

Spirituality from the Perspective of Philosophical Anthropology: Against the Background of Helmuth Plessner's Conception

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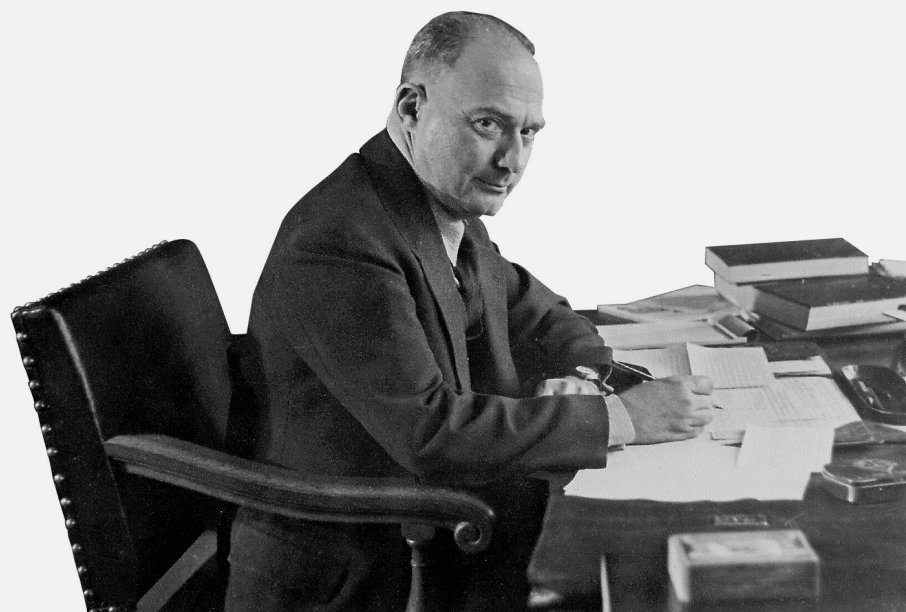
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The aim of the study is to situate the question of spirituality, religion, and God within the discourse of philosophical anthropology and to present the productive and inspiring approach found in Helmuth Plessner's conception. We consider as the key theme for the specific position of man the so-called utopian standpoint, which offers the possibility of an extension of experience towards transcendence in confrontation with the contingency of man's life. We also complement this view by observing the structure and configuration of such an experience. As man loses the unshakeable certainty and stable place of his own "where", one of the answers for him is the leap of faith, which, despite its various historical and cultural forms, is connected to the religious core of man. We find Plessner's project relevant today because it captures the inner dynamics and uniqueness of human experience, which requires reconfiguration in relation to the actual human situation, which is also connected to the coping with the question of faith and uncertainty, as well as to the emergence of new and surprising forms of religious experience and expression.



1 Introduction

Religion, and the related experience of spiritual kind, are of natural interest of anthropologists. This is partly due to the forms and variations of religion in different cultures, but also due to the specificity of the human perspective that accompanies religious experience. In the following study, we will focus on the analysis of spirituality [1] within the framework of philosophical anthropology, which has been developed since the 1930s in Germany, specifically by Helmuth Plessner. The reason for the choice of such a thematization is twofold: first, it is due to Plessner's conception of so-called "*excentric positionality*". For this interesting figure or function of experience, human action and expressions offer a concrete, individual view of the structure of experience that considers its specificity and uniqueness. Related to this is the potential contemporary application of Plessner's project, since the conditions of his philosophy are open and do not derive from ontological, ethical, theological, or cultural premises. Rather, they seek an appropriate – and attentive – approach to the human being in his or her experience and insight into the relevant configuration of experience. The second reason has to do with the fact that Plessner's philosophy is currently experiencing a revival of interest, which can be traced in the developing discourse of Plessner studies, which is related to the translation of Plessner's texts into English, as well as to the rich thematic scope of his philosophy.

In general, philosophical anthropology relates to the work of its three main representatives – Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner and Arnold Gehlen. However, the inspirational backgrounds as well as further elaborations of philosophical anthropology are richer: there is the philosophy of life, phenomenology, and the philosophy of biology, as well as intersections with related human and social disciplines. Philosophical anthropologists ask what man's place in the world is, the human perspective, the view of man through his own eyes. In doing so, they consider both his biological imperfection and his agency in cultural evolution. In what sense?



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2 Spirituality in the Perspective of the Non-Place of Man

Human instincts are undeveloped, not so specialized as to give man the possibility of biological “survival”. Man is thus an unstable, insecure being. But she or he is also a being who can say “no” to instincts and go beyond his or her own limitations, act and develop oneself in the sphere of culture. Man thus *becomes* (Ger. *werden*) someone, becomes who he is, in the performance of his life.

The relevance and actuality of anthropology in relation to issues of religion and spirituality can be traced in recent and forthcoming publications [2]. Within the platform from which we proceed, two tendencies could be identified in the search for an answer to the role and place of religiosity and God. On the one hand, these themes are explicitly present and elaborated in the work of Max Scheler, especially in *On the Eternal in Man*, in relation to phenomenology, revelation and givenness, and with his emphasis on the originality of religious experience as irreducible. In Scheler, we can find several impulses from both Christianity and pantheism. On the other hand, there is Arnold Gehlen’s conception, where we can draw from his work *Primitive Man and Late Culture*. His conception is based on derivation of early forms of religion and the genealogy of institutions, and we can find here rather a localization of this question in the network of human needs and interests, and thus a placing of God and religion in the structure of the stabilization of human life. On this basis, we can say that Helmuth Plessner’s approach is specific. It represents a third way, neither metaphysical nor reductive, which is based on a configuration of human experience, irreducible but originally linked to its expressivity and corporeality.

Now that we have clarified the place of philosophical anthropology and the investigation of religious experience within it in the introduction, we should clarify our starting point in Plessner’s work itself. Indeed, the topic of religion and spirituality is not explicitly elaborated in detail within a single work, but we will consider as a source a combination of selected texts: in particular, the final section of *Levels of Organic Life and the Human, Homo absconditus*, the consideration of the role of anthropology in *On the Anthropology of the Actor*. The earlier text *Die wissenschaftliche Idee: Ein Entwurf über ihre Form* belongs to this context, too, as pointed out by Patrick Wilwert (2011), who together with Oreste Tolone (2011) are among the main contributors to this discourse around Plessner’s work (Vydrová 2022).

As we mentioned in the introduction, Plessner’s conception is based on the so-called *excentric positionality*. What does it mean? In what ways might excentric positionality be beneficial for a kind of distinctive experience that differs from ordinary experience and tends towards self-transcendence, deepening of experience or inner transformation? We believe that we can find here a productive resource for this topic, thanks to the complexity and holistic approach to the human perspective, reaching all areas of human experience. Its starting point is the anthropological difference from which *centricity* and *excentricity*, *closedness* and *openness* (Plessner 2019, 298–316), develops at the levels of the living: plants, animals, and sphere of human. In *centric positionality* is the organism situated in an environment in the manner of the center, but in *excentric positionality* one defines oneself in relation towards the center and becomes aware of one’s situation as a kind of tension, while for human it is impossible to found one’s life from the center. This brings into life of human being the effort to resolve this situation, which is always present. At the same time, man’s perspective is constantly changing since one is subject to configurations according to the situations in which she or he finds herself or himself in the world, in society, in history. As an excentric positionality, one becomes oneself in the performances of one’s own life. Human being is open, not pre-fixed or derived from an instance, but constituted in relation to the boundaries of one’s world, the possibilities of own corporeality, in relation to other people and one’s own activity in the sphere of culture in the broadest sense of the word.

Excentric positionality is more specifically determined by three anthropological principles or theses that Helmuth Plessner, in his major work *Levels of Organic and the Human*, offers to explain in detail what he calls the human situation: natural artificiality, mediated immediacy, and the utopian standpoint. In the case of spiritual experience, we can focus precisely on the third anthropological principle, which expresses man’s coping with his *special position* (Ger. *Sonderstellung*) (Scheler 1991, 10–11) as a *non-place* or without place (Ger. *Nicht-Ort, ortlos*) (Plessner 2019, 270–271), in which lies the paradoxical grounding of his life – the search for home, the dealing with finitude, the contingency of mundane existence, the search for meaning, as well as the possibility of doubting it. Plessner expresses this inner contradiction or ambiguity of his situation by the designation *homo absconditus* – man is hidden and is aware of this peculiar situation

(Plessner 2017, 357, 359). The religious reference that is associated with this designation in the form of *Deus absconditus* and negative theology is analogously used by Plessner to highlight the need for a new approach not only to man (who is not transparent to himself), but also to God and religiosity. Firstly, regarding man, he connects with him such characterization as rootlessness, opacity [3], brokenness, insufficiency, and openness. This, of course, also influences the approach (method) to the facts concerning a man, which must be appropriate and attentive to it. Plessner suggests that anthropology is not a discipline which should interpret the results of other sciences or get lost in “borrowing” from other disciplines, but he calls for the renewed establishment of anthropology directly as a *project* (Ger. *im Ansatz*): it will only get in touch with reality when it includes it in the basis of itself, when it learns about it already in its basis, not only from its result (Plessner 2003, 140). This can also be expressed in the aptly words of Merleau-Ponty, which describe the direction of the philosophy concerning question of human life: “*It is life which validly comprehends the life of the human composite.*” (Merleau-Ponty 1970, 70).

Secondly, the religious perspective is also being transformed. Plessner therefore titles the chapter devoted to the third anthropological principle, *Nullity and Transcendence*. In what sense? The two notions are correlative here. On the one hand, “*his own lack of anchor, which both bars the human from finding an anchor in the world and becomes apparent to him as the conditionality of the world, suggests to him the nullity of reality and the idea of a ground of the world.*” (Plessner 2019, 320). On the other hand, thanks to this, there is also a space for the emergence of transcendence in one’s life, where an experience can develop that has the potential to deepen our living, to intervene and transform a person, for example, in religious experiencing, mystical experience, or to liberate one from the ordinary flow of life’s affairs in meditation and contemplation. The felt inner tension can thus be released in both ways – by deepening and intensifying the experience, by verticality, or by liberating it, by relaxing it, by minimizing its demands.

At the same time, the fact that this utopian standpoint is not linked to the establishment of some defined human or mundane space as a starting point, it does not lead to a reduction of religious experience or its subordination to cultural conditions. “*Religious experiences and their norms, therefore, neither*

arise from nor are reducible to cultural, ethical, biological, or aesthetic experiences and norms or any combination of them. It has own structure, its own integrity.” (Steinbock 2007, 22) [4].

Man longs for a home, a place in the world, the anchoring of his own life in a meaningful reality, but he never actually exhausts this longing completely – he does not reduce himself in the material world, in actual space-time. This longing must be constantly verified *vis-à-vis* contingency, mortality, doubt, and uncertainty, because as an inner need to search it always reappears and takes on different forms (for example, at different stages of human life). For by being in a place, in the world, in a situation, we are also “behind and above” it. The precariousness of man, which philosophical anthropology draws attention to, is related to the fragility of the totality of the world and the care for the whole. If the utopian standpoint establishes meaning as the space and time of human life, then this constant striving – though not reduced only to conscious effort – manifests itself in man becoming who she or he is.

Spiritual, religious experience is, according to this, a legitimate part of the life of man, who cannot step out of excentric positionality, and his spirituality can at the same time acquire different forms. As Anthony J. Steinbock (2007, 26) points out in the case of mystical experience that:

[S]hould not be limited to the spiritual zenith of contemplation... It is further clear that mystical elements can also be present in ordinary forms of experience, like the experience of nature. Mystical experiences take on various forms, and it would be premature on our part to assert in advance that they are just in the reach of a few privileged individuals. But this does not mean that everyone is a mystic. Rather, strictly speaking, it means that mystical experiences are not within anyone’s reach because they are not correlative to our efforts in the first place, as would be the case in the field of presentation; they are experienced as ‘gifts’.

The excentric positionality, as Helmuth Plessner describes it, implies that such experiences “*they all contain an a priori core given with the human form of life as such, the core of all religiosity.*” (Plessner 2019, 317). But the course of such experience is specific, and how it can be considered in the perspective of Plessner’s project, that will be traced in the following section.

3 Spirituality and Experience

The configuration of experience that Plessner focuses on and which he elaborates in a fundamental way in continuity with phenomenology provides a good opportunity to talk about spirituality also in a philosophical – that is, not only theological or cultural-anthropological – perspective. Generally speaking, it offers the possibility to observe spirituality “*as ‘it is lived’*” (Steinbock 2007, 25) and offers the possibility of an adequate and original investigation, taking into account the human perspective when it counts “*only with the configuration of conditions specific to human behavior. Whatever components may form the unity of the configuration in which the human being is manifested, none of them can claim priority over it by itself.*” (Plessner 2016, 418).

We thus find an effective leading clue to the analysis. It’s one side is an openness to different forms of givenness, which manifests itself on the other side in the unfolding of different modes of experience. Plessner draws attention to the duality inherent in the experience of which we are both the actor, and we live it. This duality already manifests itself on the level of corporeality, in which one finds oneself as a *living body* (Ger. *Leib*), who one is and which one at the same time has as a *physical body* (Ger. *Körper*). This belongs to the monopolies of human existence, as well as other specific manifestations of human life that Plessner draws attention to, such as crying, laughing, expressing oneself in artistic activity, acting, taking roles in intersubjective situations, situating oneself in agency, and so on. In the context of spiritual experience, we can find cases that can serve as exemplars for this analysis: icons, rituals, mysteries, but also works of art that can lead us to spiritual experience, open us up to spiritual events. As an example, Mark Rothko’s series of fourteen black paintings in the Houston Chapel are among the striking images that evoke very intense emotional movement, touching and weeping in those who view them [5]. It is the crying that is the expression of the human being in which one can speak of experiences that are associated with the disruption of normal expected circumstances, which then act as a mental-bodily tension and disorganization in the relationship

of the human being to his or her own corporeality. On the one hand, one loses control over bodily expressions, but on the other hand, one’s own expression of crying (or laughing) is released. Plessner thus points to phenomena that are at the same time natural, specifically connected to the human being, but seem to lack an adequate way of comprehending them. This is not to be found in the causal sphere, but in the dynamics of man as a corporeal, mental, and spiritual being. In other words, crying is a specific, liminal, boundary human expression. It cannot be derived from some set of assumptions, cultural or biological conditions that would lead to it. It derives from a lived experience that is penetrated by the “inexpressible.” Man is thus a being who has the inherent capacity both to face the circumstances of life and to yield to the incomprehensible and to lose control over the situation. This realm also includes spiritual experience, which in its configuration is beyond ordinary grasping, yet finds its place in the life of man – it is specifically human. We can follow the consideration of Steinbock (2007, 28): If this approach “*has a role to play in the description of spiritual, religious, and even mystical experiences, it is because it is a shift in perspective that in principle is open to all kinds of givenness and thus is in a position – however modestly – to orient us to them (and not, mistakenly, as a method that ‘provokes’ those givens).*”

Another aspect that arises from this is the exchange between the experience and the experiencer. One is confronted with oneself; one shapes oneself by relating to oneself. This also affects the potential transformation by the transcendent, vertical experience that takes place in the context of this interaction, that is, as Plessner characterizes it: as an imbalanced equilibrium, a search for stability in instability, a search for resonance with the situation in which one finds oneself as an open being – open to various, even surprising, forms of givenness, asymmetries, saturated phenomena. This happens, for example, in experiences of surprise, vocation, evocation, being addressed by the radical otherness, being shaken, by sacrifice, ecstasy, which can lead to such a fundamental transformation as a leap of faith (Plessner 2019, 317):

Just as excentricity does not permit an unequivocal fixing of one's own position (that is, it demands such a fixing, but constantly rescinds it again in a continual annulment of its own thesis), it is also not given to the human to know 'where' he and the reality corresponding to his excentricity stand. If he wants to choose once and for all, there is nothing left for him but to make a leap of faith.

This experience, though deeply individual, as a vertical experience has its own dynamics, interpersonal and trans-personal dimension, it is expressed in a specific language (e.g., in religious and secular literature, visual arts), which mediates this lived experience of the "inexpressible" in a specific poetics [6] and it can also be transferable and transformative in this form. Whereas, for example, mystical experiences are among the rare and exceptional. The direction of such experiences can be divergent, towards immanence and towards transcendence, too [7]. One can therefore also speak here of the fragility or precariousness of this experience, which can manifest itself in deception, a subversion into horizontality or closedness, idolatry, pride, or self-love. As Plessner points out, the dynamic form of man's life and realization as an excentric positionality, *vis-à-vis* his own contingency and opacity, invites him to attest, reassess, and always re-express who he is.

4 Conclusion

In the first part of the text, we focused on the interpretive framework that Helmuth Plessner uses for the question of who man is, and which represents the third anthropological principle of the utopian standpoint. In the second part, we focused on the structure of such experience, on that how it is lived. In the first respect, the non-reductiveness of such an approach was shown, in the second, the variety and diversity of the forms of experience.

Religious experience here is not merely an extended hand of culture but a specific and necessary response of a human being to contingency and nothingness. This opens up to her or him a realm of transcendence. However, the forms of spirituality are both manifold and surprising because they are based on the configuration of experience, the situation in which one finds oneself, and therefore this project may be relevant today for a person living in a changing globalized society, coping with multiculturalism, postmodernism, atheism [8] or consumerism (also religious one), technological progress and new civilizational threats (armed conflicts, pandemics), which bring factors of vulnerability, confusion, uncertainty and chaos to the imbalanced equilibrium of man.

Although the representatives of philosophical anthropology did not put the topic of spirituality at the center of their interest, the religious dimension of man was not overlooked, and it is possible to find in their works – of which we have chosen Helmuth Plessner's project – insights into the situation of a man who is open to transcendence and can be addressed and transformed or deepened in his experience. Further development of these themes could be seen in the intersections with generative phenomenology and hermeneutics [9], with which can be found in Plessner himself several convergence points [10]. At the same time, this theme offers an opportunity to reflect on the deeper meaning of the role of philosophy itself and the extension of the boundaries of philosophical discourse – including into areas such as spiritual experience.

Notes

- [1] We use the terms *spirituality* and *religiosity* as concepts that can coincide, though they may not always overlap. *Spiritual experience* is broader and can occur outside the realm of religion (for example, in a form of cultural transcendence). Both terms are specified in the connection with the flow of experience and as part of a “utopian standpoint” describing the openness of human existence. This approach avoids the subordination of these experiences to a reductive schema or position and, on the contrary, opens the realm of their diverse and varied forms.
- [2] We can mention two forthcoming monographs expected to be published this year, the author’s *The Modern Experience of the Religious in its Many Forms*, and von Kalckreuth’s *Philosophische Anthropologie und Religion: Religiöse Erfahrung, soziokulturelle Praxis und die Frage nach dem Menschen*.
- [3] Cf. Plessner 2017, 353–366.
- [4] In the following, we will trace how phenomenology, from which Plessner, as a disciple of Husserl, also drew, works with mystical experience, within the work of Anthony J. Steinbock’s *Phenomenology and Mysticism*.
- [5] James Elkins dealt with this topic in his book *Pictures and Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings*. One account of a viewer describing his visit to this chapel reads, “*it’s hard to look at, you can see it (the consolation) but maybe it’s not even there... In Rothko’s account, this inability to grasp a visual message is comparable to religion... At first glance, his paintings seem to represent a black abyss. And suddenly (as when a glimmer of hope dawns in the world) the painter gives us a small, limited inkling of hope in the form of very subtle variations of color, spots, areas of light in the painting. It is a hope that we are (can never be) sure of.*” (Elkins 2007, 173). Why is this so? According to Elkins, there is “*a natural bond between the painful closeness and the painful emptiness that make people cry when they look at Rothko’s paintings, and they can appear together in the work of one artist.*” (Elkins 2007, 167).
- [6] To “*poetics of ineffability*” (Kučerková and Vašek 2020, 3).
- [7] Transcendence, as Jean Wahl clarifies, can go in two directions – towards *trans-ascendence* or *trans-descendence*; Wahl also speaks of bad transcendences (Wahl 2016, 25).
- [8] Plessner (2019, 320) aptly remarks: “*Atheism is easier said than done.*”
- [9] The affinity between certain artistic creation and spirituality, as we have suggested in the case of the visual art, can be seen also by the question of the language of spiritual experience in, for example, poetry. Jana Juhásová addresses this in several texts of hers (2020, 40–53).
- [10] Cf. Vydrová 2021.

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