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Essay Review

Life-Philosophical Anthropology as the Missing Third: On Peter Gordon's *Continental Divide*

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Summary

Though Peter Gordon mentioned philosophical anthropology in his book *Continental Divide*, he has not yet realized how it works independently from Cassirer's and Heidegger's prejudices. The whole argument between them before, in and after Davos (1929) raged around the status of philosophical anthropology: How do the spiritualisation of life and the enlivening of the spirit come about? This was not just the central question for philosophical anthropology founded by Max Scheler, but also in Wilhelm Dilthey's life philosophy, which was systematized by Georg Misch. Cassirer and Heidegger shared three shortcomings with respect to the Life-philosophical Anthropology. Neither had a philosophy of nature or a philosophy of society or a philosophy of history. The insight into the unfathomability of humans (Misch) is given a political edge in Helmuth Plessner's book *Power and Human Nature* (1931). Elevating it to the principle of democratic equality with respect to the worth of all cultures one opens up the potential for a form of civil competition that might supersede ethnocentric wars.

Keywords: philosophical anthropology, anthropological philosophy, unfathomability of humans; human life in nature, society, and history

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1. Introduction

In this battle between two alleged titans, Heidegger and Cassirer, who allegedly also stand for two epochs within continental Europe as a whole, there is a missing third.¹ Peter Gordon has no *tertium comparationis*. This is his dilemma. We readers are subjected to a faulty either-or alternative and from this flawed perspective Heidegger's philosophy looms larger than it actually was. For the reader, Heidegger's philosophy appears simply more true to life from an existential perspective than Cassirer's demanding idealism,

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¹ Peter Gordon, *Continental Divide—Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos*, (Cambridge, MA, 2010), 214.

which always privileges the notion of humanity as a whole and conceives of history in big-picture terms. I admit that Gordon's dilemma is not his alone. To the extent that I am acquainted with the Heideggerian debates in the United States (US) and France, both appear to suffer from the same shortcomings, assuming that in the Germany of the 1920s and 1930s Cassirer's idealism was the only alternative to Heidegger's philosophy.² But this is not the case, either in a historical-factual or philosophical-systematic sense. There was a third school of thought in German philosophy that might serve as the *tertium comparationis*.³

I am not speaking of the extended circle of Frankfurt School Critical Theory, which Gordon touches on only peripherally. Nor do I mean the deplorable tradition of seeking to identify German-Jewish philosophers—Heidegger's former students—in an attempt to substantiate the perfidious myth of 'Heidegger's children' and thus to rehabilitate him.⁴ Heidegger was not of course a racist but rather a social anti-Semite.⁵ It would have been better if Gordon had taken Hannah Arendt seriously as an intellectual who had emancipated herself from Heidegger's philosophy.⁶ He would then have been able to quote from her 1946 essay *What is Existence Philosophy?*, where she concludes that Heidegger's philosophy was one of 'absolute selfishness'.⁷

2. Life-Philosophical Anthropology as the Missing Third: Misch and Plessner

Instead what I have in mind is a third philosophical perspective that took centre stage in the actual dispute between Cassirer and Heidegger. Though Gordon mentioned philosophical anthropology, he has not yet realised how it works independently from Cassirer's and Heidegger's prejudices. The whole argument between them before, in and after Davos raged around the status of philosophical anthropology, positioned as it was between philosophy and anthropology. Not only was philosophical anthropology the explicit theme of one of Cassirer's lectures in Davos, but his other lecture was on Max Scheler, the spiritual-metaphysical founder of philosophical anthropology as a philosophical approach.⁸ Cassirer, as Gordon correctly notes, reproached Heidegger (as did Husserl in a similar vein) for being merely an anthropologist of the *Zeitgeist* rather than a philosopher. Heidegger defends himself by claiming to discover in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*—Cassirer's sacred shrine—a metaphysics of finiteness that serves as a prototype for his own 'fundamental ontology' of 'thrownness (*Geworfenheit*)'.⁹ Heidegger did everything to prevent his fundamental ontology from coming across as philosophical anthropology. And that is what is interesting about this dispute. Neither of the protagonists, Cassirer nor Heidegger, wanted to be seen as a philosophical

² Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 57, 80.

³ Hans-Peter Krüger, *Zwischen Lachen und Weinen*. Vol. I: Das Spektrum menschlicher Phänomene (Berlin, 1999), Vol. II: Der dritte Weg Philosophischer Anthropologie und die Geschlechterfrage (Berlin, 2001), 128–43; Matthias Wunsch, *Fragen nach dem Menschen*. Philosophische Anthropologie, Daseinsontologie und Kulturphilosophie (Frankfurt am Main, 2014), 11–7.

⁴ Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 268.

⁵ See Heidegger's correspondence with his wife, Elfriede, in Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 264.

⁶ Hans-Peter Krüger: *Philosophische Anthropologie als Lebenspolitik. Deutsch-jüdische und pragmatistische Moderne-Kritik* (Berlin, 2009), chapter 8.

⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Was ist Existenzphilosophie?*, (Frankfurt, 1990, first published in 1946), 37. All translations are my own.

⁸ Ernst Cassirer, 'Grundprobleme der philosophischen Anthropologie (unter dem Gesichtspunkt der Existenzanalyse Martin Heideggers)' [1929], in 'Davoser Vorträge. Vorträge über Hermann Cohen', in *Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte* (Hamburg, 1995–), XVII.

⁹ Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 142–147

anthropologist. Both refer to a missing third party from whom they distance themselves. Both conceal their implicit anthropologies in Davos—the Dasein of finitude and the infinitude of symbolic forms—by presenting them as philosophies. Cassirer explicates his anthropology, the notion of the *animal symbolicum*, for the first time in his *Essay on Man*,¹⁰ and Heidegger admits his religious questions to a secularised individual only after his turn (*Kehre*), stating in his later work that only a god could save us.

If one thinks back to that time more clearly and asks which authors represent this missing third party in Davos and in the pre- and post-war history of this dispute, Georg Misch and Helmuth Plessner spring readily to mind—Max Scheler having died in 1928. Scheler, alongside Nikolai Hartmann and Cassirer, was undoubtedly one of the most impressive figures within the clash of German philosophies, and leading thinkers now sought recognition as his successor and heir. Heidegger dedicated his book on Kant to Scheler,¹¹ while Cassirer wrote one of his best essays on “‘Spirit’ and ‘Life’” in his honour, a centrepiece of the planned fourth volume of his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*.¹²

Cassirer’s essay correctly reproduced Scheler’s key concern: how do the spiritualisation of life and the enlivening of the spirit come about? This was not just the central question for philosophical anthropology, but also in Dilthey’s life philosophy, which was systematised by Georg Misch. At the end of *Being and Time* Heidegger also claimed intellectual kinship with Dilthey’s *Critique of Historical Reason*. It was at this time, 1929/30, that an alliance formed between Georg Misch, who was responsible for systematising Dilthey’s life philosophy, and Helmut Plessner, who refounded philosophical anthropology in 1928 in *Levels of the Organic and the Human Being* but dropped Scheler’s metaphysics of spirit.¹³ Cassirer and Heidegger are silent about this third, i.e., life-philosophical anthropology in their publications.¹⁴ It is only in their (at the time) unpublished texts—Heidegger’s lecture in the winter of 1929/30 and Cassirer’s drafts of the fourth volume of the *Symbolic Forms*—that traces of the debate with Plessner are to be found. On the historical facts: in 1929/30 Georg Misch published his series of articles ‘Life Philosophy and Phenomenology: A Dispute with Heidegger and Husserl from a Dilthian Perspective’ in Plessner’s journal *Der philosophische Anzeiger*, on whose advisory board Heidegger sat. It was published as a monograph in the first issue in 1930 and the second in 1931.¹⁵ The theme was taken up and developed in Plessner’s 1931 book *Power and Human Nature: An Essay on the Anthropology of the Historical World View*.¹⁶ Both Misch’s and Plessner’s books were splendidly and extensively reviewed. It is very peculiar that Cassirer and Heidegger refrained from making any public response. Were they rendered speechless?

¹⁰ Ernst Cassirer, *Versuch über den Menschen. Einführung in eine Philosophie der Kultur* (Frankfurt, 1990).

¹¹ Martin Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* (Frankfurt, 1973, first published in 1929).

¹² Ernst Cassirer, “‘Spirit’ and ‘Life’ in Contemporary Philosophy” [1930], in *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*, translated and edited by R. W. Bretall and Paul Arthur Schilpp (La Salle, IL, 1949).

¹³ Helmuth Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch. Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie* (1928), (Berlin/New York, 1975).

¹⁴ Georg Misch, *Lebensphilosophie und Phänomenologie. Eine Auseinandersetzung der Dilthey’schen Richtung mit Heidegger und Husserl* (Bonn, 1930); Helmuth Plessner, ‘Macht und menschliche Natur. Ein Versuch zur Anthropologie der geschichtlichen Weltansicht’ [1931], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Günter Dux, Odo Marquard, and Elisabeth Ströker 10 volumes (Frankfurt, 1981–1983), V, 135–234.

¹⁵ Misch, *Lebensphilosophie und Phänomenologie*.

¹⁶ Plessner, ‘Macht und menschliche Natur’, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, V.

For Misch and Plessner, Cassirer's point of departure with his symbolic forms of infinity was too 'high', while that of Heidegger with his analysis of finitude was too 'low'. Cassirer was seen as too idealistic and Heidegger as too pragmatic to explicate the human situation in nature and historically. For Misch and Plessner, Cassirer and Heidegger perpetuated the old dualism of being and consciousness. Heidegger begins with the *Dasein*, whose being is supposedly concerned with Being itself, and Cassirer begins with symbolic forms, which are supposed, historically and systematically, to reveal human self-consciousness as a cultural phenomenon. Misch and Plessner counterpose these modifications of being or consciousness with *life* forms in which finite and infinite dimensions are interlocked. They inquire into the relation between being and consciousness in life, examining it in the context of both natural philosophy and the philosophy of history.

First on Cassirer. He presupposes life, expression and the spontaneity of consciousness as so-called primordial phenomena that cannot be explained or derived, in volume 3 of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, for example.¹⁷ Historically and systematically his philosophy began with the symbolic forms, which undoubtedly implied a pluralisation of the transcendental consciousness. The one super-historical and transcendental consciousness¹⁸ was thus replaced with a diversity of symbolic forms—from myth, language and art through religion to science, history and technology. How these symbolic forms were ordered historically and systematically was open to discussion. These symbolic forms enabled human cultural achievements, so it might seem appropriate to call this intellectual endeavour 'cultural philosophy'. But they lacked a substructure in the history of nature and society. They enabled a collective mind, but they themselves were enabled (a posteriori) phenomena and not only enabling (a priori) ones. Cassirer's historicisation of the function of the a priori, i.e., of that which makes experience possible, failed to satisfy Misch and Plessner. Cassirer's historicisation of the function that enables a certain kind of experience suffices for the symbolisation of entities, but not for an investigation of life, either natural or social, let alone the examination of inorganic nature.

In 1928, in his philosophy of nature, Plessner had criticised Cassirer's symbolic forms for taking effect only within an already presupposed human history. In nature there are forms of life whose reproduction is not bound to any consciousness. Plessner speaks of non-centralised forms of organisation to describe the structure that makes these forms of life possible. In nature there are forms of life whose reproduction is essentially dependent on consciousness. Plessner calls the structure deriving from the organism that makes these possible a centric form and that deriving from the environment also a centric form, both of which must respond and adapt to each other. It is only the excentric form of positioning living beings that requires symbols as symbols for its reproduction.¹⁹ Ex-centric form means to get a distance from the centre of one's own organism and one's own behaviour in taking over the perspectives of other persons. In Plessner's 1936 inaugural speech in Groningen, Cassirer's philosophy surfaces as an example of an 'anthropological philosophy' that exemplifies the opposite of what Plessner understood as 'philosophical anthropology'.²⁰

¹⁷ Ernst Cassirer, 'Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Dritter Teil: Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis' [1929], in *Gesammelte Werke*, edited by Birgit Recki (Hamburg, 2010), XIII.

¹⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Leipzig, 1979), A 115–17, B 150–52.

¹⁹ Differing from non-linguistic expression, language is an expression in second potentiality (Expression in zweiter Potenz); see Helmuth Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch. Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie* (1928), 340.

²⁰ Helmuth Plessner, 'Die Aufgabe der Philosophischen Anthropologie' [1937], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, VIII, 33–51 (36).

3. Philosophical Anthropology or Anthropological Philosophy?

According to Plessner, ‘philosophical anthropology’ had the following double duty to perform. Firstly, it must criticise as anthropology the dualism found in modern philosophy since Descartes, as this dualism could not live up to the task posed by the conduct of modern life. What had to be—according to this dualism—*either* spirit (psyche) *or* matter (physis), could not *live* account for modern human existence. According to this dualism, something that had to be either spirit (psyche) or matter (physis) could not exist in such a state of complexity and self-awareness. Rather, human life consists in an interplay of physical, psychical, and intellectual dimensions. In this sense we are concerned with the anthropological question of how, in the midst of modern dualism, people might achieve integration within their personal lives. Secondly, anthropology becomes *philosophical* anthropology, and subsequently philosophy, when it criticises the overly hasty generalisation of some intermediary anthropological findings in order to posit the end of nature and the end of history. Philosophy reconstructs the presuppositions that enable anthropological differences. So as it carries out its second task, philosophy criticises anthropology insofar as it has conclusively defined the essence of humanity, claiming to have set out the species’ key characteristics once and for all.²¹ For Plessner, ‘anthropological philosophy’ emerged when certain authors claimed to have conclusively defined the nature of human beings, so that philosophy’s only task was to impart this irrefutable anthropology philosophically. Cassirer backs up Plessner’s criticism—though having fled Germany he could not have known this—in his *Essay on Man*, in which he went so far as to claim the ability to define the nature of human beings as *animal symbolicum*.²² In Cassirer’s honest self-restraint, where he confines himself to cultural philosophy, Plessner’s natural philosophy continued to have an effect.

The relationship between the philosophies of Cassirer and Plessner could have turned out very differently if Cassirer had gotten around to developing and publishing the fourth volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolical Forms*.²³ This becomes clear if one looks at Cassirer’s unfinished drafts of this volume from 1928, an edition of which was published in 1995 under the title *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*.²⁴ In these drafts Cassirer speaks of his ‘fundamental agreement’ with ‘Plessner’s presentation of “philosophical anthropology”’ in his *Levels of the Organic and the Human Being*²⁵ and with Scheler’s basic view in *Man’s Place in the Cosmos*,²⁶ which, however comprised only a ‘short sketch’.²⁷ Perhaps Cassirer is grappling with Plessner’s distinction between the two arrays compared in modern anthropology, since he comments that Plessner’s results, which were ‘very close to [his] own [...] were reached by an altogether different route’.²⁸ Plessner had distinguished between the natural-philosophical critique of anthropological differences in the ‘vertical’ sense (between humans and other living organisms) and the historico-philosophical critique of anthropological differences in the ‘horizontal’ sense (between different human societies

²¹ Plessner, ‘Die Aufgabe der Philosophischen Anthropologie’, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, VIII, 38f.

²² Cassirer, *Versuch über den Menschen*, 51.

²³ Hans-Peter Krüger, ‘Philosophical Anthropologies in Comparison: The Approaches of Ernst Cassirer and Helmuth Plessner’, in *Papers of the Swedish Ernst Cassirer Society*, edited by Mats Rosengren and Ola Sigurdson (Göteborg, 2007), III; Krüger, *Philosophische Anthropologie als Lebenspolitik*, chapter 9

²⁴ Ernst Cassirer, ‘Zur Metaphysik der symbolischen Formen’, in *Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*, I.

²⁵ Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*.

²⁶ Max Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* (Bonn, 1995, first published in 1928).

²⁷ Ernst Cassirer, *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, edited and translated by J. M. Krois and D. P. Verene (New Haven, CT, 1996), 60: 1–287.

²⁸ Cassirer, *Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, 60.

and cultures).²⁹ Inherent in Plessner's horizontal comparison was an invitation to Cassirer's cultural philosophy. This wasn't enough for Cassirer, but he conceived of a succession of symbolic forms extending from myth through language and the performing arts to the religion of the personality. Scheler, Plessner and Cassirer were in agreement against Heidegger and Ludwig Klages that the level for modern ways of life must not fall below the personhood developed in the monotheistic religions. Human living beings have to be respected as persons with human rights. Furthermore, Cassirer recognised the problem of a natural philosophy that proceeded in a symbolically mediated mode or 'indirectly', as Kant had prescribed, though in a different way. Each in his own way, Cassirer and Plessner followed up on the *Critique of Judgement* rather than the *Critique of Pure Reason* in examining life and the living as a functional whole that cannot be sacrificed to our teleology.

Cassirer, through Scheler, understood the task set by the concept of life. The living cannot manifest itself 'by itself' if it is to be subject to Heidegger's egoistic ontology of 'readiness-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit*)', 'presence-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*)' and 'fore-running (*Vorlaufen*)' towards its own death. The spirit would then appear only as a turning away from and negation of life, but not as an aesthetic 'retuning' of life towards the form of the spirit,³⁰ or as the 'inner transformation and about-face experienced by life itself'.³¹ If, on the other hand, the living is allowed to manifest itself, then the spirit not only says 'no' to life but can also say 'no' to itself, and in so doing perpetuate the infinity and energy of the life process, and thus also say 'yes' to life.³² Scheler had identified the spiritual affirmation of life in the ecstatic form of love, passion and the social senses of compassion and shame. Plessner remarks that in *Being and Time* Heidegger only recognises life *privatively*, i.e., to the extent that it is required for the staging of one's own death.³³ The life process, for Plessner, fused finite dimensions (matter) with infinite dimensions (its potential structures).

Reading Heidegger's lectures from the winter semester of 1929/30, it is clear that he realised that his criticism of philosophical anthropology (published in 1927 and 1929) was faulty. Neither for Scheler nor for Plessner is philosophical anthropology a regional ontology and least of all is it a philosophy of the subject that is closest to itself.³⁴ It is an opening up of the world that calls modern dualism into question, including Heidegger's dichotomy of the finitude of *Dasein* and the infinity of each individual's distinct 'authenticity' or 'ownedness (*Eigentlichkeit*)'. And this is what motivates Heidegger's key objective in his lectures to discredit Scheler's and Plessner's qualitative difference between environment and world. Heidegger's fundamental ontology is supposed to replace this conception. Heidegger's talk of 'worldless [*weltlos*] stones', 'world-poor [*weltarmen*] animals' and 'world-forming [*weltbildenden*] humans' transforms the world-environment difference into a 'more or less', a quantitative distinction between animals and humans.³⁵ The *qualitative* difference is then only supposed to arise through the ontology of existentialism insofar as the *Dasein* in its being becomes preoccupied with

²⁹ Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, 32.

³⁰ Ernst Cassirer, "'Geist" und "Leben" in der Philosophie der Gegenwart' [1930], in *Geist und Leben. Schriften zu den Lebensordnungen von Natur und Kunst, Geschichte und Sprache*, edited by Ernst Wolfgang Orth (Leipzig, 1993), 32–60 (45).

³¹ Cassirer, "'Spirit" and "Life" in Contemporary Philosophy', in *Philosophy of Cassirer*, 873.

³² Cassirer, "'Spirit" and "Life" in Contemporary Philosophy', in *Philosophy of Cassirer*, 876f, 208–239.

³³ Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, xiii.

³⁴ Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, 211–13.

³⁵ Martin Heidegger, 'Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik. Welt – Endlichkeit – Einsamkeit (Freiburger Vorlesung Wintersemester 1929/30)', in *Gesamtausgabe*, edited by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, (Frankfurt, 1983), XXIX/XXX, 263.

being itself, this time (winter lecture 1929–30) by way of a profound boredom instead of the reflexive dread of one's own death (in *Being and Time*, 1927).

Heidegger puts forward profound boredom as a counter-response to Scheler's and Plessner's plaudits for Wolfgang Köhler's experiments with chimpanzees. For Scheler and Plessner, Köhler had found proof of the *practical* intelligence of chimpanzees, both individually and in groups, for the first time. What their memory and self-consciousness lacked was symbolic contrasts referring to a world extending beyond their environment like a frame. They were incapable of 'exde-centring' and deriving their environment in the foreground from a world in the background. Their behaviour in this sense remains centric, as they produced physical and mental correlations to the things in their environments according to experience and memory. But these chimpanzees could not symbolically position themselves next to these centric correlations in order to transform the latter into an object. This excentring requires the external symbolisation of culture through the institutionalisation of society. This sociocultural 'co-world [*Mitwelt*]' allowed a new assessment of the difference between the inner and outer worlds. What then emerged was an excentric world frame through which the environments of individuals and groups could be transformed. The excentred world frame could be neutralised in relation to the *individual* body and psyche, i.e., appear to it as empty and still. Heidegger transformed this spatial emptiness and temporal stillness into the mood of profound boredom that is inherent in *Dasein*'s basic mode of happening (*Grundgeschehen*). This deep boredom gave rise to philosophy, art and science as new 'world revelations' distanced from the environments of the human *Dasein* in everyday life.

Heidegger thus corrected his understanding as set out in *Being and Time*.³⁶ From Plessner's perspective, Heidegger's analysis of the *Dasein* was false when he spoke of the *Dasein* as always being in the world. For Plessner, the everyday life of the *Dasein* was not a world, but rather an artificially produced environment. It resulted from a sedimentation and habitualisation of the world into the sociocultural environment.³⁷ Logically viewed, everyday life presupposed an extraordinary life in an excentric disclosure of the world. Insofar as the latter had led to the setting up of an artificial environment through technology, society and culture, all symbolic communications could be directly lived in this superficial environment, i.e., through the concentricity of 'lived' constituting bodies (*Leibern*). For Plessner, what Heidegger called the *Dasein*'s 'being-in-the-world' was thus an artificial environment, which made possible the concentricity of the *Leib*.³⁸ By contrast, Heidegger had identified the disclosure of the 'authenticity' of the individual *Dasein* as the true world in *Being and Time*. But from the perspective of Plessner's categories, Heidegger's privileging of the inner world and the authenticity within it was a very one-sided interpretation of the inner world of competitive petty-bourgeois society. The inner world could only be differentiated from the outer world, without being circular, if this difference were determined from the standpoint of an interpersonal *Mitwelt*. But this publicly shared *Mitwelt*³⁹ had been degraded by Heidegger to the mere 'being-with' of the anonymous *man*.

Heidegger had still not understood that he lacked a fundamental philosophy of nature and society. However, in his *Metaphysics* of the winter of 1929/30 he did allow for excentric world-disclosures through philosophy, art and science. In his extensive

³⁶ Wunsch, 'Fragen nach dem Menschen', 151–160.

³⁷ 'second nature'; see Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, 311.

³⁸ Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, 294.

³⁹ Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, 302–05, 344f.

comparison between ‘Husserl and Heidegger’, Hermann Schmitz thus refers to an excentric phase in Heidegger’s development in which he tacitly appropriated the excentric opening up of worlds (particularly as conceptualised by Plessner) as opposed to artificial environments.⁴⁰ What Heidegger certainly did not appropriate is Plessner’s social philosophy, which the latter had already begun to expound in his 1924 book, *The Limits of Community: A Critique of Social Radicalism*.⁴¹ Here Plessner criticised the dualistic reduction of the social to community—as opposed to society—in both right- and left-wing community ideologies. Rather than joining Plessner’s quest for a public and civil society that could oppose totalitarian ideologies, Heidegger compensated for his socio-philosophical deficiency by developing an ideology of community service for the Nazis in 1933/4.

4. Conclusion: Three shortcomings

Cassirer and Heidegger shared two shortcomings with respect to philosophical anthropology. Neither had a philosophy of nature or a philosophy of society. They also shared a third important shortcoming—and this is where Georg Misch and his influence on Plessner comes into play. If the theory of knowledge was no longer to be grounded outside of life, but rather, from anew, from within it,⁴² then this had a negative consequence right from the outset: Misch advocated the theory of the unfathomability of life and of humans with respect to the conduct of their lives as a whole.⁴³ Human beings cannot take on the role of God in epistemology, a role independent of any individual life. The ideal of a godlike knowledge of and beyond all life thus collapsed as something unattainable for human beings. Thus, history can continue into a future that is open as a whole. The insight into the unfathomability of humans is given a political edge in Plessner’s book *Power and Human Nature* (1931). By eschewing a simple pragmatic tolerance for the unfathomability of humans and instead elevating it to the principle of ‘democratic equality (with respect to the worth) of all cultures’, one opens up the potential for a form of civil competition that might supersede ethnocentric wars.⁴⁴ The principle of unfathomability replaces a material a priori⁴⁵ or a formal a priori⁴⁶ in which there is still too much centrism.⁴⁷ And why should the grooming of individual ‘ownedness’ and ‘absolute selfishness’, as Hannah Arendt branded Heidegger’s philosophy, be the future essence of mankind?

⁴⁰ Hermann Schmitz, *Husserl und Heidegger* (Bonn, 1996), 372–80.

⁴¹ Helmuth Plessner, ‘Grenzen der Gemeinschaft. Eine Kritik des sozialen Radikalismus’ [1924], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, V, 7–134.

⁴² Georg Misch, *Der Aufbau der Logik auf dem Boden der Philosophie des Lebens. Göttinger Vorlesungen über Logik und Einleitung in die Theorie des Wissens*, edited by Gudrun Kühne-Bertam and Frithjof Rodi (Freiburg, 1994, first published in 1927/8 and 1933/4).

⁴³ Misch, *Lebensphilosophie und Phänomenologie*, 51.

⁴⁴ Plessner, ‘Macht und menschliche Natur’, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, V, 186.

⁴⁵ Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*.

⁴⁶ For the formal/structural character of his analysis, see Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, (Tübingen, 1993, first published in 1927) 114.

⁴⁷ Hans-Peter Krüger, ‘Die Leere zwischen Sein und Sinn: Helmuth Plessners Heidegger-Kritik in “Macht und menschliche Natur”’, in *Die Weimarer Republik zwischen Metropole und Provinz. Intellektuellendiskurse zur politischen Kultur*, edited by Wolfgang Bialas and Burkhard Stenzel (Weimar, 1996), 177–99; Krüger, *Zwischen Lachen und Weinen*, I; Hans-Peter Krüger, ‘Persons and Their Bodies: The *Körper/Leib* Distinction and Helmuth Plessner’s Theories of Ex-centric Positionality and *Homo absconditus*’, *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 24 (2010), 256–74.