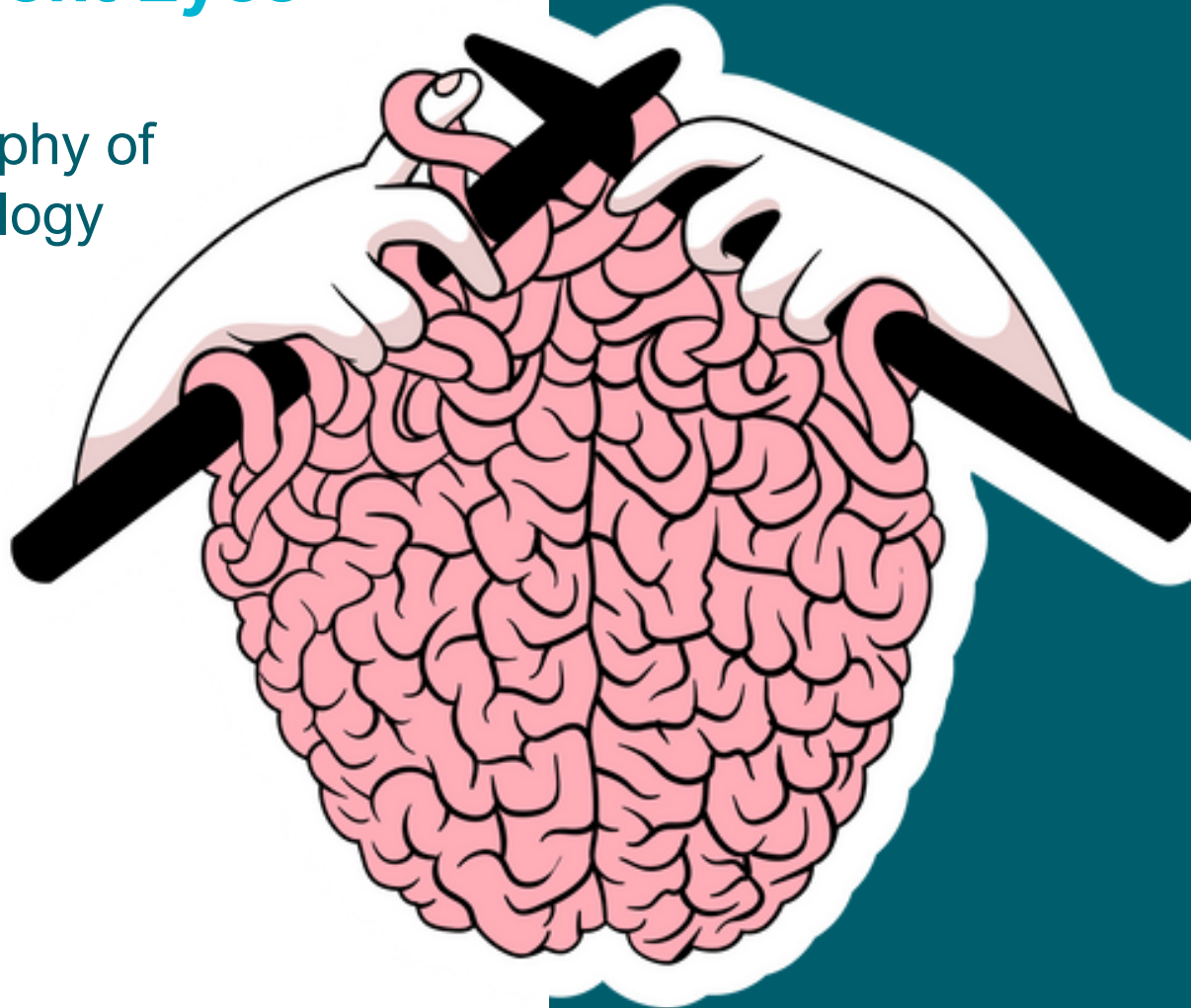


# Psychology Through Different Eyes

Philosophy of  
Psychology



Critical alternative from the perspective of  
philosophical anthropology for the foundation  
of the human in psychology

**Aimee Nelen**

Bachelor thesis  
Double degree philosophy  
450679an

Words: 11.583  
Dr. Julien Kloeg  
Rolf Viervant  
8th of July, 2022

## Table of contents

Introduction	2
Part I	4
1.1. Positionality	5
1.1.1. Centric positionality	5
1.1.2. Excentric positionality	6
1.2. Self-reflexivity	6
Part II	8
2.1. <i>Doppelaspektivität</i>	9
2.2. Modes of being	10
2.3. Gestalt psychology	11
Part III	13
3.1. The three fundamental anthropological laws	14
3.1.1. The law of natural artificiality	14
3.1.2. The law of mediated immediacy	14
3.1.3. The law of the utopian standpoint	15
3.2. Subjectivity	15
3.3. Intentionality	16
3.4. The functional approach	16
3.5. Autonomy and freedom	16
Part IV	18
4.1. Dualism and reductionism	19
4.2. Physicalist reductionism	19
4.3. Mechanistic reductionism	20
Part V	21
5.1. The subjective perspective first	22
5.2. Growth and change	22
5.3. The role of the therapist	22
Part VI	24
6.1. Causality	25
6.2. Treatment of the inner world	25
6.3. Multidisciplinary approach	26
Conclusion	27
Bibliography	28

## Introduction

Psychology has recently been struck by a physicalist trend towards human behavior and mental illness, reducing it to mere (mal)functioning of the brain and other bodily processes. Applied neuroscience is being applauded for its potential to solve all intricate psychological questions. However, this approach has major drawbacks. It discredits abstract concepts that are irreducible to biological processes, such as consciousness and emotion (Linsky 2002), even though they are vital to daily clinical practice.

The polar opposite of this physicalist approach leads to radical culturalism. This paradigm holds that nature itself and the way science treats it as just a discourse, a way of using speech and reason to think about the world (Bernstein 2019, xl). For culturalism, the distinction between nature and culture is premade by culture itself, as a product of our customs and reason (Fischer 2014, 43). In the end, culturalism claims that the world is made up of social norms, conformity, hierarchy, and first and foremost, power (Bernstein 2019, xl).

A middle way that is highly relevant though neglected, is philosophical anthropology. This philosophical paradigm, which has its roots in phenomenology, does not only delimit the realm of influence of both culturalism and physicalism, but it also combines the two (Fischer 2014, 47). Philosophical anthropology tries to formulate a theory of the human, who is essentially a cultural being, embedded in a theory of general biological life (Fischer 2014, 42).

The main question of this work is: 'how can we use philosophical anthropology to formulate a critical alternative for looking at the human is psychology?' The focal point of this project is to propose a different way of thinking about the human, presenting a critical alternative inspired by philosophical anthropology, bearing on the works of two great thinkers in particular, Helmuth Plessner and Frederik J.J. Buytendijk.

Helmuth Plessner (1892-1985), was a biologist, philosopher and sociologist from Wiesbaden, Germany (De Mul 2014a, 12). Originally educated in zoology and medicine, his interests eventually lead him to study philosophy. He was one of the founding fathers and a main representative of philosophical anthropology (De Mul 2016). The main concepts and ideas of his philosophical anthropology were set out in his philosophical magnum opus *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* (1928). Inspired by Neo-Kantianism and phenomenology, his main objective was to set out the fundamental characteristics of the human condition, via the human's essential characteristic of 'excentric positionality' which he naturally connects to the human's necessary artificiality (De Mul 2014a, 11). As humans have the unique capacity to be aware of their center of experience, they do not only live life, they 'experience themselves experiencing it'. Via our excentric positionality and through our capacity for self-reflection, we simultaneously are a body and possess a body. Therefore, according to Plessner, life is a psycho-physical unity. This self-reflexivity results in the fact that we do not live according to our instincts, but we have to shape our world. This is what makes the human necessarily artificial.

With the foundational principles set out, Plessner applied them to the fields of sociology and political thought, for instance in his work *Die verspätete Nation* (1935), on the religious, social, and philosophical origins and rise of national-socialism in Germany (De Mul 2014a, 13). Unfortunately, Plessner's work was largely overshadowed by his renowned contemporaries, as Scheler's *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* appeared in the same year, and Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* the year before (De Mul 2014a, 18). Moreover, Plessner was forced to flee Germany as a result of the Nazi regime, due to his Jewish heritage from his father's side. He eventually settled down in the Netherlands at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, on invitation by his good friend Frederik J.J. Buytendijk (Abma 2014).

Frederik J.J. Buytendijk (1887-1974) was particularly influenced by Plessner's philosophical anthropology. Much like Plessner, Buytendijk was first and foremost a man of biology: he studied medicine and was an expert in the field of experimental physiology, where he was committed to researching animal and subsequently human behavior. He eventually became a professor in psychology in Utrecht and Nijmegen, although he never actually studied psychology (Abma 2014).

Buytendijk was highly productive and wrote various books and numerous articles, columns, and chapters. His two main works are the *Algemene theorie der menselijke houding en beweging* (1948)

and *Prolegomena van een antropologische fysiologie* (1965). The latter sets out the most important concepts and foundations for his anthropological physiology and is an elaboration of thoughts already mentioned in the *Algemene theorie* (Abma 2014).

Plessner and Buytendijk both take an anthropological approach in their attempt to install a new foundation for the sciences, one that regards the human as an integrated totality. Whereas Plessner's philosophy remains more ontological and theoretical when it comes to medical praxis and psychology, Buytendijk combines philosophical anthropology with physiology and experimental psychology. Connecting philosophical anthropology with more concrete thoughts, his approach offers fruitful ideas for medicine and clinical psychology.

In this work, I argue that philosophical anthropology, as found in Plessner and Buytendijk, avoids reductionism, physicalism, and culturalism and can therefore be used to formulate an alternative approach to the human in psychology. This alternative approach is a middle ground between culturalism and physicalism as it bridges the gap between biology and the humanities. Philosophical anthropology relativizes and so nuances the importance of naturalism as an all-encompassing force and simultaneously does this for culturalism (Fischer 2014, 42). This is a useful starting point for psychology in thinking about being human, as it considers the human as an interwoven, polarized unity of the physical and the mental, having an intentional relationship with the world. From here, an alternative view on illness and disease can be developed that is applicable both mentally and physically.

This thesis outlines a contemporary issue and discourse within the discipline of clinical psychology. In doing so, the attempt is to make a start with an interdisciplinary foundation for a new way of thought about the human condition, useful as a critical alternative in modern-day psychology. The first chapter will outline the foundational structure of the human condition according to philosophical anthropology, departing from the central concept of positionality.

The second chapter will explain why psychologists must consider the human as a polarized unity, which can be retrieved from Plessner's notion of *Doppelaspektivität* and Buytendijk's 'modes of being'. Consequently, this approach eliminates reductionism in psychology.

In the third chapter, I will argue for the reintroduction of the subject according to philosophical anthropology from the point of excentric positionality. Via the three fundamental anthropological laws (natural artificiality, mediated immediacy, and the utopian standpoint) subjectivity and intentionality are elementary aspects of the existence of the human. In turn, this prioritizes the need for autonomy and freedom of the subject.

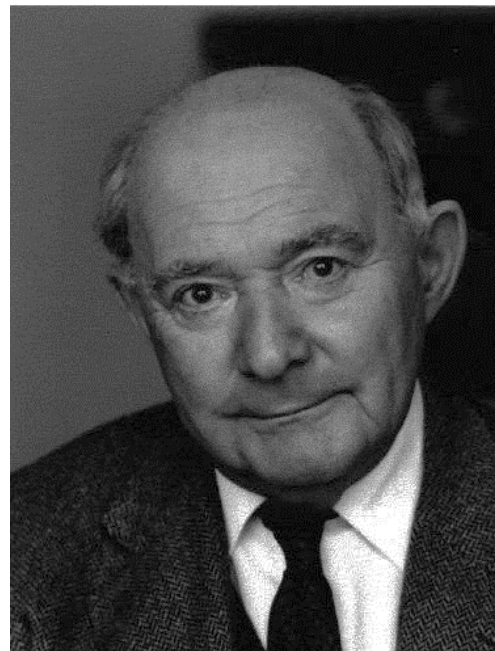
In the fourth chapter, I will argue how philosophical anthropology's view of the human as a polarized unity eliminates reductionism and dualism. In chapter five I will describe how taking a philosophical-anthropological approach fosters a change in the therapeutic relationship. This relationship must place the subject on the foreground and look at the process as one of growth and change, instead of healing and removal. Moreover, it stresses the need for a different role for the therapist. Finally, thoughts on a changed methodology in psychology are discussed. Philosophical anthropology leads to avoiding thinking about causality in human behavior and advocates a multidisciplinary approach.

## Part I

### The human condition

Timeless and placeless, the human can experience himself and at the same time his timelessness and placelessness as a standing outside of himself, because the human is a living thing that no longer stands only in itself but whose “standing in itself” is the foundation of its standing. He is placed within his boundaries and therefore outside of these boundaries that confine him as living thing. He not only lives and experiences, but also experiences himself experiencing.

—Helmuth Plessner (2019c, 271)



## Part I

### The human condition I – Positionality as a novel approach to psychology

One major problem psychology faces is that it holds implicit assumptions about the human condition, or in other words what 'being human' entails. Plessner writes that by giving a foundational structure for the existence of the human, the issues that could not be dealt with by psychology on its own, can now be solved with the help of philosophical anthropology (Helmuth Plessner 2019a, xx). Concepts that are irreducible to specific bodily functions or brain areas, such as self-esteem, self-consciousness, experience, awareness, fantasy, and personality, cannot be studied in isolation. As they cannot be separated from subjective experiences and cannot be reduced to physiological functions alone, we must consider these abstract concepts in an integrated whole.

Buytendijk argues that all human-focused sciences have an implicit presupposition of what 'being-human' entails. Buytendijk strives to make this implicit assumption about the human condition explicit because the idea of being-human (*mensvisie*) is the fundament of the specific human discipline. This way, an explicit understanding of being-human should lead to an approach that considers both humans as well as the 'humane' or the 'being-human'. His solution is the fusion of a physiological view with the anthropological view, to create a discipline of physiology that embraces psychology.

Thus, human-focused disciplines such as psychology and sociology are in desperate need of explicit philosophical grounds to build their theories on. Plessner and Buytendijk's philosophical anthropology describes human existence with as its core the notion of 'positionality.'

Plessner's point of departure is human finitude – the human as a being with an end and a beginning (De Mul 2014a, 15). Whereas Heidegger places this end and beginning in relation to time, Plessner used space as the focus of human finitude. The human is decentered from its position in the world, in other words, the human's positionality is 'eccentric'.

#### 1.1. Positionality

Plessner assigns a central role to our physical body (De Mul 2014b). All bodies – living or lifeless – have contours or borders, they are characterized by this *Grenze*. Although lifeless objects have boundaries as well, they differ from living organisms in that there is no interaction between the lifeless being and the environment. Whereas living organisms interact with their borders, the lifeless passively undergo what the environment throws at them.

In contrast, living beings cross and interact with their contour (*Grenzverkehr*). As a result, they can define their own *Grenze* and differentiate themselves actively from their surroundings. They act independently on their environment by shaping themselves but are also dependent on their environment via, for example, food and shelter (Bernstein 2019, xlix). The kind of relationship the organism has with its own *Grenze* determines the organism's specific form of positionality.

Therefore, the organization of positionality demarcates the differences between living beings. On the most primitive level, plants have an open organization, as they do not express their relationship with their border (Helmuth Plessner 2019c, 267–68). Because the plant has no center, neither on the in nor the outside of the plant a subject is present.

Compared to plants, animals do cross their boundaries and have a center. Plessner also gives a biological explanation for this, as he describes that the animal's center results from the possession of a central nervous system that provides them with awareness of their surroundings (De Mul 2014a, 16).

##### 1.1.1. Centric positionality

The organization of the animal is limited, because the 'individual's being-itself' or in other words, its center (*Zentrum*), is hidden from the animal. As the animal cannot relate to its positional center, it will remain concealed. For the animal, life from its *center* is the highest it can achieve, hence called 'centric positionality' by Plessner. He argues that the animal lives and takes action out of its center, but it does

not experience his center. To put it in Plessner's words: "The animal lives out **from** its center and **into** its center but not **as** center. [...] it is a system that refers back to itself, a self, but it does not experience—itself<sup>1</sup>" (Helmuth Plessner 2019c, 267).

The center and physical body of the animal are given to the animal and relate to the absolute here and now (Helmuth Plessner 1982, 13). The only awareness the animal has is his experience of a lived body and everything he experiences through the senses, which it experiences as a unity in the here and now. Therefore, the animal is fully absorbed in the here and now, due to its incapacity to relate to its positional center. This level of positionality and lived experience is not reflexive yet (Helmuth Plessner 2019c, 268). The animal can influence its physical body and respond to its bodily impulses, but the animal cannot reflect to its center.

### 1.1.2. Excentric positionality

The human, on the other hand, is one step up on the evolutionary ladder of organization. This provides him with the highest level of positionality, which is called excentric positionality and is bound to the human form of life (Helmuth Plessner 2019c, 268). As opposed to the positionality of animals, which is solely centric, the human finds himself with both excentric and centric positionality (Helmuth Plessner 1982, 14).

The human is the only animal that can think out of his center. The characteristic of this excentricity is not the multiplication of our core, but the consciousness and ability to reflect on our center. To avoid the confusion of multiple or split centers, Plessner describes that we should think about our center as a given bodily feature bound to our physical body, but that comes into being as a process (Helmuth Plessner 2019c, 269). This process of reflexivity is realized by the moment in time, as the animal is consciously experiencing itself. In Plessner's words: "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<sup>2</sup>" (Helmuth Plessner 2019a, 269). Therefore, Plessner concludes that being human does not result from any physical characteristic, but from his excentric positionality.

### 1.2. Self-reflexivity

Because of the human's reflexive capacity, we are conscious of our existence (Helmuth Plessner 2019c, 269). This way, we are bound to shape our own, to form our own identity. Plessner writes about the human: "It has itself; it knows of itself; it notices itself—and this makes it an I. This I is the vanishing point of its interiority that lies "behind" it; it is removed from its center and is the observer of the scene of this inner field<sup>3</sup>" (Helmuth Plessner 2019c, 270).

Plessner does not mean that we go outside of our bodies while looking at ourselves, but that as humans, we can look at ourselves through the eyes of others by using our consciousness. As a result, humans have self-awareness and self-reflection (Helmuth Plessner 2019c, 291).

Therefore, we can leave the spatiotemporal here/now, and think about what it means to experience; we experience our experiencing. We think about what it means to be human; we know ourselves as we have the ability to reflect upon our inner world.

This leads the human to live in two situations. Not only is the human physically bound to the here/now, but at the same time, he can also take a stance away from the present moment while

---

<sup>1</sup> *Das Tier lebt aus seiner Mitte heraus, in seine Mitte hinein, aber es lebt nicht als Mitte. [...] es bildet ein auf es selber rückbezügliches System, ein Sich, aber es erlebt nicht — sich*" (Helmuth Plessner 1975, 287).

<sup>2</sup> *"Damit ist die Bedingung gegeben, dass das Zentrum der Positionalität zu sich selbst Distanz hat, von sich selbst abgehoben die totale Reflexivität des Lebenssystems ermöglicht"* (Helmuth Plessner 1975, 290).

<sup>3</sup> *"Es hat sich selbst, es weiß um sich, es ist sich selber bemerkbar und darin ist es Ich, der „hinter sich“ liegende Fluchtpunkt der eigenen Innerlichkeit, [...] aus der eigenen Mitte entzogen den Zuschauer gegenüber dem Szenarium dieses Innenfeldes bildet"* (Helmuth Plessner 1975, 290).

reflecting. This is the dual aspect of his existence, the conflict that man faces within himself due to the tension between what we experience and our core, our inner world. In the end, we face an irreconcilable split into a threefold situation; a physical/bodily object, an inner life (psyche), and lastly, the helicopter view that looks at the first two situations. Because of this, Plessner argues that we are 'without place and unbound in space and time' (Helmuth Plessner 2019c, 270). This void leads to the nothingness and nullity that the human feels and that he has to fill up in order to feel meaningful. In other words, man's 'existence is literally based on nothing' (Helmuth Plessner 2019c, 272).

#### **Final remarks**

Plessner describes living organisms as being defined by the relationship they have with their *Grenze*, which is their positionality. Animals have centric positionality, as they live from their center and are absorbed in the here and now. In contrast, humans have excentric positionality as well, as they are able to reflect on themselves (self-reflexivity) and thus experience their lived experience. The result of self-reflexivity is the internal conflict man experiences, and his feelings of nullity and placelessness.

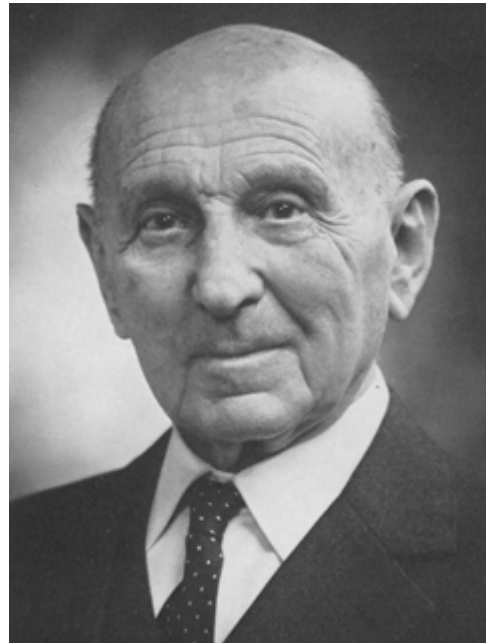


## Part II

### The human as a polarized unity

What reappears in every investigation and in every contemplation on the unbreakable relationship of the person and the world, is the fact that man exists physically. Regardless of how man completely forgets his body in the thoughtlessness of his activities, the slightest internal or external disturbance gives him the certainty that every activity depends on his physicality.

—Frederik J. J. Buytendijk (1957, 141)



## Part II

### The human as a polarized unity

#### 2.1. *Doppelaspektivität*

In the previous chapter, we have placed the human on a new foundation by using excentric positionality. From this positionality, the major consequence is the human's double aspectivity (*Doppelaspektivität*). Plessner uses this concept to describe the two aspects in which the human body appears to us, that of *Leib* and a *Körper*. The *Körper* is the physical body of the human, the body of flesh and blood, whereas his *Leib* is his lived body, the body that experiences himself. This experienced body is 'the center of our perception and actions' (De Mul 2014a, 17). This dual distinction constitutes our twofold corporeality.

Differentiating between *Leib* and *Körper* enables psychologists to focus on *Leib* as the source of abstract mental concepts such as emotion and consciousness without neglecting the physical body as an object (*Körper*). As a result, psychologists can see self-awareness not as consciousness focused on an object (the self as an object), but as subjective self-experience (Zahavi 2008, 207). This way, it is possible to work with more abstract psychological concepts, that could otherwise not be coherently discussed. In other words, philosophical anthropology can offer the foundational leap of subjectivity that psychology on its own cannot offer.

#### ***Doppelaspektivität* and mental illness**

Furthermore, double aspectivity also has a striking relevance for mental illnesses and clinical psychology. Oreste Tolone argues that our twofold corporeality causes an unbridgeable gap and a conflict within ourselves, as there is always a need to balance our double aspectivity (2014, 163). In this line of reasoning, health becomes the 'intrinsic adequacy and agreement with oneself,' being at a harmonious balance with our existence as a *Leib* and a *Körper* (Tolone 2014, 166). But in the case of illness, the balance is disrupted, meaning that *Leib* and *Körper* become one and the same, or either one becomes the most pronounced and the distance between them becomes larger. The latter case would result in 'a decrease in distance from the self' reducing 'the autonomy in being a body or having a body'. In the case of pain and suffering, a coinciding *Leib* and *Körper* is more likely. This will lead to an experience of absorption in the body, feeling as the only experience one has of the world. For instance, when someone is very ill, the illness will be all the person can talk about, dominating his or her present experience of existence.

Contrasting physical and mental illness, Tolone writes that the physically ill person more often ascribes his illness to something 'foreign,' so that it becomes something to free himself from (Tolone 2014, 168). But for mental illnesses, distancing yourself from the illness becomes a necessity for recovery. Just as the human can never completely reconcile with either his *Leib* or *Körper*, it is also impossible to completely overlap with your inner world. The same distance that causes humans to become mentally disoriented, gives us the ability to overcome a mental illness.

#### **Laughing, crying, and pain**

This conflict between *Leib* and *Körper* is the tension of wanting to coincide with our natural body, like the naturalness of animals, and our existential need for artificiality. This conflict reveals itself in typical human characteristics such as laughing, crying, and smiling. In *Laughing and Crying* (1940), Plessner describes that these expressions are unique to human nature and emerge from our excentric positionality (Helmuth Plessner 1970, xi–xiii). We cry when we are overwhelmed, things get too much for us – positively when we cry out of joy – but also negatively when we are sad. When the ambiguity stemming from our excentric positionality shines through and we lose our grip on it, we laugh. Whereas laughter and crying are temporary disruptions of our excentricity, illness is a constant vulnerability to our excentric positionality (Tolone 2014, 167).

Buytendijk connects Plessner's Laughing and Crying to smiling (*glimlachen*). His illustration of smiling captures this functional relationship between the human and his environment, via his intentional relationship with the external world. With so much as a smile, people can express their understanding of the other.

Moreover, the human expression of pain is particularly attributable to our double aspectivity as well, according to Buytendijk. Pain as described by Buytendijk is not the mental pain of being hurt, but what we feel when our body suffers. Controversially, Buytendijk rejects typical descriptions of pain as a stimulus, sign, or punishment. Instead, pain is not a sensory experience at all, it is vitally useless and it has no primary psychological, biological, or physiological function. He understands the essence of pain as something that strikes man in the most intimate part of his being, in the nakedness of both his physical and mental existence (Coolen 2014, 121). This unleashes a conflict between the ego and the physical body; although we mentally feel the very core of our intimate being is threatened, the painfulness will always remain bound to the body. With pain, Buytendijk illustrates a concrete psychological example of the tension between being a body and having a body.

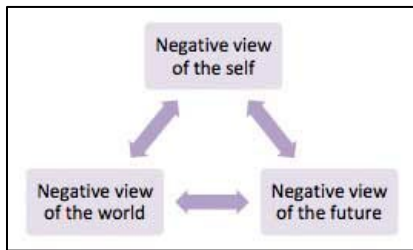
## 2.2. Modes of being

Buytendijk captures the polarized unity of the human in his 'mode of being' (*bestaanswijze*). Being an advocate for what he calls 'physiological anthropology, he stressed the intertwinement of the physical and the mental. He argues that human behavior cannot be seen as something exclusively mental or physical, but as something in between. This means that the study of human behavior must cross the border between the disciplines of psychology and physiology.

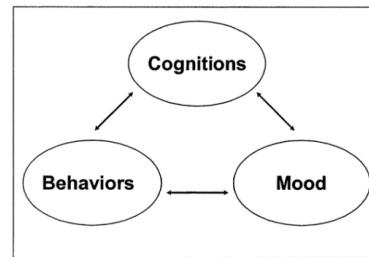
The mode of being is the way in which the human exists, his pre-reflexive 'being in the world', and how he is conscious of this being in the world and his nature and appearance. For example, there is being-hungry, being-excited, and being-asleep. According to Buytendijk, it is the drive for all behavior. Animals do not search for food because they sense that their blood sugar levels run low, or because their belly is empty. Instead, they do so as their complete being is in the mode of 'being-hungry'. These modes of being relate to physiological processes inside our bodies, such as hormone production, respiration, and digestion. But they are also a product of our subjective way of being, the anthropological states of existential meaning (*zingeving*) and intelligibility (*verstaanbaarheid*) (Van der Horst 1966, 853). Therefore, humans are not only driven for a certain action because of the pressure of internal or external influences, but also because of the experience and meaning of these pressures. As a result, every mode of being both involves the subject with and in a body, as every subjective mode of being has its bodily manifestation, related to physiological processes (Dekkers 1985, 157).

### Modes of being and mental illness

Buytendijk's physiological-anthropological approach is relevant for clinical psychology as well. For instance, in cognitive-behavioral theory by Beck and others, automatic negative thoughts are considered to be the most pronounced origin mechanism for depression (Beck et al. 1979). Due to negative thoughts, a person ends up in a negative cognitive triad including thoughts about the self, the world, and the future. In other words, negative thoughts provoke other negative thoughts. As a result, if we take an integrated psycho-physical approach, the person's moods, decisions, and behaviors as well as his bodily state are affected by these depressive thoughts. Buytendijk would say that the person's mode of being becomes that of 'being-depressed,' impacting both physical and mental aspects of existence.



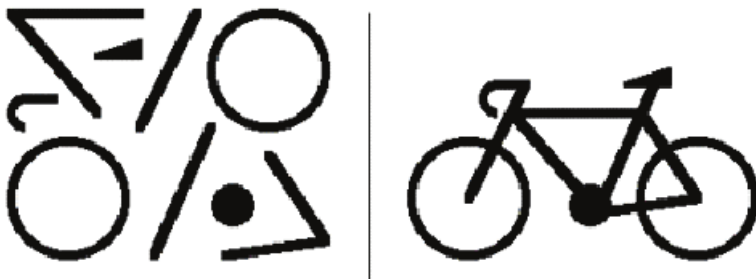
a. Beck's negative cognitive triad.



b. Cognitions influence behaviors and moods.

### 2.3. Gestalt psychology

The integration of the human as a whole has some similarities with Gestalt psychology. Buytendijk adopts the Gestalt principle: the whole is greater than the sum of parts. To illustrate this principle, when perceiving a clown, we don't just see his red nose, his make-up, his funny clothes, but we see a totality or 'Gestalt'. The same holds for the notion of personality in Gestalt psychology. A person is not just the sum of all different characteristics, it is the totality that makes up the person (Dekkers 1985, 116).



c. The unified whole is different from the sum of parts.

Buytendijk appreciates the dynamic stance of Gestalt psychology. Whereas the reflex theory holds that the same situations always lead to the same result, Gestalt psychologists rather see input-response as a moving field under the influence of dynamic internal and external forces (Dekkers 1985, 116). Buytendijk regards the central nervous system as a dynamic organ, subjected to constant change by internal and external influences. This organ should be understood in its totality, instead of looking at separate elements. As a result, learning, associating, and perceiving are not separate processes taking place in a specific part of the system, but the whole system is involved in these functions.

Nevertheless, we should refrain from equating the integration of the human in Buytendijk with Gestalt psychology. Buytendijk has an ambivalent relationship with Gestalt psychology, as he draws inspiration from the perspective but at the same time criticizes their approach (Dekkers 1985, 115).

One point of critique Buytendijk has is that Gestalt psychologists regard learning and perceiving as processes, only attributing function to them in a later stage. In contrast, Buytendijk gives them a functional meaning at the moment they happen. Moreover, Gestalt psychologists do not relate these functions or movements to a subject, which is an integral part of Buytendijk's philosophy. Instead, in Gestalt psychology, psychological phenomena only have a relationship with the dynamic processes in the central nervous system. The subject and his perspective is not of relevance to them.

Because they neglect the subject, Buytendijk delineates Gestalt psychology as psycho-physic parallelism, meaning that psychological and physiological processes are happening simultaneously but separately from each other (Dekkers 1985, 117). Instead, Buytendijk's greatest attempt is to connect the two of them, illustrating the relationship between physiology and the mental.

Buytendijk argued that the relationship between the different elements of the organism is of vital importance. As different elements relate to each other, they create an irregular regularity, a cycle. From Viktor von Weizsäcker Buytendijk adopts the notion of the *Gestaltkreis*, the relationship of perception and movement, but inherently the relationship between the subject and the object as well (Dekkers 1985, 118).

#### Final remarks

Plessner and Buytendijk describe that our body appears to us in two ways, as a physical body (*Körper*) and an experienced or lived body (*Leib*). This double aspectivity creates a fundamental conflict within ourselves. As the balance between the two aspects of *Leib* and *Körper* is disrupted, physical and mental illnesses may emerge.

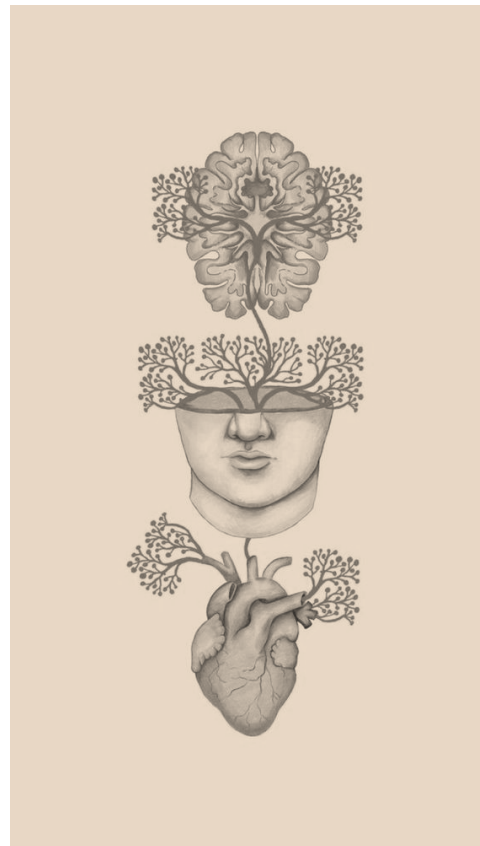
This polarization can also be found in Buytendijk's modes of being. Because the human is a psycho-physical unity, we are always entirely, both physically and mentally in a specific state, such as being-hungry or being-tired. This also holds for states of mental illness, such as being-depressed. Buytendijk borrows the Gestalt principle, that the whole is more than the sum of parts. This integration of the human as a polarized unity shows some similarities with Gestalt psychology, but is a different approach. Buytendijk focuses on functionality and subjectivity, which are neglected by Gestalt psychologists.

## Part III

### Reintroduction of the subject

The body that moves, is what we have through which we act on that what is the alien, the other, the strange, of which we are the subject to the outer world, for which we can become the object.

– Frederik J.J. Buytendijk (1948, 47)



## Part III

### The reintroduction of the subject

#### 3.1. The three fundamental anthropological laws

Arising from Plessner's notion of excentric positionality, the human is subjected to three fundamental anthropological laws, natural artificiality, mediated immediateness, and the utopian standpoint. Plessner describes them as an inevitable consequence of the gap created by our excentric positionality.

##### 3.1.1. The law of natural artificiality

The first anthropological law is the law of natural artificiality: man is artificial by nature. Due to the excentric positionality, our capacity for self-reflexivity makes the human into a broken being. In contrast to the animal, which lives out of its center by its instinct and responds to the environment, the human must determine his own way of living, to *realize* himself. This makes the humans 'constitutively homeless' (*konstitutiv heimatlos*) (De Mul 2014a, 18). We are the only organism that asks ourselves the question: 'Who am I? How should I live?' The answers to these questions are ontically necessary (*ontische Notwendigkeit*); they form human nature, what the human is (De Mul 2014a, 19). To bridge this gap, the human needs to color in his existence with artificialities, such as technology, culture, language, and tradition. This way, 'the human must make himself into what he already is' (Helmuth Plessner 2019c, 287). We are aware of our 'nakedness' as we cannot achieve the same naturalness that other organisms have since being-human is empty and unthinkable without the addition of artifacts (Helmuth Plessner 1982, 16).

##### Artificiality as an existential struggle

According to Plessner, the human is confronted with his artificial existence on a daily basis. Where the animal feels the certainty of his instincts, the human has the freedom and deliberate choice (Helmuth Plessner 2019c, 288). Because the knowledge of our existence leaves us directless, Plessner writes that the human is in pain due to the inability to achieve the naturalness of the animal. The human feels the pressure to control or perfect his being, and this comes with the stress (Tolone 2014, 163). But man also coincides with his being, and also *is* his body, placing limits on what is possible. As Plessner writes, this conflict is the 'basis of the existence of man, the source but also the limit of his strength' The dual aspectivity of our existence needs to be in a harmonious balance, otherwise it will result in physical or mental distress or even illness (Tolone 2014, 164). Oreste Tolone hypothesizes what it would mean for our well-being if this balance is disrupted. He argues that especially in the case of the third fundamental anthropological law, it would possibly lead to behavioral disorders. The law of the utopian standpoint namely represents our vulnerability and our innate dangerousness (Tolone 2014, 165). Tolone even goes as far as to claim our excentric positionality to be our 'pathological predisposition'. In other words, excentric positionality and the ability for self-reflection and thus the need to artificially shape our existence, it sets us up for mental illness.

##### 3.1.2. The law of mediated immediacy

Secondly, our corporeality and artificiality actively mediate the relation between ourselves and the environment, which is the law of mediated immediacy (Ernste 2014, 252). On the one hand, we are mediated by our physical body and the necessity to use artifacts to realize ourselves. But on the other hand, our existence is immediate, as we are 'immediately' in the world, it is given to us through our physical body. Whereas the animal is always in a direct or immediate relationship with himself and the environment, the human contains a subjective perspective that mediates the relationship with himself and the environment (Helmuth Plessner 2019c, 302). For the animal, this subject is hidden, so the relationship between himself and the environment will always appear immediate since there is no

subject to mediate this. As the human mediates the experience of the world and lives this immediate experience, the human is subjected to the law of mediated immediacy.

### 3.1.3. The law of the utopian standpoint

The last fundamental anthropology law is that of the utopian standpoint. Our everlasting feeling of rootlessness creates the need for an artificial system that helps us deal with our transience. Conscious of our nullity, we feel the world is a nullity as well. *‘Dos moi pou sto<sup>4</sup>’* is the central feature of our existence as humans (Helmuth Plessner 2019c, 316). Therefore, we look for something that gives us a sense of belonging, of why the world appears to us in this way, and how it all came to be: we long to find ‘a ground of the world’, or *Weltgrund* (Helmuth Plessner 2019c, 317). This gap is often filled by religion. How the world appears to us, invokes in us the tempting idea that there must be an absolute God that created it all. This leap of fate gives us ground beneath our feet. What all religions have in common, is that they create a *definitivum*, they give the human the confirmation that things are the way they appear. Religion offers a feeling of security and an interpretation of reality as well as a narrative or explanation of what this life is and what comes after.

The fundamental anthropological laws of natural artificiality and the utopian standpoint delineate the inseparable connection of the human within culture. Due to the necessity to shape himself via tools and artifacts, he is both built by and a builder of culture. The search for connection and a greater good creates his embeddedness in a group.

## 3.2. Subjectivity

Plessner’s law of mediated immediateness requires a subject that mediates human existence. The subject is not something that arises or that we chose to be, it is immediately given to us. Buytendijk elaborates on this, as he defines the polarity of the objective and the subjective body as the central notion of his philosophical anthropology. He describes the subject and ‘being-subject’ as the individual, the own personal ‘I’ and the collections of the contents of consciousness but also the tendencies, reflexes, and unconscious habits, drives, and motives (Dekkers 1985, 94). Even though ‘being-subject’ is immediately given, we cannot fully grasp it or completely describe it, because it is impossible to picture it in concrete shape and time. As the body is part of this subjective experience and the body changes according to the situation (such as in the mode of ‘being-hungry’) the subject is constantly changing as well. Buytendijk illustrates this with the analogy of the dog. We could say ‘the dog is in pain’ or ‘the dog has four legs and a tail’ but it is all part of the same dog and we cannot distinguish or decide what notion would be part of the subject of the dog. It is all an integrated whole. Here we see Buytendijk’s argument that animals are subjects or ‘selves’ as well. What is exclusively human about ourselves, is our excentric positionality and typically human forms of expression, such as laughing and crying.

The ‘self’ relates to the subject in Buytendijk’s understanding of self-movement (Dekkers 1985, 94). He describes self-movement as ‘the movement of the totality of the organism, decided from within.’ He connects this to the notion of the *Grenze* he adopted from Plessner. Namely, the self has a border, which appears as a totality and as a shape. This *Grenze* is then crossed when the totality moves. In other words, the self appears through the act of self-movement, and according to Buytendijk, this is what makes self-movement and being a subject the most fundamental aspect of human existence. Inspired by von Weizsäcker, he writes *‘Leben erscheint, wo etwas sich bewegt, also durch angeschaute Subjektivität’*.

Buytendijk emphasizes the ontological necessity of the subject or self for the possibility of existence. Taking an approach more related to existential phenomenology, he argues that ‘humans

---

<sup>4</sup> *‘δος μοι που στω’* typically translated in English as ‘give me (a place) where I may stand’ (Webster’s New World College Dictionary 2004)



and animals are intentionally involved in the situation with their behavior' (Dekkers 1985, 94). When there is no subject, there cannot be intentional behavior and so it does not make sense to talk about existence in any situation. As this behavior is motivated through an intentional relationship with the situation, we again see that we do not speak of causal relations of human behavior, but the existential-phenomenological notion of 'dialectic' relations (Dekkers 1985, 94). Meanings take shape by the active relationship between the subject and the world. Therefore, every meaning a subject gives to something he encounters is part of the greater whole that comprises the world.

### 3.3. Intentionality

Buytendijk adopts his understanding of the concept of intentionality from Merleau-Ponty. With '*être au monde*' Merleau-Ponty describes the human as inseparably tied to the world through his intentional relationship with the world (Dekkers 1985, 146). Via this intentional relationship, the human is in constant dialogue with the world. Our access to the world is effected by perception through the body-subject. Humans give meaning to what their senses perceive, making the world into their object (Davis and Steinbock 2021). This dialogue already happens at a preconscious level, in the physical body: all that we perceive enters our body and is part of giving meaning at a pre-reflexive state before we have even thought about it. This preconscious intentionality forms the basis for conscious intentionality. By meaning giving through perception, which shapes motives and intentions, man has an intentional relationship with his environment, which is the basis for his actions and behaviors.

The intentional relationship between the human and the world can also be found in Plessner's idea of excentric positionality and the double embodiment. As discussed in the previous chapter, excentric positionality gives man the capacity to not only live out of his center but also to reflect on himself, the present, and the past. Consequently, the distinction between *Leib* and a *Körper* is one of intentionality as well. We experience and perceive with our body (*Leib*) and about our body (*Körper*), which Buytendijk calls 'embodied intentionality' (Wehrle 2020, 1).

### 3.4. The functional approach

As we have seen in part II, Buytendijk deems the physicality of the human inseparable from our existence. Therefore, he describes human behavior by taking a functional approach. The functional approach towards behavior holds that not only the physical processes leading to the behavior matter but that the behavior has a specific meaning for the subject (Dekkers 1995, 17). This meaning makes the behavior intentional and functional for the organism.

Buytendijk defines a function as an 'indivisible whole of changes' (*ondeelbaar geheel van veranderingen*) (Dekkers 1985, 86). Functions are meaningful in themselves, it has meaning without the change it results in. This means that the meaning of the function is preserved even when the behavior does not result in any change. For example, the function of hunting behavior is to find food, with the meaning to fill your belly, to enjoy a nice meal. Even if the hunting behavior does not result in any change, for example, if the food cannot be found and the organism stays hungry, the function and meaning of the behavior still stay the same. Therefore, a function implies a subject; the subject behaves and thus functions according to this subjective meaning. Because of their subjective nature, functions always refer back to the situation in which they arise: it is an interaction between the human and his environment as they derive their meaning with regards to the situation (Dekkers 1985, 86).

### 3.5. Autonomy and freedom

Through this functional and intentional relationship, humans 'act' in a specific way in a specific situation via attributing meaning to it. Therefore, human behavior is led by motives rather than causes. In contrast with the way nature necessarily determines animals, the human always has reasons, motives, and thoughts leading him to make his own decisions and shape his world. Drives and instincts have their impact on the human but do not determine him.

Buytendijk takes this role of autonomy in relation to mental health one step further, by defining the 'mental' (*het geestelijke*) as responsibility, freedom, and self-determination. Therefore, being mentally healthy means having the freedom to make your own deliberate decisions. In turn, being mentally unhealthy would mean being incapable of making free and responsible decisions, due to the forceful subjection to unfortunate situations or predispositions. Buytendijk illustrates mental illness as '*Being subject to the irresistible coercion of circumstances or of the predisposition, being caught, lost, and confused by weakness, despair, desperation, guilt, blind passion or conflict*'<sup>5</sup> (1948, 4). The ideas of self-determination and autonomy in mental health is where the existentialist<sup>6</sup> sentiment in Buytendijk's philosophical anthropology shines through, which he derived from Sartre and de Beauvoir (Dekkers 1985, 213).

### Final remarks

The three fundamental anthropological laws follow from the excentric positionality of the human and illustrate his natural artificiality, mediated immediacy, and utopian standpoint. Our natural artificiality creates our nakedness and pressure to shape ourselves.

The excentric positionality requires a subject to be present, who has an intentional relationship with the world. For this reason, the reintroduction of the subject in human sciences and medicine is crucial. This return to the subject entails that we must nuance the objectivity as is usually found in natural sciences, and value the personal experience of the subject of interest (Dekkers 1985, 182). Our body is the thing we know most of since it belongs to us and we are bound to it. Insights into our existence thus stem from the body and our subjective perception of it. Therefore, the subject is an integral part of the understanding of life itself (Dekkers 1985, 96).

---

<sup>5</sup> '*Het onderworpen zijn aan de onweerstaanbare dwang van de omstandigheden of van de aanleg, het gevangen, verdoold, en verward raken door zwakheid, wanhoop, radeloosheid, schuld, blinde hartstocht of door conflicten.*'

<sup>6</sup> Whereas Buytendijk appreciates Sartre and de Beauvoir, Plessner has a more complex relationship with existentialism, though certainly leaning more towards the critical side (Pols 2014, 265). However, Plessner's stance towards existentialism is outside the scope of this thesis.

## Part IV

**The elimination of dualism and reductionism**

[...] if mathematical physics operates through the reduction of the observable qualitative features of the world to different kinds of quantities that can be accounted for through mathematical laws that can be set in logically deductive relations to one another, then the qualitative life worlds of living subjects are illusory, mere semblance, from a scientific standpoint.

—J.M. Bernstein (2019, xxxix)



## Part IV

### Elimination of dualism and reductionism

One major asset of regarding the human as a polarized unity, is that it eliminates reductionism of all sorts, including physicalism, culturalism, and mechanism. But moreover, it does so without neglecting their realm of influence, c.q. that of either physiology or culture.

#### 4.1. Dualism and reductionism

In science, the human is often reduced to a very meticulous machine or too intensely complex mammals (physicalism). In these approaches, there is no room for the mental, which is either completely neglected or reduced to a topic exclusively treated in other sciences (e.g., psychology, sociology).

In the recent introduction of *Die Stufen*, J.M. Bernstein discusses Plessner's philosophical anthropology to counter physicalist, mechanist, and culturalist reductionism. Plessner notes that if natural reductionism were true, all observable qualitative features of the world can be reduced into math and physics (Bernstein 2019, xxxix). This would mean that the qualitative life worlds of all organisms are illusions, as well as the social sciences and humanities. Bernstein writes 'The final story about the human will be written in the austere language of mathematical physics' (Bernstein 2019, xl).

In Cartesian Dualism, the qualitative features of our experience cannot be reduced to mere physical quantitative features, instigating the separation between the physically reducible substance of *res extensa* and the nonreducible *res cogitans* (Bernstein 2019, xl). This implies that cartesian dualism was in the first place motivated by physicalist reductionism. But as this mind-body dualism proved untenable due to the inability to connect the two, the reaction was extremist reductionism (Bernstein 2019, xl). The result is either physicalism or culturalism. Culturalism is not feasible, since modern science and technology could not have been achieved without the help of physics. But on the other hand, as humans can think about 'what experiencing is like' due to our excentric positionality, physicalism is implausible as well, as it would deny the full qualitative aspects of our consciousness.

#### 4.2. Physicalist reductionism

The reduction of consciousness to elementary neuronal units is stripping away the qualitative features of our subjective judgment. Neither can physicalism explain exclusively human phenomena, such as 'the historical causes of the Civil War or the significance of Shakespeare's Hamlet' (Bernstein 2019, xli). Even the cognitive phenomena necessary to conduct science cannot be explained without the help of cognitive phenomena such as explanation, theory, logic, and criticism.

What is necessary here, is an account of organic life that can encompass consciousness as well. Here Plessner's philosophical anthropology comes into play. This way, Plessner is also able to connect biology to the human in his cultural realm, including the life of social norms and values that shape and are shaped by the human in a reciprocal or dialectical fashion. The primary question of philosophical anthropology is, therefore, according to Plessner: "what must life be such that it becomes categorically intelligible that human beings are living beings who can live—survive and reproduce themselves—solely through leading a norm-governed social existence? How does the latter feature relate to and deviate from the former feature?" (Bernstein 2019, xlvi).

Buytendijk describes that in current psychological and physiological studies, researchers strive to find a chemical explanation of processes that work at a micro-dimension, which makes it unfeasible to relate this to processes at a large scale, and virtually impossible to arrive at an integration of the organism via this method. This led him to conclude that the life sciences must get used to that there is always a degree of uncertainty and ambiguity in their explanations, as it consists mainly of partially ordered factual knowledge (*gedeeltelijk geordende feitenkennis*).

The physicalist understanding of space and time in the life sciences does not capture the functional relationship that animals and humans have with their environment. The elements described in

physiology are part of how biological processes operate, but the totality of behavior can only be explained by free and intentional relationships between the human and his environment. In the series *Natuurwetenschap en sociologie*, Buytendijk criticized positivism within the life sciences as it reduced the human to a physical thing, denying qualitative features of consciousness, resulting in physicalist reductionism. He deemed this approach 'unscientific' because it did not recognize the essence of its object (the human) and thus neglects what makes the human a human: its subjective perception stemming from his excentricity, and thus his possession of consciousness and capacity of self-reflexivity. Connecting this to Plessner's fundamental anthropological laws, this would ultimately lead to the denial of man as a cultural being.

#### 4.3. Mechanistic reductionism

Plessner turned against greedy reductionism in the mechanistic worldview. He admitted that elementary analysis of man as a machine may ultimately explain how living organisms function at the atom-level, but it can never show what the expression of life *is* (de Mul 2014, page 459).

Buytendijk criticized the cybernetic trend in the life sciences, which reduced the human to a highly developed computer via formalization and mathematization of bodily elements. In this approach, there is no room for subjectivity and meaning in human behavior. Man cannot be reduced to a mechanistic computer, since we do not run on predetermined programs. Computers do what people ask them to do, given the information and software provided by humans (Dekkers 1985, 204). In contrast, humans act according to what Buytendijk calls 'subjective self-regulation,' the subject acts based upon his intentional relationship with the environment. In subjective self-regulation not only the present matters, but the past and the future as well: we make decisions based upon our personal past, but also the goals we have set for the future.

Living organisms are also different from machines in their movements; organisms are different in function as their elements are more fluently connected. Buytendijk illustrated this by comparing the fluent flight of a seagull to the working of a machine.

Buytendijk recognized the domination of mechanistic and reductionist tendencies in neurophysiology, which he heavily criticized. In general, the discipline neglects seeing the human as a unity and only looks at specific parts of the body in terms of organs or parts of organs. The function of these organs is the central concept of their study, but the integration of the specific part into the whole of the body is lacking. Instead, neurophysiology has to understand the body in terms of self-movement; the functioning of the entire organism.

## Part V

**The therapeutic relationship**

When illness is also affected by the mind, when the person as a whole is involved and the clinical picture shows a steady correlation between physical and psychological symptoms, then diagnosis as well as therapy must be carried out with the help of ‘non-scientific observation.’ ‘Intelligence from the heart,’ kindness towards men, tactfulness, sensitivity, strength of character, and the quintessence of his charismatic qualities are diagnostic and therapeutic tools.

—Helmuth Plessner (1985, 53–54)



## Part V

### The therapeutic relationship

The foundational principles of the human condition laid down by philosophical anthropology imply the concepts and values of an integrated but polarized unity of the person, as well as the reintroduction of the subjective perspective and intentionality. This results in a different way of thinking about the therapeutic relationship.

#### 5.1. The subjective perspective first

This gives an increasingly relevant and fruitful perspective on a current debate within psychology, connected to Buytendijk's reintroduction of the human in medicine. Recently, in the discipline of psychology, the denotation of the subject as 'client' instead of 'patient' is under scrutiny. Contemporaries argue that 'client' is preferred to emphasize his or her subjective autonomy and to place the person before the illness. Psychiatrist Stephen Joseph says "the words we use reflect how we think about the help we offer" as it describes how the therapist thinks about the subject, as it "reflects a different ideology on the part of the helper" (2013). Joseph argues that the word 'patient' puts the subject in a position of asking for help as they are ill, damaged, impaired, or deficient. Instead, 'client' gives the subject autonomy and acknowledges their search for growth, development, and change. Not the need to be cured, which is what patients with physical illness desire.

This client-focused perspective illustrates Plessner's approach towards illness, regarding the subject as a 'harmonious whole, a *Körper* and *Leib*. Moreover, it captures the new therapeutic relationship Buytendijk proposes. Putting the person before the illness and acknowledging his autonomy in their need for change and growth rather than curing the illness, avoids making the doctor the 'all-knowing' subject and the patient the submissive object of study.

#### 5.2. Growth and change

Both Plessner and Buytendijk take an interesting stance toward mental health care. They argue that not so much the distinction between health and illness matters, but rather the internal and external influences that work on the person. Buytendijk calls 'mentally healthy' a derogatory term, as it implies the normativity of what a 'normal, well-functioning person' is. What mentally healthy is, depends on the context, in which cultural values play a role, as well as the personal perspective on mental wellbeing (Dekkers 1985, 212). It is therefore impossible to empirically establish mental illness.

Instead, Buytendijk argues that "Healthy is that which will grow and flourish, which can flow freely, which evokes something fruitful and good, which can develop, which promotes culture and prosperity or brings forth the condition for the development of a rich life" (Buytendijk, Christian, and Schulte 1962, 8). As health is something that comes into development, it is not a state of being, but a continuous process of growth and change (Dekkers 1985, 211). This process of growth and change can be found in Plessner, the necessity to continuously balance between *Leib* and *Körper*, and naturality and artificiality, as described by Tolone in the previous chapter.

#### 5.3. The role of the therapist

Because mental and physical illnesses are the result of a disbalance of our excentric position, the role of therapists or doctors should be altered accordingly (Tolone 2014, 171). Currently, medical science reduces the patient to 'an object to be studied' as they see science as a facilitator of the process toward health. By using technology and equipment that depersonalizes the patient rather than seeing him or her as an individual, the 'patient becomes the studied object and the doctor the cognitive subject' (Tolone 2014, 171), which is in essence a paternalistic approach (Ruffalo 2017). In contrast, Plessner argues that a doctor must regard the patient as a 'harmonious whole' and not just treat his patient as a *Körper* but as *Leib* as well.

This might seem more applicable in the case of physical illness, but the same can be seen in mental health care. Psychological tools of assessment, diagnosis, and classification sometimes categorize individuals instead of acknowledging and understanding their personal situation. This is related to the widespread phenomenon of ‘labeling’, in which the patient is given an illness label that describes how the facets of the mental illness can be grouped under one denominator. Recent studies have shown that labeling can have negative effects on the well-being of the participant in terms of self-image and stigmatization (Van Delft 2015).

Instead, it is better to use diagnostic labels only to define the focal point of a treatment, not to define the patient (Van Delft 2015). This way, established treatments that are proven effective for a specific group of illness are still important but opens up the field for personalized treatments as well, which are becoming increasingly popular.

The key to a good practitioner, according to Plessner, is intuitively understanding your patients (Tolone 2014, 173). Plessner argues that the practitioner needs both science and ‘intelligence of the heart’, as the one seeking help becomes both the object of science and a ‘subject of spirit’. We could hypothesize that Plessner would therefore use both terms, patient and client. This subject of spirit is where Plessner believes that psychology is partly unscientific, as knowing a person is rather a personality skill of the therapist than a science.

Buytendijk’s anthropologically-oriented medical praxis (Dekkers 1995, 24) shows a more radical view on the patient-physician relationship than Plessner’s. Buytendijk stresses the importance of a personal relationship between a doctor and patient, as he argues that the doctor should gain an insight into ‘the fundamental motives of the patient’s existence’ in a way to ‘partake in the patient’s disordered existence’ (Dekkers 1985, 221). The conditions required for a such relationship are an open-minded, unprejudiced conversation. The therapist, paradoxically, must regard the patient ‘without any sympathy nor antipathy,’ to set his or her own subjective experience aside. As a result, a therapeutic relationship is established which advances the diagnostic process and recovery.

The role of the therapist is not one of a scholastic, but of an experienced helper, according to Buytendijk. This helping nature goes from ‘heart to heart’ in an objective but compassionate way. Buytendijk clarifies this relationship as an antithesis of distancing and approaching. However, this is characterized as a one-way street (Dekkers 1985, 222). The health care worker does his utmost best to gain insights into the ‘being’ of the patient, but this must not be done reciprocally by the patient.

### Final remarks

The combination of the subjective perspective of autonomy and the approach to mental health as a balance of *Leib* and *Körper*, makes health into a never-ending project of growth and change. This impacts the way therapists must look at the patient. It also requires them to rethink their role within the therapeutic relationship and the effect of diagnostic labels and the distinction between ‘client’ and ‘patient.’ Philosophical anthropology’s ideal therapist is a compassionate and experienced helper, who uses both science and intelligence of the heart.

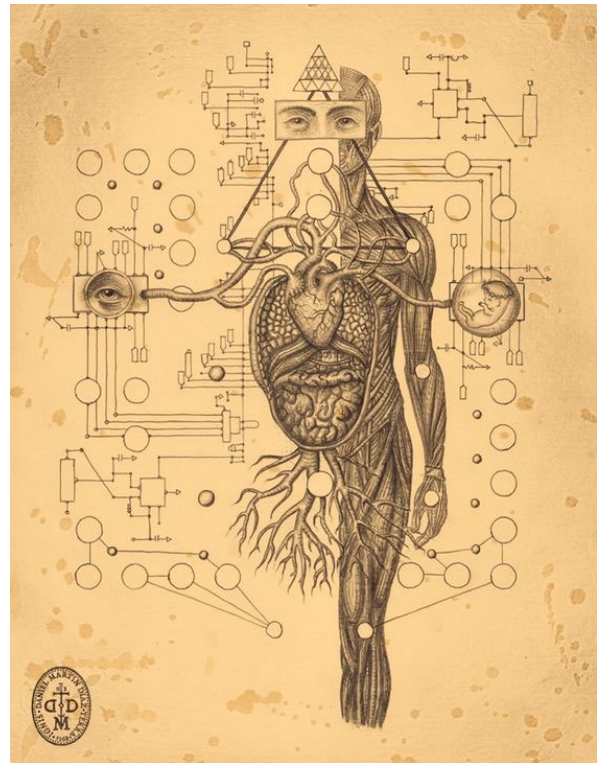


## Part VI

# Methodology

Philosophy can never prove a hindrance to the advance of empirical science. On the contrary, she traces every new discovery back to fundamental principles, and thus lays the foundation for fresh discoveries.

—Alexander von Humboldt (2009 [1805], 204)



## Part VI

### Methodology

The general aim of philosophical anthropology as found in the work of Plessner and Buytendijk was to offer a sturdy ground for the human, on which all disciplines in science could base themselves. This issue is inherent to the derivative methods within a specific discipline, speaking of how we conduct science and how we explain human behavior.

#### 6.1. Causality

The main goal of psychology for Buytendijk is to understand ‘the human within his world, meaning the foundational structure of the whole of situations, events, and cultural norms to which his feelings, thoughts, and behaviors refer: the world in which the human exists and gives meaning to’. The human must be grasped as having connections and relationships he deliberately chooses to make with the world, not as a being of certain fixed characteristics. The focal point of psychology as a discipline is all facets of human existence. And as the human is always connected to something, and cannot be detached from his situation and his condition, the human lives in the contexts of many worlds or ‘realities’. Due to all these different facets and worlds that are the object of psychology, ‘the psychologist is not only an objective observer or empirical thinking’ so that he takes on a completely different stance than the mathematician or the physicist does.

Plessner wrote that the methodology of psychology partly stems from that of the natural sciences (involving causality) and partly from the humanities, such as history and ethnology (Helmuth Plessner 2019b, xx). Using the same distinction as Wilhelm Dilthey, Plessner and Buytendijk demarcate the difference between the natural sciences and the human sciences by how they form explanations. Natural sciences such as chemistry and physics could suffice by using a process or causal explanation (*erklärend*), whereas the human sciences need additional explanation; attention to the unity and coherency within the organism is required. Human behavior arises from intentional motives, which stem from the attribution of meaning, rather than from causes.

Buytendijk’s main methodological claim is that sciences should adopt their method with regard to the object of their specific study, meaning the tailoring of the methods to the ontological qualities of the subject. As in psychology, medicine, and other life sciences, the human is the object of interest, it does not make sense to ignore the true essence of man. Instead, we must make what determines the human the centerpiece of the psychological discipline. Thus positionality, subjectivity, and the intentional relationship between the human and the world must be the central theme of the science of human behavior. Choosing the method in accordance with the essential characteristics of the object of study, psychology should use human motives instead of causality as its method of acquiring knowledge.

#### 6.2. Treatment of the inner world

Because of double aspectivity, the world appears to the human in three worlds or ‘spheres’: an outer world, an inner world, and a shared world. Plessner calls these the ‘spheres’ as they appear as a part in light of a greater whole. As everything that appears to the human belongs to a specific sphere and thus ‘against the backdrop of a whole’, everything appears to the human as a fragment. The sphere of the outer world consists of an empty spatiotemporal continuum filled with objects (Helmuth Plessner 2019c, 272). As the beings within this sphere manifest themselves and stay within their boundaries, the space between these objects is ‘nothingness’ in a continuum of space and time.

Due to the human’s extrinsic positionality, the human must distinguish between an individual ‘I’ and a general ‘I’, to see himself both as an individual and as part of a group (Helmuth Plessner 2019c, 279). We do this as we assume that the others in this world also all have an ‘I’ (Helmuth Plessner 2019c, 280). This is what forms the shared world or *Mitwelt*. In this shared world, we are a personal *Ich*, that participates and contributes to the cultural world, as well as a *Wir*, part of a greater whole that shapes us (De Mul 2014a, 17).

Going into detail about the outer world and the shared world is out of the scope of this thesis. What matters here is the inner world, the distance between a living being and its core (Helmuth Plessner 2019c, 276). In this world, we find another dual aspect resulting from the human's excentricity: the soul (*Seele*), which is the active inner life, and the lived experience (*Erlebnis*), 'the theatre in which the psychic processes take place' (De Mul 2014a, 17). As Plessner writes "*I am the one who provides the material and the forms of my inner sphere and, furthermore, that this self-position is itself given to me, allows me to both discover and reshape my psychic reality*" (2019c, 276).

Plessner criticizes psychologists' current methodology of the inner world, as he finds it too narrow and simplistic (Helmuth Plessner 2019c, 278). Psychology treats the inner world as psychic appearance – a sphere filled with mental aspects and processes such as ideas, thoughts, and feelings, which we can grasp and perceive. In this appearance, we are sometimes the object and sometimes the subject.

This view is incorrect according to Plessner, as our inner world is always apparent, even if we are unaware of it or unconsciously processing it. Since these inner appearances are always present at the backdrop of our existence, the current view is too narrow. We are never exclusively the object or the subject, we are always both: because the human is always immediately 'in himself', we are always immediately appearing (we are always experiencing ourselves). However, what appears to us is determined by what we focus on. Our inner world can only be grasped by us by performing mental acts such as reflecting, observing, remembering, and imagining, which are given to us by the exclusive human characteristic of excentricity.

Through these mental processes, the living subject shapes and builds his psychic reality. This, in turn, shapes mental aspects such as the individual's wishes, dreams, and feelings. The inner world consists of a 'spectrum of being', e.g., ranging from extreme neglect of our feelings and desires (such as repressed trauma), to complete submersion into our psychic world (e.g., when the psychic life completely consumes us at times, for example by grief and loss). Negative thoughts or feelings can completely flood us, clouding the experience of 'ourselves as a whole.' During these moments, we only have attention for our psychic life. At other times, our absorption into our psychic life takes a less extreme form, as we can let our mental impression cloud our judgment. Or, as Plessner poetically puts it, "The gaze of the experiencing subject can cause its inner life to change as dramatically as light affects the sensitive layer of a photographic plate" (Helmuth Plessner 2019c, 276).

### 6.3. Multidisciplinary approach

Buytendijk's philosophical anthropology connects anthropological aspects of consciousness, such as intentionality and subjectivity with the physiology of the human. By taking a functional approach, he argues that the study of behavior should cross the border between the disciplines of psychology and physiology. Human behavior cannot be studied as something that is exclusively mental or exclusively physical but as something in between. The crossing of interdisciplinary boundaries creates a new fused perspective on psychology, in which a multidisciplinary view is necessary to explain how behavior and mental life are constituted.

#### Final remarks

The essential characteristic of the object of study should determine the method of the specific scientific discipline. Because the exclusive human characteristic is excentric positionality and intentionality, human behavior is better explained by motives rather than causes. Thus, the human sciences must adopt a methodology of motives, not of causality.

The current approach of psychology to mental aspects is too narrow, according to Plessner. We must see introspection as a shift of focus on aspects that are always present, rather than seeing it as something that sometimes appears to us, and sometimes not. The ability to focus on our inner world is, again, given to us by our excentric positionality.

Lastly, seeing the human as an integrated psycho-physical unity requires us to cross the borders between different disciplines, and to adopt a multidisciplinary method.

## Conclusion

This work sought an answer to the question ‘how can we use philosophical anthropology to formulate a critical alternative for looking at the human in psychology?’ to present a different way of thinking about the human. Inspired by Plessner and Buytendijk, I argued that philosophical anthropology is a middle way that avoids reductionism, physicalism, and culturalism. This middle way leads to an interdisciplinary foundation for a new way of thought about the human condition and bridges the gap between biology and the humanities.

Departing from the concept of positionality, Plessner argues that the centric animal lives out of its center, whereas the human holds excentric positionality. Our excentric positionality entails that we have the capacity to reflect on our experience, on ourselves, and on our body.

This creates an incommensurable split of experience between the two aspects of the human body, between *Leib* and *Körper*. This double aspectivity offers a new way of thinking about mental illnesses. This conflicting situation must be at balance to prevent any mental or physical disturbances to occur, leading to both mental and physical illnesses.

As the human’s excentric positionality gives rise to the three fundamental anthropological laws of natural artificiality, mediated immediacy, and the utopian standpoint, we must consider the subject and its intentionality vital to the existence of the human. As a consequence of man’s subjective existence and intentionality, we must adopt a functional approach to the human, one that emphasizes his intentional motives instead of causes of behavior. In turn, psychologists must prioritize the need for autonomy and freedom of the subject.

Freedom as the hallmark of (mental) well-being is a fruitful approach in modern-day psychology. Both physical and mental illnesses can have an incapacitating effect, although physical illnesses often make this more visible. The crippling effect of mental illnesses is captured by Buytendijk’s description of autonomy, freedom, and self-determination as central to mental health. This emphasizes the need to look at mental health care as a process of growth and change, instead of curing and healing. This requires the therapist to take on a different role, that of compassionate helper instead of authoritative healer.

Looking at the human as a polarized unity creates the need for a multidisciplinary method, crossing the borders of various sciences and ways of thinking. Using causality is not a helpful approach to human behavior, which is better explained by motives and intentionality.

As a final thought, we might relate our struggle with natural artificiality to our modern-day experience. Our double aspectivity provokes the need to shape our existence with artificiality, such as tools and culture. The rich plethora of opportunities and possibilities of this day and age at hand might enforce the pressure to perfect our existence. Pressures embedded in modern-day culture might elevate this common source of struggle in the twenty-first century, leading to increased rates of burn-out, stress, and anxiety. Maybe the burn-out crisis is an existential crisis, resulting from the very basis of our existence: is it a symptom stemming from our artificial nature?

In conclusion, this work has illustrated the fruitfulness of philosophical anthropology by Plessner and Buytendijk as a middle way in psychology. It offers an interesting starting point for looking at human existence, leading to insights into psychology and its methodology. An integrated approach to the human offers new ways for clinical practice within psychology. It stipulates the need to reintroduce the subject, which results in a different perspective on mental health care, including a distinct therapeutic relationship.

## Bibliography

- Abma, Ruud. 2014. "Frederik Buytendijk (1887-1974)." In *Van Fenomenologie Naar Empirisch-Analytische Psychologie*, edited by Willem Koops, Vittorio Busato, and Mineke Van Essen, 1st ed. Vol. 2. Pioniers van de Nederlandse Gedragwetenschappen. Amsterdam: Prometheus.
- Beck, Aaron T., A. John Rush, Brian F. Shaw, and Gary Emery. 1979. *Cognitive Therapy of Depression*. 1st ed. Guilford Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy. New York, NY: Guilford press.
- Bernstein, J.M. 2019. "Introducing Helmuth Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology." In *Levels of Organic Life and the Human. An Introduction to Philosophical Anthropology.*, 1st ed. New York, NY: Fordham University Press.
- Buytendijk, F. J. J. 1948. *Algemene Theorie Der Menselijke Houding En Beweging*. Utrecht: Het Spectrum.
- Buytendijk, F. J. J. 1957. "Het Innerlijk Evenwicht." *Tijdschrift Voor Filosofie* 19 (4 (December)): 559–76.
- Buytendijk, F. J. J., P. Christian, and W. Schulte. 1962. "Het Verband Tussen de Maatschappelijke Rangorde Der Waarden En Gezondheid." In *Tijdgeest En Geestelijke Gezondheid*. Serie Geestelijke Volksgezondheid 21. Utrecht: Het Spectrum.
- Coolen, Maarten. 2014. "Bodily Experience and Experiencing One's Body." In *Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology. Perspectives and Prospects*, edited by Jos De Mul, 111–27. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Davis, Zachary, and Anthony Steinbock. 2021. "Max Scheler." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 2021. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/scheler/>.
- De Mul, Jos. 2014a. "Artificial by Nature." In *Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology. Perspectives and Prospects*, 11–37. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Dekkers, Wim J.M. 2014b. *Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology. Perspectives and Prospects*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Dekkers, Wim J.M. 2016. "'Aan Deze Zijde van de Utopie' ~ De Wijsgerige Antropologie van Helmuth Plessner." *Rozenberg Quarterly*. August 21, 2016. <https://rozenbergquarterly.com/aan-deze-zijde-van-de-utopie-de-wijsgerige-antropologie-van-helmuth-plessner/>.
- Dekkers, Wim J.M. 1985. "Het Bezielde Lichaam: Het Ontwerp van Een Antropologische Fysiologie En Geneeskunde Volgens F.J.J. Buytendijk." Zeist: Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen.
- Dekkers, Wim J.M. 1995. "F.J.J. Buytendijk's Concept of an Anthropological Physiology." *Theoretical Medicine* 16 (1): 15–39.
- Ernste, Huib. 2014. "Eccentric Positionality and Urban Space." In *Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology. Perspectives and Prospects*, edited by Jos De Mul, 243–59. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Fischer, Joachim. 2014. "Philosophical Anthropology. A Third Way between Darwinism and Foucaultism." In *Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology. Perspectives and Prospects*, edited by Jos De Mul, 41–55. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Joseph, Stephen. 2013. "Patients or Clients? What Word Should Psychologists Use to Describe the People They Help." *Psychology Today*. August 4, 2013. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/whatdoesnt-kill-us/201308/patients-or-clients>.
- Linsky, Robert. 2002. "Physicalism and Its Discontents. Reviews." *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*. University of Notre Dame. August 4, 2002. <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/physicalism-and-its-discontents/>.
- Lowenberg, Julius, Robert Avé-Lallemant, and Alfred Dove. 2009. *Life of Alexander Von Humboldt*. Vol. 1. 2 vols. New York, NY: Cosimo.
- Plessner, Helmut. 1975. *Die Stufen Des Organischen Und Der Mensch. Einleitung in Die Philosophische Anthropologie*. 3rd ed. Berlin, DE: Walter de Gruyter.
- Plessner, Helmuth. 1970. *Laughing and Crying: A Study of the Limits of Human Behavior*. Edited by James Spencer Churchill and Marjorie Grene. 2nd ed. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

- Plessner, Helmuth. 1982. "Der Mensch Als Lebewesen." In *Mit Anderen Augen. Aspekte Einer Philosophischen Anthropologie*, 9–62. Stuttgart: Reclam.
- Plessner, Helmuth. 1985. "Über Die Erkenntnisquelle Der Arztes." In *Gesammelte Schriften IX: Schriften Zur Philosophie (1928)*, 45–55. Gesammelte Schriften 9. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Plessner, Helmuth. 2019a. *Levels of Organic Life and the Human. An Introduction to Philosophical Anthropology*. Translated by Millay Hyatt. 1st ed. New York, NY: Fordham University Press.
- Plessner, Helmuth. 2019b. "Preface to the Second Edition (1965)." In *Levels of Organic Life and the Human. An Introduction to Philosophical Anthropology.*, translated by Millay Hyatt, 1st ed., xix–xxxv. New York, NY: Fordham University Press.
- Plessner, Helmuth. 2019c. "The Sphere of the Human." In *Levels of Organic Life and the Human. An Introduction to Philosophical Anthropology.*, translated by Millay Hyatt, 1st ed. New York, NY: Fordham University Press.
- Pols, Kirsten. 2014. "Strangely Familiar. The Debate on Multiculturalism and Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology." In *Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology. Perspectives and Prospects*, 261–74. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Ruffalo, Mark L. 2017. "Power, Paternalism, and Psychiatry. Authoritarian versus Libertarian Psychiatry." *Psychology Today*. September 2, 2017.  
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/mental-illness-metaphor/201709/power-paternalism-and-psychiatry>.
- Tolone, Oreste. 2014. "Plessner's Theory of Eccentricity. A Contribution to the Philosophy of Medicine." In *Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology. Perspectives and Prospects*, edited by Jos De Mul, 163–75. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Van Delft, Marcel. 2015. "The Possible Threats of Labeling in a Psychiatric Context." *Journal of Psychology & Clinical Psychiatry* 2 (4): 14–12.
- Van der Horst, L. 1966. "F.J.J. Buytendijk, Prolegomena van Een Antropologische Fysiologie." *Het Nederlandse Tijdschrift Voor Geneeskunde* 110 (18 (April)): 853.
- Webster's New World College Dictionary. 2004. "Pou Sto." In *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 4th ed. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.  
<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/pou-sto>.
- Wehrle, Maren. 2020. "Being a Body and Having a Body. The Twofold Temporality of Embodied Intentionality." *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 19 (3): 499–521.
- Zahavi, Dan. 2008. *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-Person Perspective*. Cambridge, MA: MIT press.

## Illustrations

- Front Page. Anonymous. N.d. *Knitting a brain*. Digital Illustration. Stickermania.  
<https://mystickermania.com/sticker-packs/noob-pack/knitting-brain>
- Page 4. Anonymous. N.d. *Helmuth Plessner*. Photograph. Alchetron. <https://alchetron.com/Helmuth-Plessner>
- Page 8. Dekkers, Wim J.M. 1985. *Het Bezielde Lichaam: Het Ontwerp van Een Antropologische Fysiologie En Geneeskunde Volgens F.J.J. Buytendijk*. Zeist: Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen.
- Page 11a. McLeod, S. A. 2019. *Cognitive behavioral therapy*. January 11, 2019. Digital illustration. Simply Psychology. [www.simplypsychology.org/cognitive-therapy.html](http://www.simplypsychology.org/cognitive-therapy.html)
- Page 11b. Persons, Jacqueline B. 2005. *Empiricism, Mechanism, and the Practice of Cognitive-Behavior Therapy*. *Behavior Therapy* 36 (2): 107–18.
- Page 11c. Uzunoglu, Semra and Uzunoğlu, Kozan. 2011. *The application of formal perception of gestalt in architectural education*. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 28: 993-1003.
- Page 13. Anonymous. N.d. *No title*. Digital Illustration. <https://www.fondosimagenes.com/fondos-de-pantalla-de-psicologia/>
- Page 18. Mondriaan, Piet. 1913. *Table no. 1*. Oil on canvas. Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.  
<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/piet-mondrian-tableau-no-1>
- Page 21. Fink, Vincent. N.d. *Iteration 18: Nature of Ego & Self Painting*. Acryl on canvas. Vincent Fink Surrealism paintings. <http://www.vincentfink.com/surrealism-paintings/>
- Page 24. Martin Diaz, Daniel. 2013. *Self-Aware System*. Drawing, Intaglio print. Daniel Martin Diaz original artwork. <https://www.danielmartindiaz.com/>