

Łukasz Sebastian Sobiech

**THE AMBIGUOUS MAN**  
**THE THOUGHT OF HELMUTH PLESSNER,**  
**OR THE EMBODIED PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY**

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

For decades, the name Helmuth Plessner wasn't well-known. Nevertheless, the past years have been marked by a remarkable rediscovery of the life, work, and especially the thinking of the German anthropologist, sociologist and notably philosopher, who for a long time stayed in the shadow of his contemporary opponents Max Scheler and Arnold Gehlen, and in particular of the most original and important philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Martin Heidegger. Although the German academic community is dared to speak about a 'Plessner Renaissance', for the Polish academic community, however, it seems too soon to talk about a revival.

For that reason, the present dissertation includes both biographical threads for the sake of a framework and an attempt of wide analysis of Plessner's philosophical views. Against the background of the theory of pure metaphysical (Scheler), empirical (Gehlen) and ontological (Heidegger) features of man, Plessner takes a step towards a biologically oriented philosophy including historical dimensions of human existence. It saw man as a corporal living creature among others and as a particular kind of autonomous individual. Even this determination has allowed Plessner to formulate a theory of man, which abolished the Cartesian dualism and, furthermore, display the role of the *Leib-Körper* (living-corporal body) as a mediator between the individual and the self-centered world. In other words, the thesis suggests that in most of Plessner's works exist a constant image of man as a main idea of his anthropological philosophy. Besides, this specific image of man had already been established during his period of residence in Cologne, where he worked between 1920 and 1933 with the objective of generating the concept of *ambiguous man*.

Usually, Plessner's philosophical anthropology is represented by his primary work *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* (The Levels of Organic and Man). Such focus on a one-work approach, however, is threatened by a substantial cut, and leads most often to

[1]

misinterpretation. The thesis revises this dominant position of the work *Die Stufen*, by means of a demonstration that Plessner's foundation of his anthropology laid in more than one work. Thus, his book *Die Stufen* is considered in the context of further works, which appears in the mentioned period, namely: *Macht und menschliche Natur* (Power and Human Nature), *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft* (The Limits of Community) and *Lachen und Weinen* (Laughing and Crying). Moreover, as a practical consequence, it was analytically determined to separate Plessner's philosophical chain of thought in two parts, i.e. the foundation of his anthropology, on the one hand, and the philosophy of expression, on the other hand. We should keep in mind that Plessner, in the first place, has built up his fundamental consideration about man, before he starts his further reflection about the expressivity of man. Both, of course, do complement each other, but the thesis puts the emphasis to explore and categorize an initial significance of the structure of the foundation.

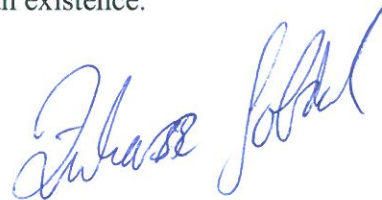
While doing this the focus on the structure of the foundation has not only allowed to systematize the work of Plessner, but also created the opportunity to lay the groundwork for the arguments of the author. The central ideas of the dissertation can be summarized in the following statements. Man seen as ambiguity is nothing more than a discussion about the problem of Cartesian dualism, which had differentiated radically between the worlds of measurable body and of the products of the mind. Therefore, the first part pays much attention to the ontological mind-(or)-body question and the role it played in the concepts of Scheler, Gehlen and Heidegger in contrast to Plessner. Whereas Scheler indicates the place for human self-reassurance in the metaphysical cosmos, Gehlen in the empirical world and Heidegger in the ontological understanding of time, the core of Plessner's method admittedly aims to counter this fundamental distinction and its inadequacy when it comes to describing man, but give up the fundamentalist separation in favour of double self-experience as mind-(and)-body.

Next we move to the most important issue in this context, namely to deal with both the natural (body) and the historical (mind) perspective. For the understanding of the foundation of Plessner's anthropology the second part turns, on the one hand, to a more biological approach and, on the other hand, requires attention concerning human nature that must be understood by taking further account of the cultural dimensions of life. The main focus of this objectivity of double self-experience presupposes no immutable essence of human nature, but only his ambiguity made possible by both the eccentric positionality (*Stufen*) as a structuring moment of human biology and the unfathomableness (*Macht*) as a structuring moment of his historical existence. From a methodological point of view, it can even be said that eccentricity and unfathomableness overlap each other. It's because man is in a state of eccentric



positionality and, therefore, not only in a body, but rather in a reflexive relationship to his body. Thus, he is centred in two bodies in once and obliged to express themselves as well as to react to his expressivity. It is this reflective apprehension that forces man to create a horizon of open immanence, which gives expression to unfathomableness of his power and may even lead to modes of interpretation that are far beyond the grasp of his concrete place and time. Here lies the inner ground for the historical character of human existence.

Based on the above-mentioned conditions, at the split point of the foundation, the last part has tended to put the living-corporeal body as a concretization of ambiguity. In light of the bio-philosophical character of the human existence, it seems to be rather consistent to display the concept of dual understanding of a living-corporeal body, namely that man has a body (possession of a physical substance) and at the same time is a body (be an embodied consciousness). This last remark evokes the understanding of the ambiguous phenomenon of man, which is determined and interpreted from two parts, that is, as inner experience or soul (*Grenzen*) and as outer experience or the physical body (*Lachen und Weinen*). In this sense, the notion of ambiguity is thus not only a phenomenological category, but rather a theoretic-practical basic structural formula for the fundamental constitution of man. It references to the functional potential and constitutional conditions of human existence.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Eusebio J. ...'.