted to instinct-driven responses to stimuli; there is literally "play" or bandwidth in the responses of the higher animal or human being. It is in relation to such play of possible responses that we can, also in relation to higher animals, speak of "intelligent" behavior.[41] In the human being these characteristics are combined with the *extra long* preparation period in the many years of the child's development after birth. On the one hand, the postponement of full participation is necessary because the postnatal development of the nervous system stretches into the human's late teens. On the other hand, this postponement allows for an extremely long trajectory of learning behavior in all of its generally human, and its specific cultural and individual forms. In Plessner's view, it is this combination of characteristics, on the one hand from precocial animals and on the other hand from altricial animals, which renders possible the advanced character of human consciousness and behavior and brings it to a higher level.

Plessner discusses a number of further properties unique to the human physical constitution. One of the most important physical characteristics of human beings, as has long been recognized, is the upright posture of the human body: "Precisely because in human beings [the upright posture] is the normal posture and not, as in animals, a response depending on the situation (fear, curiosity, defense), it is immediately connected to our approachability as persons."[42] So, on the one hand this position widens the human gaze and deepens the social character of his world, where people meet as persons. The face-à-face of the human social world is much more outspoken than in primates: it helps create the sphere of verbal and non-verbal communication, and of the social roles we play, embedded in an institutional framework. And on the other hand the upright position frees the hand, so that an advanced form of the construction and use of tools becomes possible. Plessner here speaks of the "emancipation of the visual and tactile field".[43]

In sum, Plessner does not regard the gestalt of the objective human body as merely coincidental in relation to the *essence* of human beings: the eccentric position. So when, in this context, Plessner again refers to the paleontologist

41 Plessner, *Stufen*, 272-276/343-347.

42 Ibid., *Die Frage nach der Conditio humana*, 170.

43 Ibid., 171.

Dacqué, he is no longer captivated by his imagination: "If one pictures to oneself from this perspective (of a maximum of autonomy, which must express adaptability to the surroundings and independence from it) the human design, then Dacqué's thought, that the human being could also have existed in the physical form of an amphibian, a fish, or a reptile, becomes an absurdity."[44]

And yet it would be an exaggeration to state that the particular combination of precocial and altricial properties, the upright posture, or the free, multifunctional hand would themselves belong to the essential core of being human. This would be a step too far because eccentric positionality is not unthinkable without these properties. So what is their status?

They are at least "essence indicating characteristics", i.e., characteristics which belong to the specific content of perception which at the same time convey what is essential to what appears *through* these characteristics.[45] But perhaps we are starting to see that essence indicating characteristics are, generally, not just indications: their relation to the essence is not coincidental but *intelligible*. They do not have the character of a symbol which might just as well be replaced by another symbol so long as we agree on its meaning. The relationship between an essence indicating characteristic and the essence indicated by it *makes sense*. It makes sense that a being who develops an upright posture, a posture that frees his hands, is capable of bringing tool-creation to a higher level, that she is capable of regarding tools as tools, i.e., as things whose identity and function does not get lost under varying circumstances. And it is not a coincidence that a being who is relatively hairless compared to primates, the species closest to him, disposes of the "tool" called clothing and, on a more existential level, is a being whose existence is defined by shame and its antipode pride.[46]

Although the human being's upright posture and relative hairlessness make sense (are intelligible) in relation to the essence of the human being, it is strictly

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44 Ibid., 166.

45 Cf. Mitscherlich, *Natur und Geschichte*, 245.

46 Plessner mentions nakedness and clothing (Plessner, *Lachen und Weinen*, 244-245/40), but, to my knowledge, not in relation to the human being's relative hairlessness as an essence indicating characteristic.

Incidentally, it is no use asking which came first: the freeing of the hand by the upright position or the hand-tool, "because it is the wrong question. The upright position and the 'invention' of the tool constitute one and the same structural relationship." (Plessner, *Die Frage nach der Conditio humana*, 171.) The same can be said of the relationship between on the one hand nakedness and shame and on the other hand clothing.

speaking not unthinkable that human beings would have a dense fur and would walk on all fours. The concept of the eccentric position does not depend on these properties. But one physical gestalt of the body supports this form of positionality more easily than another; it is the more logical, more probable precondition for it than another. So Plessner did not disqualify his remark in the *Stufen*, that "[b]eing human is not tied to a particular gestalt and . . . could just as well occur under a variety of gestalts that do not correspond with the one we know", because strictly speaking this observation is correct. The remark is *qualified* by an account of the intelligible relationship between the physical form of the human body and eccentric positionality. I will not present a complete or definite answer to the question of what the exact nature of these properties (upright posture and so forth) is, but it is clear that they are located somewhere in between a priori and a posteriori, and in between logically necessary and coincidental. From that intermediate position they fulfill their role as indicators of the essence, but their meaning is not exhausted by this function, because their relationship to the essence makes sense.

This also holds for Plessner's mentioning of the human being's "highly complicated cortex",[47] compared to other mammals. It is generally accepted up to this day that human being's are unique in terms of the relative complexity and size of their brains. We have the greatest brain mass in relation to the mass of our entire body, and this fact is to a large extent due to the size of the cortex. It is hard to regard as arbitrary the relationship between the eccentric nature of human consciousness (and the differentiation and depth of the phenomenal world entailed thereby) and the size and complexity of his brain.[48]

Despite their meaningfulness, we should not overestimate the role of physical essence indicating properties, because we can in the process of interacting with a being also receive indications which do not reside on the physical level but on the level of interpersonal communication. Consider the example of the

47 Ibid., 170.

48 Hans-Peter Krüger (*Gehirn, Verhalten und Zeit*, 88-89, 120-121) cites neuroscientific research which proves that, compared to the brains of primates, human brains are characterized by a large amount of so-called "metarepresentations" (ibid., 121), i.e., neural connections correlated with *self-referential* behavioral functions. Krüger explains these functions philosophically in terms of eccentric positionality. He does not refer to Plessner's "essence indicating properties" here, but it seems that we can interpret this high quantity of metarepresentations in the human brain as a further essence indicating property of eccentric positionality, but one that is only accessible from the third-person perspective of science.

chat function on many service websites. Often it is not clear whether the "person" on the other side of the line is a human being or a computer program. We may thus wonder whether Anna, the helpdesk girl we encounter on the website of furniture retailer Ikea, is a real person or not. If you ask Anna all kinds of information about couches and tables for sale, Anna's flexible way of answering might give us the impression that Anna is indeed a real person. But there are limitations to this flexibility. Although Anna even answers the question whether she likes working at Ikea (she does!), she cannot tell you how long she has been working there. And she seems to miss the point of our jokes—which admittedly happens between people as well. When asked whether she is real, Anna admits that she is not: "I am a 'Bot'; my name is Anna, and my task is to provide you with online help about IKEA."[49]

This example illustrates that it is ultimately our personal *interaction* which is decisive in determining whether the person over-against us is indeed a person or not. It is in the praxis of interacting, of living *with*, a being that we discover its true nature. When we watch Disney classics like *Jungle Book* or *Bambi*, we understand immediately that Baloo the Bear or Bambi are in essence not centrically positioned animals but persons.[50] If we would encounter an animal of *this* kind in real life, we would be able to interact with him or her as a person, simply because these animals express themselves as eccentrically positioned beings. These examples illustrate that, besides *physical* essence indicating properties, there are essence indicating properties which show themselves in (quasi-) interpersonal communication. Anna's awkward way of answering questions is an illustration of such essence indicating properties. It reveals that we only thought we were communicating with a person, whereas in fact we were receiving programmed or computer-learned responses.

Let me return to the question I started with: to what extent is there an *essential* difference on a physical level between human beings and animals? The answer is a little more subtle than it seemed at first sight. The core of the answer is already in the *Stufen*, when Plessner says that "physically speaking, the human being must remain an animal". This claim refers to the form of organization of the human body. The human being shares with higher animals the closed form of organization, and more specifically, the centralistic variant, which is characterized by a central nervous system. However, in *Die Frage nach der Conditio humana* Plessner makes clear that the physical gestalt of the human being is by no means arbitrary or coincidental: there is a certain intelligibility to the fact that

49 http://www.ikea.com/gb/en/ (accessed: 4 April 2013).

50 Example borrowed from Krüger, personal communication.

precisely this species possesses a different form of positionality than the species naturally closest to it.

Consequently, Gesa Lindemann overstates the point when she argues that "organic particularities" play no role whatsoever in determining "whether entities are personal or not".[51] Although social interaction also provides us with essence indicating properties, we should not consider this interaction in isolation from the species, the human being, capable of such interaction. I agree with Olivia Mitscherlich that Lindemann "detaches eccentric positionality from the human being as a natural entity",[52] and that she "reduces eccentric positionality to social-worldliness [*Mitweltlichkeit*]".[53] Lindemann's sociological concept of personhood and eccentricity is so broad that, depending on the sociohistorical community she is concerned with, it can include not only animals but also "gods and other powers".[54]

As regards gods, Plessner convincingly demonstrates that only an organism has positionality, and that only an organism with a centralized organization can be eccentrically positioned. This not only excludes inanimate things, plants, and lower animals from the domain of potential persons, but also entities which do not have a physical-organic nature at all, like angels or gods. It also rules out Ikea's helpdesk computer program or the computer on which it is run. Lindemann is right to the extent that, in principle, non-human higher animals could in principle be persons. However, as I have tried to show, despite the contingency of essence indicating properties of eccentricity, the relationship between these properties and eccentric positionality is not arbitrary but makes sense. It is by no means a coincidence that specifically human beings are eccentrically positioned, compared to, for example, mice or chimpanzees, or dogs.[55]

5.3 EMBODIED PERSONHOOD

Let us turn to the nature of human positionality. What kind of positionality do human beings have? What level of ideality is realized in the human body? What does this mean for the structure of the human environment?

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51 Lindemann, *Soziologie – Anthropologie*, 55.

52 Mitscherlich, *Natur und Geschichte*, 338 (footnote 373).

53 Ibid., 339 (footnote 373).

54 Lindemann, "The Lived Human Body from the Perspective of the Shared World (Mitwelt)", 287.

55 Cf. the discussion of Lindemann's position in §3.5.

Similar to animals, human beings *are* their body and *have* their body, Plessner says, but they also have a position outside their sensorimotor center. Being a body pertains to our being part of the outer world. Having the body happens from the subjective center of perception and action. In addition, we are at a distance to this situation, so that, in comparison with animals, we have a double distance to the body. This is the human being'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 a *person*"[56]

Accordingly, the world of the person has a threefold structure.[57] Plessner indeed regards the world as a constellation of *three* worlds: the outer world (*Außenwelt*), the inner world (*Innenwelt*) and the shared world (*Mitwelt*). Each of these worlds is the correlate of one of the three moments of our being. The outer world correlates with our *being* our body: the body that we are is part of the world of things. The inner world correlates with our *having* our body: the "soul" (*Seele*) is the subject of having the body but also relates to its inner self, thus constituting an inner world. Plessner uses the word "double aspect" to designate the relationship between body and soul, i.e., between external and inner world. It is from our eccentric position that we relate to both these aspects, and that we can experience, or reflect on, the discontinuity between them. I will present an example of such experience in the next section. I also return (still in the current section) to the question of why the eccentric position is fundamentally a *shared* position, and thus correlates with the "shared world" (*Mitwelt*).

For now, it is important to note that the outer world and the inner world are not isolated structures: they are always already determined by eccentric positionality. As noted in the previous chapter, according to Plessner, the thing is a unity of properties organized around a core, and it is this unity throughout a multitude of different appearances, potentially over a long period of time. The outer world thus shows a double aspect of immanence and transcendence which correlates with the eccentric position of the human being as a sensorimotor subject. The inner world also shows a double aspect. Insofar as I simply live my inner life and fall together with it, the inner life is in the "self-position" (*Selbststellung*).[58] We can understand what Plessner means when we think of being in a certain mood without really realizing it. We are simply absorbed in our psychic life. This inner life in self-position Plessner also calls the "soul" (*Seele* in the

56 Plessner, *Stufen*, 293/365.

57 Ibid., 293-308/365-382.

58 Ibid., 297/370.

narrow sense, as this term also refers to the inner world as such). But the inner life can also be in the "object-position" (*Gegenstandstellung*).[59] It is then the object of an inner experience. This is a "psychic" object, i.e., a *Gegenstand* within the inner world. Eccentric positionality guarantees that we can always in principle take distance from our inner life in this way and we constantly move between simply being in a certain mood, state of mind, etc., and realizing that we are in that mood or state of mind, so that many forms of our psychic life are "transitions".[60]

Let us dwell for a moment on Plessner's description of 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 a *person*." It is important to note that the spatial expressions Plessner uses often do not have an external but rather an ideal meaning. At the same time the "ideal" always refers to a form of embodiment. The subject is "in" the body, Plessner says, but the subjective center is not literally located within the body. Nor is the center purely immaterial: it is the body itself according to its subjective aspect. So it is the body-subject that has the body-object. Materially speaking, both subject and object are the same body.[61] A similar observation can be made in regard to our eccentric position. From what place do we have this distance to the world and ourselves? The only right answer is: from the here-now of the organism that we still are. We only have a distance to our embodied existence *from* the position that we have, and *through* the body that we are.

As regards the external world, Plessner would agree with Merleau-Ponty that for humans this world is characterized by a "thing structure", but Plessner explains this on the basis of his concept of eccentric positionality. A thing is a "unity of properties organized around a core";[62] only some properties of the thing appear at a particular moment, while others remain hidden. This structure not only pertains to individual things, but to the outer world as such:

> The human being lives in a surrounding field that has the character of a world. Things are given to him as objects, real things that *in* their givenness appear as detachable *from* their

59 Ibid., 296/369.

60 Ibid., 297/370.

61 In a paradoxical way, the body is itself "in" the body. In *Lachen und Weinen* (240/36), Plessner puts it this way: "as physical lived body—in the physical lived body" (*als Körperleib—im Körperleib*).

62 Plessner, *Stufen*, 81/128.

givenness. Their essence includes the surplus of their own weight, of existing-for-themselves, of being-in-themselves, without which we would not speak of them as real things. Nevertheless, this surplus moment, this surplus weight becomes manifest in—their appearance, which of course belongs to reality, but does not reveal all of reality, and which, in objectivity, only presents the side of the real that is turned toward the subject in a real, that is, direct way. As a result, the subject can only grasp reality through the mediation of this appearance—in the manner of immediacy, because the surplus weight of being-in-itself, of being more than appearance, immediately appears 'in' the immediate presence of the appearance.[63]

We are again concerned with a form of mediated immediacy: we are immediately out there, *with* the things" (*bei den Dingen*), but our perceptual consciousness is the necessary medium of this attending to things.

Human beings are tacitly aware of this mediatedness of experience. The eccentric position therefore entails the ambiguity of immanence and transcendence of the external world. On the one hand the perceiver can at any moment become emphatically aware of this moment of mediation, i.e., of the immanence of consciousness in regard to which the world is transcendent. On the other hand, insofar as we are immersed in the world, its transcendence manifests itself as the "in itself" of the world which we grasp *through* its appearance. The transcendence of the world is then not a totally obscure in-itself, but rather the inexhaustible depth of its qualities and meanings. The world always has a hidden side, a "surplus" (*Überschussmoment*) of possible appearances. These shifts of the boundary between ourselves and what is other to us define various modes of the same ambiguity between immanence and transcendence. They illustrate that eccentric positionality does not mean that there is a fixed intermediate layer, a filter, which detaches us from the world. Rather our *dis*engagement shows itself within the structure of our *engagement* in the world.

In Plessner's view, the subjective relationship to the outer world is embedded within a social sphere. The fact that the eccentric position correlates with the social world implies that the human being's positionality is not the form of existence of an isolated ego: the ego immediately understands his own position "as the sphere of other people".[64] The decenteredness of the self implies that I identify with other human beings, because the distance I have to their being in the world is not essentially different from the distance I have to my own existence.

63 Ibid., 327/403.

64 Ibid., 302/375.

At the same time our position remains one of "frontality" (*Frontalität*)[65]: we live as distinctive individuals facing one another. We are frontally positioned within all three worlds: each individual lives within and over against his own inner world, possesses a subjective perspective within and on the outer world, and has a personal perspective within and on the social world. So the formal interchangeability of persons goes together with a material diversity of identities or points of view and this happens in all three world-relationships.

On all three levels, the body is positioned in the world, open to the world and it lives as the "break" (*Bruch*) or "hiatus" (*Hiatus*)[66] between these two aspects. We can thus speak of "embodied personhood". This includes and surpasses "embodied subjectivity", which is, strictly speaking, restricted to the person's relationship to the external world.[67] Eccentricity neither refers to the outsider's perspective in the sense of the scientific third person (although it includes this possibility), nor to a divine perspective from which one oversee and fathom all. Rather it inserts a dimension of negativity in our being in the world. The person stands where he stands, but he is structurally aware that this is the case. He "stands in the center of his standing".[68] Or, as Plessner also puts it: he stands "in nothing".[69] I will return to this "negativity" below, when I address the "psychophysical neutrality" of human existence.

At the end of Section 4.1 I posed the question: what is it about our mode of existence that renders possible our switching between structurally different perspectives? Why can human beings, contrary to animals, shift from a first-person perspective to the third-person perspective of science and why can they, in addition, also reflect on such shifts? Merleau-Ponty presupposes that the concept of a sensorimotor subject suffices for understanding not only the animal's monoperspective but also the differentiation of the human perspective. His concept of the body remains restricted to our being both a subject and an object among other objects and the fact that the animal body also possesses these aspects is not addressed as a fundamental problem. When Merleau-Ponty introduces symbolic forms in *The Structure of Behavior*, this is not supported by a fundamental revision of the concept of embodiment.

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65 Ibid., 305/379.

66 Ibid., 292/365.

67 Plessner himself does not use the terms "embodied subjectivity" and "embodied personhood". I use these terms to clarify the difference between Plessner and Merleau-Ponty.

68 Ibid., 290/362.

69 Ibid., 292/364.

Plessner agrees with Merleau-Ponty that our relationship to the world is first and foremost symbolic. The importance of the symbolic is illustrated by the prominence of language, which serves as the main medium of the distance we have to ourselves and the world. Through human language, which is of a different kind than animal signals, human beings have a grasp of times and places remote from the here-now of their organic bodies. We realize ourselves as beings who are not unreservedly *where* we are, and who are not unreservedly *when* we are. Facial expressions, "body language", but also our ability to create advanced technology and institutions are all inscribed in this symbolic domain. All these powers require the type of higher structures Merleau-Ponty refers to, but these higher structures must be founded on a mode of embodiment that is specific for human beings. The advantage of Plessner's philosophy is that it addresses this form of embodiment. Symbolic behavior presupposes that we are structurally at a distance from the double aspect (subject and object) of our existence. It is our eccentric—i.e. fundamentally variable—position that enables us to shift from a first-person to a third-person perspective, or to a point of view from which we reflect on the implications of such shifts.

Eccentric positionality means that we are at a distance to ourselves as both subjects and objects, but this does not imply that we are constantly emphatically concerned with either aspect, or with the relationship (the hiatus) between these two aspects. In Plessner's view, our distance to both aspects opens a new space which is "spiritual" (*geistig*)[70] and "psychophysically neutral" (*psychophysisch neutral*).[71] This spiritual and psychophysically neutral sphere actually clarifies why we are so often *not* concerned with the subjective or the objective body. Let me first elucidate this by explaining Plessner's use of the terms "spiritual" and "psychophysically neutral". Then we can also see in what sense this spiritual life is at the same time an *embodied* life.

The word *Geist* ("spirit") belongs to a tradition that distinguishes between the individual soul (or mind, subject, consciousness, etc.) and the social sphere of which this soul is a part (subjective spirit realizing itself through objective spirit, intersubjectivity, culture). The term used to refer to both social and religious life at once: Hegel's philosophy of spirit is a case in point. Although Plessner, at the end of the *Stufen*, also addresses something like a religious dimension of life, I think that his concept of *Geist* is much more secularized than, for instance, Hegel's. On top of that, Plessner's "spirit" does certainly not imply a specific religious orientation or any relation to the now-fashionable "search for

70 Ibid., 303/377.

71 Ibid., 292/365.

spirituality". The core of Plessner's concept of spirit is not religious but social: the eccentric position implies a moment of interchangeability of individuals, because each of us is able to see herself through the eyes of another. As noted, this principle is brought into balance by the principle of frontality which separates us from one another. The frontality of our perspective determines its limitations, it gives us our unalienable freedom and responsibility, and it opens the perspective on an otherness which escapes the dimension of interchangeability of individuals. "Spirit" refers to this sphere of the *Mitwelt*, the shared world, of which I am an immediate part but within which I also *face* the others.

The word "psychophysical neutrality" is essential to a good understanding of Plessner.[72] Instead of presenting a close reading of relevant passages I will illustrate what I think Plessner has in view by considering the way we tell stories about ourselves. When I tell a story of success or failure, or of love, friendship, or animosity, we cannot say that these words refer exclusively to bodily states. We can neither say that they only describe subjective mental states. However, such narrative terms do presuppose a physical and a psychic *aspect*. Falling in love, for instance, can set free physical processes that seem to lead a life of their own. The physical aspect of our being detaches itself somewhat from the wholeness of the person, perhaps even more than we like. But falling in love often also entails that we cannot stop *thinking* about the person we are in love with. We become dreamy, lost in our inner world, and detached from what happens around us. The phenomenon of falling in love encompasses both aspects, the physical and the psychic, and it may bring one of them to the fore at a particular moment, but it is itself not limited to either of the two: it is "psychophysically neutral". At one time the physical aspect makes itself felt, at another time the inner world of reflection and imagination comes out strongly, but many expressions pertaining to being in love do not emphatically refer to either one aspect. We say that we long for the other, that we are happy with a message or a phone call, that we feel insecure and at the same time hopeful about the future. None of these terms is restricted to a bodily feeling or to a mental process. Neither can we make sense of terms like "longing", "insecurity", "hopefulness" or "anticipation", by referring to the *sum* of physical and mental processes.

Instead we are concerned with meanings which belong to the situation of a person in the social world. The meanings of falling in love are not restricted to representations or concepts which I, this ego, have about the world. The whole

72 Incidentally, Plessner was not the one who introduced the concept of psychophysical neutrality. Plessner borrowed the term from Max Scheler, but he also adjusted it, merging it with his philosophy of eccentric positionality.

process of falling in love is inscribed in a symbolic order which is shared by a culture, and even by humanity. Although falling in love is a highly personal experience, we cannot claim that its meaning for us is in all respects completely individual and original. Nonetheless, it would go too far to say that the social environment predetermines entirely what a personal experience means to me. This is why Plessner says that our eccentric positionality, which embeds our personal life directly in a symbolic, social order, is kept in balance by the frontality of our being in the world: I am still also an individual facing the others. I can hide my desire from another person, and I can express my feelings in a way which, although it depends on a pregiven symbolic order, is at the same time unique and personal.

Our mode of existence is neither restricted to the outer world nor to the inner world. When in philosophy we are concerned with history, with narrative, esthetics, or morality, we often do not refer to the physical or the mental. We are simply concerned with knowledge, moral decisions, values, freedom, stories, beauty, and so forth. When Taylor sets out to expound his view of the disenchantment of the Western world he makes clear that he does not need to present a solution to the mind-body problem in order to achieve his aim.[73] Taylor is right: we can leave out an account of the different aspects of the human body, and still say something essential about history, narrative, politics, and other issues. Although I think that many problems, e.g. concerning life and death, illness, sexuality, *do* require a philosophy of the body, I agree with Taylor that our philosophical language can often remain remarkably neutral with regard to the question of body, mind and spirit, and yet be rich in its power to describe the phenomena at hand. It is then still interesting to ask how this is possible. I think that Plessner's conception of the psychophysical neutrality of our existence answers the question. The reason we philosophize about many issues without addressing something like the mind-body problem is precisely that we live in a sphere which is neutral with regard to the physical and the psychic nature of the processes and events involved. However, ironically, this also means that only a philosophy of the body explains why we often do not need a philosophy of the body.

The term "neutral" in "psychophysically neutral" can lead to misunderstandings. On the one hand this neutrality renders possible that we describe our

73 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 30: "I am not attributing to our lived understanding some kind of Cartesian dualism, or its monist materialism, identity theory, or whatever; or even a more sophisticated and adequate theory of embodied agency. I am trying to capture the level of understanding prior to philosophical puzzlement."

lives in terms which are unspecified in terms of body, psyche, and spirit. On the other hand, the psychophysically neutral sphere must encompass the mental and the physical aspect of our existence. This sphere *surpasses* the physical and the mental *dialectically*, which means that the physical and the mental are *retained* within a higher unity. However, Plessner's dialectics is not synthetic, like Hegel's: it respects the fundamental discontinuities within our being in the world which Plessner refers to in terms of "negativity", "hiatus", "paradox" and "ambiguity".[74] The example of falling in love clearly demonstrates this, and it illustrates that there are logically three possibilities: (a) the mental aspect comes to the fore, e.g. when one cannot stop thinking about the other; (b) the physical aspect makes itself felt: this happens when the libido, urging itself upon the person, shows itself to be an autonomous force, or when the body shows symptoms of excitement or nervousness from which we feel alienated; (c) both aspects remain implicitly presupposed or they are integrated in a more holistic experience which would be characterized by neutral terms. The latter possibility applies when one simply longs for the other, enjoys her company, or is miserable in her absence—these words all have meanings which cannot be reduced to something either psychic or physical. This does not mean, however, that specifically physical or mental connotations do not play a role at all.

Psychophysical neutrality does not mean that human beings live as purely immaterial spirits who are divorced from their bodies. Rather the term announces a new form of embodiment. When you gesture with your arm to brush aside a ridiculous suggestion made by your friend, this physical movement cannot be understood as merely an operation of a subject within the outer world. The gesture *includes* a movement in the outer world, but its sense clearly surpasses its physical effects: the sense is *neutral* with regard to these effects. This means that it is at a distance to them, but the distance is not absolute. I might hit the coffee cup from the table in making my gesture, or my friend might feel a slight breeze when I wave my arm. On the one hand we should acknowledge that the meaning of the gesture cannot be understood on the level of external objects, because the same meaning can also be conveyed by a spoken word. So the gesture can only be properly understood within the sphere of the symbolic. We recognize the same structure in different ensembles. But on the other hand, this symbolic level *lends* its meanings to our actions in the external world: the broken coffee cup becomes a symbol of my temperament and the slight breeze and the proximity of my arm to the face of my friend might be intimidating and even affect the friendship. According to Plessner, the embodiment of our spiritual lives does not

74 Cf. my Introduction (3).

stop at the boundaries of our bodies: the external world rather becomes the "stage" (*Szene*) of the roles we play within the social world.[75] In addition, we learn from this that the lives of our bodies are themselves spiritual, i.e. psycho-physically neutral. So on this higher level, the physical embodies a spiritual life: the body is spirit, and the spirit is embodied. This higher form of embodiment is the pivot of Plessner's theory of expression.[76]

I have been arguing that, according to Plessner, the human body is a subject, an object, and an eccentric body that is at a distance to these two aspects. However, I face the same objection as in my interpretation of Merleau-Ponty: one could argue that Plessner's philosophy is an attempt to go beyond the subject/object-opposition we find in Descartes and that therefore Plessner's philosophy does not center on subjectivity and objectivity.[77] On the one hand it is without doubt true that Plessner, like Merleau-Ponty, wanted to leave behind the polarized relationship between res cogitans and res extensa we find in Descartes. On the other hand, the words "subject" and "object" are still very useful and it would be a pity if we would give these wonderful terms away to thinkers who choose to remain within the Cartesian tradition.

I do not need to argue against Plessner, because Plessner himself uses both "subject" and "object" in the ways I have been using these terms. Although Plessner mostly 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,[78] Plessner frequently uses the terms "subject" (*Subjekt*) and "subjectivity" (*Subjektivität*) in a positive way. When applied to human beings these notions should, of course, not be confused with the centric positionality of the animal. Contrary to animal subjectivity, human subjectivity has itself eccentric structure, viz. a form of mediated immediacy that gives the outer world the double structure of immanence and transcendence. Subjectivity is the human being's first distance to the body which is modified by the second distance, i.e. of the person. It is also the position from which the human being *has* his body. In *Anthropologie der Sinne*, "subject" does not only occur as the opposite of "object", as one would expect, but also as a signifier of the person

75 Plessner, *Zur Anthropologie des Schauspielers*, 411. For Plessner's theory of social roles, see also his *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft* and *Soziale Rolle und menschliche Natur*.

76 See Plessner, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Volume VII: *Ausdruck und menschliche Natur*, a collection of Plessner's texts on expression.

77 Hans-Peter Krüger, personal communication.

78 Plessner, *Stufen*, 321-340/396-418.

who knows of the rupture between subject and object and who struggles with this rupture: "My own being a body presents itself to me, the subject, as a *conflict* whose insolvability is given with the rupture between subject and object."[79] So sometimes Plessner even uses the word "subject" where those familiar with his philosophy might expect "person".

What about the notion "object" (*Objekt*)? Plessner uses the word "object" both in reference to the scientific subject/object-opposition and in a prescientific sense. Although most of the time Plessner denotes the material aspect of the human body by "thing" (*Ding*), he also calls it an "object". The topic of philosophical anthropology, according to Plessner, is "the human being as subject-object of culture and as subject-object of nature".[80] Consider also, again, the passage from *Anthropologie der Sinne* I quoted above. In order to highlight the 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 considered as the object of perception, consciousness or action. The systematic argument for this choice is that something which can appear as an object to a subject, must in some sense have already been an object before it appeared as such. As we saw in the previous chapter, this principle also holds for the human body: we do not only perceive a part of the body, thereby making it the object of perception; we also have a basic awareness of the objective aspect of the body proper as a whole.

The objectivity and instrumentality of the body proper can recur on different levels within the more encompassing dialectical structure of eccentric positionality. They can even refer to a whole pattern of behavior. For instance, we can say that Iago uses Othello as an instrument to achieve his secret goals. The word "instrument" implies that Othello is to Iago an object of manipulation, but of course Othello is not manipulated in the way one manipulates a hammer and a nail. The object, Othello, is moved to do something himself, in this case murder his wife Desdemona. In this example, the objectification of behavior still presupposes a level of subjectivity or personhood of the one who is manipulated. The fact that we are concerned with a dialectical structure implies that we can analyze such structures on different levels of our being in the world, and that the terms "subject" and "object" can in principle recur on all these levels.

79 Plessner, *Anthropologie der Sinne*, 369.

80 Plessner, *Stufen*, 32/70.

5.4 THE EXPERIENCE OF THE BODY PROPER AS AN OBJECT OF THE PHENOMENAL WORLD

According to both Plessner and Merleau-Ponty, human beings have a basic awareness of the subjectivity *and* the objectivity of their bodies in the world. Nonetheless, there is an important difference between the two ways in which this awareness is understood. As we saw in the previous chapter, one key passage from *The Structure of Behavior* opens a broad perspective on the body as an object, because the objective body is here not exclusively considered to be perceptual content, as it is in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. According to *The Structure of Behavior*, our body is to us an object inasmuch as we intuit the analogy between, on the one hand, the relationship of the thing's core to its appearances, and on the other hand, the relationship between the body proper and *its* various possibilities and manifestations. At the end of the previous chapter I raised the question: from what position does the subject have the basic awareness of this meta-structure? If the animal's bodily existence is our starting point, how does our insight in the human "aptitude . . . to detach himself from" (*aptitude . . . à se déprendre de*) the situation, change this concept of bodily existence?

The answer I propose is Plessner's "eccentric positionality", which implies a self-awareness without principle limitations. This does not mean that our knowledge is infinite; it means that we always have some intuitive preunderstanding of every aspect of our being. In this sense we can say that "we know what we are just insofar as we already are what we are."[81] The psychophysically neutral body knows that it is a thing in the world, that it is a bodily subject open to that same world, and that it is at a distance to these two aspects of his existence—a distance which it embodies.

When I claim that the objectivity of the body is just as originally given to us as the body's subjectivity and our eccentric position itself, this may seem to contradict the primacy of first-person experience defended in Part I and in Sections 4.1 and 4.2. Am I suggesting that, besides opening ourselves to the world, we are always at the same time objectifying the body proper? This would be a misunderstanding. I have distinguished between the scientific perspective on the objectivity of the body and our own first-person experience of the objectivity of the body. Human beings are first of all persons who live in a phenomenal world, who can then turn to the objectifying perspective of science in order to restore,

81 This is a variation on Samuel Todes, *Body and World*, 64.

heal or enhance their mode of being in the world. The discussion of self-perception, and also of Köhler's chimpanzee experiments, showed that there is a first-person experience of the body proper as an object. The turn to the scientific perspective is only possible because our bodies are to us primarily "things" in this sense, i.e., objects of the phenomenal world. The turn to science is not the same as the experience of one's body as a thing, but it is rooted in this experience, in the sense that our bodies must already be objects of the phenomenal world, before science *isolates* this aspect from the ambiguous whole it is a part of. We can only fully appreciate this after we distinguish between the organic and the physical aspect of the human body. I turn to this in the next chapter.

Although the objectivity of the body proper is, in virtue of our eccentric positionality, always already preunderstood by us, there are situations in which we become more emphatically aware of the hiatus between subjective and objective body. Let me illustrate this with an example from Coolen. In Section 4.3 I mentioned Coolen as one of the philosophers who criticized Merleau-Ponty for neglecting the objective aspect of our being in the world. Coolen also defends Plessner as, in this respect, a better alternative, and my comparison of Merleau-Ponty and Plessner can partly be read as an elaboration of Coolen's criticism of the *Phenomenology of Perception*.[82] Coolen borrows some of his examples from art. He argues that installation art can remind us of the fact that we, who look at art, are not only subjects but also things that we need to give a place when we get poised to look at something. One of the most compelling examples Coolen discusses is Bill Viola's video installation *Passage*. This is the example I want to discuss.

When the visitor of the museum arrives at Viola's installation, he is led into a long T-shaped corridor (figure 3, lower drawing). On the back wall inside the space there is a video projection of a children's party. However, due to the narrow corridor leading all the way to the back wall, the viewer cannot find the right position to see the projection: he either sees only part of the screen, or he sees it from a position too close to it.

> The visitor loses his attentiveness to the images of the birthday party, and instead senses a concern with where he is standing and how he is looking. He has not decided to do this after an explicit intellectual reflection on his situation, it just happens to him. But it is an experience only embodied beings can have . . . The specific spatial characteristics of the environment prevent the viewer—the lived body he is—from finding an appropriate position for himself—this living body as this physical thing—in it. Before any intellectual rep-

82 Coolen, *Bodily Experience and Experiencing One's Body*.

resentation of his situation, he has a bodily sensation of not being able to find the right place to be, and, at the same time, of actually being in a place where there is no right place to be.[83]

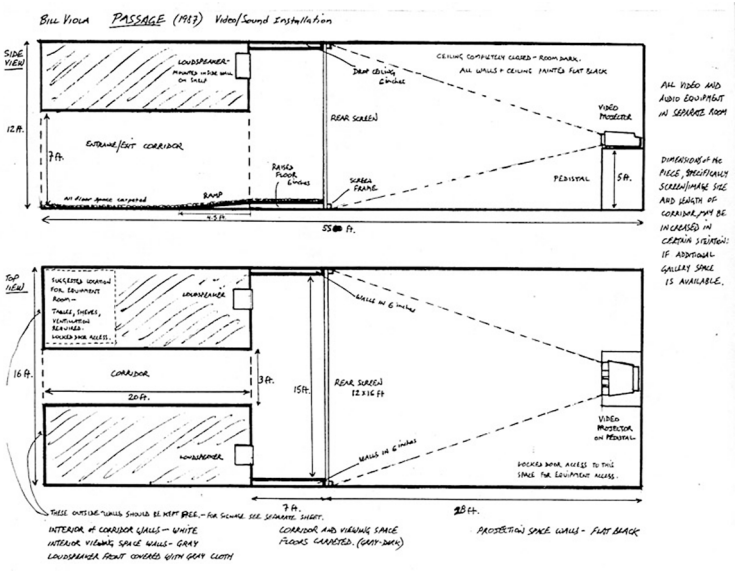

Figure 3. An early sketch of the installation *Passage* (side and top views) by Viola from 1987[84]

The installation invites us to look at a birthday party video. However, it is clear that this is not what the work of art is about. The movie on the wall motivates us to explore, as subjects, what is there with our eyes, to lose ourselves in what we see, but due to the objective location of our body this perceptual engagement is at the same time severely inhibited. The real invitation of the work of art therefore pertains to the experience of the ambiguous relationship between the subjectivity and the objectivity of our bodies. The experience Coolen describes amounts to a heightened awareness of the possibility conditions of perception and the ambiguities involved. On the basis of my own experience inside the in-

83 Coolen, *Being and Place*, 161.

84 San Fransisco Museum of Modern Art website: http://www.sfmoma.org/media/features/viola/pass_n1.html. Although it is hard to read the handwriting, the sketch gives us a good impression of the shape of the installation's inner space.

stallation, I can say that Coolen is right to emphasize the curious sense of place the installation gives us: the installation offers our bodies a place which is not really a place to be for us as subjects. We can thus experience the negative dimension of our being in the world: the hiatus between subjectivity and objectivity.

I have tried to shed some light on the similarities and differences between the philosophies of the body we find in Plessner and Merleau-Ponty. To what extent have I answered the questions I formulated at the end of the discussion of Taylor (Section 3.2)? The question concerning the arrangement of perspectives (question (A)), has been addressed in Section 4.1. First-person experience has the primacy: we are first human beings living in a phenomenal world, and this is also both the starting and the returning point for switching to the scientific perspective. In the current chapter we have seen that the possibility of such shifts of perspective is founded on our eccentric positionality. Only a being that can decenter from her being in the world can turn to a third-person perspective, which isolates the objective aspect of her existence from her subjectivity and her personhood. This does not imply that the eccentric position falls together with the third-person perspective. As we have seen, the structure of first-person experience is itself modified by eccentric positionality. On top of that, the point of view from which we reflect on these matters is also only possible if we decenter from the perspectives involved. The eccentric position lends its structure to all modes of engagement and disengagement.

We have also made some progress with the mind-body problem (question (B)). Rather than thinking of a body and a mind, we should contemplate a subjective and an objective body and, in addition, a personal body that is at a distance to the subjectivity and the objectivity of the body. But this is not the whole answer to the problem; our account of embodied being in the world is by no means complete. So far we have been concerned only with the phenomenal world, not with physical reality. Materialism challenges us to take position on the question whether physical reality is indeed a reality or rather an artificial construction by human beings. In the Introduction and Part I, I expressed my support for Dennett's physical realism, but I have not yet backed this up with an account of physical reality. On the basis of which arguments do I support physical realism (question (C))? This problem automatically leads to the final question we asked at the end of Part I: how can we reconcile physical realism with phenomenal realism (question (D))?

My story is incomplete because a certain discrepancy has crept into my thinking, a discrepancy which now needs to be lifted. I have begun the current part of my book by discussing in what way the human body is a *scientific* object.

To science the human body is a physico-organic thing. Science does not reflect on the relationship between this object and the phenomenal world of the first person. I then moved on to the question how the body proper can also be an object to ourselves as first persons. This caused me to present Plessner's "eccentric positionality" as an elaboration of Merleau-Ponty's rudimentary "aptitude à se déprendre de la structure élémentaire". So hopefully we now have a better understanding of the ways in which we are an object to ourselves. But in what sense have we, after the discussion of scientific objectification, been speaking of an "object"?

So far, when we say that our bodies are objects to us as first persons, this formulation describes the way we use our bodies *within the phenomenal world*. This is clear in the case of self-perception, but also in the case of the sensorimotor functioning of human beings compared with chimpanzees. The awareness of the body proper as an object is constitutive of our activities within the phenomenal world. The same goes for Coolen's example: although the experience described by Coolen does not primarily pertain to the body insofar as it *appears* to ourselves and others, it *is* about finding one's place within the world of appearances. The point is: this is not the only way in which we can address the objectivity of the body. The body proper is not only an object of the phenomenal world, but also an object of physical reality. And it is an object of physical reality, not only to science, but also—in a different way—to ourselves as first persons. I will demonstrate this in the final two chapters.

In the next chapter I introduce the body proper not as an object of the phenomenal world, but as an object of physical reality. In accordance with both Plessner and Merleau-Ponty, I mean by "physical reality" non-living matter that is subject to laws of causality. In this conception, the physical in some sense precedes and supports organic life, human life, and the phenomenal world. I argue that Merleau-Ponty's view of physical reality is not entirely consistent. On the one hand Merleau-Ponty presupposes that physical reality supports the higher dialectics of the vital and the human. On the other hand he negates that there is a physical reality in-itself, i.e., *prior to* or *beyond* the human world. Physical reality would be a human construction on the basis of the lived world, and physical structures would be ultimately structures of perception. As I will show, a Plessnerian approach is not restricted in this way: it includes an ontology which goes beyond phenomenology (in the narrow sense[85]) and affirms the existence of physical reality as both supporting and transcending the phenomenal world.

85 See Section 3, point (2), of the Introduction.