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# **Philosophische Anthropologie als interdisziplinäre Praxis**

*Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner und Nicolai Hartmann  
in Köln – historische und systematische Perspektiven*

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in Cologne – Historical and Systematic Perspectives*

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# Inhalt

Einleitung .....	IX
<i>Erik Norman Dzwiza-Ohlsen &amp; Andreas Speer</i>	

## I

### *Wissenschaftsgeschichtliche Reflexion: die Kölner Konstellation*

1	<i>Philosophische Anthropologie und Neue Ontologie. Die ›Kölner Konstellation‹ zwischen Max Scheler, Nicolai Hartmann und Helmuth Plessner als philosophiegeschichtliches Ereignis im 20. Jahrhundert .....</i>	3
	<i>Joachim Fischer</i>	
2	<i>Wissenssoziologie und Liberalismuskritik bei Max Scheler .....</i>	24
	<i>Olivier Agard</i>	
3	<i>Max Scheler und Paul Ludwig Landsberg: Lehrer-Schüler-Beziehungen und der Kölner Kontext der Entstehung der philosophischen Anthropologie zwischen Wissenssoziologie und Philosophiegeschichte .....</i>	44
	<i>Mikhail Khorkov</i>	

## II

### *Epistemische Praktiken: Anthropologie, Phänomenologie und Psychologie*

4	<i>Philosophische Anthropologie als Konvergenzwissenschaft .....</i>	61
	<i>Emanuele Caminada</i>	
5	<i>Emotional Expression: The Phenomenological View .....</i>	79
	<i>Ingrid Vendrell Ferran</i>	
6	<i>Can There Be a Phenomenology of Free Will? .....</i>	99
	<i>Eugene Kelly</i>	

- 7 **Unsichtbar und unerhört: Kontroversen um Max Schelers Wertphilosophie** ..... 114  
*Alexander Nicolai Wendt*

### III

#### *Anthropologische Grenzen: Animalität, Personalität und Geist*

- 8 **Geistiges Sein und Parteilichkeit** ..... 137  
*Volker Schürmann*
- 9 **Die exzentrische Struktur der Sorge** ..... 154  
*Lisa Alexandra Henke*
- 10 **Deus Absconditus! Homo Absconditus. Animal Absconditum?** .. 173  
*Hannes Wendler*
- 11 **Bestien – Zur Anatomie des Schreckens vor dem Animalischen** ... 194  
*Thiemo Breyer*

### IV

#### *Interdisziplinäre Praxis: Philosophie, Wissenschaft und Gesellschaft*

- 12 **Cultural Anthropology: An Axiological Approach** ..... 207  
*Roberta De Monticelli*
- 13 **»Kritische Forschung und forschende Kritik«. Triadische Transdisziplinarität in Helmuth Plessners *Philosophischem Anzeiger*** ..... 228  
*Julia Gruevska*
- 14 **»Von Natur aus?« Darwin und die Evolutionstheorie aus der Perspektive der Schelerschen Anthropologie: ein erster Problemaufriss** ..... 247  
*Susan Gottlöber*

- 15 **Sondierungen zur evolutionären Anthropologie des  
›Atmosphären‹-Begriffs** ..... 269  
*Corvin Rick*
- 16 **Metapher und Mitvollzug. Zwei Ansätze zum Zusammenhang  
von Musik und Emotionen bei Plessner** ..... 283  
*Marie Louise Herzfeld-Schild*

## V

***Interdisziplinäre Anthropologie der Zukunft: Mensch,  
Technologie und Umwelt***

- 17 **The Political Task of Philosophical Anthropology in the Age of  
Converging Technologies** ..... 305  
*Jos de Mul*
- 18 **Approaching Artificial Consciousness via Scheler's Framework:  
Considering the Possibility for *Geist* in Machines** ..... 329  
*Daire Boyle*
- 19 **Max Schelers Wertetheorie und die Anforderungen einer  
veränderten ökologischen Ethik** ..... 347  
*Evrin Kutlu*
- 20 **Mein fremder Killer in mir: Menschen, Organismen und  
Designer-T-Zellen** ..... 364  
*Johannes F. M. Schick*
- 21 **Nicolai Hartmann's Contribution to an Ecological Materialist  
Anthropology** ..... 385  
*Keith Peterson*
- Namensverzeichnis** ..... 403

# The Political Task of Philosophical Anthropology in the Age of Converging Technologies

*Jos de Mul*

First of all, I would like to thank the organizers of this conference for inviting me to speak here tonight. It is a great pleasure to participate in the conference *Philosophical Anthropology as an Interdisciplinary Praxis. Historical and Systematic Perspectives*, because it is a special event for at least three, partly overlapping reasons.

The first reason is, of course, the fact that this year we celebrate the 100th birthday of the University of Cologne. I'd like to congratulate my Cologne colleagues with this achievement. I know how it feels to reach this respectable age. Not personally, as – I hope – you will see, but institutionally. Next Friday, the Erasmus University Rotterdam will celebrate its 106th birthday. Within the context of European universities our universities are both still young and vital. And this conference is a clear demonstration of the vitality of the University of Cologne. This brings me to the second reason why this conference is special.

1919 is the year in which Max Scheler and Helmuth Plessner entered the newly founded university and – from 1925 on with Nicolai Hartmann as the connecting catalyst – developed, in a close interdisciplinary dialogue with natural and social sciences such as biology and sociology, philosophical anthropology, not only as a new philosophical discipline, but also as a philosophical paradigm or school (in order to distinguish these two meanings, I will use capitals to refer to the paradigm or school). As such Philosophical Anthropology was part of what Wolfram Eilenberger in *Zeit der Zauberer* calls »das große Jahrzehnt der Philosophie 1919–1929«. In the intellectually roaring twenties Philosophical Anthropology emerged alongside and in critical debate with several other important 20th century philosophical movements, such as Heidegger's *Existenzphilosophie*, the *Logical Positivism* of the *Wiener Kreis* and the *Critical Theory* of the *Frankfurter Schule*. However, the fact that of the three founding fathers of Philosophical Anthropology Scheler and Hartmann only appear in a subservient role on the first pages of *Zeit der Zauberer*, and that Plessner is not even mentioned at all in the book, indicates that the turbulent and tension-filled *Kölner Konstellation* between Scheler, Plessner and Hartmann – as described and analyzed in detail by Joachim Fischer in his monumental monograph

*Philosophische Anthropologie*<sup>1</sup> – together with the sudden death of Scheler in 1928 and the exile of Plessner during the national socialist era, prevented that Philosophical Anthropology experienced a similar international breakthrough as the three other paradigms mentioned. However, since a couple of decades we witness – another proof of the ›Kölner Vitalität! – a renaissance of Philosophical Anthropology, especially of the Plessnerian branch, which makes a comparison between the challenges and tasks of Philosophical Anthropology, as they appeared in its formative years, one hundred years ago, and the challenges and tasks Philosophical Anthropology faces today, an urgent task. And this brings me to the third reason why this conference is so special.

If we take the adoption of the *Weimarer Reichsverfassung* on the first of August 1919 as a criterion, the year 1919 also marks the beginning of the *Weimar Republic*. Among the founders of Philosophical Anthropology, it was especially Helmuth Plessner, who – motivated by the turbulent political struggles within the *Weimar Republic* – wrote extensively about the political dimension of his Philosophical Anthropology. After all, *Die Stufen des Organischen* (1928), in which the bio-philosophical foundation of his Philosophical Anthropology is being laid, was written alongside and in close reciprocal constitution, with a series of political writings: *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft* (1924), *Macht und menschliche Natur* (1931), and *Das Schicksal deutschen Geistes im Anfang seiner bürgerlichen Epoche* (1935), republished in an extended form in 1959 with the title *Die verspätete Nation. Über die politische Verführbarkeit bürgerlichen Geistes*.

In my contribution, I will focus on the reciprocal constitution of Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology and political philosophy. I will analyze Plessner's critique of reductionist and determinist Neo-Darwinism and its political implications as elaborated in *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* (1928), *Macht und Menschliche Natur* (1931) and his recently published lectures on *Philosophische Anthropologie*, which he held in Göttingen in 1961. Against this background, I will discuss the challenges and task of Philosophical Anthropology in our present age, characterized by converging technologies. This term refers to the increasingly integrated biotechnologies (such as genetic modification), digital neuro-technologies (such as brain implants), artificial intelligences (such as predictive algorithms) and nanotechnologies (manipulation of matter on an atomic, molecular, and supramolecular scale, which plays an enabling a role in the other three).<sup>2</sup>

1 Fischer, *Anthropologie*, pp. 23–134; see also Fischer, *Konstellation*.

2 Bainbridge/Roco, *Converging Technologies*.

The thesis I will defend is that whereas in 1919 Neo-Darwinism was primarily a *theoretical* challenge, which necessitated a *rethinking* of – to quote the title of Scheler's most famous contribution to Philosophical Anthropology – »the human place in the cosmos« (Scheler, 1928), in the course of the 21st century, it became a *practical* one. Supported by multinationals like the »Big Five« tech companies (*Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft*), the »Big Six« seed, biotech and agrochemical corporations (*Dow Chemical, DuPont Pioneer, ChemChina, Syngenta, Bayer and Monsanto*), as well by authoritarian states such as the People's Republic of China (we should not only think of the social credit system, but also of the present biopolitical state terror against the Uyghur population in the Xinjiang Province), Neo-Darwinism has become a biopolitical project, more or less intentionally aiming at a transformation of human life in the direction of trans- and posthuman lifeforms. The question is no longer *what* is the human's place in the cosmos, but rather *whether* there still is a place for human life in the cosmos, and what we should do vis-à-vis Neo-Darwinian biopolitics. The decisive question in the present age is, in other words, how to choose our right enemy.

I will argue that today, Plessner's philosophical and political anthropology, and especially the key concept of *Unergründlichkeit*, will not only help us to understand and criticize the contemporary theoretical challenge of Neo-Darwinism, but may also inspire us if we want to tackle the practical threats of Neo-Darwinism politically.

In the following I will try to show that Philosophical Anthropology does not stand alone in its struggle against Neo-Darwinist theory, but can and should ally itself with postgenomic movements in the life sciences, such as systems biology and epigenetics, which also oppose the still dominant Neo-Darwinist theory and practices. In the domain of philosophical anthropology, interdisciplinary cooperation with these subdisciplines in the life sciences is therefore needed more than ever.

Let me finish my introduction with a short overview of the remainder of my contribution, which consists of three parts. In the first part I will discuss Plessner's philosophical anthropology, as developed in *Die Stufen*, as a critical, *theoretical* reaction against the challenge posed by reductionist and determinist Neo-Darwinist evolutionary theory. I will argue that unlike many of his contemporaries, Plessner does not fall back on metaphysical principles, but develops an emergentist non-reductionist naturalism, which integrates critical rationalism as one of its levels.

In the second part, I will discuss the *practical* (*biopolitical*) challenge of Neo-Darwinian theory in the 1920s–1960s and Plessner's politico-anthropological answer in *Macht und menschliche Natur* and in his lectures on

*Philosophische Anthropologie*. I will argue that the most dangerous aspect of Neo-Darwinian biotechnology is its undermining of the fundamental unfathomability (*Unergründlichkeit*) that characterizes the human lifeform.

In the third and last section I will turn to the present and discuss the Neo-Darwinian ›War on Unergründlichkeit‹. I will focus on three challenges caused by respectively molecular genetics, digital neurotechnologies and artificial intelligence. In this section, I also will try to formulate the task and challenges of a Plessnerian political anthropology vis-à-vis converging technologies. It will be argued that the main task of Philosophical Anthropology in the coming decades is to prevent the biotechnological and algorithmic control which – ultimately – might lead to the negation of human life as we know it.

### 1. **The *Theoretical (Philosophical) Challenge of Reductionist and Determinist Neo-Darwinism in the 1920s and Plessner's Non-reductionist and Emergentist Answer***

The history of philosophical anthropology is a multifaceted phenomenon of which many different stories can be told. Here, I will focus on only one of the facets that played an important role in the formation of Philosophical Anthropology: Neo-Darwinian theory and practices. The spectacular rise of Darwinism after the publication of *On the Origin of Species* (1859), compelled a fundamental reconsideration of ›the human place in the cosmos‹<sup>3</sup>. Darwin's ›dangerous idea‹ was that a simple algorithm of reproduction, variation and selection is responsible for the entire evolution of life on earth.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Neo-Darwinism – the synthesis of Darwin's theory of evolution and Mendel's theory of genetics at the end of the nineteenth century – did not only question the alleged gulf between human beings and (other) animals, but even the gulf between animate and inanimate nature. Darwin's theory of evolution, fueled by the rise of molecular genetics, seduced Neo-Darwinists to a ›greedy reduction‹<sup>5</sup> of life to a series of biochemical and – in the final analysis – sheer mechanical processes. According to this reductionist model, DNA molecules in the nucleus of each cell determine all life processes and as such the destiny of each individual organism. In the Neo-Darwinist view, expressed eloquently and with rhetorical bravura by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (1976), probably the most influential biological book since Darwin's *Origin of*

3 Cf. Scheler, Kosmos.

4 Dennett, Dangerous Idea.

5 Dennett, Dangerous Idea, p. 82.

*Species*, humans are nothing more than »survival machines, vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes«. <sup>6</sup> And according to a recent statement of Daniel Dennett, »there is not much difference between a human and a robot«. <sup>7</sup> Human beings are »biochemical puppets«, »moist robots«, made of flesh and blood instead of silica and steel. <sup>8</sup> Human consciousness is nothing more than the result of physical material processes. Or, to quote a famous saying of my 19th century fellow-countryman Jacob Moleschott: »Ohne Phosphor kein Gedanke!«. <sup>9</sup> Obviously, notions like freedom and responsibility do not have a place in such a mechanistic worldview.

In the 1920s, the reactions of those who opposed this mechanistic Neo-Darwinist interpretation of Darwin's theory of evolution were twofold. Negatively, the opponents tried to underpin the claim made by Kant in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790), that there will never be a »Newton« who could explain teleological phenomena such as the emergence of even a single blade of grass. <sup>10</sup> Positively, opponents of Neo-Darwinism tried to show that there are phenomena or principles that escape a sheer biochemical or mechanistic explanation. They *either* postulated a vital, teleological principle, a life-force distinct from biochemical reactions, as did, for example, the neovitalist biologist and philosopher Hans Driesch – who was appointed professor in philosophy in Cologne in 1920 and who in that same year supervised Plessner's Habilitationsschrift *Untersuchungen zu einer Kritik der philosophischen Urteilskraft* – by implementing an Aristotelean notion of entelechy, *or* emphasized a spiritual, metaphysical dimension, as did Max Scheler by opposing a divine spirit (*Geist*) to the vital urge (*Drang*).

However, as much as Plessner rejected the »greedy reductionism« of the mechanistic worldview, which attempts to explain »too much with too little« <sup>11</sup>, he also rejects the »greedy transcendence« of the vitalist and metaphysical alternatives of Scheler and Driesch, which explain »too little with too much« and for this reason inevitably are driven back to an »an untenable makeshift

6 Dawkins, *Selfish Gene*, p. xxii; cf. De Mul, *After Neo-Darwinism*.

7 Cf. Schuessler, p. 1.

8 Ibid.

9 Moleschott, *Kreislauf*, p. 5.

10 Cf. Kant, *Urteilskraft*, B 337.

11 Dennett, *Dangerous Idea*, p. 82.

solution«<sup>12</sup> and »cryptological formulas«<sup>13</sup> as in the case of Driesch, or to theomorphic intuitions about a transcendent God, as in the case of Scheler.<sup>14</sup> To clarify his own position, Plessner uses the term »hylozoist«, which Driesch used to debunk Plessner's approach in *Die Stufen*, as an honorary nickname. After all, the idea that life is inseparable from matter<sup>15</sup>, and that human life is a psycho-physical unity<sup>16</sup>, is not only defended by ancient hylozoists like Thales, Anaximenes, and Heraclitus, but it is indeed also the very presupposition upon which Plessner's bio-philosophy and philosophical anthropology rest; it is therefore neither vitalistic nor mechanistic.<sup>17</sup>

Phrased in a contemporary vocabulary, we could say that in *Die Stufen* Plessner manages to unite a naturalist position with a Kantian notion of the human being as a rational being (*Vernunftwesen*), which is a self-conscious and morally responsible being with a free will. Here the impact of Nicolai Hartmann is evident, especially of his *Theorem der kategorialen Schichtung*, which enables Plessner to distinguish several levels (*Stufen*) in organic life without reducing the higher levels to the lower ones.<sup>18</sup>

An important part of *Die Stufen* consists of Plessner's description of the subsequent levels of plant, animal and human life. Every living thing is characterized by the fact that it is always already »placed within its boundaries« (*in seine Grenze gesetzt*).<sup>19</sup> At the same time, it has to create (*setzen*) its boundaries. All living things have to realize – i. e. build and maintain – their boundaries, which is a lifelong task. Depending on the way they relate to their boundaries – i. e. their specific positionality – different levels of boundary realization can be distinguished.

In *Die Stufen* Plessner distinguishes between the categories of open, centric and excentric positionality, which characterize respectively plant, animal and human life (notabene: Plessner notes, that there is no necessity in correlations of categories with lifeforms). Although already in the case of plants the interaction with the environment is mediated by their body, they do not have

12 Plessner, *Levels*, p. xxxiii/*Stufen*, p. 32. The first page number refers to Millay Hyatt's English translation of *Die Stufen*, which has been published under the title *Levels of Organic Life and the Human* by Fordham University Press in 2019. In the remainder of this chapter, if the reference to a quote of Plessner does not include a reference to an existing English translation, the translation is mine.

13 Plessner, *Newton*, p. 261.

14 Plessner, *Levels*, p. xxiii/*Stufen*, p. 18.

15 Cf. Plessner, *Levels*, p. 115/*Stufen*, p. 177.

16 Cf. Plessner, *Stufen*, p. 75.

17 Plessner, *Newton*, p. 261.

18 Cf. Fischer, *Konstellation*, p. 117.

19 Plessner, *Levels*, p. 271/*Stufen*, p. 364.

a relationship to their own positionality. *Open positionality* means that their expressions happen to them rather than that they are executed by them. In the *centric positionality* of the animal, however, the interaction with the environment is mediated by a center, localized in the brain and the connected nervous system and sensorimotor apparatus. Here, Plessner notices – connecting to an idea developed by Kant in *Die Kritik der Urteilskraft*<sup>20</sup> – a (gradual) reversal of the relationship between the whole of the organism and its parts. Quoting Uexküll, Plessner expresses this idea as follows: »When a sea urchin runs, the legs move the animal. [...] When a dog runs, the animal moves its legs.«<sup>21</sup>

In the case of the *excentric positionality* of humans, a second mediation takes place. Unlike animals, human beings not only live from their center, but they are also always behind and beyond their center. They can reflect on their centric behavior and the distance between their excentric positionality and their center of experience enables them to mediate and control their centric behavior to a certain extent – that is: not always and not totally, but sometimes and partly – with the help of the reasons, meanings, values and norms that characterize the shared world of culture (*Mitwelt*). Unlike Kant's transcendental subject the human person in Plessner's philosophical anthropology is not fully autonomous, it rather functions like a »second nature«, a reflective feedback on our centric drives. The human person »knows himself to be free and despite this freedom to be bound in an existence with which he struggles and which inhibits him.«<sup>22</sup>

In *Die »Kölner Konstellation«* (2014) Joachim Fischer describes Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology as an »Ontologie der emergenten Seinsschichtung.«<sup>23</sup> In the language of analytical philosophy of science, we could call Plessner a non-reductionist, emergentist naturalist. At present, we witness a remarkable »re-emergence of emergence theories«, both in the life sciences and in the philosophy of science.<sup>24</sup> Whereas in the reductionist paradigm of Neo-Darwinism the »arrow of causality« points in only one direction, in disciplines like epigenetics the »arrow of causality« points in opposite directions. Next to the upward causation from genes to organism, there is also downward causation. From the perspective of a Neo-Darwinian reductionist determinism, downward causation looks impossible as a concept, but this does not preclude, as the French philosopher of science Michel Bitbol wittily adds, that it

20 Cf. Kant, *Urteilskraft*, B 286.

21 Plessner, *Levels*, p. 230/*Stufen*, p. 316.

22 Plessner, *Levels*, p. 271/*Stufen*, p. 364.

23 Fischer, *Konstellation*, p. 89.

24 Cf. Clayton/Davies, *Emergence*; De Mul, *Self-understanding*.

is »well established as a fact«. <sup>25</sup> Just like Plessner, non-reductionist emergentist naturalists point to the fact that in the case of emergence, the higher levels are characterized – on a phenomenological level – by new properties. However, these emergent properties do not refer to new causal forces. Downward causation is understood as a new relatedness of the parts, which constrain the behavior of the lower-level elements. »Higher-order properties act by the selective activation of physical powers and not by their alteration«. <sup>26</sup>

However, although excentric positionality elevates the human being above the level of sheer animality, this elevation has its price. Being excentric also means that we do not coincide with ourselves. We are »constitutively homeless« (*konstitutiv Heimatlos*). <sup>27</sup> This homelessness is connected with the fact that we are no sheer excentric beings. As bodily beings, we always remain centric as well. Nevertheless, the relationship between our centric and our excentric experience is fundamentally broken. We hope to overcome this homelessness by creating a home, a *Heimat*. This neediness constitutes the natural artificiality (*natürlichen Künstlichkeit*) of the human lifeform. Or, as Plessner expresses it in the final chapter of *Die Stufen*, in which he discusses the first of his famous three anthropological laws, *the law of natural artificiality*:

The human wants to escape the unbearable excentricity of his being; he wants to compensate for the dividedness of his own form of life, and he can achieve this only with things that are substantial enough to counterbalance the weight of his own existence.

The excentric form of life and the need for completion constitute one and the same state of affairs. Need, however, should not be understood here in a subjective or psychological sense. This need is presupposed in all needs, in every urge, every drive, every tendency, every volition of the human. In this neediness or nakedness lies the motive of all specifically human activity, that is, activity using artificial means that is directed toward the unreal. In it lies the ultimate ground for the *tool* and for that which it serves – that is, *culture*. <sup>28</sup>

Now, it is important to emphasize that the fact that human beings are both centric and excentric does not mean that the two modes of positionality co-exist independently (as is the case in dualist theories of Plato and Descartes, in which the soul is imprisoned in the body like a prisoner in a dungeon or a ghost in a machine). Nor does it mean that we oscillate between our centric

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25 Bitbol, *Downward Causation*, p. 233.

26 Van Gulick, *Who's in Charge*, p. 252.

27 Plessner, *Levels*, p. 288/*Stufen*, p. 385.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 289/p. 385.

and excentric positions constantly.<sup>29</sup> After all, excentric positionality is a new emergent type of mediation and boundary-realization. This is expressed in the second of the three anthropological laws, the *law of mediated immediacy*.<sup>30</sup> In our life we have to realize (centric) immediacy in an (excentric) mediated way, that is, with the help of tools and culture. Like any boundary realization, this is not a once-only event, but a life-long task, not only for the individual, but for the human species as a whole. The mediated immediacy must be realized again and again in a dialectical process of excentering (*Exzentrierung*) – some authors use the terms decentering and recentering (*Dezentrierung*).<sup>31</sup>

For that reason, we are forced by our very excentric constitution to ever new realizations of our mediated immediacy. Or, as Plessner expresses it in his section on the law of mediated immediacy: »The expressivity of the human thus makes him a being who even in the case of continuously sustained intention continues to push for ever *new* realizations and in this way leaves behind a *history*«. <sup>32</sup>

As the third of the three anthropological laws – *the law of the utopian standpoint* expresses, every attempt to create a home, to definitely recenter ourself<sup>33</sup> – either by returning to some original naturality (as we find it expressed in conservative branches of Romanticism) or by domesticating our excentricity in a fixed, final form (as we find in totalitarian political and technological ideologies) – is doomed to fail. After all, because of their constitutive brokenness and homelessness, humans have never lived in such natural state and never will be able to bridge the gulf between their centric and excentric positionality.

## 2. The *practical (biopolitical)* Challenge of Neo-Darwinism in the 1920s–1960s and Plessner's Politico-Anthropological Answer

The fact that human beings are artificial by nature and have to realize themselves in ever new realizations, make them – as Plessner formulates it with a word derived from Dilthey's philosophy of life – unfathomable (*unergründlich*) and for that reason inexhaustible (*unerschöpflich*).<sup>34</sup> Although Plessner expresses his indebtedness to Dilthey repeatedly in *Die Stufen*, the

29 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 302/p. 401.

30 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 298/p. 396.

31 Cf. Kockelkoren, *Art and Technology*; Krüger, *Antwortlichkeit*; Nauta, *Synchronie*.

32 Plessner, *Levels*, p. 314/*Stufen*, p. 416.

33 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 317/p. 419.

34 Cf. De Mul, *Finitude*; Mitcherlich-Schönherr/Schloßberger, *Unergründlichkeit*.

word *unergründlich* does not appear in it. However, it becomes a key concept in *Macht und menschliche Natur* (1931), a study for which Plessner himself preferred the title *Politische Anthropologie*. It appears many times throughout the text and is even part of the title of two of the twelve chapters.

Because of its *Unergründlichkeit*, the anthropological ›Quest for Man‹ is inevitably an open question, which can never arrive at a fixed answer, neither empirically nor aprioristically:

It must remain open, for the sake of the universality of its view onto human life in the full scope of all cultures and epochs of which the human is capable. This is why the unfathomability [*Unergründlichkeit*] of the human moves to the center of anthropology, and the possibility of being-human that contains what makes the human a human in the first place, that human radical, must yield to the standard of unfathomability.<sup>35</sup>

According to Plessner, the *Unergründlichkeit* of the human makes Philosophical Anthropology necessarily political: »In [the] relation of indeterminacy toward itself, the human conceives of itself as *power* and discovers itself as an open question to the benefit of its life, theoretically and practically.«<sup>36</sup>

Plessner draws two political conclusions from this. Accepting the *Unergründlichkeit* of human life, »which is anchored religiously in the sense that everything that bears a human face is equal before God« implies »acknowledging non-European cultural systems and worldviews that are relative to their bearers and thereby indirectly are relative to God, before whom, as ›humans,‹ they are all equal, equally legitimate, or at least equally possible.«<sup>37</sup>

However, although Plessner speaks with much respect about other cultures, he at the same time acknowledges that the multiplicity of cultures also implies conflict and struggle about the validity of the different values and norms:

As power, the human – risked in this generality toward what is human, and any statement determining its formal character remains a risk – is necessarily engaged in a struggle for power, i. e., in the opposition of familiarity and foreignness, of friend and enemy.<sup>38</sup>

This quote makes clear that for Plessner, affirmation of the plurality of cultures and of the historical and cultural relativity of all values and norms, which has

35 Plessner, *Political Anthropology*, p. 26/*Menschliche Natur*, pp. 160–61.

36 Idem, p. 49/p. 188.

37 Idem, p. 14/p. 148.

38 Idem, p. 53/p. 191.

its ground in the unfathomability of human life, does not imply that one should not defend one's own familiar culture, and the values and norms it embodies.

The affirmative use of the infamous friend-enemy distinction, introduced by Carl Schmitt in *Der Begriff des Politischen* (1927), which was answered reciprocally by Schmitt's praise of *Macht und menschliche Natur* in the second edition of this work<sup>39</sup>, has evoked a lot of discussion, varying from denouncement of Plessner's entire political anthropology because of its proximity to Schmitt<sup>40</sup> to attempts to rescue him by suggesting that the alliance with Schmitt was a regretful, but temporary flaw.<sup>41</sup>

However, in my opinion, the friend-enemy distinction as such is not that problematic, it seems to be a realistic picture of the way politics works. Moreover, in opposition to Schmitt, Plessner combines the friend-enemy distinction with a strong affirmation of liberal pluralism. Whereas Schmitt's use of the friend-enemy distinction seems to be motivated by a strong centric desire for *Heimat* – a kind of *Über-Rezentrierung* to use a phrase of Hans-Peter Krüger<sup>42</sup>, to end all excentering tendencies characterizing the modern world – Plessner's use of this distinction rather stems from an excentric appreciation of human *Unergründlichkeit* and the accompanying *konstitutive Heimatlosigkeit*. Moreover, according to Plessner, the opposition between friend and enemy, familiarity and foreignness, can be applied to all kinds of relationships:

There is politics between man and woman, master and servant, teacher and student, physician and patient, artist and patron, and whatever other private relationship you like, just as in the public sphere, there are, beside the politics proper of the state and of parties, politics and policies concerning the law, the economy, culture, and religion, as well as social policy.<sup>43</sup>

We could even extend Plessner's list of friend-enemy relationships by including philosophy, science and technology. After all, Plessner's struggle with Neo-Darwinism is, like every friend-enemy relationship, immediately connected with theoretical and practical questions about its ›Nutzen und Nachtheil für das Leben‹ – to quote the title of a famous essay of Plessner's fellow-traveler in philosophy of life Nietzsche.<sup>44</sup> Here, the crucial question is: what are the implications of Neo-Darwinism for the *Unergründlichkeit* of human life?

39 Cf. Schmitt, *Begriff*, p. 47.

40 Cf. Kramme, Plessner & Schmitt.

41 Cf. Honneth, Plessner & Schmitt.

42 Cf. Krüger, *Lebenswissenschaft*.

43 Plessner, *Political Anthropology*, p. 55/*Menschliche Natur*, pp. 194–95.

44 Cf. Nietzsche, *Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil*; Plessner, *Political Anthropology*, p. 49/*Menschliche Natur*, p. 188.

Except for a short, general remark about the optimism of Darwinism<sup>45</sup> Plessner in *Macht und menschliche Natur* does not discuss (Neo-)Darwinism. However, in his recently published *Philosophische Anthropologie*, which consists of a transcription of the lectures delivered in Göttingen in the summer semester of 1961<sup>46</sup>, Plessner does. In the final, 18th lecture, which bears the title *Zur Aktualität der Philosophischen Anthropologie*, Plessner discusses at length the threat of Darwinism and its application to society (so-called Social Darwinism). His discussion starts with a quotation of a lecture Erich von Holst, the leader of the *Max-Planck-Institut für Verhaltensforschung* in Seewiesen and an expert in *Instinktforschung*, gave that same year and published in *Merkur*.<sup>47</sup> In the first part of his lecture, Holst describes the tremendous success of artificial »selection« (*Auslese*) in domestic animals. In the second part, Holst discusses »organized human enhancement« (*planmäßige Menschengenese*). So far, Holst notices, we have not domesticated ourselves and that is why we, unlike domesticated animals, are still stuck to our »original natural drives« (*urtümliche Triebnatur*). However, as human culture has de-activated natural selection up to a great extent, humans show a great genetic variety, which is an advantageous starting point for human enhancement. Anticipating Sloterdijk's *Regeln für den Menschenpark*<sup>48</sup>, Holst suggests that we owe it to ourselves – »friend(s) of mankind« – to apply the insight gained by the domestication of animals to the perfection of mankind. Although Holst acknowledges that there are multiple obstacles – such as the possibility of misuse and the difficulty of finding useful criteria for selection – he concludes his lecture with a plea for a world government to organize human enhancement. If we do not, Holst writes in the midst of the cold war – we risk a nuclear war »that will end all life on earth«.<sup>49</sup>

Plessner immediately expresses his astonishment about Holst's suggestion, not long

after a time which has thought about this in exactly the same way and which has brought the greatest misery upon our country. Exactly with the same kind of idealism in the background that also speaks through these words. You see then, ladies and gentlemen, that the past in Germany has not been overcome, and (this is the case) for the greatest minds of our science. That should give one pause.<sup>50</sup>

45 Cf. Plessner, *Political Anthropology*, p. 32/*Menschliche Natur*, p. 167.

46 Cf. Plessner, *Anthropologie*.

47 Cf. Holst, *Instinktforschung*; Plessner, *Anthropologie*, pp. 210–11.

48 Cf. Sloterdijk, *Menschenpark*.

49 Plessner, *Anthropologie*, pp. 210–11.

50 Plessner, *Anthropologie*, p. 211. Translation taken from Julien Kloeg's review of Plessner's *Philosophische Anthropologie* (Kloeg, 2019), who I also like to thank for the inspiring talks

Plessner refers within this context to the impact Social Darwinism had on the *Züchtungsideo­logie* of National Socialism, aiming at the creation of a *Herrenrasse*. True, Holst explicitly rejects the National Socialist *Züchtungsideo­logie*, but because of the threat of a nuclear war he nevertheless recommends considering an »organized enhancement« (*planmäßige Auslese*) of humans.<sup>51</sup> Plessner criticizes the all-too-utopian character of Holst's proposal. After all, it is – as Holst himself in some of his formulations seems to admit – unrealistic, because the idea of human enhancement in the direction of a more perfect mankind presupposes the very kind of perfect political leaders that it hopes to realize.<sup>52</sup>

Moreover, Plessner adds, Holst's proposal is not only fully unrealistic (*vollkommen unreal*), but it is also fully irresponsible – just as in the case of the nuclear bomb – because it deprives humans of the conditions of the possibility to exist and to be human (es »beraubt die Menschheit der Bedingung der Möglichkeit zu existieren und Mensch zu sein«<sup>53</sup>). And Plessner not only and primarily refers to the possibility that the transformation of *Homo sapiens sapiens* into some trans- or posthuman species would lead to a total extinction of the species that we are, but also to the fact that the whole idea of a domestication of human beings erroneously presupposes that the human is a *sheer animal*, be it a rather dangerous and disturbed animal.<sup>54</sup>

However, if human beings really were animals, than the whole problem would not arise, as animals do not domesticate other animals. Plessner adds that although in the world of nature there exist all kinds of parasitic and symbiotic relationships between different species – such as, for example, between ant and plant louse – these relationships are the result of a coming together of these species over the course of millions of years, and not as a result of active intervention. Domestication presupposes rational distance, planning, objectifications, and these are, as we have seen, features that characterize the excentric positionality of human beings.

The idea that the human being is an animal that has »original natural drives« (*eine urtümliche Triebnatur*)<sup>55</sup> which can be domesticated, has in human history lead to two opposing, but equally erroneous ideas. On the one hand we find – with philosophers like Rousseau and Marx – the utopia of a paradisiacal

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we had about these Göttinger lectures and about the relationship between Plessner and Schmitt.

51 Quoted by Plessner, *Anthropologie*, p. 210.

52 Plessner, *Anthropologie*, p. 215.

53 Plessner, *Anthropologie*, p. 212.

54 Plessner, *Anthropologie*, pp. 215–16.

55 Plessner, *Anthropologie*, pp. 210, 216.

origin, which has been perverted by culture. The opposing idea supposes that the human being was originally an aggressive predator (*Raubtier*), which has thankfully been domesticated by culture through repression. Here we can think of Freud's theory of the repression and the inhibition of aggressive and sexual drives, which easily may result in discontents towards civilization.<sup>56</sup> Plessner also refers to »biological politicians« of the 19th century and their followers »im dritten Reich«<sup>57</sup>, who wanted to rescue and further develop the valuable remains of the human *Raubtiernatur* through selection in order to re-create »the blond beast« of the past.

Yet a third group of thinkers, like life scientist Holst, argue that we *should* domesticate the human, but they add that, so far, we have failed to do so. All in all, the situation is quite confusing. According to Plessner, this confusion results from the fact that these conflicting ideas ignore the fundamental characteristic which distinguishes the human lifeform from those of other animals: its excentric positionality.

Just like other animals, we humans have instincts, but because of our brokenness, our relation to our instincts as well as the way we realize them, differs fundamentally from those of other animals. In the case of other animals (Plessner mentions bird migration as an example), instincts push through with a tremendous preponderance (*ungeheuren Übergewalt*). However, in humans, the rhythms of instincts (*Triebrhythmik*) are interrupted. We could think of the release of the sexual drives from the fixed rhythms of these drives in animals<sup>58</sup>, and the same is the case with human aggression. Whereas the aggression of animals is always embedded within the limited horizon or *Umwelt*, the aggression of humans is infinitely. In that sense the human being is no predator, otherwise we would be much more peaceful. Our brokenness leads to a fundamental conflict between our instincts and our reason (*Vernunft*). The human is a self-domesticating being, and by domesticating itself, it creates the very possibility of infinite aggression, a secondary wildness. Animals do not kill, only humans do, and they do it even with lust.

In that sense the national-socialist hope to re-create the »blonde beast« from the past rests on a fundamental misconception of the human lifeform. The »blonde beast« is rather a secondary wild form, a byproduct of

56 Plessner, *Anthropologie*, pp. 122ff.

57 Plessner, *Anthropologie*, p. 221.

58 Plessner points to the fact that we witness this release of sexual drives also in the case of domesticated animals, a similarity that has been understood by some authors as a support for the idea that humans are domesticated animals, too (Plessner, *Anthropologie*, p. 220).

self-domestication. »This powerful, belligerent, dominating creature! However, ladies and gentlemen: The blonde beast can be found in the stable!«. <sup>59</sup>

Erich von Holst's hope that the domestication of the human requires nothing more than the elimination – through genetic manipulation – of the dangerous natural remains in the human, rests on a similar misconception of the human lifeform, because it neglects its excentric positionality.

### 3. The Neo-Darwinist ›War against *Unergründlichkeit*‹. Human Survival vis-à-vis Molecular Genetics, Digital Neurotechnologies and Artificial Intelligence

In his lectures Plessner wonders why, unlike in the case of the nuclear bomb, there is still no discussion about the biotechnical deprivation of »the conditions of the possibility to exist and to be human«. <sup>60</sup> Maybe the lack of discussion in 1961, only eight years after the first adequate description of the DNA molecule by Crick and Watson, was due to the fact that biotechnologies were still in their infancy. However, since then Neo-Darwinism has grown biotechnological wings. The life sciences and the accompanying biotechnologies have outstripped physics. Whereas physics, and the technologies based on it – cars and planes, nuclear energy, computer – dominated the 20th century, the *Human Genome Project* (1990–2003), in which the 3 billion bases of the human DNA were sequenced in order to determine the 20.000 genes which supposedly constitute the human being, marked the beginning of the ›Century of the Life Sciences‹ and the age of ›real existing Neo-Darwinism‹.

Evidently, Neo-Darwinism does not stand alone. The sequencing of the 3 billion nucleotides of the human DNA would not have been possible without the availability of digital computers. In molecular biology, DNA research has increasingly moved from the analogical world of atoms and molecules to the/a digital world of bits. <sup>61</sup> And with the help of programmable scissors like *CRISPR-Cas9* – which enables molecular biologist, after having learnt to read DNA, now also to write it – and various nano-technologies, the *in silicio* manipulations of DNA can also be realized *in vitro* (in a test tube) and *in vivo* (in living organisms). Information- and nano-technologies – manipulation of matter on an atomic, molecular, and supramolecular scale – played a similar enabling role vis-à-vis the neurosciences, for example through the development of new

<sup>59</sup> Plessner, *Anthropologie*, p. 126.

<sup>60</sup> Plessner, *Anthropologie*, p. 212.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. De Mul, *eLife*.

imaging technologies like MRI-scans and brain implants. And as the work of Alan Turing shows, the development of the electronic digital computer also led to the development of the new field of artificial intelligence. In turn, information technologies, neurosciences and artificial intelligence research found strong inspiration in evolutionary theory, for example in the development of evolutionary algorithms and neural networks.

Because of their interdependence, biotechnologies, digital neurotechnologies, artificial intelligence, and nanotechnologies are often called *converging technologies*.<sup>62</sup> Although they are all rooted in the mechanization and mathematization of the world view that characterizes modern physics and technology since the 16th and 17th century, they have complemented the postulates of analyzability, lawfulness, and controllability, which characterize the mechanistic world view, by the informationistic postulates of synthesizability, programmability, and manipulability.<sup>63</sup> Whereas mechanical sciences and technologies aim at understanding, predicting and controlling phenomena as they are, informationistic sciences and technologies are modal, in the sense that they aim at synthesizing, programming and manipulating phenomena according to human interests and desires. For example, think about the modification, manipulation and even creation of matter, life and consciousness.

The converging technologies seem to increase and enhance the rational, technological control over the world. They enable us to control the natural and cultural world on a much more fundamental level than ever before. But they are also increasingly being applied to modify and manipulate human life and human behavior. Let me just mention some examples, taken from the domains of biotechnology, neuroscience and Artificial Intelligence respectively.

Whereas Erich von Holst's 1961 proposal to use *genetic modification* for the enhancement of the human species was still a dream, in 2019 genetic screening for the detection of missing or extra chromosomes or inherited disorders like *sickle-cell anaemia*, *cystic fibrosis*, and *Tay-Sachs disease* is already a common practice in many countries in the world. Whereas these types of screening are already accepted by large parts of the population, there is still a lot of discussion about other types of genetics screening, for example the test for *Down syndrome* in women over 35 expecting birth. And prenatal screening aimed at physical or mental enhancement is still very controversial. Moreover, in the case of complex traits such as intelligence, which are also strongly dependent on environmental factors after birth, genetic modification is still and may even remain out of reach. However, with the growth of knowledge and the

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62 Cf. Bainbridge/Roco, *Converging Technologies*.

63 Cf. De Mul, *Informatization*; eLife.

introduction of new genetic tools, such as the aforementioned *CRISPR-Cas9*, a whole array of new possibilities of genetic modification, manipulation and creation appear at the horizon, such as the production of cybrids and chimaera, human-animal combinations, designed for the breeding of human organs in animals.<sup>64</sup> And in synthetic biology the holy grail is to create life from scratch.

In the domain of neurosciences, I would like to mention the therapeutic use of *deep brain stimulation*, for example in the case of *Parkinson's disease*. In order to compensate for the loss of bodily control by the patient, an electrode is implanted in a specific region of the brain, the *subthalamic nucleus*.<sup>65</sup> It is electrically powered by an impulse generator with a battery implanted in the patient's chest. After successful insertion, fluctuations, dyskinesia (inability to keep one's body in a stable or balanced position) and tremor (involuntary movement of the hand) are significantly reduced. Whereas this kind of therapeutic use of brain implants is generally welcomed as it is used to restore the patient's autonomy, other uses of brain implants are still more controversial. I am thinking of the experiments, commissioned by *Google* and *Facebook*, to establish brain-computer interfaces in order to be able to search the web with your thoughts instead of using a keyboard.<sup>66</sup> Given the business model of these companies, they certainly will also explore how to import valuable information from our brain into their database(s). Visionaries even foresee the creation of a global brain, which will function as a kind of hivemind.<sup>67</sup>

Whereas prophecies with regard to the global brain still remain utopian or dystopian dreams, AI already has many applications in our present world. One might think of *predictive algorithms* which use data about human behavior to make predictions, as they are being used, for example by *Amazon* to predict and recommend your next purchase. In 2012, *Amazon* patented an algorithm for anticipatory shipping; they start sending you the stuff before you bought it.<sup>68</sup> This use of our ›invisible visibility‹ might be handy, but what about other applications of predictive algorithms, such as anticipatory imprisonment? In the case of Philip K. Dicks 1956 novel *The Minority Report* – in 2002 loosely adapted by Steven Spielberg in his movie with the same title – it is still a science fiction fantasy, but in present day China these kinds of predictive algorithms are being used in the so-called *Social credit system*, which tracks and predicts the behavior of citizens in order to achieve and/or preserve societal stability.<sup>69</sup>

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64 Cf. De Mul, Genetisch.

65 Cf. Hätscher, Switching.

66 Cf. Perry, Interface; Sherwin, Google's Future.

67 Cf. De Mul, Encyclopedias.

68 Cf. Lomas, Amazon.

69 Cf. Dick, Minority.

And in case of resistance, as is the case among the Uyghur population in the Xinjiang region, to actually imprison people.<sup>70</sup> And whenever, despite the use of sophisticated AIs, the domestication of recalcitrant humans fails, there is still the option to replace them or let them be terminated by robots.

How are we to understand these phenomena, produced by the converging technologies, from a Plessnerian perspective? Let me first note that Plessner, already in the 1960s and 1970s, foresaw these developments. In *Ein Newton des Grashalms* (1964), for example, several decades before the emergence of synthetic biology, Plessner already writes that »eventually chemists should be able to synthesize a small polynucleotide specifically arranged, hence one now dares to think of synthesizing in the laboratory a structure possessing genetic continuity and of all the tremendous implications of such an accomplishment«. <sup>71</sup> And in the 1965 foreword to the second edition of *Die Stufen*, he writes: »Phenomena of regulation, control, and memory, once regarded as arcana of living matter, lost their special status in the light of cybernetics – perhaps too quickly, but electronic models do invite analogies. And these too are fertile«. <sup>72</sup>

These phenomena seem to express a kind of reversal of the three anthropological laws formulated in *Die Stufen*.<sup>73</sup> Whereas the human being has been artificial by nature, it gradually seems to turn into a product of artificial naturality. And whereas human life is characterized by mediated immediacy, life in the age of converging technologies increasingly has the character of an immediate mediation. And finally, whereas mass communication media like television already put us in a situation where we experience the world through screens, in the age of converging technologies we experience the world increasingly via computer simulations and virtual realities. Representations increasingly become simulacra, copies without an original, immediate mediation.<sup>74</sup>

Certainly, these reversals are originally driven by a desire to control the outer world. Control of the biological constitution, as we witness in *genetic modification*; control of behavior, as we witness in *deep brain stimulation*; control even of the future, as we witness in *predictive algorithms*. However, although they promise greater control, the question remains *who* is in control. It is tempting to point – as I did in my introduction – to the Big Five tech companies, the Big Six agricultural chemical and seed corporations and to authoritarian governments. In their attempts to control our lives, these companies and

70 Cf. Roberts, Biopolitics.

71 Plessner, Newton, p. 262.

72 Plessner, Levels, p. xxi/Stufen, p. 15.

73 Cf. De Mul, Anthropology 2.0.

74 Cf. Baudrillard, Simulacres.

governments aim to bring about an over-re-centering (*Über-Rezentrierung*). However, in these cases we are no longer steered by our instincts, but by technological drives instead.

After all, the big companies and authoritarian governments are not the final powers that rule the world, but themselves functions and instruments of the technologies they use. Human leaders using these technologies may think that they are in charge, but they have in fact become the ultimate objects of technological control and manipulation themselves.

This should not be a complete surprise, if we remember Plessner's clarification of the second anthropological law in *Die Stufen*.

Just as essential to these technical aids (as well as to all works and rules originating from human creativity) is their inner weight, their objectivity, which appears in them as that which could only be found and discovered, not made.

Everything that becomes part of the sphere of culture thus exhibits both a connection to its human authorship and (to the same extent) independence from it.<sup>75</sup>

For a long time, we could debunk notions like technological autonomy by remarking that such notions are just anthropomorphic metaphors. Technologies may have unpredicted and perhaps even unpredictable side-effects, but, in opposition to humans, they have no real agency or autonomy. However, in the age of converging technologies, in the case of synthetic biology, neural networks and autonomous vehicles, ascribing agency and autonomy loses its metaphorical character. It is not without tragic irony that whereas Neo-Darwinism has reduced human being *theoretically* to sheer machines, vehicles of selfish genes, in the age of converging technologies, which *actually* transform humans into vehicles of selfish technologies, these technologies themselves increasingly become alive (Hockfield, 2019). In this scenario *Homo sapiens sapiens* might turn out to be the creator of its own successor in the evolution of life on earth.

Here we see how the utopian standpoint – where the human is confronted with »Nullity and Transcendence« (*Nichtigkeit und Transzendenz*).<sup>76</sup> – transforms into a tragic one. Whereas transhumanists dream of eternal life through a radical modification of their organic basis or by uploading their minds to machines, they are actually organizing a party for which they will not be invited.

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75 Plessner, *Levels*, p. 298/*Stufen*, p. 397.

76 *Ibid.*, p. 316/p. 419.

In his discussion of the second anthropological law in *Die Stufen*, Plessner makes the same point when he explicitly discusses the human impossibility of immediate mediation. In the case of immediate mediation, the human would become sheer excentricity without the experience of being an organic body. In that case »he would no longer be the other to himself«.77 For beings characterized by a fundamental brokenness – Hans-Peter Krüger comments on this passage in his contribution to *Philosophie im 21. Jahrhundert*, this would be hardly livable (*schwerlich lebbar*).78 Both over-excentring (*Über-Exzentrierung*), and over-recentring (*Über-Rezentrierung*) would put the humanity of humans at stake. Both extremes would equally deprive humans of the conditions of the possibility to exist and to be human.

In conclusion, this raises the question which political implications Philosophical Anthropology in the age of conversing technologies does have. Who are the friends and who the enemies? In an age characterized by globalization and migration, political debates in Europe often focus on the alleged Islamization of the continent, or its changing positions vis-à-vis the United States and China. And because of the polarization between traditional democratic parties and new populist movements, and the increase of political violence, the comparison with the turbulent years of the *Weimar Republic* often enters the discussion. The ecological crisis that accompanies the *Anthropocene* is often another reason to distinguish between friends and enemies.

However, we can only fully fathom these problems if we relate them to the challenges we face vis-à-vis the converging technologies. Here the future of the *human condition* as such is at stake. It would be wise to join »Team Human«79 to unite against the real enemy of our age: technologies that threatens to strip us of our humanity. Of course, as excentric beings we cannot turn our back to technology. We are already living in a »technotope«, we cannot survive without technology. The real challenge is to distinguish between technologies that will support human life and those who will undermine or even terminate human life. As always in politics, we should defend our own human *culture*, but vis-à-vis the converging technologies, we enter the age of life politics, in which Team Human has to defend human *nature*.

Not long before his death Stephan Hawking warned humankind that superior AI's could end mankind before the end of the century.80 That is a frightening prospect, but given the *Unergründlichkeit* of human intelligence and

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77 Ibid., p. 303/p. 403.

78 Krüger, *Antwortlichkeit*.

79 Rushkoff, *Team Human*.

80 Cf. Cellan-Jones, 2014.

creativity probably also no more than a dystopian dream. The real danger is that *inferior* technologies will dominate us. In order to prevent that, we should nourish the unfathomable depths of the human condition.

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