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THEORETICAL/PHILOSOPHICAL PAPER

The Social Undecidedness Relation

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Abstract

Plessner not only formulates a theory of positionality here but also a principle of how to construct this theory with respect to empirical research, a principle he calls the "deduction of the categories of life". This is described in the literature as "reflexive deduction". With reference to Plessner's methodology of theory construction I unfold a new understanding of his theory of the shared world. At present, there are two understandings of the shared world. The traditional understanding of the shared world is primarily concerned with relativizing particular individual selves, whose boundedness to their own standpoint is devalued by the we-form. I call this SWU-1. SWU-1 is not developed in accordance with the principle of reflexive deduction. The second understanding of the shared world, on the other hand, is developed, in accordance with that principle, as a reflexive turning upon the factual state of existing in relationships of touch. This leads to a different understanding of the shared world, which I call SWU-2, or the social undecidedness relation. Such an understanding of the shared world forces us to also reconsider our understanding of the inner and outer worlds.

Keywords Helmuth Plessner · Philosophical anthropology · Theory of the shared world (Mitwelt) · Reflexive deduduction · Individualiziation · Dividualiziation · Person · Personal world/world of persons

In this paper I argue that Plessner is not only a more or less well-known classic, but also that his work *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* (translated as *Levels of Organic Life and the Human*, forthcoming from Fordham University Press) has the potential to serve as a contemporary theory that can be challenged and/or supported by empirical biological, sociological, or anthropological research. Plessner not only formulates a theory of positionality here but also a principle of how to construct this theory with respect to empirical research, a principle he calls the "deduction of the categories of life" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 115). This is described

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in the literature as "reflexive deduction" (Lindemann 2014: 85ff; Mitscherlich 2007, chap. II; Schürmann 2002: 100ff). I argue that the theory of positionality is a contemporary theory, which—following the principle of its construction—can be revised with respect to empirical phenomena, if necessary.

I unfold my argument by confronting Plessner's theory of the shared world with the results of ethnographic research. According to the standard understanding of the theory of the shared world, social phenomena are brought about by individual actors who produce a socio-technical and institutional-symbolic world (Asemissen 1973; Fischer 2008, 2009; Mitscherlich 2007). But if we take seriously the results of ethnographic studies by Leenhardt and Strathern, Plessner's theory has to be revised, or at least formulated in a more precise way. According to Leenhardt and Strathern, individuals as such do not exist; instead the researchers found agents, which they refer to as dividuals (Leenhardt 1947/1983; Strathern 1988/2001).

My thesis is:

There are two understandings of the shared world. The traditional understanding of the shared world is primarily concerned with relativizing particular individual selves, whose boundedness to their own standpoint is devalued by the we-form. I call this SWU-1. SWU-1 is not developed in accordance with the principle of reflexive deduction. The second understanding of the shared world, on the other hand, is developed, in accordance with that principle, as a reflexive turning upon the factual state of existing in relationships of touch. This leads to a different understanding of the shared world, which I call SWU-2, or the social undecidedness relation. This leads us to the insight that there is a personal sphere without individual persons, i.e., without an I. Such an understanding of the shared world forces us to also reconsider our understanding of the inner and outer worlds.

I unfold my argument in three steps. First, I give a sketch of the principle of reflexive deduction, which Plessner followed to build his theory of excentric positionality. Second, I present the standard understanding of the theory of the shared world and how it is challenged by the results of ethnographic research. Third, I come up with a new version of the theory of the shared world, which provides a new starting point for understanding social phenomena: the social undecidedness relation. This allows for a formally precise understanding of the social that leaves it undecided whether social phenomena are brought about by individual actors or whether there are forms of personal existence that should better be described as dividualizing sociation.

The Reflexive Deduction of Excentric Positionality

Plessner develops his theory of excentric positionality on two levels. On the one hand, he works out the structure of the environmental relation of excentric positionality as a theoretical concept in accordance with the principle of reflexive deduction (Lindemann 2014: 85ff; Mitscherlich 2007, chap. II; Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 115; Schürmann 2002: 100ff). On the other hand, he examines whether there are intuitively given phenomena that can be considered to be the realization of the theoretically formulated environmental relation. In this sense, Plessner explicates

the formal-reflexive structure of the environmental relation of excentric positionality and takes up the human mode of existence as a possible form of its realization. Whether excentric positionality can only be realized in human form or whether other realizations are possible remains an open question (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 293, 301).

The Principle of Reflexive Deduction

Plessner has developed the principle of reflexive deduction within the context of an intensive engagement with Kant (Plessner 1918/2003, 1920/1981, 1923/1981, 1976/1981), especially with Kants *Critique of Judgement* (Kant 1790/2007).[1] Plessner sees himself as being guided by the revolution of philosophy he considers Kant to have proposed, which consists "in a particular art of asking. One should not ask questions randomly but in a way that brings forth precise answers" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 14). Based on this methodological approach, Plessner develops his theory of positionality, according to which, the human, as a practically active being, is not only an intellectual and cultural, but also a natural being. The question of the human must thus be asked in a way that understands her as part of nature (see Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 24).

The theory of positionality begins with a postulate. Plessner formulates a hypothesis of how living things differ from non-living things: living things realize their own boundaries. He develops this hypothesis of boundary-realization in accordance with the principle of reflexive deduction, in which the self-referential structure of the execution of life, the realization of boundaries, is once more reflexively related back to itself. This leads to a complex structure of environmental relation, for the body does not just exist as a body that delimits itself, but also experiences itself as a self-delimiting body. This means as well that the living body experiences not just its own states (hunger, pain, emerging impulses) but the extrinsic and foreign entities it encounters, by which the lived body is touched or affected and challenged to activity. Such a living subject forms the center of its surroundings, which are ordered around it. Plessner describes this as "out from its center [acting upon its surroundings—GL] and into its center [it perceives the events of its surroundings and its state is affected by them—GL]" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 288).

In accordance with the principle of reflexive deduction, the level of excentric positionality has been reached when the relation between the lived body and its surroundings found in centric positionality is once again related back to itself. Plessner inquires into the conditions that have to be met "in order that a living thing be given the center of its positionality, in which its life is absorbed and by virtue of which it experiences and acts" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 289). If the center is to be given to it, the most obvious solution would be to assume the existence of a second center, a second core of the subject. There would then be a subject that relates to itself

[1] For an in-depth discussion of the relation between Kant and Plessner and in particular of the relation between Kants *Critique of Judgement* (Kant 1790/2007) and Plessners principles of the open question and of reflexive deduction see Lindemann (2015) and the interview with Jay Bernstein (this issue).

like an object. This would mean the dissolution of the unity of the subjective execution of life, since a "multiplication of the subject's core" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 289) would occur that would entail a "contradictory doubling" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 290). The living subject would then be a subject and at the same time divide into two subjects, the connection between which would remain unclear.

However, this doubling of the subject core is only necessary if we neglect the positional character of excentric positionality. "A positional center [centric positionality—GL] only exists as execution" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 290), i.e., as the execution of a present from which relations to a past and future corresponding to the particular now are developed. If we also involve the relation to space, the self only exists *here* as the execution of its relation to the environment playing itself out *now*. The self thereby also experiences its present states, e.g., that it is hungry or thirsty, feels its own drives etc. Plessner describes this as being "set into its own center" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 290).

At the level of excentric positionality, the self relates to the circumstance that it relates to the environment in this manner. "It stands at the center of its standing" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 290). Plessner means here that a self on the one hand experiences its environment and experiences itself as hungry or feels its emerging impulses, and on the other hand refers to the circumstance that it experiences its hunger, that it feels its own impulses. At the level of excentric positionality, a self can relate to the circumstance that it lives from out of its own center. "This satisfies the condition that the center of positionality be at a distance from itself; set apart from itself, it makes possible the total reflexivity of the living system" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 290). The self remains at the center of the particular execution of that moment and is at the same time in the present execution "excentrically" set outside of itself. The excentric self is thus also "the subject-pole that can no longer be objectified or put into the object position" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 290). Plessner describes this as the "I" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 290). The non-objectifiable I is not an additional subject pole, but rather refers to the circumstance that the self is at a distance from itself as the executing center. The excentric self is marked by a division in its execution, which does not however mean that there are two distinguishable unities. Hence Plessner avoids a doubling of the subject core.

Insofar as the excentric self is at a distance from itself, it is the execution of its current spatiotemporal relations that the self is developing here and now and at the same time it is set apart from the spatiotemporal determinations of these executions and thus spatiotemporally undetermined. "As the I that makes possible the full return of the living system to itself, the human is no longer in the here/now but 'behind' it, behind himself, without place, in nothingness…" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 292). This formulation shows that the environmental relation of excentric positionality is characterized not just by reflexivity but also and equally originally by negativity (Henkel 2016; Krüger 2013: 141). As I, the living subject is at a distance from itself as the center from which it lives. For this reason, as I it is not determined by present connections to the past and the future. Insofar as the I is not determined by the spatiotemporal relations of the current execution of life, it stands in nothingness. "Nothing" here means that there is no positively determinable place that the I could inhabit. The I does not stand in a different place next to itself, rather it relates to

itself from a not-place. Insofar as the I stands placeless in nothingness, it becomes questionable to itself and thus becomes a task to be fulfilled (Krüger 2013: 140f.). The solution consists in creating artificial forms of living life.

Deduction of the Outer World, Inner World and Shared-World

The reflexive deduction of excentric positionality, starting from the focus on the I, culminates in the statement: "the living thing is body, is in its body (as inner life or psyche), and outside its body as the point of view from which it is both. An individual characterized positionally by this threefold structure is called a *person*" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 293—emphasis in the original). This structure is then differentiated further in the distinction between outer world, inner world, and shared world. As body, the living creature is a thing among things in the outer world, just as in the body the living creature forms an inner world, and the point of view from which it is both is then described as shared world (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 293).

For the outer and inner worlds, Plessner begins by naming the structural features of centric positionality and showing for one particular aspect what consequences ensue when we move from centric to excentric positionality in accordance with the principle of reflexive deduction. This approach is not maintained for the shared world; Plessner does not name any aspect of centric positionality that would become questionable in any specific way in the transition to excentric positionality. It seems rather that the shared world is generated by the reflexivity of excentric positionality. For only with the reflexivity of excentric positionality does the necessity arise for an I to set itself in relation to the I of others. Excentric positionality enables the human "to experiment with laying claim to the timelessness and placelessness of his own position (by virtue of which he is human), for himself and for every other being, even those that are entirely alien to him" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 300).

Hence, in methodological terms, the shared world takes on a special position here: it is the sphere that is first formed through excentric positionality. It does not exist as the becoming questionable of aspects already given at the level of centric positionality. In the secondary literature, this special position of the shared world is accepted without comment. This is even true for Olivia Mitscherlich's study on Plessner, which puts a particular focus on the principle of reflexive deduction (Mitscherlich 2007: 207ff.).

Structures of the Shared-World

I describe this as the traditional understanding of the shared world. According to this understanding (SWU-1), the shared world is directly derived from excentric positionality. The structures of the shared world are characterized by negativity, which leads the relation of the I to itself beyond itself, as it can apply excentric positionality to others as well. The I is thereby set in a relation to other selves that it could also be.

"If one wanted to speak metaphorically of the spherical structure of the shared world, one could say that it devalues the spatiotemporal diversity of human

standpoints. As a member of the shared world, every human stands where the other stands" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 304).

Centric selves exist here and now as spatiotemporally distinct executions. This results in a diversity of spatiotemporal standpoints and in the self's absorption in the concentrics of individual executions of life. The shared world devalues this diversity, for as I the self is at a distance to itself and could also take on the standpoint of others or be another. The interchangeability of standpoints characterizes the personal sphere of being. Its members, persons, are individual I's insofar as they are bound to a standpoint, and a general I insofar as they can take on the standpoints of others or of everyone (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 300). The different standpoints that can be taken by an individual personal self are singular and plural. If we consider the possibility of the interchangeability of standpoints as such, the difference between the singular and the plural dissipates. For if being a person is characterized by the possibility of taking on all standpoints, then all standpoints could potentially be occupied by one person. The person exists as a possibility as all other possible persons. Conversely, however, all other particular individual persons can take on the standpoints of the others. Due to this possible exchangeability, Plessner speaks of the "we-form of his own I" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 303) and characterizes excentric positionality as "truly indifferent to singular and plural" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 305). The shared world as such, i.e., the structure of the interchangeability of standpoints made possible by negativity, forms the general presupposition for the formation of social and symbolic order, e.g., that the perspectives of particular concrete others can be assumed in concrete processes of sociation. At least with respect to the concept of interchangeability, the theory of the shared world also formulates the general premises implicitly presupposed, e.g., in the pragmatist theory of sociation (Mead 1924–1925/1987).

SWU-1 is primarily concerned with relativizing particular individual selves, whose boundedness to their own standpoint is devalued by the we-form. Nevertheless, it seems to contain an ambiguity. One understanding of it puts the I at the center of the argument (Asemissen 1973), whereas a second understanding argues that the shared world cannot be derived from the individual I; it is rather the existence of an I that presupposes the existence of a personal sphere in general (Lindemann 2010, section on the theory of the shared world; Schürmann 2014, chap. 7.2; Wunsch 2016, part 3.2). Referring only to the text of the *Levels* itself, both interpretations seem possible.

"The assumption of the existence of other I's is not a matter of transferring one's own mode of being, the way in which a human being lives for himself, onto other things only corporeally present to him—in other words, an extension of his personal sphere of being—but rather a restriction and limitation of this sphere of being, that was originally not localized and resisted localization, to 'human beings'. The *process* of limitation, as it unfolds in the interpretation of alien centers of life appearing before us in an embodied way, must be clearly distinguished from the *premise* that other persons are possible, that there is such a thing as a personal world" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 301; emphasis in the original).

Following the traditional interpretation that is SWU-1, this is the result of the negativity of excentric positionality, for an excentric creature is free to make use

of its position for anything it encounters. If we take Plessner's examples seriously, anything we encounter that unfolds its presence here and now and directs itself at others from this position can be experienced as a member of the personal sphere of being (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 300f.). According to the first interpretation of SWU-1, a particular I serves as the starting point of personalization. This is one way to understand the statement that the shared world is real "even if only *one* person exists" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 304), for this one person could, as an experiment, try taking everything it encounters as persons (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 300). Nevertheless, there is a second understanding of SWU-1. "One person" must not be understood as a quantifier, but in the sense of "any one person" (Schürmann 2014, chap. 7.2). That is, if any one person exists, she would exist within a shared world. The shared world as such and the individual person would presuppose each other. With respect to the dialectics of the I and the We-form, Plessner draws on insights of German Idealism, he explicitly mentions Fichtes understanding of the personal sphere (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 301). In later works (Plessner 1946/1983, 1965/1983, 1967/1983) Plessner repeatedly refers to the significance of the I respectively to the we-form of the I, in order to comprehend the special position of man in relation to animal.

Both versions of SWU-1 are somehow reluctant with respect to the openness of the shared world. Plessner argues that only the "rational culture" of European and North American modernity led to a delimitation of the shared world in a way that living human beings alone can be recognized as its legitimate members. His choice of metaphors shows that he has a preference for the modern delimitation of the shared world (Beaufort 2000: 218f.). He speaks of a process of "disenchantment" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 301). This suggests that the reflexivity of excentric positionality gave rise to a state of enchantment that required a stay in the iron cage of "rational culture" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 301).

Ethnographic Research: A Challenge for SWU-1

Confronting SWU-1 with the results of ethnographic research challenges it in two respects. First, there are non-modern orders of the world that have not yet been disenchanted in this manner. There are institutionalized orders within which non-human beings are recognized as persons who count morally: plants, animals, or ancestors and spirits (Luckmann 1970). According to SWU-1, we must characterize these orders as childish or undeveloped; they are not quite capable of understanding their own excentric positionality. In a later book Plessner himself described such a view as ethnocentric. According to *Macht und menschliche Natur*, published in 1931 (English translation as *Political Anthropology* published in 2018), we have to recognize that there are diverse understandings of nature and culture. The European understanding according to which there is only one nature and a diversity of human-made cultures is only one among others (Plessner 1931/1981: 160ff.). Plessner thus appears as a precursor of Thomas Luckmann, Philippe Descola, or Eduardo Eviveros de Castro (de Castro 1998; Descola 1993, 2005; Luckmann 1970), who have described other orders of nature and culture. While these are not compatible

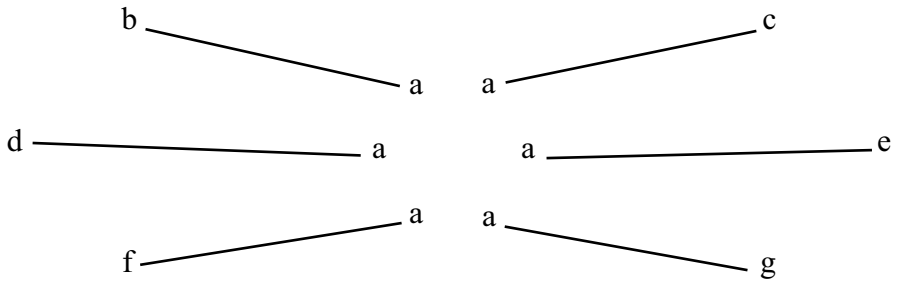

Fig. 1 The Melanesian dividual according to Leenhardt (1947/1979:154)

with a modern Western understanding in the strict sense, they would be compatible with SWU-1 insofar as non-humans are included into the sphere of persons capable of taking the standpoints of others. If the pejorative metaphors were replaced with neutral descriptions, the ethnographic research of Descola or Castro could well serve as a corroboration of SWU-1. This is in line with the interpretation of SWU-1 offered by Krüger (2001: 116f.), Schürmann (2014, chap. 7.2), and Wunsch (2016, footnote 61), who argue that the contingency of the shared world (Lindemann 2010) has a constitutive function for Plessner's understanding of being a person.

However, there is a second and more severe challenge to SWU-1, which questions the focus on the I as such. According to the ethnographic work of Maurice Leenhardt (1947/1983), it would be a distortion to conceive of Melanesians as individuals having relationships with other individuals. The individual is rather absorbed by the plurality of its relationships.

According to Leenhardt, the circle formed by the small "a" in Fig. 1 describes an empty space where an I could be, but, within the framework of the Melanesian conception of the person, is not. Instead of an individual, there is a cluster of relationships. "The lines correspond to him and his father, him and his uncle, him and his wife, him and his crosscousin, him and his clan, and so forth" (Leenhardt 1947/1979:153). Strictly speaking, the center does not contain an individual actor but a representative of a group. "To understand what I am writing here, it is necessary to visualize the Melanesian social landscape. A young man is never encountered alone but always in a united group of 'brothers' maintaining the same relationships as a unit with other groups" (Leenhardt 1947/1979: 153). Thus every small a is the replication of a group member in relation to the replications of the elements of another group, for b, c, d, e, f, and g are not individuals either, but relationships in a network without nodes.

These findings seriously call into question an understanding of the shared world that focuses on the individual I and how it adopts the standpoints of others. According to Leenhardt, there are no individual I's, but only replications of group members in relation to the replications of members of other groups. If we assume that SWU-1 correctly describes the general structure of the shared world, we must interpret the social world of Melanesia as a self-misunderstanding. Operating with the first interpretation of SWU-1 forces us to argue that there are I's taking the standpoints of

others here, but they do not recognize that this is the case. The second interpretation of SWU-1 suggests that there is a personal sphere of relations and individual I's and that these presuppose each other. But if we take Leenhardt seriously, his work shows that there is a sphere of personal relations, but no individual I. Ultimately, two options remain: either the results of ethnological research have to be revised or our understanding of the shared world.

A More Precise Reflexive Deduction of the Shared World

For persons there is a differentiation into outer world, inner world, and shared world, relating to the different aspects under which creatures of excentric positionality can become questionable. They become questionable because they relate to themselves from a distance that cannot be positivized, i.e., when they act from their center they are at the same time standing in nothingness. Both the outer world and the inner world can be understood in accordance with the principle of reflexive deduction as follows: in both cases Plessner names one particular aspect of centric positionality that is structurally modified by the reflexivity of excentric positionality and thus becomes questionable. Thus the surrounding field that challenges the creature to become active is securely given. It then becomes an outer world, the things of which have a side facing away from the subject, thereby making them questionable—they could turn out to be different than they seem. And: the center as living execution is given in the reflexive turn upon oneself as inner world that then becomes questionable for the living subject, since it could also be another, a different inner world.

As I have shown, for the shared world Plessner does not name any aspect of central positionality that is developed in the reflexive turn of excentric positionality along the lines of a reflexive deduction and would thereby become questionable in its own particular way. Instead, the shared world is understood exclusively as the condition of the formation of questionable outer and inner worlds. To make explicit how differently the concepts of inner, outer, and shared world are constructed, in the following I first describe the reflexive deduction of the outer and inner worlds. Then I work out what the reflexive deduction of the shared world would have to look like if it were to follow the same logic as the deduction of the inner and outer worlds. This leads to a different concept of the shared world: SWU-2, which can more precisely be called the social undecidedness relation. This understanding of the shared world forces us to also reconsider our understanding of the inner and outer worlds.

The Reflexive Deduction of the Outer World

"The surrounding field filled with things becomes the *outer world* filled with objects, a continuum of emptiness or of spatiotemporal extension" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 293). For centric creatures, there is a surrounding field and field conditions, which involve perceived contexts in the surrounding field that are experienced relative to action: there are things that can be grasped or pulled. The use of tools is also possible at

this level; they become integrated into the relation between lived body and surrounding field (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 268).

The reflexivity of excentric positionality turns the perceived field conditions (*Feldverhalte*) and action-relative things into factual states of affairs (*Sachverhalte*) and objects, which can be perceived independently of their relation to action. Here the negativity that is given with reflexivity, and is equiprimordial with it, is decisive, as this is lacking at the level of centric positionality (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 270f.). For a centric self, the things that can be practically handled are there where they can be grasped and used. When this practical relation becomes reflexive, the self is set outside itself; as an I it stands within and outside of the spatiotemporal determinations of its current execution. The same holds for the outer world: an object can be distinguished from the spatiotemporal position it currently occupies, while at the same time it becomes possible to identify other spatiotemporal positions that objects could occupy. The excentrically structured approach to the world means that things and states of affairs are distinguished from their spatiotemporal presence here and now. They are here, they could be elsewhere, and there are other possibilities. Based on the negativity of excentric positionality, the living subject forms an outer world independent of itself that has a spatiotemporal order with an objective, subject-independent character.

Objects existing in the outer world also take on a form characterized by negativity. For a centric living subject, there are things that challenge it to action here and now. While this still holds at the level of excentric positionality, a modification is introduced. Corresponding to the excentricity of the self, the objects take on a center that functions in perception as "the X of predication, the carrier of properties" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 295). The thing is outside of its spatiotemporal determinations. That which we encounter is what can be done with it here and now: I can pick up a hammer and hit something with it. At the same time, that which we encounter is also an X that is more than the spatiotemporal determinations that presently characterize it. For this reason we can always discover something new about the thing, we can always do something different with it. The thing is that as which it appears and at the same time it is not that as which it appears.

In the reflexive relation to herself, an individual person, an I, can also discover herself as a body located at an isolated point in space–time. As such a body, the living subject is part of the outer world turned away from the subject (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 294).

The surrounding field and the outer world refer to two views of a world. For within the framework of excentric positionality, the worldview relating to the lived bodily self, with an absolute above, below, ahead, behind, right, left, before, and after, remains alongside the excentrically enabled worldview leading to a space made possible by negativity. This space is filled with things, but one can imagine their absence. That is, this space can be filled with things—or not.

The Reflexive Deduction of the Inner World

At the level of centric positionality, the self is the execution of its current experience with the correspondingly fulfilled relations to past and future. Excentric positionality

means that the living subject reflexively relates to this fact. "The living being at a distance from itself is given to itself as *inner world*" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 295). The insight that Plessner took from his discussion of the multiplication of subject cores holds here as well. There is a splitting of the subject, but not a severing into two experiential subjects. The splitting of the experiential subject determines "a dual aspect of its existence as *psyche* (*Seele)* and *experience (Erlebnis)*"(Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 295). The split in the present execution makes of experience a thoroughly lived experience. It can also, however, be taken further in the direction of a stronger objectification, allowing the person to discover the psyche given to him or her as individual. This comprises the psyche as "the given reality of the dispositions, as an entity that develops and is subject to laws" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 296) and as such is distinct from the experience to be executed here and now. Plessner refers to these two aspects as the self in the "self-position" (the experience to be traversed) and "object position" (the reality to be perceived) (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 296). Both aspects taken together make up the inner world, which thus includes not just the objectively ascertainable psyche subject to laws (object position) but also the experience to be gone through in that moment (self-position).

The split in this excentric execution means that the excentric self for its part is both here/now and at the same time at a distance from itself. This distance leads to the person becoming questionable to him- or herself as I. When a self does not just currently execute its own center but also relates to the fact of doing so, it can become another for itself, it can ask itself whether it might not act or think differently: must I be the one I am or could I be someone else (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 298)? This thought can also be turned around: is it I who acts and thinks or is someone else acting or thinking as myself (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 298f.)? The possibility of not-being given with the reflexivity of excentric positionality and equiprimordial with it enables the I to become questionable to itself. It can experience itself as replaceable *qua* executive center. Since the distance from itself does not mean positively being able to assume another place or another center, the executive center cannot be replaced. Such a split self experiences itself as, e.g., Ms. Müller with certain dispositions and abilities; it criticizes itself and wishes to be another. But the self cannot leave itself; it cannot replace itself with another, for it remains bound up in its current execution (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 299).

The Reflexive Deduction of the Shared World

As I have shown, a new understanding of the shared world is required in order to meet the ethnographic challenge posed by, e.g., the works of Leenhardt. To this end, in the following I examine how a development of the shared world analogous to that of the outer and inner worlds following the principle of reflexive deduction changes our understanding of the shared world. To review the possibility of whether the shared world can be developed in a similar manner in accordance with this principle, we have to begin by clarifying whether there are relationships-with (*Mitverhältnisse*) at the level of centric positionality. Plessner affirms this. However, he only introduces the relationships-with after developing his theory of the shared

world (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 306). Moreover, these relationships-with are only demarcated negatively. The shared world is reserved for excentric positionality. This defensive position is quite surprising, given that Plessner had emphasized the peculiarity of the other structures of excentric positionality such as outer world and inner world without limiting himself to negatively demarcating them from the relation to the surrounding field at the level of centric positionality.

In order to describe the relationships-with of centric positionality in terms of their positional content, I will take up the phrase "lives out from its center and into its center" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 288). The second part of this phrase describes the fact that the lived bodily self stands over against a surrounding field, the various elements of which touch or affect the self in a differentiated manner. It feels affected in its own state by the events in the surrounding field and might be challenged to act. Other lived bodily selves form an integral component of the relation between the lived body and the surrounding field. Plessner does not mention this explicitly, but it seems that we are compelled at this point to assume that it belongs to the centric self's experience to be affected by the boundary realizations of other lived bodily selves. The lived bodily self notices that those of its kind, competitors, or prey orient themselves to the environment and how they do so and adjusts its own behavior accordingly (Lindemann 2014: 90–95). On the practical level, this effectively breaks up the immanence of the self's relation to the surrounding field, but this fact is not reflexively given to the lived bodily selves involved and does not set itself apart for them as such.

An example should make this clear: there are groups of birds of different species that live in the treetops of the Amazon jungle. They eat insects they flush out from the trees. In their search for food, they continually get into competitive situations with other birds trying to catch the same insect. Here some birds gain a tactical advantage by making a call normally used to warn others of approaching birds of prey. This warning call briefly distracts the competing bird and the deceiving bird catches the insect (Sommer 1992: 38f.). In interpreting this situation, it is not necessary to assume that the competing birds interpret the intentions of the other birds or that we are dealing here with subjects who understand one another as subjects. It does seem to me, however, that since the birds comprehend the directional significance of the movements of their competitors, we are forced to assert that their positional executions are related to one another.

This example should illustrate that it is reasonable to assume that relationships of touch exist on the level of centric positionality, in the sense of a lived bodily experience of other lived bodily selves. The selves involved experience the ways in which others orient themselves to the surrounding field and integrate this into their own relation to the surrounding field. The concentric relation between lived body and surrounding field is thus effectively broken up by relations with other lived bodily selves (Krüger 2014: 238). The lived bodily selves experience themselves being touched or affected by others directing themselves towards them. That is, bodily selves exist in relationships of mutual touch. Lived bodily selves whose relation between the lived body and the surrounding field is broken up in this way by relationships of touch need not belong to the same species. Predator and prey also have this kind of relationship of touch. The formation of relationships of touch, like the

formation of the entire relation of lived body and surrounding field, is structured by instinctive parameters that determine how lived bodily selves touch or affect other selves, which other selves they touch and affect, and how they are touched or affected by them. These parameters make it possible to learn how to structure individual relationships of touch, e.g., when to come closer or when to flee from whom, how to warn others, etc.

At the level of excentric positionality, relationships of touch become questionable in a specific manner and thus become a shared world. At the level of centric positionality, the relationships of touch do not set themselves apart as such for the lived bodily selves involved; in practice, they break up the relation between lived body and surrounding field, but this is not set apart as a factual state for the lived bodily selves themselves. When the structure of centric positionality itself becomes reflexive, these elements also set themselves apart for the selves involved and the structure becomes questionable in a twofold way: first, how to delimit the sphere of those who touch or affect one another as personal selves; second, in what way personal selves touch or affect one another. At the level of excentric positionality, persons find themselves in relationships of touch, and they must distinguish between being touched or affected such that they experience this as a relation to other personal selves and being touched or affected such that they find themselves in relation to objects.

Thus we can distinguish between two possible understandings of the shared world.

Shared-world understanding 1 (SWU-1): the shared world is directly derived from excentric positionality and the negativity given with it.
Shared-world understanding 2 (SWU-2): the shared world is developed in accordance with the principle of reflexive deduction as a reflexive turning upon the factual state of existing in relationships of touch.

Limits of the Shared World

With respect to the limits of the shared world, SWU-1 and SWU-2 are similar in terms of results, but they get there on different paths. We can summarize where they both end up in as follows: There is a personal world without pregiven boundaries, wherefore it needs a "process of limitation" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 301) to institutionalize specific boundaries for the sphere of personal existence.

According to SWU-1, this is the result of the negativity of excentric positionality, as an excentric creature is free to make use of its position for anything it encounters.

According to SWU-2, when the way in which lived bodily selves are bound to relationships of touch becomes reflexively accessible, their relationship to the environment becomes determined by negativity and the structural parameters for the formation of relationships of touch lose their effectiveness. Hence it becomes fundamentally questionable how to structure one's sensitivity to being affected by other personal selves. Persons have to determine for themselves, in their current executions, how to distinguish between personal relations and relations to mere things. Without structural parameters, persons find themselves in an unstructured sphere of

possible encounters with others. The negativity of excentric positionality means that every delimitation is only provisional and can be challenged and changed.

As concerns the impossibility of indicating any set boundaries of the shared world, both of these understandings reach a similar result, if by different paths. If we take Plessner's examples seriously, anything we encounter that unfolds its presence here and now and directs itself at others from this position can be experienced as a member of the personal sphere of being (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 300f.). A difference suggests itself, however. According to SWU-1, a particular I serves as the starting point of personalization (see above); by taking the standpoint of others, the I could experiment with treating everything it encounters as persons. Even if we assume that the I and the we-sphere presuppose each other, a crucial reference to an individual I remains.

If, however, we start with SWU-2, the lived bodily self finds itself always already in relationships of touch that is, in a shared world, the members of which affect it. Persons do not lay claim to something for others that may not apply, but rather experience themselves as integrated into a shared world, the exact structures of which have to be institutionalized. Due to the structural negativity of excentric positionality personal beings can, however, contest each institutional order. In other words, different obligations to be affected by others can be institutionalized. There are institutional orders within which the obligation is institutionalized to be affected by personal relations to inanimate objects, trees, spirits, or deceased ancestors or others. These are all possible members of a shared world. But every institutionalized shared world is questionable as such. It can be questioned by differing experiences of being affected, and subcultures of different ways of being affected can be institutionalized.

(In-)Dividualization

By developing the shared world starting from the structural negativity of the I, SWU-1 places the I at the center of the argument. The relation to the I remains, as it were, implicit at the level of centric positionality. In the surrounding field ordered concentrically around the living subject there is a functioning "I," the executive center. The reflexivity of excentric positionality makes of this a non-objectifiable I, and the possibility of negation leads this beyond the boundaries of the person's own I to its we-form.

SWU-2 starts from relationships of touch at the level of centric positionality. In the reflexive turning upon this circumstance, the lived bodily selves involved find themselves in undetermined personal relations of affecting each other. This shared world is in itself questionable in a twofold way: on the one hand, in terms of the limits of the personal world and, on the other, in terms of the structure of the personal world itself, i.e., how personal selves touch or affect one another. Building artificial institutional orders of the shared world is a necessary answer to this twofold questionability. To be precise: That an institutional answer to the twofold questionability has to be found is necessary, but each concrete institutional answer can be contested. With respect to how personal selves touch or affect one another, two possibilities arise for the formation of the shared world.

If in turning reflexively upon the fact that we find ourselves in relationships, we emphasize the state of affairs that it is always a particular individual person who finds him- or herself in this relation, this can be described by the well-known phrase: "I experience myself as a persisting individual I that can adopt the standpoints of others and that can enter into relations with others". In this case, the fact that it is an individual person entering into relations with others is realized by the current execution. A form of shared-world relating to an individual I is realized. Here we find a similarity to the second interpretation of SWU-1, within which one could argue that the I and the we-sphere as such presuppose each other, a state of affairs that is not realized as such, but only in concrete historical forms.

But we might also reflexively turn upon the fact that we find ourselves in relationships in a different manner: by experiencing the persons involved primarily as bound up in relations affecting one another. In this case, the fact that individual personal selves are involved is not of great significance. Rather we emphasize the fact that the personal world is structured by relationships. Instead of an I, there are persisting personal relations that are sustained here and now by operations of the lived body. In this case "the phrase 'I experience myself' has to be replaced […] by the phrase 'there is the experience of the execution of the mediation of persisting social bonds'" (Lindemann 2014: 97).

SWU-2 opens up a differentiated understanding of the shared world that does not presuppose a focus on the I. Rather the individualizing formation of the shared world is supplemented by the dividualizing formation of the shared world. The shared world as such is the reflexive turn upon relationships of touch, whereby given sensitizations to the connections to other selves become questionable. The shared world as such is the formal description of a social undecidedness; it leaves open whether a historically specific shared world is characterized by individualization or by dividualization and, furthermore, how the sphere of personal existence is institutionally delimited. That is why I call SWU-2 the "social undecidedness relation". The social undecidedness relation can serve as a general description of the shared world that is not forced to deny conceptually the reality of social relations such as those analyzed by Leenhardt. As I will show in the final section, the social undecidedness relation opens also new perspectives for the analysis of modern societies.

To further clarify the differences between SWU-1 and SWU-2, let us consider them in relation to Plessner's definition of excentric positionality, according to which an excentric self "stands at the center of its standing" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 290). "Center of its standing" refers to the execution of centric positionality". Standing at the center of its standing" refers to the reflexive relation to itself. The noun "center" refers to the static aspect and the verbs "stand" and "standing" to the aspect of execution. Both aspects are necessary to understand positionality (Schürmann 2014, chap. 7.2). If we follow SWU-1, the center must always be an individual self. It necessarily takes on an artificial form, because it exists in a relation of mutual presupposition with its we-form. According to SWU-2, this is only one among other possibilities. Selves exist as the execution of relationships of touch. The static aspect can be identified not only as the individual self but also as the order of relations. It is possible to identify the center as the set of group relations executed

here and now. There could be an enduring I, executed here and now, but there could also be enduring relationships executed here and now.

At the level of excentric positionality, relationships of touch are replaced by a sphere of possible personal relationships to be artificially formed. In this sphere, those involved dividualize, dissolving into persistent bonds, or become individualized as persistent I's. In a certain sense, the difference between acentric positionality (realized in plants) and centric positionality (realized in animals) can be seen as the structural analogue to dividualizing and individualizing forms of the shared world. For Plessner, plants also dissolve into their relationships, which is why he speaks of their "dividuality".

It seems as if Plessner made a mistake insofar as he did not strictly apply his own methodology of theory construction. This does not indicate a weakness in the theory of positionality. On the contrary, it reveals a particular strength of this theory, allowing us to unfold it further and to revise it in a methodologically controlled way if necessary.

Consequences for our Understanding of the Outer and Inner Worlds

SWU-1 and SWU-2 converge in their non-psychological understanding of spirit. Spirit is the sphere of relation-to-one-another, starting from which surrounding nature and the inner world can be comprehended. Spirit is negative and enables given structures to become questionable, while at the same time enabling the formation of a particular order of relations between persons and from persons to themselves and to the outer world (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 304). This can be understood a bit more elegantly on the basis of the social undecidedness relation, in that there is a focus here on the necessity of distinguishing between persons and things (in the case of individualization) or between personal relations and relations to things (in the case of dividualization). Those that make these distinctions may be personal selves who find themselves in relationships. By building and stabilizing these relationships, they generate a rule by which to identify non-personal entities and non-personal relationships. The outer world is generated as a distinction between persons and things or between personal and non-personal relationships. If the latter is the case, the outer world would not consist of individual things but the outer world consists of things that dissolve in their relations to other things and that dissolve in their relations to the personal sphere. Empirical examples can be found in what Descola (2005/2013: 144ff.) has described as the totemistic ontology.

Conceiving the realization of the shared world in terms of dividualization or individualization gives rise to a novel understanding of what Plessner refers to as the inner world. Individualization produces particular individual inner worlds of individual selves that are transcended in the we-form of one's own I. By contrast, in the case of dividualization, the innerness of the dividuals is spread around the surrounding world. The innerness of personal group relations is not located "in" each individual person or in their bodies. Instead the innerness of personal relations is distributed in the surrounding space, where group relations are enacted (for empirical corroboration, see Strathern 1988/2001: 359, see also Lindemann 2014: 303).

This also leads to a twofold understanding of what personal existence means. With respect to an institutional preference for individualization, we could refer to Plessner's well-known statement: "the living thing is body, is in its body (as inner life or psyche), and outside its body as the point of view from which it is both. An individual characterized positionally by this threefold structure is called a *person*" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 293; emphasis in the original). If we take the possibility of dividuation seriously, this statement describes only half the truth. It has to be supplemented by another understanding of personal existence, according to which this existence is realized in bodies dissolving into their relationships to each other; as inner life of the group it exists between bodies (inner life is distributed in a non-measurable space around the bodies), and it is beyond bodies; it is not comprehensible within orders of time and space.

Finally, I would like to preempt a misunderstanding. One might be tempted to equate Plessner's (1924/1999) concept of community with dividualization. At least partly, this is problematic, since community refers to the formation of a group that refers to itself as 'we' and, if necessary, uses violence against the individual to enforce internally harmonious relations (Plessner 1924/1999). The societies described by ethnology as dividualizing exhibit a different structure. Here it is a matter of the relations between different groups (clans, fraternal communities, etc.) who as groups relate to each other by way of exchange, conflict, and war. Dividualization describes a network of group relations that are partly cooperative and partly antagonistic, without reference to the individual. Dividualization is compatible with Plessner's concept of community, as long as there are many communities with different relations of conflict or cooperation. Dividualization is not compatible with this concept if it understands community as being focused on itself as a 'we' that is internally harmonious and demarcates itself outwardly.

Prospects for Sociological Theory

From the perspective of the social undecidedness relation, basic theoretical assumptions of sociological theory become highly questionable. Thus action theory takes the existence of individual actors for granted. But if we understand every social phenomenon as composed of the actions of individual actors, it becomes impossible to analyze "the individual actor" as an institutional form. What in fact is an institutional artefact of modern society (Lindemann 2018: 45ff., 101ff.) is taken as a universal concept. If we take instead the social undecidedness relation as a starting point, we can see that even in modern societies there is not only a strong institutional preference for individualization, but there are also contemporary forms of dividualiziation. Taking the perspective of the social undecidedness relation would allow for asking new questions in different social fields. For example: Is the institutional form "man" stronger associated with the institutional pressure towards individualiziation whereas the institutional form "woman" is associated with an institutional pressure towards dividualiziation (Landweer 1990). Starting from this perspective, Rational Choice interpretations of the increasing divorce rate in Germany and the US since the 1960 (Esser 2002) can be identified as a misinterpretation of a

changing institutional order. Whereas in the 1950s "women" encounter an institutional pressure to understand themselves as members of a familiy in relation to other families, since the 1960s "women" increasingly experience an institutional pressure towards individualiziation (Lindemann 2016). The question is not, why individuals (women) leave their group (family), but why the institutional order changed such that the institutional form of individualiziation became crucial for the practical self-understanding of women.

If we adopt the difference between "raw actor" and "agentic actor," we are also stuck with just another variant of individualism. "By 'raw actor' we intend to connote an entity pursuing rather unselfconsciously its built-in purposes—built in either through socialization or prior to socialization (e.g., by biology)" (Meyer and Jepperson 2002: 110, fn. 7). Agentic actors are then understood as self-conscious actors. The fact that individual actors can act on behalf of organizations does not contradict the assumption that they are individual actors. Organizations are themselves defined by the membership of individual actors, who are in principle free to enter into the hierarchical structure of an organization or to leave it (for a definition of organization see Tacke 2008).

The theory of double contingency has been understood as a kind of common ground between different sociological theories (Lindemann 2005: 72ff.). Unfortunately this too becomes problematic from the perspective of the social undecidedness relation. Double contingency (Luhmann 2005, chap. 3; Parsons 1968) presupposes that there are distinct individual actors or systems who encounter each other and have to make sense of an unknown and distinct individual counterpart. Double contingency starts with the relation between individual actors who are shaped through the way they relate to each other. This is in line with the idea that the individual I and its we-form presuppose each other. But double contingency neither allows us to give an account of institutional forms of dividualization nor of how the problem of the contingency of the shared world can be solved. Addressing this contingency requires us to give up a dyadic starting point—double contingency between ego and alter—for a triadic starting point, which allows for analyzing the building of institutional orders (Lindemann 2005: 88f.).

The social undecidedness relation invites us also to reconsider Berger and Luckmann's (1966) theory of reflexive institutionalization. Negativity characterizes the environmental relation of excentric positionality, which is why the configuration of environmental relations, including the structure of social relations, is essentially questionable. Since they can be questioned, creatures of excentric positionality have to develop artificial answers. They have to themselves form the structural parameters of their relationship to the environment, and in such a manner that it cannot be arbitrarily questioned. Plessner describes this as the need for the created structures of the environmental relation to acquire a "weight of their own" (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 311). They have to appear to those involved as detached from their own actions. These kinds of detached structurings can be found at two levels, that of the tool, i.e., functionally taking up and handling objects, and that of symbolic structuring by institutions and culture (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 311). This idea is taken up by Berger and Luckmann, who explicitly refer to Plessner. But Berger and Luckmann fail to recognize that Plessner's theory is not about individual actors but about

the necessity of analyzing institutional forms of individualized or dividualized executions of institutional orders.

In order to live their lives, creatures of excentric positionality depend by nature on such artificial institutional-symbolic ordering systems and tools/technology. Plessner calls this the law of natural artificiality, which is closely related to the law of mediated immediacy. Excentricity means that lived bodies can only immediately refer to the environment by the mediation of such socio-technical or institutional-symbolic ordering systems. Hence the need for an artificial order precedes every other form of need. Concrete needs can only arise within the framework of environmental relations configured by culture and material technology (Plessner 1928/forthcoming: 311). Hence the immediacy of impulses, needs, etc. of excentric lived bodies is always mediated by artificial ordering systems.

In *Political Anthropology*, where the intercultural comparison is key (Krüger 2013: 128; Mitscherlich 2007), Plessner further elaborates this aspect of natural artificiality. Nature itself is conceived here as only artificially accessible. For this reason, Plessner operates from the assumption that not only is there a diversity of cultures, but also a diversity of natures (Plessner 1931/1981: 149). Here Plessner also conceives the modern conception of space as relative "to our Western humankind" (Plessner 1931/1981: 149). Thus the orders of space and time belong to general cultural and institutional forms that artificially mediate the environmental relations of excentric creatures (Lindemann 2014: 126 ff.).

The theory of excentric positionality has a dual character: it formulates the openness, the fact of being questionable, and at the same time the necessity of creating technical and symbolic forms in order to arrive at an artificial security in the mediatedly immediate conduct of life. Hence the theory of excentric positionality is on the one hand the transition from a philosophy of biology to a philosophical anthropology and on the other hand a promising epistemological theory of the humanities and social sciences, which face the task of analyzing the variability of artificial forms of life with their specific outer worlds, inner worlds, and shared worlds, without attributing primacy to any one of these forms of life.

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