Abstract: The first part of the article (§§ 1-3) illustrates the critical relation the authors establish with the leading figures of philosophical anthropology in terms of their engagement with “world-openness” (Weltoffenheit). This notion cannot be reduced to the objectivity that confronts man as a spiritual being, as in Max Scheler, but rather makes it possible to grasp the limits of distancing objectification; in Arnold Gehlen, the coercion to action derived from the indeterminacy of man’s relation with the world is not sufficient to comprehend the role of culture for the constitution of the human animal itself; and with the biological means utilized by Helmuth Plessner it is not possible to account entirely for the human capacity to establish relations by means of society. Historical anthropology, as the second part (§§ 4-5) of the article shows, aims to respond to such deficiencies by bringing to light the numerous historical and cultural forms of openness to a plurality of worlds. Freeing itself of any abstract and binding anthropological norm that claims to define the essence of man, historical anthropology investigates human structures and phenomena through a series of transdisciplinary studies centering on themes such as the body, ritual, mimesis and the performative dimension in its entirety, performance and performativity.

“In about ten thousand years of history, ours is the first age in which man has become completely and absolutely ‘problematic’ to himself: in which he doesn’t know what he is, at the same time that he knows he doesn’t know it.”

This is how Max Scheler characterizes the point of departure for philosophical anthropology. Since then, even more doubts have been raised, and more radical questions been asked about humankind. Philosophical anthropology attempted to assure itself of man by defining his specific nature in contrast to that of the animals. Here, the distinction the biologist Jakob von Uexküll makes between animals’ Umweltgebundenheit [dependence on their milieu] on the one hand and human Weltoffenheit [world-openness] on the other hand is crucial. Scheler, Plessner and Gehlen make use of this distinction when attempting to define human specificity. Here, the milieu is regarded as the close correspondence between an animal’s anatomy and the surroundings this anatomy cor-

responds to. Thus, every animal is integrated into its appropriate milieu, but it is therefore also unable to escape from it. Humans, by contrast, do not belong to a milieu in this way – to them, a world is ascribed. Therefore, milieu and world are opposite terms which, however, continue to relate to each other. “It follows from the principle of correspondence of the anatomy to the milieu that it is conditioned by interest and that it is subjective – interest and subjectivity as applicable to an animal organism, that is. Functional connections between it and its food, prey, enemy, ally, mate, terrain connect the manner, scale, and situation of becoming and remaining noticeable, on one hand to its range of action as predetermined in its organization, and in biological necessity on the other. Perceptual and operational world (Merkwelt and Wirkwelt) correspond to each other. They cannot be independent of their biological functional context, i.e. they cannot be objective in the way that enables man to attempt to perceive and act, and to objectively correct his perceptions and actions.”

1. Max Scheler and world-openness

Assigning an inescapable dependence on their milieu to animals on the one hand, and world-openness to humans on the other, is characteristic of philosophical anthropology. Scheler, in his 1927 Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos, refers to this distinction with what he terms the “shaking off of the spell cast by the milieu” (“Abschütteln des Umweltbannes”), of the “existential independence from the organic” (“existenziell[e] Entbundenheit vom Organischen”) in which the outside world, conceived of as “centers of resistance” (“Widerstandszentren”) by the human organism, is transformed into “objects” (“Gegenstände”). Man, as an “intellectual being” (“geistiges Wesen”), is able to “understand the very essence (“Sosein”) of the objects themselves, without any restrictions imposed on the world of objects or its conditions by vital instincts or, prior to that, by the functioning of the senses and the sensory organs.”

This is how Scheler characterizes man’s independence from the environment, his objectivity, and his world-openness. He does not differentiate between the attitude towards objectivity and that towards the essence of an object. However, Scheler’s characterization of human world-openness as bringing forth objectification and objectivity is not sufficient. After all, the

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ability to objectify and to think objectively come from certain historically
and culturally determined attitudes that are the result of a long process of
civilization and that enable our culture today to view the world as object, and
objectively. Therefore the meaning of world-openness is too much reduced if
one equates, as Scheler does, objectivity or objectification with world-open-
ness. This was justly pointed out by Johannes Flügge, when he said that “being
capable of pure objectivity, of a distanced attitude towards objects cannot be
regarded as the perfection of world-openness. Rather, it is due to this world-
openness that we can recognize and cross the borders of distancing objectifica-
tion, even though world-openness has also been the first enabling condition
of this distancing objectification of the world. World-openness is realized in
the sequence of man’s reactions to the world, which at the same time changes
the course of his own existence. To a merely formal way of thinking, this
process will seem to concern evaluation only: man ascribing to himself more
importance at one time by feeling himself to be authorized to rule, and recog-
nizing the importance of the world at another time by adjusting himself to it.
However, what we see here is in fact a dialogic relationship.”

2. Arnold Gehlen and the transition from nature to culture

In Gehlen’s view, world-openness is connected to man's extrauterine early
childhood, which is characteristic of the human biological make-up, as well
as to the hiatus between stimulus and reaction and to the inherent deficiency
which follows from it. World-openness is made possible by the unspecific char-
acter of human instincts, and it is a precondition as well as a consequence of the
principle of Entlastung [unburdening]. All these characteristics are what enables
humans to survive. Taking into consideration the extremely small chances of
survival, the successful development of the human species had to appear as
an achievement in itself, according to Gehlen. Implicitly, Gehlen takes the
mere fact of survival as a positive value and changes the biological concept of
humankind into a normative one. In the first part of his argument, he agrees
with the opinion of most anthropologists that, as the human species is not
specialized, it secures its own survival by its ability to act. Secondly, Gehlen
makes a logical connection between human existence as that of a Mängelwesen
[deficient being], and human evolution. However, from the biological argu-
ment that the species’ lack of specialization is the precondition for a virtually
unlimited adaptability he goes on to integrate biology into a metaphysics of
humankind: Man’s wretched defenselessness and his inherent inferiority nec-

It is man’s productive side, his world-openness that poses such a risk: it is “a burden. Man, in contrast to animals, is subject to sensory overload, to an ‘unspecific’ mass of impressions which flood in on him and with which he must cope.” He can cope with this task only by “relief” – he has to “turn, by his own work, the conditions of lack that determine his existence into chances of life.” Gehlen takes up the principle of relief to justify the necessity of social institutions. From his aristocratic point of view, such institutions are indispensable especially for weak persons who are in need of support from outside to deal with sensory overload.

All of Gehlen’s central terms – necessity, deficient being, development, morals, relief – are constructions of a story told from the end and passed off as ineluctable fate. From the perspective of the survivor, rescuing oneself entirely by one’s own means is always an act of heroism. A “rescuing element” does not “grow” for man, as in Hölderlin’s verse, but the evolution of humankind consists, in Gehlen’s view, of the same kind of personalized and willful self-help which can be found in the narratives of the survivors of an army. “The only trouble” with such a dramatic view is, as Clifford Geertz points out, that this moment in which the survival of humankind is said to have hung in the balance “does not seem to have existed. By the most recent estimates the transition to...
After the “Death of Man”

the cultural mode of life took the genus \textit{Homo} several million years to accomplish; and stretched out in such a manner, it involved not one or a handful of marginal genetic changes but a long, complex, and closely ordered sequence of them.”\footnote{C. Geertz, \textit{The Interpretation of Cultures}, New York: Basic Books, 1973, p. 47.} “[C]ulture, rather than being added on, so to speak, to a finished or virtually finished animal, was ingredient, and centrally ingredient in the production of that animal itself.” It played “a major directive role in his evolution.”\footnote{Ibid., pp. 47-48. Geertz continues:“The perfection of tools, the adoption of organized hunting and gathering practices, the beginnings of true family organization, the discovery of fire, and […] the increasing reliance upon systems of significant symbols (language, art, myth, ritual) for orientation, communication, and self-control all created for man a new environment to which he was then obliged to adapt. As culture, step by infinitesimal step, accumulated and developed, a selective advantage was given to those individuals in the population most able to take advantage of it – the effective hunter, the persistent gatherer, the adept toolmaker, the resourceful leader – until what had been a small-brained, protohuman \textit{Australopithecus} became the large-brained fully human \textit{Homo Sapiens}.”} Philosophical anthropology pretends to view man from the perspective of nature and science, guided by biology. In reality, though, it looks back from man to nature in order to measure the distance man has put between himself and his origins. It is only from this perspective that this specific image of man is created: that of a being whose existence is due only to himself.

Faced with the high-strung claims Gehlen makes for humanity, and with the research of social and cultural anthropology, one may suggest the following alternative: between the polar opposites of human metaphysics on the one hand and locally based knowledge about human beings in the context of specific cultures on the other, there is sufficient space for fundamental reflection on the situation of anthropology, on human ways of experiencing and thinking which follow from it, and on cultural constructions, social structures and institutions. Their point of departure is the specific human Being-in-the-World. Only very few anthropological theories take into consideration that man is in fact not alone, but is born into a network of other human beings; that he grows up in it, and that he does not imprint his knowledge of the world, his abilities and his behavior on himself, but acquires them in concert with others. Being-in-the-World means being-among-men. Moreover, the body is no less important for an anthropology that deals with society – the body in its specific material form (walking upright; form and function of the hands; the senses; the face). The human body makes specific forms of sensorially experiencing the world possible\footnote{This has already been noted by Kant when he writes in his \textit{Anthropology}：“The characterization of the human being as a rational animal is already present in the form and organization of his hand, his fingers, and fingertips; partly through their structure, partly through their sensitive feeling. By this means nature has made the human being not suited for one way of manipulating} (while it makes others impossible).
More than that: it is able to embody experiences of living in the world, to form tools, to make symbolic use of objects and to reach a new and higher level, that of language, independent from practical manipulation and from any given situation. This enables man to experience and deal with the world in ways totally different from those available to animals. All of the above are assumptions anthropology makes as a philosophical discipline – answers which do not allow for scientific methods and theories. Every field of enquiry which might offer a solution already presupposes an answer to these problems. It can offer hints, evidences, important facts and results, but its theories, concepts and terms are founded upon fundamental assumptions on the problem in question. This kind of anthropology can be seen as a founding theory for the “Menschenwissenschaften” (“human sciences”) (N. Elias).

3. Helmuth Plessner and the reflectivity of the self

The most fundamental problem is that of the anthropological situation of Being-in-the-World. This is what I will discuss here, starting from the position of Plessner whose suggested solution is currently widely accepted. Philosophical anthropology assumes that everything that is natural in man belongs to the same nature as that of nonhuman beings. A seemingly democratic principle: “nature” is the same for all. However, human nature differs fundamentally from that of the animals. The difference is obliterated by the fact that natural processes in man can be described in biological terms. Nevertheless, such terms are inadequate when it comes to the specificity of human nature, which is something philosophical anthropology itself emphasizes. By biological means it is impossible to grasp the specificity that fundamentally distinguishes man from animals: the ability to establish social relations, the plasticity of human behavior, the social openness towards other human beings, the possibility of entering into relationships, of experiencing emotions and of organizing social situations, and the subject’s ability to repeat things but undetermined for every way, consequently suited for the use of reason; and thereby has indicated the technical predisposition, or the predisposition of skill, of his species as a rational animal.” See I. Kant, Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht abgefasst (1798); [Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View, trans. R. B. Louden, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 227-228].

13 See N. Elias, Was ist Soziologie?, Munich: Juventa, 1970, p. 114; [What is Sociology?, trans. S. Mennell and G. Morrissey, New York: Columbia University Press, 1978]: “The uniqueness of man in comparison to other creatures can already be seen in the meaning the word ‘nature’ takes on when used for man; which differs to a certain extent from the meaning it takes on in other contexts.”
at will any given action. “There is no such thing as a human nature independ-
ent of culture.”

In contrast to animals, human beings always take part in situations: they
may have entered a situation by pure chance, but once in it, they change it:
they are involved, they take a place (even if they intrude), they claim atten-
tion, they get in contact with others, they interfere, they cause emotions, and
they form relationships. This begins even with a new-born child, even by
simply being in the world. Even though a crying, smiling or sleeping baby
may seem to us purely natural, already at that stage the biological processes
are influenced by the child’s social existence, and it is involved in the network
of relationships existing in its environment (family, friends, neighborhood)
from the very beginning. For this, no special effort on the child’s part is
necessary – it simply relates to its environment and vice versa. It is the object
of others’ care. The little child’s new existence gives responsibility to other
human beings, to its parents. Simply by being born, it creates social relations,
moral duties, care, but also emotions, wishes and the joy of caring for it, pro-
tecting it, regarding it. Its nature, not yet cultivated or civilized, comes into
the world as a new part of society. It is involved in material practice which
is not limited to biological facts, but changes such facts by mutual influence,
from the first actions on: by assimilating to the others’ preexisting world, and
by the difference the child’s presence makes to that world.

The position just indicated will now be described in detail on the basis of
Helmut Plessner’s criticism. Plessner has described the relationship of individ-
ual and society with more discernment than most anthropologists. His con-
cept is the following: There is an active self at the center, a self which is in the
world with its body, which is in its body and creates its own world. The self
is autonomous: it is not dependent on mere instinct, but depends on its own
activity instead. Animals, by contrast, act on instinct, live exclusively in the
here and now, and have a “position of frontality” (“Position der Frontalität”)5
towards the world. As human beings are independent from instinct, it is not
immediately necessary for them to act. They have a relationship of distance
towards the world by existing also as consciousness, in an intellectual mode
of being. Thus Plessner draws a line between the self, set as primary and, in
spite of having a physical existence, an intellectual principle in its own right,
which exists independent from material conditions and from its instinctive
existence. This autonomy takes the “burden” of instinct and of the need for
immediate action from human beings – they are not limited to their posi-

14 Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, p. 49.
As physical beings, they are part of nature, inextricably bound to the body’s fate. However, they are enabled by reflection to distance themselves from their actual situation, thus taking up a position outside their body. This ability makes man a being that is neither limited to his spirit nor to his body: man is in the body and outside it at the same time. Men have two modes of being, one belonging to the inside and one to the outside. From the inside they are the body, from the outside they have a body. Plessner compares this double position to lying in a case (“Futteralsituation”): it is a “containment of myself in my body” (“Binnenlage meiner selbst in meinem Körper”).

According to Plessner, the natural make-up of man thus contains the germs of his intellectual and cultural achievement. The necessity of culture is accounted for by the conditions of nature. Nature requires a logically necessary transition to culture and thought. The crucial point in this construction is the self, which belongs to nature by virtue of its physical existence, but is positioned outside it by its ability to reflect. In the “case formed by the body” it is still contained by its natural existence, but having fewer instincts, it has to develop its own inducements to act by thought, apart from nature. However, it remains unclear what a natural self is supposed to be and how it should be possible for an organism to have a self and be a person. The whole construction of the transition from nature to culture is questionable. Social categories are not the result of natural states. A transition from nature to culture can not even be identified, as it is not clear what is supposed to have existed instead of the self in a state of nature, or how a social being should have developed from that. It is probably useless to speculate on it, as the individual, the self, and the person are specific social constructions that, even though they presuppose material, biological, and natural conditions, have belonged to the social world from the very beginning. It is impossible to claim a natural forerunner to these categories. Having once admitted the claim that there is a natural core to the social self, one would easily come to the conclusion that the continually present self, once evolved, were independent of its social and material surroundings and divided from them by a clear line. Plessner sees man basically as a being that is able to reflect – that is

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16 Ibid., p. 383 ff.
18 See Plessner, Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch, p. 396: “It is because man is but half by nature and […] stands above himself that artificiality is the means of restoring the balance between oneself and the world.” Honneth and Joas are right in calling Plessner’s conception a “naturalized hermeneutics” (see A. Honneth and H. Joas, Soziales Handeln und menschliche Natur. Anthropologische Grundlagen der Sozialwissenschaften, Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1980, p. 77; [Social Action and Human Nature, trans. R. Meyer, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988]).
able to become “his own spectator” (“zu einem Betrachter seiner selbst”). This “principal possibility of retreat” (“prinzipielle Rückzugsmöglichkeit”) behind the border separating man from nature and from his own body, “makes […] everyone his own double” (“macht […] jeden zu einem Doppelgänger seiner selbst”). What Plessner neglects in favor of this perspective is the permanent social process of formation that works on the body from outside and that the acting subject itself exercises on behalf of society.

Merleau-Ponty, who has long advocated a concept similar to that of philosophical anthropology, writes in his posthumous Le visible et l’invisible (following a fundamental theoretical reorientation) about the ways the self is entangled with the preexisting order of the world: “The flesh (that of the world or my own) is not contingency or chaos but a texture.” With the term “flesh” (“chair”) he opposes the idea of the reflective subject: “what is visible of me is by no means a ‘representation’ of myself, but flesh.” “Owing to its ontogeny, the body connects us directly to objects.” These are nothing but “an extension of my body, and my body is an extension of the world: by means of it, the world surrounds me.” Man is one with the world in so far as he is “chair,” “flesh.” He is visible, and he is surrounded by visible things. “That is: He sees himself and is visible – but he sees himself as seeing […]. Thus the body stands upright in front of the world and the world stands upright in front of the body, and their relationship is one of entwinement. And there is no line between these two vertical beings, but a surface of contact.”

4. Historical anthropology: a transdisciplinary knowledge for human plurality

Historical anthropology comprises diverse transdisciplinary attempts to continue exploring phenomena and structures of the human after the “death of man,” i.e. after the end of a generally accepted abstract anthropological norm. It stands between history and the humanities without, however, consisting only in a history of anthropology as a discipline or in the contribution of history as a discipline to anthropology. Instead, it attempts to connect the historicity of its perspectives and methods to that of its object. Therefore, historical anthropology is able to summarize the findings of the humanities as well as

21 Ibid., p. 328.
22 Ibid., p. 179.
23 Ibid., p. 308.
24 Ibid., p. 324.
those of a criticism of anthropology founded on the philosophy of history, and to make them productive of new paradigmatic questions. At the center of its activities there is an inexorable intellectual unrest. Historical anthropology is not limited to specific cultures, nor to specific historical epochs. Rather, reflecting on the historicity of historical anthropology enables us to overcome the humanities’ Eurocentric perspective as well as a merely antiquarian interest in history, and to privilege the unsolved problems of the present and future.25

These considerations lead to the defining of new questions for anthropological research. Human beings are made the object of research in the context of their world, under their living conditions, and in concert with the others’ perspective on them. All the ingredients of this interpretation of “anthropology” can be viewed in various ways and are subject to historical change.

The human material constitution is given by nature and connected to non-human nature. However, the human body is extraordinarily capable of learning; from the very first days of an individual’s life the body can change under the influence of others as well as that of its own actions. Even though it begins by being determined by its biological nature, it is ultimately its own product. However far its constructions may be removed from it, they can never be totally independent from it: they continue to relate to it. Therefore one cannot expect universal knowledge from anthropology but only local knowledge, dependent on time and place. Human constructions cannot be regarded as if they were independent from their genesis; they remain connected to man in the world. Instead of severing the link of the construction to the world inhabited by men, anthropology renders this link visible. Human beings assure themselves of the world by means of their bodies. This Wittgensteinian idea can be understood in a materialist way: the basis of human knowledge is generated by the use of the body – and therefore in social practice. Human beings are woven into their world in the same way as a thread is woven into its fabric. The body is part of the world, but the world is also incorporated by the acting subject. This generates a “double inclusion” of world and body that produce each other in social practice. The body is a principle that forms a precondition for society: it is endowed with the (biological) characteristic of opening itself to the world but it is also exposed to it and can therefore be conditioned by it.

The world that human beings inhabit is already determined at their birth; it is a biological, material and social environment that makes, forms, educates and teaches them. However, human beings are not passive recipients of these influences: they actively take part in them. Everyone changes the

world into which he is born. He makes it his world at the same time as the world is in turn incorporated into his actions and his body. The self makes its own world in becoming a subject, but this is always connected to a countermovement of becoming an object: by the actions of human beings, their social acts, institutions, language, and symbolic media in general, the world is given an objective form.26

It is a normal part of everyday life that human beings are seen by other human beings; all of us see others and are seen by them: this belongs to our human condition. In so far as seeing contains something reflexive, all human beings are “natural anthropologists”. Everyday observations, reflections, interpretations and judgments should not simply be dismissed: It is the task of anthropology to account for them when forming its own theories, and to integrate them into an academic context.

A theoretical view of man that is distinguished by these characteristics is part and parcel of the very foundations of anthropology. This is true of every philosophy that thinks man from the perspective of the human and not from that of ideas, the universal, the eternal – in short, from an omniscient point of view. Human beings are both the subject and the object of anthropology. They only exist in relation to others, to whom they are similar, and to whom they are connected by their actions. This assumption can again be interpreted differently, depending on the way the foundations and instruments of anthropology are thought: whether they are separated from the course of history or involved in it themselves. If they are seen as taking part in the historicity that also characterizes their objects, the abovementioned double historicity will emerge. It is not only the objects but also the manner of analyzing them that emerges from the historically and socially localized conflicts acted out between human beings of one epoch. This view will not lead to relativism, but it dispenses with normative attitudes and universal points of view.

This kind of anthropology, which includes its own historicity in its theoretical framework, does not start out from the question: What can I know?, but: Where does the knowledge I have come from? We must first establish the object of anthropology, for us as well as for others; we must explain our own perspective on man and the conditio humana. We must be able to give reasons for our questions and for the construction of our theoretical objects. What makes men an object of anthropology, and from what perspective? We cannot avoid admitting the restriction of anthropology to its own point of view, but we can admit it only under the condition that we proceed to objectify this

reflection. This makes it possible to search for a way from local thinking to transsubjective and public discourses and concepts that enable us to compare individual cases. Anthropological reflection takes place in the world: from a point of view inside the world it searches for the truth of man in man himself and his life history, which it regards in a finite horizon.

Anthropology as a historical undertaking is not just based on philosophy. There are a number of conditions that are necessary for its emergence: the elevation of the individual in relation to society; the evolution of categories that assign to all members of a community their own private space; a relatively free public scope for the individual, which leads to individual rights. One can crosscheck these conditions by examining cultures that conceive of the individual in different ways or that have never formed an idea of the person or of the self at all.

It should be clear by now that the question of the nature of man has been avoided here, even in its more refined versions, such as that of the comparison between man and animal. In fact, such comparisons teach us more about the world of animals than about that of man. The crucial specificity of human beings, in comparison to an animal, lies in their diversity. To find out what human beings are, the differences between them are much more important than what they have in common. What is common to mankind is rights, especially human rights, which belong in a normative discussion. Anthropology, however, is not a part of morality or any other discipline concerned with what should be. Instead it is concerned with empirical human beings, examining the ways they develop diverse differences from given situations, and relating these differences to each other.

Historical anthropology is not a systematic anthropology but rather one of differences and possibilities, with history and culture as its central dimensions.27 Its inter- and transdisciplinary research has also contributed to the development of anthropologically oriented cultural studies, which cross the borders between the humanities and the social sciences. Among the early studies that were crucial for the development of cultural research were those published under the heading Logik und Leidenschaft.28 These studies start out

from fundamental cultural changes in the present and proceed to examine their genesis and meaning and to work out perspectives from which possible future developments can be assessed. In contrast to anthropological studies made by historians, they put greater stress on the necessity of dealing with the chosen issues in theoretically and reflectively informed ways.

Historical anthropology, like philosophical anthropology, crosses the borders to other disciplines, gaining a transdisciplinary orientation. However, historical anthropology refers less to biology or behavioral studies than to cultural studies, to whose framework it is crucial. Thus, historical anthropology gains new questions and methods, including ethnographic ones. This is the case with research into social phenomena of the present that takes into consideration their historical and cultural dimension. This includes, for example, studies on the performative character of social actions and the performative creation of communities. This kind of research demonstrates the fruitfulness of a historical anthropology that also takes into consideration social phenomena of the present.

5. Performativity

Thus, in dealing with the performative, one stresses the way in which the body is constitutive of the world. This is visible in the creation of images, in language, and in social action. The imagination (which, as Gehlen assumes, probably correctly, has its roots in the body’s vegetative system) creates imaginary images. Some of them become culturally effective with the help of language and action. In dealing with the body’s performative character, stress is laid on the theatrical and staged character of social actions. This view of human actions as staged cultural actions – as a cultural performance – leads to a transformation in our understanding of social processes. Therefore, greater attention is paid to the acting persons’ physicality as well as their actions’ character as a staged event. This makes it clear that social action consists of something more than just realizing one’s intentions. This “something” may refer to the manner in which the acting persons pursue their goals and attempt to realize them. Unconscious wishes, early experiences and feelings find their way into these processes. Even though two actions may be guided


by absolutely identical intentions, there will still be crucial differences in the way they are carried out – in the way the required physical performance is staged. The reasons for these differences include, on the one hand, the general historical, cultural and social framework and, on the other, the specific characteristics that pertain to the acting persons’ individuality. These two kinds of factors interact to create the performative character of social action as well as its unwanted byproducts. The limits of the predictability of social actions become visible in their character as an event and a process.

The character and quality of social relations is dependent, in crucial ways, on the manner in which men use their body in an action, what physical distance they keep, the postures they show and the gestures they develop. By way of these features men communicate a great deal about themselves to others. These features carry information on the acting persons’ view of life and their manner of seeing, feeling and experiencing the world. In spite of their crucial importance for the effects of social actions, these aspects of physical performativity are absent from many theories of action, which reduce the acting persons to their conscious intentions and ignore the sensual and contextual conditions of their actions. To avoid this reduction, it is necessary to study the emergence of action, its connections to language and the imagination, the ways in which its uniqueness is made possible by social and cultural patterns, and the relationship of its event character to its repetitive aspects. One should ask how far speech and communication can be conceived of as an act and what role the acts of naming and repetition play in the emergence of gender, social, and ethnic identity. From this perspective, an act is regarded as the physical and sensual imitation of, participation in, and organization of cultural practices. Cultural and social actions are then understood as performance, speech as a performative act, and all these phenomena are described by the term performativity.

These terms, performance, performative and performativity, show the relevance of the aesthetic dimension of human action, as well as the orienting function of social models. They clarify the importance of the forms of action for its success. Their design is a constitutive element of all kinds of social action in the course of which the acting persons stage their actions and themselves, thereby causing their actions to manifest themselves. They generate images of their actions and of themselves as sensual and physical representations that act on the memory and imagination of others.

Performance as the physical staging of artistic or social actions means a unique event that is confined to a limited amount of time. An artistic performance takes place at a certain time in front of or in conjunction with an audience. It is an event that suspends everyday order, that shocks the audience and conveys to it new experiences. To turn an event into an artistic per-
formance, an appropriate framing is necessary, of which the audience forms a part, and this is in fact constitutive of what is going on. It is only in the artistic action’s reference to an audience that a performance takes place at all. In everyday life, too, however, performances of social situations take place, in which persons, by arranging their bodies, express the way they wish to be seen and the role they want to play in the community. Some of these actions have a ritual character and mark specific institutional and communal situations such as feasts, celebrations, or the transition from one social status to another. These social actions are physical, scenic, and expressive. They have ludic elements, and they require an incorporated practical knowledge of the way they must be staged in specific situations.

While the term “performance,” especially since the 1970s, has come to be used for the description of innovative artistic action, the term “performative” has its origin in Austin’s philosophy of language. Here the term refers to acts performed by means of speech. In such cases speech is not representative but performative. Austin calls an utterance performative (in contrast to constative) that is neither descriptive nor can be judged true or false, but that can succeed or fail (“I hereby name this ship ‘Poseidon.’”). After Austin himself had discovered the inadequacy of this distinction, his speech act theory was further developed by Searle, who differentiates between different types of speech acts. Like artistic performances, performative utterances are highly self-referential and declarative and reveal their close connection to social institutions, rituals, and stereotypes, and the ways in which they constitute reality.

The use of “performative” as a term in anthropology or cultural studies underscores the physically constitutive character of social actions. Thus, Judith Butler regards gender as constructed by performative acts. Bourdieu uses “performative” to characterize the effects of rites of institution, which inscribe themselves on the body. His concept of habitus, which characterizes actions as the result of past actions and as the precondition for future ones, is also performative. We (Gebauer and Wulf) have shown the importance of mimetic processes for the emergence of performative knowledge and action. From this perspective, society, community and culture can be understood as crucially determined by performative social action. It is precisely because of their physical and performative aspect that gender, identity, ethnicity, rituals, and ritualized acts are easily regarded as “natural.” Thus they create illusions and obscure their historical origins as well as the power relations implicit in them, and the possibility of change.

When society and culture are regarded as the result of performative actions, repetition is crucial. Repetition is also at the center of mimetic processes, which refer to previous similar actions, but never have exactly the same results as they do. Rather, these physical and sensual processes lead to change and reorganiza-
tion by means of imitating an example. This is where the innovative and creative momentum of mimetic processes lies, and this is also what makes them crucial to social actions. This element of performative difference plays a decisive role in the emergence of society and culture. In the course of this process, criticism and change can be staged and performed. Performative action creates social constructions, institutions, and practical knowledge that differs according to cultural practices. This practical knowledge has become one of the main areas of the anthropological research carried out in recent years.30

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