Philosophical Anthropology from the End of World War I to the 1940s and in a Current Perspective
KARL-SIEGBERT REHBERG

Abstract: The first part of the article discusses the conditions under which the “school” of thought known as “philosophical anthropology” arose and the relevance today of the problems it posed, concluding with a look at the recent prevalence taken by biological research. The second part examines the conceptions advanced by its leading figures, Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner and Arnold Gehlen, and shows how each of them contributed to a “sociologization of anthropological knowledge.” On the basis of this analysis, philosophical anthropology proves itself capable of making a significant contribution to an interdisciplinary understanding of the conditions of human life and to reflection on the foundations of sociological research and social theory.

The approach generally known as “philosophical anthropology” – one that originated in Germany during the 1920s – essentially posed an ancient question in a new way. For it represented a reassessment and renewal of the question concerning the fundamental character of the human being as such, a question characteristic of the western philosophical tradition but one that was now addressed under the particular conditions of the early twentieth century. Emerging in the wake of the Great War in a period of great instability and uncertainty, this “school” of thought was specifically marked by the German experience – that of military defeat coupled with the rapid, indeed hectic, pace of modernization (or should we perhaps in retrospect speak rather of a partly missed chance of modernization?). Many Germans felt that their “belated” achievement of national identity (although it was hardly later than that of the Italians) was particularly vulnerable and precarious and saw themselves as surrounded by powerful enemies, and had not merely reflected intellectually on this specific weakness, but even turned it into a widely disseminated topos of their collective self-understanding.¹ As a result, we could say that the threat

¹ See Plessner’s Groningen Lectures on Das Schicksal deutschen Geistes im Ausgang seiner bürgerlichen Epoche, Zurich: Niehans, 1935, later published as Die verspätete Nation. Über die politische Verführbarkeit bürgerlichen Geistes, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1959. A similar thesis was elaborated in N. Elias, Studien
to humanity, which Max Scheler presented as “demonic” and which both Helmut Plessner and Arnold Gehlen had dramatized as the bourgeois “fear of chaos,” came to appear as a specific feature of the German predicament. The German individual could thus appear as a politically “deficient being” (Mängelwesen) par excellence (to use Gehlen’s expression).

I.

1. Philosophical Anthropology in Twentieth-Century Germany: the Emergence of Mass Society and of Evolutionary Biology

Yet however much the fundamental problem addressed by philosophical anthropology was politically motivated in various respects, this problem was not exclusively or primarily a political one. For the characteristic approach adopted by philosophical anthropology – from the earliest contributions of Paul Alsberg onwards – actually led to results and discoveries which are still valid, and can still help us to understand more recent developments. Two challenging phenomena in particular had encouraged the rise of philosophical anthropology: the emergence of mass society (a development, according to Georg Simmel, which made the modern discipline of “sociology” possible and indeed necessary in the first place) and the eventual emergence of the modern science of biology. The results and consequences of these developments now clearly had to be integrated in the context of general philosophical reflection. Thus the question concerning the essence of the human being now also became a question concerning the character or nature of a “species.” The growing tendency to grasp human beings in an essentially evolutionary context called for the further discovery and interpretation of new factual data and observations that would in turn prove directly relevant to our understanding of the specific character of human nature. The “offense” to our traditional self-understanding which was effectively produced by the claims of Darwin (and equally by those of Freud) had to be acknowledged, even if many were
still reluctant to subscribe whole-heartedly to the English thinker’s demand for a complete revolution in the sciences generally – and in Germany in particular there was considerable resistance to the immediate acceptance of the evolutionary conception with its perceptible echoes of competitive market liberalism (a resistance which also encouraged a critical attitude to political liberalism and liberal individualism in general). Thus Arnold Gehlen, in particular, turned to the possibility of an anti-Darwinian “theory of evolution,” drawing in this connection upon the claims of the Dutch anatomist Louis Bolk who argued that the unique development of the human being derives from a certain inhibition of the evolutionary process, from a “fetalization” or “retardation” of groups of primates.  

From this perspective, the human being could not simply be regarded as the result of evolutionary “progress” (there was likewise considerable resistance in the German context to what was also seen as the typical British and American view of historical progress, preferably coupled with the utilitarian idea of constantly increasing “the greatest happiness of the greatest number” – the attitude which had already spurred Friedrich Nietzsche to his contemptuous remark that it is not “man” that strives for happiness but only the Englishman). Konrad Lorenz once emphatically insisted, in conversation with the present author, that his admiration for Gehlen’s scientific achievement did not extend to the latter’s speculative response to the problem of the “missing link” with regard to the development of the human species, and went on to argue that Gehlen had “played a bad hand” in his choice of preferred paleontological witnesses. But it is all the more noteworthy, in this connection, that the relatively recent English translation of Gehlen’s book Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt, his principal contribution to philosophical anthropology, certainly did not derive from a specific political or philosophical interest in one of the leading representatives of philosophical anthropology, but from a purely theoretically motivated interest on the part of the celebrated American biologist Ashley Montagu who, in contrast to the majority of his professional colleagues, regarded Bolk’s claims in this connection as still eminently plausible.

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6 During my interview with Konrad Lorenz in Altenberg, Austria in April 1978.

and desired for this reason to introduce Gehlen’s contributions to a broader American and global audience.

The connection with biology was thus one fundamental reason for the emergence of the new approach to anthropology. This is already clear from the way in which Max Scheler presented his entire program of philosophical research, but it is also evident in Plessner’s emphatic claim that every new epoch has its own distinctive catchword: that of the eighteenth century was “progress,” that of the nineteenth century was “development,” while the twentieth century could only invoke “something incontestable that can only be grasped prior to all ideologies, to God and the state, to nature and history, something from which all ideologies perhaps arise, and by which they will just as certainly be devoured in turn: namely life itself.”

Contrary to a rather widespread critical view of the matter, the representatives of philosophical anthropology were not attempting to present essentially pseudo-rigorous arguments modeled on the procedures of the natural sciences. Indeed it is surely obvious today that their approach actually reflected a perspective more characteristic of the human or social sciences, indeed a perspective we could even describe as intrinsically “culturalist” in character, one that expressly countered the dominance of the deterministic form of thought which appealed instead to the example of the natural sciences. In this sense the movement of philosophical anthropology represented the very opposite of “biologism.” It was rather the discourse of a cultural elite, of a polemical position defended from within the cultivated and well-educated classes, a discourse which was not only directed against mass society, or even against the factually oriented society of “secondary systems” (as Hans Freyer described them, followed by Gehlen with his theory of “material compulsion” and by Luhmann with his highly elaborate “systems theory”). It was also directed against the increasing tendency to eliminate the specific significance of human existence by incorporating the human being entirely within the continuum of the animal order. For the central question which preoccupied all the protagonists of philosophical anthropology was precisely that concerning the unique position (Sonderstellung) of this particular “animal,” one characterized by powers of fantasy and imagination, by the need to labor and actively direct its own life,

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by “the capacity to negate.” For the human being is specialized only by virtue of its own non-specialized character, is a creature that can both reveal and conceal itself. Plessner described this unique status of the human animal with the provocative formula, already partly anticipated by Scheler, of “excentric positionality,” a formula that was subsequently accepted by Gehlen as well.¹¹

2. Philosophical Anthropology in Twentieth-Century German Thought: the Cultural and Political Debate before and after 1945

This overall approach also fitted in with the general debate concerning the “loss of personality” which had increasingly come to preoccupy intellectuals during the last century. For the suspicion that the rise of the modern individual was equally shadowed by the threat of its own destruction had already been expressed by Georg Simmel, and was something feared as much by Theodor W. Adorno as it was by Plessner or Gehlen. The challenges now posed to humanity could arise from the most various sources and tendencies of the age (and the authors in question offered constantly changing and associated possibilities in this connection): from the alienated character of capitalist modernity, from the alarming technological potential of modern warfare and the totalitarian methods of oppression and liquidation, from the power of anonymous bureaucracy, from a “culture industry” propagated through the new forms of mass media, or from the mass consumerism of modern society. All these interpreters of the age effectively lamented a process of dissolution that would eventually, at the end of the twentieth century, be apostrophized as something “cool” in line with the supposed “death of the author” (which followed hard upon the devastating effects of the earlier “death of God”): namely the end of exemplary individuality (which already appeared as a terrifying prospect in the eyes of Max Weber who in this regard had also adopted Nietzsche’s negative vision of “the last man”). In this sense, the emergence of philosophical anthropology fitted in with the most varied historical processes of radical change: with the cultural struggles of the Weimar period, with the activism that characterized the Fascist delusion of reawakening, even finally with the post-1945 need for “confronting” the events of the recent past and the extensive associated renewal of reflection upon “humanity” in response to the criminal and genocidal character of the National Socialist regime (which was perhaps all too easily emotionally distanced from the present as a form of “barbarism”).

In the ensuing period of growing economic prosperity the existential dramatization of these questions may have appeared to recede, but were in fact politicized. For the generation of 1968 also witnessed the reemergence of the philosophy of history. The doctrine of certain anthropological constants and universals was now “practically” refuted as a conservative impediment to the idea of any genuine human progress; thus the sociologist Wolf Lepenies, for example, was effectively prevented at the time from pursuing even a critical examination of philosophical anthropology at the Free University of Berlin simply because the whole issue was suspected of representing an entirely reactionary perspective. It is quite true that this kind of intellectual taboo was succeeded by a phase of interpretive academic consolidation with respect to the principal protagonists of philosophical anthropology in the form of new editions, specialist dissertations and learned contributions of one kind or another. But the general public profile and influence of this tradition continued to wane throughout this period (in part because the Anglophone world had never really participated in the “special path” of Germany in the first place, even though certain English-language authors had actually already addressed comparable issues of philosophical anthropology in their own way, especially in the context of American pragmatism).

3. Is Philosophical Anthropology still Relevant Today?

Thus one might speak of a vanished paradigm in this connection. Yet careful observation of contemporary public and scientific discourse would seem to suggest otherwise. In a number of different contexts it has recently been suggested that these theories are still highly relevant (and not merely with respect to the claims of Arnold Gehlen who, in my own opinion, is the most significant of these theorists from the substantive point of view). It appears that the human and social sciences (including the theoretical perspective of cultural sociology), after enjoying a period of great success (also promoted by the “linguistic turn”), have entered something of a crisis; and the tremendous and ever accelerating accumulation of new knowledge in the field of genetic research has emphasized the natural processes that determine individual human life so clearly that specifically sociological and philosophical reflection on the character of human existence might initially look rather anachronistic. But in fact the opposite seems to be the case. The most recent physiological investigations into the processes of the brain (particularly when they are pursued in an interdisciplinary context), and even the genetic research with the factors responsible for releasing the latent and already “prepared” genetic programs, have in many respects confirmed the biological model proposed by the
philosophical anthropologists. As Joachim Fischer has shown, the most recent developments of embryo research along with the phenomena of transsexuality, of robotically encoded intelligence, sculptural “body-worlds,” and indeed the entire area of cosmonautics, can hardly be explained without explicitly acknowledging and investigating the specific character of the human body as the protagonists of philosophical anthropology had already done.

As far as investigations into the phenomenon of language are concerned, the position of Wilhelm von Humboldt (and that of Gehlen likewise) can draw on powerful arguments against the claims of Noam Chomsky (although it is fair to say that Humboldt’s theoretical approach to language is still not nearly as well known as his contributions to the issue of university reform). From amongst the many stimulating insights and discoveries of Gehlen’s “elementary” anthropology, to my mind the most productive one remains his fundamental recognition, in the wake of Herder, of the intrinsically “linguistic character” (Sprachmässigkeit) of the human being. This does not of course imply a fixation solely upon the explicitly verbal dimension of language, since it can be shown that human beings possess a structural competence for relating and connecting events, experiences, images, emotional impressions and words in such a way as to generate active chains of associations, and thus to succeed in representing the world at an effectively “unburdened” level, as Gehlen puts it.\(^\text{12}\)

4. The Relation between Philosophical Anthropology and Contemporary Social Research

And then we must also recognize a further reassessment and appropriation of philosophical anthropology: namely through the rediscovery of anthropologically grounded theories of social organization (not indeed in the politically conservative manner in which Gehlen himself emphatically defended this approach, but certainly in relation to the investigation and interpretation of the various processes of social stabilization, an area in which Gehlen’s work still offers us the most fruitful place to start).\(^\text{13}\) In this connection it is particularly interesting to note, for example, that when Jürgen Habermas, in his

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major work *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, attempts to explain the origin of the validity or binding power of social norms and forms of social organization, he is driven to violate his own fundamental convictions regarding the theory of language by appealing to certain arguments already presented by Emile Durkheim, who expressly rooted such binding power in the totemic rituals of earlier cultures. This appeal represents, as Habermas must recognize, the effective adoption (if still an implicit and perhaps “repressed” one) of a fundamental argument of Gehlen’s that had been defended and elaborated in detail in his book *Urmensch und Spätkultur* [Primitive Man and Late Culture]. Furthermore, in the context of sociological approaches that are inspired by just such anthropological reflections and considerations, we should also mention the conception of “habitus” developed by Pierre Bourdieu who could certainly have appealed to Gehlen in this regard (or equally to Plessner’s attempt to investigate the various social roles and forms of life that serve to protect the vulnerable individual from the ever-persisting threat of absurdity and meaninglessness). There is also a direct contemporary connection between these approaches and my own attempt to develop an analysis of institutions and to investigate the mechanisms of symbolization and the specific ways in which the various operations of social power are concealed from explicit view.

The fact that the early 1990s witnessed a late and rather surprising growth of interest in Plessner’s book *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft* [The Limits of Community] (a work that first appeared in 1924 under the title *A Critique of Social Radicalism* and already outlined an anthropological account of the process of socialization in terms of ritual performance and the stylized adoption of specific personal roles), certainly speaks for the continuing relevance of an anthropological approach to the foundations of social order and organization. And from this perspective, in turn, the anthropological premises of Norbert Elias’s theory of civilization could also be clarified by recourse to Plessner’s considerations and developed specifically in the direction of a historical anthropology.

18 N. Elias, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation: soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen*,
5. The Concept of “Post-Histoire”

One of the reasons behind the emergence of the attempt to develop a fundamentally anthropological approach in philosophy at the beginning of the twentieth century lay in the crisis of the philosophy of history after the decline of Hegelianism (and in opposition to the continuing practical influence of Marxism). In the meantime, we have of course witnessed new variants of the same problem, from the collapse of the kind of developmental ontology defended in the former Soviet Union and in its general sphere of influence through to the declared overcoming of the “grand narratives” by the protagonists of “postmodern” thought.19 These developments were also paralleled by the emergence of the notion of “the end of history,”20 most emphatically presented in Gehlen but indeed already anticipated in Scheler’s essay “Der Mensch im Weltalter des Ausgleichs” [Man in the Age of Equivalence].21 Gehlen’s reflections in this regard had already disturbed the Nazi ideologues who were attempting to project a positive Aryan vision of the future. But Gehlen only developed his view of the end of history explicitly after the final collapse of the self-destructive Hitler regime (a regime on which his own earlier career had effectively been based).22 With the defeat of 1945, Germany seemed almost to have fallen out of the historical process itself (like the Athenians after the defeat of 404 B.C.). From the perspective of this “zero-point” of political powerlessness, the stagnation of the present could perhaps be recognized more easily and clearly as the imminent fate of the world at large. Drawing upon certain earlier motifs in Hegel and Nietzsche, Gehlen now defended the notion of “post-histoire” as the principle of a future that will no longer develop or advance in substantive terms, even though it will continue to be marked by innumerable other events. Much later, Francis Fukuyama would produce something of a global bestseller based upon Hegel’s allegedly definitive experience of the end of history upon witnessing Napoleon on horseback in Jena (though actually


based upon Alexandre Kojève’s specific interpretation of Hegel). And only
recently we have heard Jean Baudrillard proclaiming much the same thesis
in his inaugural lecture at the School of Humanistic Studies at the University
of Siena: “Of course, there are ever more events transpiring today, but events
do not suffice to produce history.”

Gehlen also developed this question in a most thought-provoking manner in
relation to the arts. He believed that the avant-garde movements that charac-
terized the classical phase, so to speak, of modernist art effectively represented
the last great intellectual and artistic process of innovation and renewal (com-
parable in its fundamental significance with the invention of pictorial “realism”
during the Renaissance). Speaking as a lover of the arts, Gehlen claimed that this
aesthetic revolution in the principles governing image and representation, pio-
neered by Picasso, Braque, Kandinsky and Mondrian, and by the “pictor doctus”
of our time, the incomparable Paul Klee, could now only be succeeded by vari-
ous repetitions and ultimately tedious re-combinations of the same techniques:
all the principal modes and possibilities of visual and plastic art, so Gehlen argues,
have already been tried and pursued. Here too, it is not the lack of further acts
or events that is to be feared, but rather the end of “the key and characteristic
attitude” of earlier times, in art just as much as in the fields of politics, philoso-
phy, and the sciences. One may of course always feel free to doubt such notions
of any final and definitive “end” – but even this disturbing prognosis still reveals
a relevant aspect of Gehlen’s thought, and thus of an interpretation of our own
time that is grounded in the insights of philosophical anthropology.

II.

6. The Tradition of Philosophical Anthropology and the Sociologization
of Anthropological Knowledge

As far as the 1930s and 1940s are concerned, it has become common to
describe this general philosophical development as an “anthropological turn,”

25 See A. Gehlen, Zeit-Bilder: Zur Soziologie und Ästhetik der modernen Malerei (1960), K.-S.
Malerei” und konstruktivistische Moderne. Arnold Gehlens ambivalente Kunstssoziologie,” in G.
Breuer (ed.), Die Zähmung der Avantgarde. Zur Rezeption der Moderne in den 50er Jahren, Basel and
26 What follows is an abridged version of my essay “Philosophische Anthropologie und die
‘Sozialisierung’ des Wissen vom Menschen,” in M. R. Lepsius (ed.), Soziologie in Deutschland
und Österreich, special issue 23 of the Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie, Opladen:
an expression that was already used in 1934.\textsuperscript{27} And to some extent it can certainly serve to characterize the self-understanding of the principal authors of this general philosophical line of thought, all of whom were attempting to escape from the intellectual dead-end of traditional philosophy and from the crisis of the sciences which had been proclaimed again and again since the end of the nineteenth century. The explicit beginning of the movement is usually traced back to Max Scheler’s programmatic work *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* [Man’s Place in Nature] of 1927 (first published in 1928),\textsuperscript{28} but its origins can already be discerned in the early 1920s.

These conceptual approaches, which frequently presented themselves with an emphatic pathos of universality, were developed in a strikingly close historical, thematic and methodological parallel with one another, although also in a remarkably independent manner in each case. Most of the relevant authors after Max Scheler claimed to have articulated their respective contributions on their own, a process which suggests something like the output of a broad “scientific community” without any pre-existing network of mutual communication, something like a group of nonetheless singular and unique individuals. And although we may rightly emphasize the overall similarity of the questions posed and the answers provided by philosophical anthropology, this should not lead us to underestimate the considerable differences between the various theorists and their individual contributions with respect, for example, to the theoretical structures, the style of demonstration, the substantive originality, the precise productive consequences, and, finally, the political implications and repercussions of these several contributions. From the perspective of the “sociology of knowledge,” for example, we should also have to try and determine the exact grounds and circumstances of these different but “parallel” developments in philosophical anthropology. With respect to the connection between this general movement and sociology in particular, I should merely like to review the most important figures from the “school” of philosophical anthropology here and sketch the theoretical contribution of their respective approaches for a “sociological interpretation” of the problems which they originally posed and the kind of responses they furnished for those problems.

7. The Science of Man and the Science of Society in the Work of Max Scheler

In his book *Man’s Place in Nature* Scheler begins by considering what he calls three “images of man”: the Judeo-Christian one, the Greek one, and the


modern scientific one. In this connection he does not specifically address the eventual rationalistic elimination of the “bourgeois” image of man, which was grounded in the advances of natural science and itself took over in secularized form many aspects of the Judeo-Christian view of the world, but which nonetheless presents its own distinctive combination of these features. Scheler himself frequently drew implicitly on this image of man, and particularly in all those passages of his work which are dedicated to the rational organization of life, to the human control of the world.

In Scheler’s view it is the “principle of spirit” which determines the distinctive character of the human being, a conception which he developed from themes in Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of will, in the philosophy of Nietzsche, in the dualistic interpretation of “soul” and “spirit” in the thought of Ludwig Klages. Scheler thus presents man as the being that can “say no,” as the “ascetic of life,” as the “eternal protester against all mere reality.” From this perspective, he attempts to understand all the creative ways in which the human spirit is capable of negating, transforming, or reversing the conditions of his life, and this brings into play the whole sphere of interpersonal human relations, of hierarchically organized value systems, of the various basic forms of knowledge – in short, everything that we have just described as the “sociological interpretation” of our fundamental question. Thus we might well have expected Scheler’s fully elaborated philosophical anthropology to contain a properly developed theory of culture and society in general. The entire body of his work should be read as an attempted comprehensive “science of man” which is pursued as a “science of culture” that is essentially concerned with the realization of our specifically human form of life. In this sense, Scheler can also be interpreted as a “classical” sociological thinker insofar as we are interested in establishing the boundaries and parameters of particular disciplines.

The crisis of the age and the crisis of science, and thus the loss of certainty confronting human beings who always stand in need of direction and orientation, encouraged in Scheler’s case an ambitious attempt to grasp the “construction” of the world. Insofar as he wished to reveal the order at work within all the apparent disorder, we could say that Scheler’s phenomenologically conceived analysis can indeed be understood as a kind of existential “guideline” for life. From the perspective of history – and, in relation to a specific “philosophical world view,” we could also say from the perspective of a philosophy of history – this question was generated in the context of a fundamental transformation in the character of the world, a transformation that Scheler tried to describe by recourse to the concept of “equivalence”
In this context, the unique morphologically defined position of the human being was then mediated with the historical “plasticity” of the latter in such a way that it was no longer possible to draw either simply “pessimistic” or simply “progressive-positivistic” conclusions from the current situation. But it was certainly possible on this basis to outline something like a program for the future, one which found its relevant ideal in the “whole man,” in a kind of fusion of the “over-man and the under-man.” This possibility actually presupposes the “age of equivalence” as an “inescapable fate,” albeit one whose dangerous potential should not be underestimated. But this particular age can also become the condition which permits the beginning of the history of “so-called humanity.” For the unification of knowledge, of values, of different kinds of action, which have characterized all of the specific cultures which we know, are not now simply lost or submerged in a species of relativism somehow licensed by the human and cultural sciences. They are taken up instead into the reality of the greater relativization of the “age of equivalence” which certainly produces a certain leveling, but also generates the possibility of uniting and combining forms and aspects of human life which have only ever been realized in local and particular ways in the past.

In the case of Max Scheler his phenomenologically conceived ontology oriented to the analysis of the social forms of human life is not restricted to any one particular phase of his work, but is also evident as a thematic “stratum” of his writings on ethics and his reflections on love and hate. This dimension is particularly clearly developed in the book whose very title announces its “sociological” orientation, namely *Die Wissensformen und die Gesellschaft* [Problems of a Sociology of Knowledge]. The central focus of the work is a comprehensive discussion of the inner connection between “knowledge and labor” where Scheler also enters into a critical engagement with American pragmatism, an engagement which was certainly important for one aspect of Scheler’s philosophical anthropology, but would prove decisive for Gehlen’s version of philosophical anthropology conceived explicitly as a theory of action. What we have called the “sociologization” of philosophical questions thus originally lies in a metaphysics of “askesis” – for this furnishes the most fundamental motif of Scheler’s philosophical anthropology – which initially seems so unimaginably remote from the way in which the social sciences tend to formulate their own tasks and problems.

29 See Scheler, “Der Mensch im Weltalter des Ausgleichs.”
8. The “Excentric Positionality” of Man and the Variety of Human Worlds in the Work of Helmuth Plessner

Helmuth Plessner’s contribution to philosophical anthropology – and especially his book *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* [Man and the Stages of the Organic], which takes Scheler’s original theory of stages or levels as its starting point – can be understood in a number of respects as occupying an intermediate position between the views of Scheler and Arnold Gehlen. As Walter Schulz remarked, one significant difference between Plessner and both other authors consists in the fact that there is no parallel whatsoever in either Scheler’s or Gehlen’s thought to the “negative metaphysics” which Plessner explicitly develops in his work. Schulz went on to say that if we did wish to pursue a comparison, we should have to say that Plessner no longer permits himself the luxury, as Scheler had done, of resolving problems by recourse to an ultimately speculative theory of development; yet, on the other hand, he refuses to share Gehlen’s total lack of interest in all metaphysical questions or standpoints. The fundamental concept underlying Plessner’s analysis of the basic stages or levels of the living being is that of “positionality” (*Positionalität*). Plessner presents the sociological dimension which he develops from the fundamental characteristics of human life and the self-reflexive structure of human existence in a variety of specific analyses; for example, in his reflections on the anthropology of power and in his contributions to the theory of social roles. This version of philosophical anthropology thus also addresses the possibilities for stabilizing the conditions of human life, though it does so without Scheler’s existential pathos or Gehlen’s emphatic commitment to social institutions. Plessner prefers to tread the more skeptical and careful liberal path of reflexive self-interpretation. In a specifically institutional context, in his task as an academic teacher, we can see Plessner rather as a biologist who has turned to sociology precisely through the medium of philosophical anthropology.

At the center of Plessner’s analyses we find the intrinsically historical character, and thus the mutability, of the social forms of human life, since the “conditions of the possibility of human existence” are themselves decided in history, and not at the level of invariant anthropological features and characteristics, as Hermann Ulrich Asemisseen has emphatically shown with regard to Plessner’s philosophical perspective. The central category of “excentric-

ity,” which defines the “essence” of human existence in comparison with the levels of positionality which characterize the other forms of life, is opposed to what Plessner calls the “centric” character of animal life: “For human beings, excentricity is the characteristic form in which they are directly exposed to the enironing world.” By introducing a category grounded in the self-reflexive character of human existence into the center of his anthropological analysis, Plessner is able to adopt and develop many insights already formulated by Scheler. The human being thus stands at a distance from his “environment” (Umwelt), which is therefore no longer merely a natural milieu but is now understood – as it was by Scheler and will be again by Gehlen – as a genuine “world” (Welt), and one which Plessner goes on to articulate in terms of “the outer world, the inner world, and the social world.” But this intrinsic sense of “distance” is also just as essential to our relationship to the “self”: the phenomenon of self-awareness, our awareness of awareness, is a constitutive dimension of what it is to be a “person.” Reflexivity in this sense presupposes fractures and ruptures, and these are radically and originally given with the very character of human “positionality.” With respect to the “sociologization” of the fundamental analysis which is already implicit in Plessner’s approach, it is important to note that the social world, the world of the “we,” can be derived from the same structural principle which permits me to relate to my own individual self. The human being “leads” its life, and the particular form of self-relation that is involved here also finds expression in the fact that the individual not only has a physical body, but essentially experiences this body as integrated within the coordinated system of his own acts and relations to the world, namely as the “lived body” (Leib).

In parallel with the excentric positionality that belongs to the constitution of the subject, the social field – the “world of the we” – is identified as “the form of his own position which man understands as the sphere of other human beings.” Thus Plessner interprets the social domain neither as a culturally defined external framework which embraces and envelops the individual nor as a sort of inner world that has somehow been projected outwards. On the contrary, the social domain is rigorously grasped as a “world of the between,” a perspective which comes very close to the way in which Leopold von Wiese has specifically defined the object of sociology.

Plessner’s model also furnishes a plausible anthropological foundation for interactionist types of analysis, for the theory of social roles, and for theories of action which emphasize the reciprocal character of human social relations.

34 Ibid., pp. 293-308.
36 Ibid., p. 302.
It is also significant for the sociological dimension of Plessner’s theory to note how he extends those aspects of Scheler’s approach that were originally associated with a philosophy of history precisely in order to historicize his own perspective in a fundamental manner, and thus, as Günter Dux has emphasized, to develop a sound methodological foundation for the human and cultural sciences. Philosophical anthropology thus becomes an effectively synthesizing science which can clearly show “how human beings must live historically,” and precisely “how a living being must be constituted that comes to stand in nature in such a way that it must effectively generate the life-world as its own creation, without thereby forfeiting anything of its character as a natural being.” Dux is therefore quite right when he claims: “For this is the question which must be clarified if sociology is ever to succeed in gaining access to the historically changing constitution of the human life-world as a whole and of social organization in particular.”

9. Gehlen’s Anthropological Synthesis and its Connection with Sociological Research

In my own opinion the most fully developed and theoretically differentiated contribution to philosophical anthropology remains that presented by Arnold Gehlen, especially in the form of his “elementary anthropology.” If one speaks, as I have done here, of philosophical anthropology in terms of a “School,” we can say that Gehlen’s contribution effectively represents the concluding theoretical production in relation to the authors in question, although this is not of course intended to imply that he has solved all of the outstanding problems and questions of philosophical anthropology, nor that these problems and questions are incapable of being further developed in other contexts, in terms of a “historical” or “sociological” anthropology for example. If Gehlen nonetheless represents a certain conclusion, this actually runs counter to his own intentions since he had hoped to present philosophical anthropology as a comprehensive integrating discipline that could offer the concepts that were developed here as preliminary hypotheses for further interdisciplinary projects of research in the human sciences.

Gehlen’s example still remains particularly instructive as far as the connection between sociology and philosophical anthropology is concerned. It is true that Gehlen shared some of the philosophical “resentment” that sprang from the Weltanschauung of Max Scheler, but he did not endorse the latter’s

anthropological aim of interpreting the human being as the denier of life, as an ascetic under the guidance of spirit, just as he was never tempted with Scheler to describe man as some kind of intermediate being suspended between the extremes of the beast and the angel, and thus to follow the ancient Christian conception which still furnished the background for Scheler’s aforementioned theory of “levels” or his doctrine of spirit as a counter-principle to life. And it is also true, for example, that Gehlen entertained notions of social order that were very different from the more liberal ideas typically defended in Plessner’s work. As these brief remarks already indicate, it is obvious that not all of the conceptions of philosophical anthropology can simply be identified or conflated with one another, either with regard to their theoretical implications or to their political assumptions or consequences. Yet we can still claim that Gehlen represents this general movement of thought in a particularly striking manner precisely because he was so skilful in combining and developing a number of themes that were drawn from otherwise competing theories. He thus succeeded in epitomizing the entire approach of philosophical anthropology – even if it was heavily subjected to his own perspective in the process – and especially in bringing it into ever closer proximity to the domain of empirical research while also clearly recognizing the limits of all anthropological argumentation.

Gehlen’s fundamental contribution to “elementary anthropology” appeared in 1940 in a work entitled Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt [Man. His Nature and Place in the World] and which took the category of “action” as its central focus of attention. Step by step the book unfolds its anthropological claims in terms that have since become famous, such as the “still undetermined animal,” the “organically deficient being,” the “physiologically premature” creature – all concepts and expressions that refer back to earlier authors, specifically to Nietzsche, Jakob von Uexküll, Louis Bolk, and Adolf Portmann. Gehlen asks how the human animal becomes capable of sustaining its life in the first place: poorly adapted, instinctually unspecialized, biologically underdeveloped, the human being is chronically dependent on the necessity of overcoming the immediate natural conditions of existence and owes its life to a process of tremendous transformation and compensation, to inhibition, training and self-discipline, to the capacity for anticipation, to the ability to pursue purposes and set ends and, above all, to take itself as the highest end. Furthermore, this particular being, as Scheler had already pointed out, is “open to the world” (weltoffen) insofar as it is

not instinctively integrated within a determinate and species-specific natural environment. The human being’s openness to the world – with its open range of vision, with the disclosure of horizons that is facilitated by its erect posture (something which Johann Gottfried Herder’s anthropological reflections had identified as a decisive dimension of our specifically human development) – is interpreted by Gehlen as a kind of “emancipation.” Still, this perspective does not encourage him to endorse Ernst Bloch’s emphatic claims regarding the upright human gait, but rather leads him to focus upon our loss of immediate contact with the earth, upon the uncertainty and vulnerability of our existence, upon the laboriously acquired and cruelly enforced “prosthesis” of social order that is required to stabilize this existence and make it secure. Gehlen’s central principle of “unburdening” (Entlastung) is the principle which governs the totality of these processes of compensation and displacement which serve simultaneously both to liberate and to stabilize human life.

Fundamentally speaking, Gehlen’s “elementary anthropology” furnishes a highly differentiated theory of the process of human action, one which he developed quite independently of Wiener, though not of Scheler, in terms of a circular model of sensory-motor feedback.\(^\text{40}\) For Gehlen “action” is a psycho-physically neutral category in the sense that our sensuous-corporeal and imaginative levels of experience all essentially flow together here. He appeals to the concept of “action” as the most fundamental one for explaining our instrumental response to and control over the world in general, as comparable in its significance for him as the concept of “labor” was for Marx. And on the other side, as far as the microanalysis of the specific processes of action is concerned, Gehlen is capable of concretely, plausibly and indeed brilliantly illustrating the communication that takes place between the sensuously perceptible environment and the responsive acts of the agent in each case, clearly showing how such actions in turn now come to assume a productive role of their own. Yet in spite of his general “sociologizing” approach, which is already implied in his concept of action and which we shall discuss further below, and for all his emphasis upon American pragmatism and his relatively early acknowledgement of the work of George Herbert Mead, Gehlen still


\(^{40}\) See Gehlen, “Rückblick auf die Anthropologie Max Schelers” and Scheler, *Man’s Place in Nature*.

neglected at this stage the interactionist dimension, \footnote{See A. Honneth and H. Joas, \textit{Soziales Handeln und menschliche Natur. Anthropologische Grundlagen der Sozialwissenschaften}, Frankfurt am Main and New York: Campus, 1980 [\textit{Social Action and Human Nature}, trans. R. Meyer, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988].} i.e., the way in which the qualities and properties of things and factors in the environment are mediated not merely through our material engagement with objects, but equally essentially through our relations with others. And similarly the theory of language which Gehlen attempted to ground in anthropological terms, and mobilized in turn to support his anthropological approach, appeared overly objectivist, insufficiently active in orientation, and to a degree even a-social in character, although it was supposed to present the category of action once again as a case of “unburdening” at a higher level.

This comprehensive anthropological theory ultimately confronts us with the question of how human beings continue to survive in spite of the “poverty” of their inbuilt instinctual resources and the “excessive” character of their needs and impulses. Gehlen responds to this question by extending the insights of his general theory of action and language: human beings are forced to transform their own self-produced acts and interventions into binding and reliable features of the external world and to orient themselves to these features, and indeed even to subject themselves to these self-projected structures and forms of organization. Thus the “sociologizing” approach that was in part already contained in the individual categories is finally rendered explicit and culminates in a theory of “canalization” of human drives and impulses through substantive demands and obligations. And this leads Gehlen to connect his originally “elementary” anthropology with a further and directly ensuing investigation of social culture – an investigation which can now properly be termed “philosophical” precisely because it takes due account of these social presuppositions too. Gehlen initially outlined such a social theory in 1940 as an account of the “highest governing systems,” before effectively transforming it between 1950 and 1956 into a “theory of institutions.” The manner in which Gehlen now formulates his argument reveals an explicit “sociologization” of perspective and a theoretical transition from biological to social and cultural anthropology, although again this was also anticipated in the categories he had already developed in his book \textit{Man}. The fact that this development expressly transpired only after the war, in precise parallel with Gehlen’s new professional engagement with sociology, certainly does not imply that he regarded the latter as simply equivalent to social theory. On the contrary, as Gehlen’s published work throughout the 1950s and 1960s clearly shows, he basically wished to develop sociology as a kind of “administrative auxiliary discipline.” But despite this significant qualification, the perspective
of philosophical anthropology – and Gehlen’s position in particular – exercised an extremely strong theoretical influence on sociology in the post-war period, even though the distinction between foundational anthropological theory and factual sociological analysis was not always clearly drawn.

10. Philosophical Anthropology as a Critique of “Theories of Society” and of the Philosophy of History

When we speak of the “sociologization” of philosophical anthropology, and of its general approach to the interpretation of the world, there is also a further point of view to be considered, and one which clearly reveals a parallel with the developments in sociology. As a specific science of “social action,” “social relations,” and “social interactions,” sociology emphatically attempted to distinguish itself from the older “theories of society” which were defined by distinctive philosophies of history, and expressly relegated them to the “pre-history” of genuine scientific thought and research. In much the same way – albeit with different means and with more ambitious claims for the range and truth content of its own arguments – philosophical anthropology, with its specific concept of science and social order, was also opposed to such theories of society. For these “theories of society” were always also political in character, involving normative positions regarding political participation, economic freedom, the reduction of privilege or the extension of status, and so forth. They were originally conceived in opposition to the representatives of feudal conditions, and subsequently in opposition to the centralized power of absolutist monarchy. The social forms and relations of the time were challenged and examined in terms of their historical character, and thus interpreted as moments in the ongoing development of a humanity which has organized the conditions of human life in various stages and forms of socialization. The task was therefore to develop a conception of the social “totality,” to grasp human social life as a structural articulation and configuration of specific principles, developmental processes, and organizational norms, as the interrelated factors in the unity of “society.” But the perspective of philosophical anthropology decisively contested the very idea that we should take this mediated unity “of society” as the appropriate basis for an explanation and interpretation of the contexts and possibilities of human action, and the sociological analysis of the “forms of socialization” which developed from this anthropological perspective also clearly relativized this older approach.

The analysis of different social and cultural life-worlds which was legitimized by recourse to the nature of human beings paradoxically led to a tendency to “de-socialize” the understanding of human life, and particularly to
de-historicize the character of the problem, something which also finds expression in the strict repudiation of any kind of philosophy of history, or at least of the associated idea of “progress.” The philosophies of history which were still oriented to the outlook of the Enlightenment, which typically emphasized the developments of technology, of production, of advancing civilization, and thus the human potential for change and self-transformation, were thereby already opposed in principle to any conception which appeared so ready to appeal to the “nature” of man. The repression and marginalization of a historical perspective, the exclusion of the economy from central consideration, and finally the dissolution of the “total” social context into discrete domains of social reality, which also helped of course to legitimate the specialized professional research now dedicated to these domains: all of this accompanied and reflected characteristic developments in the field of academic sociology as well, which distinguished itself, just as philosophical anthropology had done, from all “theories of society” by virtue of the way in which it approached reality. Philosophical anthropology, which in many respects stands closer to the universal theories of society, nevertheless did not challenge this successful professional specialization in the social sciences, but claimed instead to reintegrate them, and thus to unify the related questions which they posed. The program of the “school” of philosophical anthropology which we have discussed here was not concerned, therefore, with overcoming the differentiations of the social world, but rather with organizing them from an integrating perspective, and thus also in assigning to sociology its proper place.

11. The Relationship to the Sciences of Man and the Perspectives of Philosophical Anthropology

In conclusion I would claim that the cognitive and intellectual potential of philosophical anthropology today could be mobilized above all (as could be shown most clearly with regard to Gehlen’s theory) for grounding and refining theories of action and the theories of language associated with them. And this anthropological line of thought could also serve to open up a critical perspective which can expose many of the lacunae and deficiencies of other developed “theories of society,” such as the Marxist one, and reveal sociological assumptions that are often taken for granted. The fruitful potential of this approach should not be pursued here in a merely casuistical manner or dogmatically.

asserted in a purely speculative fashion. But it seems to me important – par-
ticularly in view of the distinctions between different types of theory already
alluded to – that the conclusions of philosophical anthropology should not
be treated too hastily as proven results of a foundational science, and that we
should not therefore assume that the only problem lies in how to transfer the
insights developed by this approach to different areas of application. On the
contrary, philosophical anthropology should deliberately pursue something
like an “experimental” unification of perspectives, where the specialist sci-
ences can easily lose sight of the real connection of the phenomena, even when
the field under investigation – namely the active life of the human being, or
more precisely, of human beings in the plural – demands such a unified per-
spective. In this way, anthropology – concretized and modified by historical
and sociological insights – could contribute to a surer and greater understand-
ing of what it means for the sciences of man to recognize that the human being
is by nature a cultural being, as Arnold Gehlen so emphatically pointed out.

We must therefore acknowledge the truth of what Wolf Lepenies has pro-
grammatically expressed as follows: “The question whether, and if so which,
claims in the domain of social sciences can be grounded anthropologically,
cannot be answered today in general terms. We have more than enough reason,
therefore, to distrust both those who would reduce social claims to anthropo-
logical ones, and those who would banish anthropological questions from the
domain of the social sciences. Anyone who invokes the ‘new’ human being
without knowing the old, or is even ready to impose intellectual prohibitions
to hinder such knowledge, only hinders the progress of knowledge itself.”

In this sense, anthropology should be regarded neither as a foundational nor
as a definitively integrating science, but as a suggestive and potentially fruit-
ful source of hypotheses for the “sciences of man.” It may then contribute to
our awareness that the “nature” of man is socially and historically formed, but
equally that the entire network of relations and social formations produced by
human beings are dependent upon “man’s nature.”

(Translated from the German by Nicholas Walker)

Karl-Siegbert Rehberg
University of Dresden
karl-siegbert.rehberg@tu-dresden.de