

**Understanding Self-Tracking as a Human Activity:**  
An Exploration of Self-Tracking from the Perspective of Helmuth Plessner's  
Philosophical Anthropology

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**Author's note:**

*After reading the introduction, I invite you to visit the Fitbit website and to take a look at all the different features they provide. Although I have provided a description wherever necessary, it helps to see for yourself what features Fitbit provides.*

App description: [https://help.fitbit.com/articles/en\\_US/Help\\_article/2435.htm](https://help.fitbit.com/articles/en_US/Help_article/2435.htm)

General website: <https://www.fitbit.com/global/nl/home>

*With regards to the use of gender-specific language, I have opted for gender-neutral terminology rather than adopting the male-centered perspective of Helmuth Plessner and his contemporaries. The human being is thus not referred to as “he” but as “they”, even in those sections where this comes at the cost of readability. The only exceptions to this rule are direct citations of Plessner’s work.*

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## 1. Introduction

What does it mean to be human? There are many ways to answer this question. From the biological perspective, being human could mean that your cells contain human DNA. From a sociological perspective, it could mean that you are part of a species and partake in its social structure. From a philosophical perspective, it might be impossible to provide a definitive answer. Luckily, I will not be attempting to answer this question. I will, however, concern myself with two uniquely human phenomena: Technology and the self. More specifically, I will be focusing on a topic that occupies the middle ground between these two, a place where they interact: Self-Tracking Technology (STT).

Self-tracking technology simply refers to technology that is used to track, quantify, or record certain aspects of the self. As with most technologies, STT serves as a means to an end. Often, people engage in self-tracking to attain certain health-related goals. Take, for example, the person who wants to gain and lose weight and thus measures and documents their weight over an extended period of time to determine whether they have progressed towards their goal or need to alter their behavior. This example makes STT seem like a rather simple and uneventful phenomenon. With modern technology in the mix, however, this is most definitely not the case. Self-tracking technology has developed to allow us to document more about ourselves than we ever have before, and it has never been easier! Most new mobile phones these days even come preinstalled with self-tracking features. Think of the Apple Health application, that will start counting your steps, distance covered, and calories burned with one simple tap on your screen.

Considering that no other species has been able to do it, it is already an impressive feat that we are able to track ourselves. On top of that, we are unique in our use of technology or, at least, unique in the degree to which we have developed our technology. Although it is an interesting phenomenon, there seem to be no philosophical (or other) accounts of why the human is able to use self-tracking technology, and no satisfying explanations exist of why the human chooses to do so. In this BA-thesis, I wish to investigate STT from a perspective that describes the human and explains their behavior to determine how our use of STT relates to the human condition.

Currently, there seems to be no existing debate regarding STT that explains it as a uniquely human activity and I will thus not be picking a side in an existing debate. Instead, I will be using Helmuth Plessner's philosophical anthropology (PA) to argue **that modern self-tracking technology can be considered to be an expression of the human condition and its characteristics**. To prove this, my argument will be divided over two chapters. I will be

focusing specifically on STT that tracks the body, and not on STT focused on things such as emotions. My main reason for doing so is that most typically modern STT is directed toward the body, and I wish to examine how STT relates to our perception of our bodies rather than our mind. Additionally, I will use Fitbit as a typical example of modern STT to illustrate my arguments, analyzing its specific features and showing them to reflect fundamentally human characteristics. In the first chapter, I will bring to light some of the shortcomings of the existing literature on STT that is based on the idea of positionality, and then show that the human positionality constitutes the anthropological condition for the possibility to self-track, thus also supporting the claim that technology, or STT, is unique to the human being. In the current context, positionality can be thought of as the manner in which a being is positioned in the world and relates to it. In the second chapter, I will be discussing typical features of STT and show how they can be related to, or rather, are a reflection of the human condition. This second part will be structured according to three fundamental laws of Plessner's PA, which I will discuss individually, drawing conclusions along the way.

## 2. Self-tracking: A uniquely human activity

Before I start, I think it is in order to address the matter of terminology. There are many ways to refer to the concept I wish to discuss, and the differences are nuanced. One option would be to utilize the term *lifelogging*. In this context, *life* does not refer to biological or organismic, but rather to the personal life experienced by human beings. Stefan Selke, in his edited volume on the topic, preferred this term over *self-tracking* as it “is open and indifferent enough to encompass as many types ... as possible.”<sup>1</sup> Many others, however, opted for self-tracking, self-monitoring, or even biosensing.<sup>2,3,4</sup> Lifelogging would thus also include, for example, the usage of cameras to document everything that occurs in daily life. In this paper, I will illustrate my arguments using the example of Fitbit, a technology that is directed toward the physical body and related to health and fitness. As such, when I am referring to either self-tracking or self-tracking technology (STT) in my arguments, I intend to refer specifically to this application of STT.

The concept of self-tracking is rather self-explanatory, but I think it is worth to briefly discuss its history and the influence of modern technology. On a fundamental level, self-tracking involves both the collection and the representation of collected data. With those criteria in mind, self-tracking precedes modern technology and can be said to have been possible since humans started using notation systems for physical characteristics. A very basic example would be the weight scale. The scale allows us to measure our weight and by writing down these weights we engage in self-tracking. What has changed with the rise of modern technology, then, is not necessarily our ability to self-track, but rather the means we have at our disposal to do so. The first big change is that self-tracking, or at least the collection of data, has become an increasingly passive process. Nowadays, many smartphones come with a preinstalled step counter. Imagine having to count your steps without this technology! The second big change is that technological developments have simply opened us up to aspects of ourselves we would simply not be able to track manually. Think of, for example, blood oxygen saturation levels or sleep tracking.

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<sup>1</sup> Stefan Selke, “Lifelogging – Disruptive Technology and Cultural Transformation – The Impact of a Societal Phenomenon,” In *Lifelogging*, ed. Stefan Selke (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, 2016), 1, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-13137-1\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-13137-1_1).

<sup>2</sup> Btihaj Ajana, “Introduction,” in *Self-tracking*, ed. Btihaj Ajana (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 2-4, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-65379-2\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-65379-2_1)

<sup>3</sup> Lisa Wiedemann, “self-monitoring: Embodying Data and Obliviating the Lived Body!?” In *Lifelogging*, ed. Stefan Selke (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, 2016), 207-12, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-13137-1\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-13137-1_11).

<sup>4</sup> Dawn Nafus, *Quantified: Biosensing Technologies in everyday life* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016), ix-xxi.

As of 2016, there were over 160000 different health-related mobile applications on the market, many of which involve self-tracking.<sup>5</sup> With the immensely wide range of uses of STT it should come as no surprise that the phenomenon is approached from many different angles in the literature, and that many different cases or examples are used. For the sake of readability, understandability, and to illustrate my arguments, I will be zooming in specifically on (the) Fitbit. Fitbit is one of the more known brands focusing on self-tracking. They mainly specialize in smartwatches and “trackers”, both of these are wearable watches that include a wide range of self-tracking features.<sup>6</sup> As the name of the company indicates, the products are designed to help users in their fitness goals, or to achieve health. What makes Fitbit a good example of modern self-tracking technology is that their devices are linked to a mobile application. It includes a “Today” section where users can view and interact with their daily statistics such as the number of steps they have taken or the number of calories they have burned. Additionally, the “discover” section provides workout ideas and other useful tools. Lastly, there is a “community” section where users can share data, reply to each other, and even compete in leaderboards.

I have selected Fitbit as it is often mentioned in the literature, holds a significant share of the wearable tracker market, and represents a highly accessible and varied form of STT. Additionally, Fitbit utilizes a wide range of features and describes them properly on their website. This last reason is of great importance to the current project, as part of my argument revolved around showing these features to be a reflection of specifically human characteristics. Additionally, I think Fitbit emphasizes the “tracking” side of modern wearable technology more than its competitors, such as the Apple Watch, thus serving as a better example of STT.

### 2.1. Self-tracking and our bodily perspective

Currently, there are two edited volumes on this topic, published in 2016 and 2018.<sup>7,8</sup> My reason for selecting these is that they both provide an interesting overview of some of the applications, prospects, and risks of STT. Additionally, both editors discuss the matter of terminology and provide a clear working definition for their volumes. The alternative for

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<sup>5</sup> Ajana, “Introduction,” 3.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.fitbit.com/global/nl/home>

<sup>7</sup> Selke, “Lifeloggging.”

<sup>8</sup> Ajana, “Introduction.”

these two volumes would be a selection of separate articles, yet the scope of the current investigation simply does not allow me to properly select and discuss all of them. In the volumes, we find authors arguing that we form a sort of companionship with STT.<sup>9,10</sup> Additionally, we see some authors focusing specifically on gendered aspects of STT, arguing that STT can perpetuate existing stereotypes or provide a good opportunity to incorporate feminized bodily practices into a masculine environment.<sup>11,12</sup> The postphenomenological approach, that examines STT through human-technology-world relations, also gained popularity recently. Here we see authors examining the manner in which STT mediates our relationship to ourselves and the world around us.<sup>13</sup>

Although all of these perspectives are highly interesting, I would like to specifically focus on the manner in which self-tracking relates to our positionality as I will show this to be a necessary condition for self-tracking. In social research, positionality often refers to the manner in which our identities are shaped by our social and/or political context. Plessner approaches the matter of positionality by focusing specifically on lived experience on a fundamental level.<sup>14</sup> First, I would like to draw attention to the distinction of the body as lived thing and object in the world; as *Leib* and *Körper*. It was Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, who introduced this distinction. Helmuth Plessner's PA, on which I will provide more details in the following paragraphs, embraces this distinction. The distinction refers to the idea that the human is able to view his body as both the subject and object of experience.<sup>15</sup> This means that, according to Husserl and Plessner, the individual can in one way "live" through its body, and have it be the subject of experience. This lived body he termed the *Leib*. Additionally, the individual is able to orient their attention towards their body and think of it as an object in the world, or even an instrument to be used. The individual then does not experience *being* a body, but rather experiences *having* a body. The

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<sup>9</sup>Jill Walker Rettberg, "Apps as Companions: How Quantified Self Apps Become Our Audience and Our Companions," in *Self-tracking*, ed. Btihaj Ajana (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 27–42, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-65379-2\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-65379-2_3).

<sup>10</sup>Paolo Ruffino, "Engagement and the Quantified Self: Uneventful Relationships with Ghostly Companions," in *Self-tracking*, ed. Btihaj Ajana (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 11–25, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-65379-2\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-65379-2_2).

<sup>11</sup>Deborah Lupton, "Quantified Sex: A Critical Analysis of Sexual and Reproductive Self-Tracking Using Apps," *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 17, no. 4 (2014): 440–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2014.920528>.

<sup>12</sup>Corinna Schmechel, "Calorie Counting or Calorie Tracking," in *Lifeloggging*, ed. Stefan Selke (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, 2016), 267–281, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-13137-1\\_15](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-13137-1_15)

<sup>13</sup>Yoni van den Eede, "Tracing the Tracker: A Postphenomenological Inquiry into Self-Tracking Technologies," in *Postphenomenological Investigations: Essays on Human-Technology Relations*, ed. Robert Rosenberger & Peter P. Verbeek (Lexington Books, 2017): 143–58.

<sup>14</sup>Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life*, 267–268.

<sup>15</sup>Maren Wehrle, "Being a Body and Having a Body, the Twofold Temporality of Embodied Intentionality," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 19 no. 3 (2019): 500, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-019-09610-z>



body in this second type of experience Husserl termed the *Körper*. It is these two aspects, the body as *Leib* and as *Körper*, that make up the *Körper/Leib*-distinction.

It is not hard to imagine how this distinction can be related to STT. After all, self-tracking involves the quantification and thus objectification of certain aspects of the physical self. Additionally, the subsequent improvement of health through self-tracking requires one to alter behavior or use the body in a specific manner. It is not surprising, then, that there are several authors who have utilized the distinction or phenomenology, in which this concept plays a central role, in their discussion of STT.

Before I move on to the excentric positionality and my argument as to how it makes self-tracking possible, I would first like to show how the *Körper/Leib*-distinction has been used to explain specific phenomena of self-tracking via two examples. The first way is that, by tracking the user at all times, it allows the user to objectify aspects of life that were previously a part of their lived experience. Bas de Boer, coming from the perspective of phenomenology of health, describes this as follows: “Self-tracking applications turn specific aspects of the body that previously were habits, part of our subjective experience of the world, into objective characteristics of our body that can be related to *in* the world.”<sup>16</sup> In the case of Fitbit, we could find an example in their feature of “Active Zone Minutes”, where user acquire points according to how much time their heartrate is above a certain threshold. Now imagine a situation in which one walks their dog with the pure intention of walking their dog. If they then later use the Fitbit app and reflect on their day only to realize that their walking their dog contributed towards their health goal, this aspect of lived experience that was previously lived through, has now become an objectified activity, something that can be used or oriented towards a certain goal.

The second way concerns a more direct disruption of lived experience in which the user is triggered to objectify their body. The example of *nudges* might be most fitting here. Nudges are notifications coming from STT that inform the user on their current progress toward their health goal, and in some cases prompt them to work towards them. In a qualitative study on nudges from the perspective of sociological phenomenology, John Toner and colleagues concluded that: “Nudges had a tendency to bring the pre-reflective ‘disappearing’ body into stark relief as a focus of intentionality, and thereby provoke a certain

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<sup>16</sup> Bas de Boer, “Experiencing Objectified health: Turning the Body into an Object of Attention,” *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 23, no. 3 (2020): 407, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11019-020-09949-0>.

degree of body-objectification and disruption to lifeworldly ‘flow’.”<sup>17</sup> In concrete terms, nudges initiate in the user a shift from the body as subject of experience (*Leib*) to the body as object of experience (*Körper*). Take the example of walking the dog whilst self-tracking using Fitbit. If the watch or mobile devices were to inform the user of the registered activity and its contribution during the activity, this would prompt a reflection. In this reflection, the body is brought to the forefront of attention as an object that is used in a certain manner.

What I have shown here are two examples of the ways in which the *Körper/Leib*-distinction can and has been used to describe the effects of STT on the user’s perception of their body. What the existing literature does not do, however, is explain how self-tracking is even possible to begin with. I would argue that it is this distinction and especially our ability to conceive of our body as an object renders self-tracking possible. If one even wants to begin to understand STT, the body is required to be presented as an object in the world that can be related to. If we were unable to do this, and only lived *through* our bodies, we would not be able to manipulate and use it the way we do. Instead, we would have to rely on direct bodily input and intuitive notions of health. Referring to the dog walking example, it would simply be impossible to conceive of the body in another way than using it to live life or to execute certain actions.

These conclusions also bring to light an interesting problem occurring across all philosophical investigations of STT. The problem is that the concept of the self is only defined insofar as the STT in question defines it or requires it to be defined. Simply put, in the case of STT like Fitbit watches, the self is somewhat equated with the body. What we see when we view the explanations above, however, is that another conception of the self is presupposed. The very fact that there is a subject who experiences their body subjectively or objectively implies an existence separate from this bodily self. If I were to walk my dog and wear a Fitbit device, although I live through my body, I am not equal to it. I am still an “I” in the conscious sense. If I then receive a nudge from my watch, I interpret this, and I automatically objectify my body. Every experience, even when defined through the perspectives described so far, presupposes an I. This subject seems to just be described as the human subject, and no further thought is given to its characteristics and how it relates to STT, besides that it alters its embodiment. What is this self, and what are its characteristics? In the

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<sup>17</sup> John Toner, Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson, and Luke Jones, “‘I Guess I Was Surprised by an App Telling an Adult They Had to Go to Bed before Half Ten’: A Phenomenological Exploration of Behavioural ‘Nudges,’” *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 14, no. 3 (2021): 420. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676x.2021.1937296>.

following section, I will both explain where the possibility to view the body as lived thing and object comes from and thus why self-tracking possible, and offer a possible insight into why this self is often overlooked in the existing literature.

## 2.2. Philosophical Anthropology: What it means to be human

To do what I state above, I will turn towards Helmuth Plessner's PA, as described in his *Levels of Organic Life and the Human*. As mentioned earlier, PA embraces the *Körper/Leib*-distinction. Knowing this, it should come as no surprise that Plessner was inspired by Husserl's phenomenology. What is unique in the approach of PA, however, is that it is a descriptive, anthropological account of the human lifeform and its characteristics. Through this approach it aims to explain how the human differs from other lifeforms because of its positionality. Then, this conclusion regarding the unique human positionality is argued to be the cause of certain uniquely human activities and experiences. In the following paragraphs, I will go into detail on the positionality and show it to be a necessary condition for self-tracking. In the next chapter, I will continue to show how STT reflects certain fundamentally human characteristics.

With a background in biology, Plessner grounds positionality in the physical/biological characteristics of the organism. According to Plessner, a being needs to be positioned against its environment in order to maintain its boundary, and thereby itself.<sup>18</sup> Without this positioning, there would be no distinguishing between self and other, inner- and outer world. This boundary, then, forms the very fundament of the living being. Next, he goes on to differentiate between three types of positionality. The closed, open, and excentric positionality, characteristic of the plant, (simple) animal, and human, respectively.<sup>19</sup>

Although the plant does make up a system and operates as one living being, it does not experience the world in the same way animals or humans do. It has a boundary and constitutes a system that stands in relation to the world around it, yet it is not consciously aware that it is a system.<sup>20</sup> Its functioning is not centralized but rather decentralized, each cell responding to the next, doing what they are programmed to do. A central nervous system, or any type of localized site where experience is processed, is lacking.

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<sup>18</sup> Bernstein, J. M., "INTRODUCTION," in *Levels of Organic Life and the Human: An Introduction to Philosophical Anthropology*, auth. Helmuth Plessner, ed. Phillip Honenberger, transl. Millay Hyatt. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), xlix. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvk8w01c.7>.

<sup>19</sup> Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life*, 268-71.

<sup>20</sup> Helmuth Plessner, *Levels of organic life and the human: An introduction to philosophical anthropology*, trans. Millay Hyatt (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 268.

Next in line we find the closed positionality, characteristic of the simple animal. The being with a closed positionality does, unlike the openly positioned being, have a center through which the world is experienced.<sup>21</sup> This center mediates experience: information flows through it and the being acts out of it. The closed being is no longer only a system, it is a system with a center through which experience is mediated. Important to note, however, is that “the animal lives out from its center and into its center, but not *as* center.”<sup>22</sup> It is thus aware of the fact that it is a body, and that this body is its own whilst everything outside it is not. It has, or rather, *there is* a sense of self. The self being the passing-through of mediation, a being in the here/now. In the closed being, there is only the *Leib*; the being lives through its body. Just like the plant, the animal operates by simply responding to its environment. What is different, however, is that these responses emerge as needs and drives or, rather, instincts in the centric being.

We have now arrived at the next and final positional step, the excentric positionality that is characteristic of the human. Excentricity should here not be confused with eccentricity. Rather, “ex-” serves as a suffix, and the word could thus be interpreted as meaning “out-of-center”. As the name thus indicates, the excentric being is no longer posited in its center, but outside of it, at a distance from it. Instead of being consumed in it, Plessner argues, “it has become conscious of the centrality of its existence”<sup>23</sup> Plessner correctly points out that it is tempting to assume that this means there is a separate center, a copy, existing in addition to the absolute here/now point. This assumption would be wrong, however, as the doubling of such a site would mean there are two experiencing beings existing in one entity. The positionality of the human should, then, not be thought of in typical material terms, as material substances are unable to exist in two places at the same time.

More concretely, this awareness of the centrality of our being corresponds to our consciousness that we experience. It is the sole reason that we have the experience of the self as an “I”, a concept separate from our thoughts in the here/now. This awareness is obtained not through a complete separation of but rather a distancing between the self and its center. The human is able to exist as its center whilst simultaneously existing alongside, or rather, behind it. If we compare the excentric to the closed positionality, we see that, in the case of the closed being, the body is experienced through the mediating center, yet experienced directly. In the Excentric being, the body is experienced *through* this center, but since the

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<sup>21</sup> Plessner, *Levels of Organic life*, 268-70.

<sup>22</sup> Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life*, 267.

<sup>23</sup> Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life*, 269-270.

excentric form is removed from it the body is not experienced directly. In the excentric being, the, both the body and the center are given to it as objects that can be related to.

It needs to be remembered that the being is still only constituted by its boundary, its positionality only determined in relation to it. Because of this, the excentric being is necessarily still bound to its body and the distancing from it should not be interpreted as implying a true separation. Rather, excentricity “is the form of frontal positioning against the surrounding field that is characteristic of the human.”<sup>24</sup> The human thus exists as a being that is bound to its body, posited not only against its boundary but also its center. It is this givenness of both the body and center fact that gives rise to the double aspectivity of the human and allows them to experience both through their body (*Leib*) and experience having their body (*Körper*).

Now let us circle back to the conclusion of the previous section. The self that we experience to be, the self that subjectively lives of experiences its body objectively, the self that engages in self-tracking, is the consequence of excentricity. It is this uniquely human excentricity gives rise to our ability to both live and have our bodies and to the idea of the self-aware human subject. STT like Fitbit conceives of the self as a subject with a body, the subject only being accessible to it as a physical entity. Fitbit does not measure positionality; it measures the physically expressed parts of the human. With this in mind it, is not hard to understand why the self as an excentric being is not considered in the literature, it is simply inaccessible to STT. Yet, it is ontically presupposed in every conception of the human self. If the ability to conceive of our bodies as objects in the world is the condition for self-tracking, then excentricity is the corresponding anthropological condition that renders self-tracking possible. Without it, self-tracking would simply not be possible as we would be unable to relate to ourselves.

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<sup>24</sup> Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life*, 271.

### 3. What makes the human *human*?

Having established excentricity as the anthropological condition for self-tracking, it is now time to examine the characteristics of the excentric being and determine how it relates to STT. Plessner formulated three fundamental laws of philosophical anthropology. Although these three laws all provide new and unique insights, they are closely related to each other and are all integral parts of the excentric positionality. The following three sections will each correspond to one of the three laws, structured in the same order as in *Levels of Organic Life and the Human*. In each section, I will explain what the law means, and show that STT or self-tracking reflects the fundamental needs (characteristics) of excentricity using Fitbit as an example.

#### 3.1. The law of natural artificiality

As discussed earlier, excentricity is characterized by an existence in both a center of our being and a nothingness that exists “behind” it. It is this being in nothingness that makes up the constitutive homelessness of our being. The simple animal, although it experiences the world around it, does not think about what it is doing in it but acts through instinct. It stands in the center of its being. The (normal) human, being excentric, can never make a full return to its center and exist from outside it. Our excentricity and the corresponding ‘separatedness’ impose upon us the ability, and responsibility, to exist with intention.

Partially existing outside of its center and being unable to return into a direct relationship with its body and the surrounding world, the human finds itself in a nothingness, a realm that surrounds it but does not constitute anything. This constitutive homelessness that constitutes the human condition gives rise to an inner conflict. As Plessner puts it: “The human wants to escape the unbearable excentricity of his hbeing...”<sup>25</sup> Condemned to give shape to the life they live, the human must create their own means to escape the unbearable nature of their position. The only way to compensate for excentricity, Plessner argues, is for the human to create the artificial, as it provides them with something to counterbalance their existence. It is a sort of complement to excentricity, and as such it needs to take on a non-natural and -organic form. This need for something to counterbalance our existence is thus the reason we are artificial by nature. In this fundamental need of ours “... lies the ultimate ground for the *tool* and that which it serves – that is, *culture*.”<sup>26</sup> This need presupposes all

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<sup>25</sup> Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life*, 289.

<sup>26</sup> Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life*, 289.

other psychological needs and desires, and it is the reason we ask ourselves the question of how we should live and what we should do.

Now how does this human need for artificiality express itself in STT? Firstly, I argue that the use of Fitbit reflects a desire to understand the body that emerges as a consequence of our loss of certainty for animal instinct. The most fitting example is perhaps found in Fitbit's stress management feature. With this feature, users can keep track of their stress levels as measured by different physical indicators. When comparing the way we handle stress with the way the animal handles it, we notice an interesting difference. The animal simply instinctually avoids it, whereas the human is sometimes simply unaware of any stress. This unawareness of stress or the cause of stress, or perhaps the very fact that we do not instinctually deal with stress, is a consequence of excentricity. As Plessner puts it: "Human freedom and foresight came at the price of animal certainty of instinct."<sup>27</sup> The usage of STT for something like measuring stress is thus a consequence of the human need to compensate for a loss of a certain naturalness that the animal possesses. Knowing they cannot return to the closed positionality and regain animal certainty, the user of STT compensates by artificializing the body. Although their excentricity makes it so that they necessarily exist in nothingness, they have at least constructed a part of their body in his artificial realm.

There is a second way in which the law of natural artificiality expresses itself in STT. This second way involves the artificial environment that the excentric being creates for it to exist against: culture. With modern STT there are many different ways in which it is shaped by, but also serves culture. Simply put, I argue that STT is a tool that serves the maintenance and creation of culture, and that its usage thus expresses the fundamental need for artificiality. With Fitbit this becomes apparent through multiple key features. Earlier I mentioned that the Fitbit app features a "discover" and "community" section. The first "discover" section contains workouts, wellness reports, mindfulness routines, and more health/fitness related information. This feature thus allows the user to directly interact with the culture surrounding health and fitness and incorporate it into their self-tracking practices. The "community" section allows the user to directly interact with other users and in doing so creates a social realm around the activity of self-tracking. This social interaction can promote engagement with the culture surrounding the tracked phenomena. Furthermore, it can be said to even create an own social sphere with its own culture that is exclusive to Fitbit users.

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<sup>27</sup> Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life*, 288.

If we combine these two findings, we are faced with a situation in which the user of STT (or Fitbit) artificializes their body to compensate for their dividedness. This compensation is then continued and fortified through the understanding through and shaping of the body according to the culture, which is also artificial, that is incorporated or perhaps even embedded in the technology. Additionally, the self-tracked data can be shared with others that embrace a similar culture. Through all this it becomes clear that STT can be understood as an expression of the need for completion that the human has according to the law of natural artificiality.

An important note is that STT could be a rather effective tool to attain this culturalization of the body. As shown in the previous chapter, it specifically works through the objectification of the body or even subjectively lived experience. Combined with the features oriented towards artificiality STT makes up a powerful tool for the culturalization of everyday experience through the artificial, as well as the orientation of everyday life towards the artificial. If we interpret this in light of Plessner's statement that "the human, then, lives only insofar as he leads a life",<sup>28</sup> we are faced with the reality that STT is a way for the human being to lead their life, its concrete cultural aspects an expression of this possibility.

### 3.2. The law of mediated immediacy

The second of the three fundamental laws of PA builds forth upon the first and focusses on the what Plessner terms mediated immediacy. To understand this concept, we must first refer to the plant and the animal, for which the relationship with the world around them appears as immediate. In simpler terms, they experience the world around them directly. In the case of the animal and its closed positionality, this seems conflicting as there occurs a mediation in its center. Despite this, the animal does experience immediacy as it is unaware of its mediating center; its centricity is hidden from it. With excentricity, however, the center is given as such, and the being is able to reflect on it. It is through this reflection that the human gains a consciousness of the fact that there occurs a mediation. Being aware of this, the human is no longer able to stand in an immediate relationship to the physical world that surrounds them.

Plessner goes on to show how this distancing is the cause of the epistemological problem in philosophy and that it is for this dilemma inherent to excentricity that we are unable to conclusively prove the correctness of epistemological doctrines. The full argument

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<sup>28</sup> Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life*, 294.



is too comprehensive for the current purposes, but one of the conclusions is that the condition of mediated immediacy makes it so that the world presents itself as real through the immediate relationship we have with knowledge. As another author put it: “In the act of reflection, the environment thus appears as a separate entity, in which the human conscious is confronted with a ‘real’ world of things.”<sup>29</sup> We thus stand in an immediate relationship to our knowledge of the mediated experience, and through this we are able to conceive of a reality separate from ourselves.

According to Plessner, this same state of affairs gives rise to the expressivity of the human.<sup>30</sup> In this context, expressivity refers not to a specific need to express oneself, but rather “... an essential feature of human life that would have to be referred to as the expressivity of all human manifestations of life.”<sup>31</sup> The idea behind expressivity, then, is that the human being has the fundamental need to bring that which they experience in their inner world into existence in the outer world. Then and only then are they able to lead their life. One problem the human faces in trying to do this is that the law of mediated immediacy necessarily refracts the intention, thus distorting the realization, rendering it imperfect. It is precisely this problem, however, that leads to the uniquely human need to continuously outdo oneself in an attempt to live his life. His expressivity takes on a restless character: “The expressivity of the human thus makes him a being who even in the case of continuously sustained intention continues to push for ever new realizations and in this way leaves behind a history.”<sup>32</sup>

One way to interpret this in relation to STT is to say that the expressivity is reflected in the expression of bodily experience. The bringing into reality that which is experienced in the inner world. An adequate example would be the heart rate monitoring function. When engaging in exercise, the human would experience an increased heart rate, and the STT would be able to express this. Although this view is not necessarily incorrect, I think it is more interesting to focus on human activities as a whole.

Through self-tracking, the individual is not simply expressing its bodily state, but rather objectifying and thereby expressing what Plessner calls the “stirrings of life”<sup>33</sup> These stirrings of life are the consequences of the intention of the human subject. They are

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<sup>29</sup> Alexander Dobeson, “Between Openness and Closure: Helmuth Plessner and the Boundaries of Social Life,” *Journal of Classical Sociology* 18, no.1 (2017): 45.

<sup>30</sup> Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life*, 309.

<sup>31</sup> Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life*, 301.

<sup>32</sup> Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life*, 314.

<sup>33</sup> Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life*, 309-13.

everything the human participates in. Every stirring of life that becomes intelligible is necessarily expressive and is an objectification of spirit. Let us again turn to the example of the Fitbit user walking their dog and tracking themselves throughout the day. As the human goes about their day, lives their life, and does what a human subject does, Fitbit is constantly objectifying their activity. By their very nature, these actions and activities are expressive. They are the stirrings of life that Plessner refers to, a manifestation or objectification of human intention. What Fitbit does, however, is provide these expressive acts with extra weight. In a way, self-tracking here doubles the objectification. When the user is walking their dog, the very act is a realization of intention, it becomes a real occurrence with some objective weight. In addition to this realization, it becomes doubly realized because it is recorded and thus manifested in a second way. In this way, STT reflects the need for human expressivity and its restless character. Through STT, the user is able to doubly satisfy their need and add extra weight to its expressions. Add to this the fact that this expression can be directly related to culture in both the manner in which it is interpreted and by sharing it with other users, and we are left with a double expression of significant weight. Like I described in the previous section, this weight serves as a means of counterbalancing excentricity. STT thus reflects thus fundamental expressivity of the human.

It is important to define what kind of need we are speaking of here. Like I stated in the previous section, the type of need that Plessner describes precedes every actual psychological need or desire. The reason I am stating this in relation to the current topic is that it is important to note that this need for expressivity need not be perfectly manifested in the user's actual psychological needs or motivation for self-tracking. Neither does it exclude these actual needs from being a reason to self-track. What does somewhat confirm the existence of this need, however, is that modern STT are usually simply not used to one specific end anymore. Even people who are healthy might feel compelled to engage in self-tracking. Additionally, a user might acquire an STT with the intention of using a specific feature, and then, through their expressivity, feel compelled to use all the other features as well. These are all examples of STT uses that do not reflect a simple instrumental goal anymore. Specifically in the case of the user who self-tracks for no specific reason, it is their fundamental excentric need that drives them to do so.

Inextricably linked to human expressivity is the human's historical character. Although Plessner does not discuss this as extensively as I think he should have, he does state that the human has his essential life in a process that "is a continuum of discontinuously

deposited, crystallized events.”<sup>34</sup> This claim is closely related to the one that I presented in the previous section in which Plessner argues that the human can only live by leading a life. Historicity can be regarded as a precondition for leading life as it allows the human to understand the occurrences as a process of events that occur on his account. In essence, life is simply a continuous flow of imperfect realizations of intention, in which the human finds what they are doing: “It is a law that human beings ultimately know not what they do and only find out through history.”<sup>35</sup>

In STT, the historical character of the human is directly evident in the fact that the self is tracked to later be reflected on. The act of reflecting on the tracked data is by its very nature an historical one (except in the case of live tracking). Besides allowing us to reflect on the life that is led, we are also able to place ourselves in time as a consequence of this past, and then orient ourselves toward the future. With pre-modern self-tracking, this orientation was mostly done by the human himself. In the case of modern STT, however, both the historicity and orientation toward the future are mostly done through, but not by, the STT. The Fitbit, for example, passively expresses our acts and represents them in a log that can be accessed at a later time, thus accommodating for the historicity of the human. Additionally, it reflects the human desire to lead a life by orienting the self toward the future through history. An example of this is the fact that the main purpose of Fitbit, and almost any modern STT, is to attain future goals. It is the sole reason nudges, reminders of progress and prompts towards a goal, exist in STT.

To summarize, the fundamental excentric characteristics of human expressivity and historicity are reflected in (the use of) STT. With regards to expressivity, STT provides the user with a sort of doubled expressivity, thus serving to accommodate the human’s restlessness. Additionally, the combination with culture or the social provides this doubled expression with even more weight, thereby counterbalancing the excentric existence even more. As for historicity, STT and its use are on the one hand only possible on account of it, and on the other reflect the human need to lead a life by inspiring the future through understanding the past.

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<sup>34</sup> Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life*, 314.

<sup>35</sup> Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life*, 316.

### 3.3. The law of the utopian standpoint: Nullity and transcendence

In the third and final law of PA, Plessner reminds us that regardless of all their attempts, the human being can never escape the awareness of the nullity of their existence.<sup>36</sup> They realize that their existence is contingent on an absolute existence, a ground of the world they exist in. Their excentricity, however, makes them always doubt existence. Plessner places this at the core of religious belief, arguing that the religion and the leap of faith towards it can serve as a guarantee or certainty for the world. Besides nullity, excentricity provides the human with the awareness that they make up an irreplaceable expression of life. They do so, however, by acknowledging the existence of others and their replaceability with them. They represent something of the same kind, and something they could have just as well been, but are not. Besides just being an “I”, then, they along with the others makes up the “we”. In this way, this individuality creates an ambiguity by guaranteeing for every individual both their uniqueness and replaceability.<sup>37</sup>

This ‘replacedness’ of every individual, as Plessner calls it, provides the fundamental ground for the shared world of the human. By now we have already seen that the results of excentricity lack structure, and once again we see that the human needs to shape the resulting world himself. As humans, we necessarily recognize ourselves and each other as the same yet different, but we have no fundamental relationship other than our mode of being. In addition to this, the knowledge that we are unique but also the same and thus replaceable by everyone else gives rise to a certain pride and shame, and a corresponding urge to reveal yet also hide oneself.<sup>38</sup> All these conditions are the reason for the human’s tendency for social organization.

From this third and final law, it is mostly the sociality of the human that is found in STT. A very simple example would be the “community” section in the Fitbit app that I referred to earlier. Besides the mere sharing of results, this feature also allows users to compete against each other, thus giving rise to a certain form of social organization. This organization is rather rudimentary though, and surely does not substitute other forms of organization in modern society.

The most important thing we can learn from this law is perhaps the potential that STT has on influencing the social organization. Self-tracking, although uniquely human, did not always possess the features it does now. Remember the example of the scale that I gave in the

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<sup>36</sup> Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life*, 316-17.

<sup>37</sup> Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life*, 318-19.

<sup>38</sup> Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life*, 319-20.

introduction. It is hard to imagine that that is where modern self-tracking essentially started. Perhaps we are currently in a process of adjusting STT to perfectly accommodating for the human condition. I have already shown that it reflects fundamental human needs, but it seems that this last need is somewhat underrepresented. If we view STT from our anthropological perspective, then, we could say that STT might slowly develop to be incorporated into the social organization.

The question is whether we would want this to happen, and whether we should be cautious in future design of STT. Think of, for example, a situation in which self-tracking and likewise the sharing of data become social norms. We could end up in a situation where, depending on the measured data, people either gain or lose social merit. If STT starts to work through an explicit credit system, this could even lead to a self-sustaining social credit system. Plessner argues that the human "...has an inalienable right of revolution if the forms of sociality destroy their own meaning..."<sup>39</sup> Although this might be the case, it could prove worthwhile to examine how our humanhood drives our use of STT, or technology in general and to ask ourselves if we should develop it in certain directions.

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<sup>39</sup> Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life*, 320.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this paper, I set out to prove that STT can be understood to be an expression of the human condition according to philosophical anthropology. To do this, I first proved the human condition, defined as the excentric positionality, to be the anthropological condition for the possibility to self-track. I did this by first discussing the *Körper/Leib*-distinction and showed how it is used to explain certain aspect of STT in the existing literature. Then, I argued that STT is only possible because we can use our bodies both as the subject and object of experience, and that STT requires the latter to work. The existing literature on STT seems to always define the “self” as the self that is targeted by the STT in question and does not consider what selfhood in the sense of a human subject actually is. Plessner’s philosophical anthropology defines the human self as an excentric being that stands at a distance from its body and mediating center, thereby also explained where its ability to objectify its body originates. Because excentricity is the cause of the *Körper/Leib*-distinction and this, in turn, allows us to self-track, I showed excentricity to be the anthropological condition for the possibility to self-track.

In the second chapter I continued by discussing the essential features of excentricity, and thus the human condition, and showing how these are expressed in STT, using Fitbit as an example. First, the law of natural artificiality shows the human to require the artificial as a way to compensate for their positionality. In STT, this is seen in the fact that the user objectifies and thus artificializes their physical features and the different aspects of lived life. Additionally, I argued that STT compensates for a loss of animal certainty of instinct due to the distance between the excentric being and its body. Second, I discussed the law of mediated immediacy and showed how expressivity returns in STT as it provides a double expression of excentric intention, and I showed that human historicity and its role for the excentric being’s life also return in typical STT. Third and last, I showed the law of the utopian standpoint, which argues for the fundamental nature of the shared world, does find expression in STT, yet not as much as the previous features. This could be explained by conceiving of STT as something that might yet have to be developed to fully accommodate for the shared world.

From here on out, I wish to slightly deviate from the structure I have adhered to until now. I wish to return to my argument from the first chapter. There, I showed excentricity to be the anthropological condition for the possibility to self-track. The reason I am returning to this all is that it is important for us to integrate the different conclusions. Although I have shown STT to be an expression of excentricity according to the three fundamental laws, it should be understood that these laws also explain and guarantee the possibility to self-track. The reason

I am bringing this up is that it perfectly illustrates a major implication of PA: excentricity and uniquely human behavior do not stand in a simple cause-and-effect relationship to each other, but rather constitute one and the same state of affairs: The human condition! It is for this reason that before setting out to show STT to be an expression of the human condition, I first showed how excentricity rendered it possible. In order to make my argument understandable, this distinction needed to be made. Consequentially, although STT is an expression of excentricity, it is simultaneously a tool used to deal with our excentricity. This shows that PA essentially describes all uniquely human behavior as a way to cope or deal with the human condition.

But what does this mean; what has this conclusion added to our understanding of STT? My main argument revolved around showing STT to be an expression of the human condition. I have proved, or at least attempted to prove this to be the case. Essentially, I have shown that STT is closely related to the human condition and can in many ways be regarded as a direct consequence of fundamentally human features. By understanding it in this and not any other way, STT is not seen as a simple tool that serves the purpose of increasing health or as a simple novelty. Instead, it is a fundamentally human activity that is inseparable from our very being. This adds new knowledge in the form of insights into our motivation to use STT and could directly be used in the design of future STT. Additionally, investigations into the possible dangers and benefits according to PA could provide even more insights relevant for future STT. Finally, this paper can serve as an example of a philosophical investigation of technology using PA.

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