Taking Oneself in Earnest: Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology and Trans Discourse

Fabius Schöndube

Master Modern European Philosophy

Abstract: Within the field of Trans studies we are faced with an issue. While there have been advances in the acceptance of Trans identities, contemporary discourse rallying against Trans people is gaining attention and support. The points raised in inflammatory debates or viral posts often do not reflect the actual lived experience of those interacting as, or with, Trans people. In my view what stands at the core of this hateful conduct is the anxiety that comes from encountering someone that seems to be living out another conception of the world. In this essay I would like to approach the so-called Trans-debate by focusing on the intersubjective encounter with that which is other. I will do so by employing Helmuth Plessner's work on ontology and political anthropology. Plessner's conception of the human — as the site of a constant difficult dialogical self-negotiation — offers a much-needed anti-radicalising approach to the experience of/of Trans people, helping us understand the creative violence inevitably involved in the Trans challenge to the colonially established cis-gender-embodiment consensus. The following essay will then try to lay the groundwork for the analysis of the aspect of intersubjective meaning making which defines being human by moving from the ontological towards the political.

Keywords: Trans Studies, Gender Studies, Phenomenology, Critical Phenomenology, Philosophical Anthropology, Helmuth Plessner

Introduction

> *Weil er nur lebt, wenn er ein Leben irgendwie führt, und dieses Irgendwie stets den Charakter der Nichtnotwendigkeit, Zufälligkeit, Korrigierbarkeit und Einseitigkeit hat - darum ist ja sein Leben geschichtlich und nicht bloß natürlich, eine Kette von Unvorhersehbarkeiten, die hinterher sinnvoll sind, Versäumnisse und verlorene Möglichkeiten, aber auch gerade in dem, was es ja ist und war, bedeutsam und des Lebens wert -, muss der Mensch eine "natürliche" als die gerechte Ordnung stiften. (Plessner 1981: 199)[1]*

Let me begin this essay by rewriting this relatively complicated quote from Helmuth Plessner into a little story that begins with a very agreeable statement; being a human can sometimes be difficult. We often aimlessly wander through our lives, constantly trying to give this strange

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[1] A quick note on translation: There are as of yet not many available translations of Plessner's work. I have decided against translating these quotes myself due to the fact that I do not think my abilities as a translator to suffice. I hope that my reader can forgive any inconveniences caused by this.

adventure some rhyme and reason despite the overwhelmingly chaotic non-sense we encounter along the way. While there is of course a world out there that responds to every of our moves, it seems as if the attempts to find out what it is by itself may give us an understanding of the universe's laws, but not of its meanings. Based on this understanding, the gift of self-awareness, which has allowed us to build magnificence, seems akin to a curse that forever dooms us to wander through our thoughts and doubt any answer we can ever give to the question of why we are doing anything at all.

The combined power of an overwhelmingly chaotic universe and the self-evidently existing drive to make sense grounded in the destroying ability to doubt, I argue that storytelling is one of the most valuable tools that sustains our existence.

It is not just that they allow us to transmit useful information from generation to generation, no, they allow us to turn the existential emptiness and inability to ever just trust the world in front of us into a collective creative bonding experience. Instead of letting the question of "what if" devour us we have begun to imagine dreams upon dreams and live symbiotically with the belief that the realities we fantasies are our anchor from which we can explore a field of possibilities.

Yet, as a brief look out the window and upon the streets should make clear, this little story I am telling does not end in humanity's triumph over nihilism. A little quirk of our story telling skills is that it gives way to many different narratives. Groups of people with different lived experiences will of course conjure up different images, loose collections of these images quickly develop into sayings, sayings into narratives, and, if sufficiently gripping and useful, narratives into mythologies that can now explain away the entire world. Due to this process, we live in a world that is multiple. Memetic developments leave us with as many perspectives as there are animals birthed from genetic mutation. Yet, the beauty that comes with having so many ways to look and live upon this earth quickly fades as we come face to face with the reality of realities clashing into one another.

It is about one such conflict that I write about in this piece, one that has been growing in intensity thanks to the technological trappings of algorithmically enriched hatred.[2] It is a conflict that divides and segregates bodies into ever more complicated names whose purpose makes only sense when having the clash in mind. It is a conflict that is tiring, and which makes one lose hope and saps our strength very quickly. If you noticed yourself inserting any wide variety of social tensions such as racism, climate change, xenophobia, homophobia or any other of the many sites of political polarization, then I think the direness of the situation is evident to you. However, instead of tackling these vastly complicated topics I would like to focus upon the so-called "Trans-debate," as I think it is not only a discourse ripe for a change in tone, but also because talking of it very quickly results in a revealing of the stories from which one makes sense of the world.

Let me tell you that the act of writing about the Trans-debate as a Trans person is utterly exhausting and infuriating. Not only is it a very broad discourse lacking in good entry points, but one is faced during research with many voices that, sometimes implicitly but more often explicitly, call you mentally ill, perverted, a danger to the flourishing of society, the reason why feminism is not progressing and may not actually be valuable enough to keep alive. Fun things that I love to read on a Saturday evening. However, what is even more frustrating is that the actual talking points have not changed since the 90s.

Shon Faye and Susan Stryker in their works on transgender history clearly show that the arguments used to justify anti-Trans policymaking and push back against the acceptance of gender non-conforming people are all in one way or another echoes of the 1978 text *The*

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[2] For more information on the impact of social media algorithms and politics I can recommend researching the concepts of "Rage economics" and the "attention economy".

transsexual empire: The making of the she-male. In this often actively inflammatory book, Janice Raymond gives us the first iteration for what could be considered the greatest hits of anti-Trans arguments. Front and center is the claim that "Transsexuals" rape women's bodies and are therefore by their mere existence guilty and fair targets fur punishment. [3]While this is self-evidently a ridiculous argument that cannot be taken seriously under any scientific scrutiny, it has poisoned the ground for most other more substantial, if still hardly well thought through, anti-Trans claims. The main claim that underlies much of the pushback against Trans acceptance and helpful policymaking is the quite blunt idea that a woman is a woman, and a man is a man, and that those who disagree are dangerous. Any affirmation of Trans people under this essentialist framework is then paramount to saying that an orange is an apple, or that 2+2= 5.

I could now go on a long escapade on why human gender and sexual identity is much more complicated, that intersex people and non-binary understandings of the human already show that things are not as binary, that we could categorize humans based upon hormones/genetics/genitalia etc., and show that the mere fact that gender transitive people have existed throughout most of our collective history as a species should show that maybe thinking that our current conceptions of the world may not be as eternal as we like to think. However, I will not do that, as not only have other people much smarter than me have written on this[4], but mainly because the existence of this debate itself already shows that gender essentialism is known to be a belief rather than a fact. As Butler has already shown us in 1988:

> *"That this reassurance is so easily displaced by anxiety, that culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those that fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism should be sign enough that on some level there is a social knowledge that the truth or falsity of gender is only socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated. "(Butler 1988: 528)*

To lay the grounds for a political analysis based upon humans as we perceive them, it becomes paramount to establish the double-aspective boundaries from which a person differentiates themselves into a momentary essential thing. Let us then proceed by breaking down the simple experience of moving our hands and demonstrate what Plessner is hinting at.

When moving our hands we seem to perceive it as the way we ourselves are moving. So far so simple. However, upon further inspection, we realize that there is a distinct difference between the object that is our hand and the felt self that occurs through the hand. By diving even further into this spiral, we notice that our hands are covered with wear and tear, having been influenced by the external world. When we begin to pick up an object, we also find that our hands have not been passive recipients but are creators who themselves are be able to perform actions and leave objects with a mark of their doing. However, we begin to ask, what even is an object? It seems to be a real thing that is outside of us, yet it is also influenced by us physically and mentally, as we recognise this object as a thing and employ it for our usage. But when did we learn what things are, how come my friends see things differently, and why do I feel drawn to certain things but not others? What am I, what is this and how did I even come to recognise any of these things as things? While this sounds like a great recipe for an existential crisis, for Plessner this is a great phenomenological thought process that allows us to understand how we come about in relation to an environment we shape and are shaped by.

According to him, a human experiences themselves as both a living body and body as an object in the world. Perception and possible actions are then always conditioned by both the ability and limitation that comes with meaningfully interacting as a material being in the

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[3] Faye Shon. The Transgender Issue, 244.

[4] I can recommend the works of Lee Edelman, Susan Stryker, Jack Halberstam, Paul B. Preciado and Kit Heyam.

physical world. Thus, while there is a meaningful difference between a fist and a hand, they condition each other as there is no clenching without fingers to move.

These interlinked characteristics always refer to the larger distinction between the internal and external world. This is experienced through the mental imagination that thinks of objects as things, as well as the things as they exist as actual objects outside of us. Similar to the aforementioned hand example, the internal conception of a thing is conditioned by the material existing and vice versa, insofar as the mental act of perceiving meaningful shapes the engagement with the material object one enacts into the thing that is presupposed.

The act of enacted perception itself may then be even further nuanced into their conditional temperaments, personality and habits that we may not be aware of. Plessner summarizes this set of unconscious aspects into the broad concept of the soul, which we of course cannot read as a pre-contextual essence, but a mental set of tendencies that arise and are revealed through their expression in the world.

Finally, the soul, as the condition for self-positing, is based upon the shared world that reveals/creates what we are through perceiving that which we are not. In other words, what we have become internally, and enact onto the external world reflected on us through other beings that themselves posit their own selves. As Plessner argues:

> *"Die Mitwelt umgibt nicht die Person, wie es (wenn auch nicht im strengen Sinne, denn der Leib gehört mit dazu) die Natur tut. Die Mitwelt erfüllt auch nicht die Person, wie es in einem ebenfalls inadäquaten Sinne von der Innenwelt gilt. Die Mitwelt trägt die Person, indem sie zugleich von ihr getragen und gebildet wird. Zwischen mir und mir, mir und dir, mir und ihm liegt die Sphäre des Geistes"* (Plessner 1982: 14)

Humans as eccentrically positioned, i.e. conscious of the fact that they are aware, are from the ground up un-/consciously in relation to a multifaceted series of deeply intertwined characteristics that condition who they can become based on internal aspects, external pressure and overarching shared transcendental meaning structures. And while a being can be analyzed based upon their essence indicating characteristics, the essential core we find is in itself only a momentary response to environmental factors that will inevitably change. Any anthropological and political analysis that attempts to ascribe a singular unchanging authentic essence to any or all people will therefore inevitably be imprecise and unable to consider the dialectical process of un/conscious changing-with that may be carefully ascribed as the only truly universal essential characteristics we find expressed in human shared existence.

In short, for Plessner the human is never static or alone. We have been born from someone's body, grow up influenced by our surroundings and change when our world changes. With this ontological account of what beings are, namely becoming-with each other, we may then proceed to look at what humans actually do. Let us then look at how Plessner applies his theory and with his help analyze how meaning structures, in particular cis-normativity, are shaping our lives.

Anthropological Laws and (Trans) Politics

As we have seen in the previous section, Plessner´s ontology of double-aspectivity gives us a frame through which we can make sense of human lives as a contradictory experience of the internal sense of I-ness which arises from an intersubjective internal/external becoming-with. While this seems rather abstract, we can think of this as the impossibility to stay alive as a closed off individual without being open to external sustenance. For self-aware humans, this goes for both physical and mental sustenance in the form of transcendental meaning structures:

"Der Mensch lebt nur, indem er ein Leben führt." [5] Leading a live as some-*thing* is therefore a prerequisite for survival, which within the context of intersubjectivity requires one to take up a particular identifiable form of embodiment. Yet, as transgender individuals showcase, there is no necessity underneath a binary way of naming, and even if it is taken as truth, no category can remain true in all contexts forever. To put oneself together within a psycho-physical context is then an act that stands on nothing but itself and its momentary context.

This is an anxiety-inducing state of mind, felt in the perpetual sense of homelessness, knowledge of the ambiguity between transcendental structure and imminent reality, as well as a perpetual wish to overcome this paralyzing self-awareness and just live convinced. The paradoxical call of needing to live as something without being necessarily anything then gives rise to behaviors that can be summarized under the three anthropological laws of *natural artificiality, mediated immediacy and utopian standpoint.* Let us then explore how these laws can help us in understanding cis-normative as a sort of (be)coming home that is challenged by the uncanny world of queer potential.

Anthropological Laws

The law of *natural artificiality* claims that the natural eccentric positionality forces humans to employ tools to find a stable ground to act upon, such as clothes, language, and metaphysical structures. It is not hard to make sense of this claim if we consider the many objects in our lives that help us to both survive and enrich the world we come to find. As you also probably know from experience, nothing stays useful forever, so while these tools are ways to make oneself into something within a contingent environment, their usage is always relational to a world that always changes: "*Auch das einfachste Werkzeug ist nur insoweit Werkzeug, als in ihm ein Sachverhalt vorliegt, ein Seinesverhalt gefasst ist"* .[6] We can come to think of gender itself then as a tool that categorizes people into usable expressions of a particular species, allowing us to not panic at every encounter and simply access a wide set of presuppositions of who this person may be. As should be clear from both my introduction and the theory presented here, the currently binary conception of gender has itself arisen within a context, namely that of colonial expansion and Victorian science. As Jack Halberstm puts it:

> "*The mania for the godlike function of naming began, unsurprisingly, with colonial exploration. As anyone who has visited botanical or zoological gardens knows, the collection, classification, and analysis of the world´s flora and fauna has gone hand in hand with various forms of colonial expansion and enterprise. (…) But naming drifted quickly in the nineteenth century from plant life to human life (…) the terms we now use to describe and explain gender and sexual variation were introduced into the language between 1869 and the first decade of the twentieth century.*" (Halberstam 2018: 5)

Thus, while this categorisation acted as a functional tool to frame and enact embodiment, the claim that modalities of being gendered in accordance with a binary system that is asserted as self-evidently natural might simply have outlived its applicability in the current psycho-physical environment. The need to re-align this story is caused by things such as the existence of hormone therapy that radically alters one's physical make-up, scientific discoveries of already existing intersexed bodies, and the discursive accomplishments of intersectional feminism to undermine general essentialisms. However, as hard as it is to let go of a favorite article of clothing, so might it be seemingly impossible to see the value of discarding a binary conception of gender variability. This is made even harder by the fact that we have not simply

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[5] Plessner, *Mit Anderen Augen*, 16.
[6] Plessner, *Mit Anderen Augen*, 32.

"made up" gender but have actively structured the psycho-physical world on top of it. A cis-normative way of enforcing oneself unto the world is not more or less true than any other way to self-posit, insofar as perception always arises as a *mediated immediacy.*

The second anthropological law states that, because there exists no completely independent thing, we can perceive in itself, all imminent things that appear as their essence indicating characteristics are always mediated by the tools that structure our sensory awareness. Pre-existing mediation is therefore a prerequisite for all gendered engagement with the world, as we come to know everything, including ourselves as embodied creatures through the meaning-making tools we employ to live our undecided lives. Consequently, the result of a binary world view not only provides an answer as to what we are, but also meaningfully determines the ways we can perceive ourselves. A cisgender individual who has never been made to consider transness through their internal perspective of being can then quite literally not see the significance behind the request for non-gendered bathrooms.

Moreover, when the meaning structures are replaced, the immediate livable access we have to the world through tools can potentially be compromised. While Trans people may have a rather valuable alternative mediating structure to offer, if an individual's embodied investment in being part of the heterosexual world is already fulfilling, then the most livable way to consider the reconfiguration of meaning as a conceptual illness or dangerous alterity. It is in this context, where the psycho-physical world shaped by the binary narrative plays a supportive role. There are emotional and financial incentives to other the already othered into another that needs to be marginalized and destroyed, an effect found in online algorithms channeling skeptics into cults. Following such mediation is then to fall into further immediate realities that radicalize this fear into a larger transcendental structure of hatred and hostility.

The tendency to solve the question of gender variability then exemplifies the third anthropological law of *utopic standpoint*. Each mediating tool, if it wants to work as a stabilizing meaning structure, necessarily responds to a particular contingent question that threatens living by giving rise to uncanniness. The *utopian standpoint* is thought of as the tendency to believe that we at one point will be able to create, or have already created, the psycho-physical tool that ends the search for home forever. The task to remain alive and feel at home consistently therefore necessitates perfect tools with endless applicability, which is of course impossible within an ever-changing world. Yet, Plessner asserts that we are destined to try, regardless. Religions likely come to mind, insofar as many of them offer a variety of stories that take the imperfection of the world as the ground for ethical human behavior that may result in a final resting place. However, the utopian visions we offer need not be dependent on metaphysics, or at least not obviously so. Every super-sensible reality we engage in, e.g., the scientific study of imperceptible particles, essentializing nationalities or teleological predictions of the world, offer some sort of ground for self-creating acts. There is then an inherent political dimension to this wish for utopia, insofar as it is the proposition, othering destruction or anxiety inducing questioning of a particular transcendental structure that works to enact itself unto an imminent reality. Belief in something is therefore inevitable, yet it does not need to be destructive or unchanging.

Trans politics, as exemplified by normalizing the existence of non-binary bodies, therefore enacts its own system of belief in the form of a deconstructive approach to the belief that the heterosexual matrix is a self-evident reality. In this, it is "just" another myth that grounds a group in a home they can live in, equal in its starting point to the teleological account of transgender acceptance or the hateful destruction of gender variability. However, this is not to say that these myths are created equally, far from it, but to truly make out the consequences of any given story, we will need to consider Plessner's own stance on the political dimensions of becoming a self with others.

Violence and Politics

Let us briefly summarize, according to Plessner humans at all times have a feeling of groundlessness and distrust toward the singularity of the reality that occurs to them due to their ability to doubt everything as eccentric positioned beings. Yet, because they need to live as something to survive, they naturally employ tools to create a sense of home that limits the arising of life hindering questions. These artificial extensions in turn influence the kind of world one finds oneself as a thing within, conditioning the modalities of conduct that perpetuates this story into psycho-physical reality. This entire process occurs not by oneself, but in a shared psycho-physical world that may afford or negate the rise of a particular metaphysical meaning structure. Making it so we need to make a decision regarding what we do (not) want to live as by creating a home that is delineated from an uncanny other. As Plessner argues:

> *"Die Freund-Feind-Relation wird hier vielmehr als zur Wesensverfassung des Menschen gehörig begriffen, und zwar gerade dadurch, dass eine konkrete Wesensbestimmung von ihm abgehalten, er als offene Frage oder Macht behandelt wird.(…) Denn das Fremde ist das Eigene, Vertraute und Heimliche im Anderen und als Andere und darum - wir erinnern hier an eine Erkenntnis Freuds - das Unheimliche." (Plessner 1981: 193)*

This decision to live as something that is not something else necessarily propels another being into a juxtaposed position of otherness into which they are simplified. All human behavior is therefore both inherently political and violent, insofar as we take violence to be the assertion and realization of a core presupposed essence unto an object that is always more than the simple thing we interact with. With this, we can see that the inexhaustibility of possible meanings the individual can partake in becoming is also the condition that necessitates the limitation of an-others being to that which one can meaningfully differentiate oneself from as a self. This is of course not to say that any and all violence is justified. We remain in creative relations to beings who are inexhaustible living decisions themselves, and our stories must reflect that.

   For Plessner, the danger of certain political acts therefore lies not in the enacting of violent politics in itself, but rather in the creation of radicalizing myths that hinder the dialectical intersubjective becoming by proposing one's own self and propositions as non-contingent and essentially true unity.

> *"Radikalismus heißt Dualismus. Nur Zwiespalt rechthfertigt Schroffheit, nur Wiederstand angriffshaltung (…) Gewiss, Politik leidet- das spüren wir in der weltanschaulichen Belastung der Parteien-, wenn sie zu ernst genommen wird. Aber, diesen faschen Ernst im Spiel bekämpft man nur durch Rücksichtsloser Erkenntnis der Bedeutung dieses Spiels, das die Völker immer mit ihrem Leben und Glauben zu bezahlen haben" (Plessner 1981: 14/144)*

To differentiate between radicalizing politics from creativity inducing opposition, he proposes to read self-creating acts on a spectrum between *all too human* or *inhumane*, which I find useful to make sense of the cis-normative violence prevalent today.

Radicalizing Politics

To act *all too human* is to be completely overtaken by the inexhaustibility of our eccentric positionality and not put ourselves together as a self at all.

> *"Was allzu menschlich ist, manifestiert seine Schwäche und deren verstohlene Stärke (…) Nur der Mensch kennt kein Maß, nur er wird das Opfer seiner Träume und seiner Konsequenzen. Maßlosigkeit ist das Stigma des Menschen, weil ihm die schützende Führung der Instinkte fehlt." (Plessner 1982: 203–204)*

While at first this may appear as a harmless lack of limitation, the danger of a lack of any boundary results in the boundless consumption of things to feed the groundless feeling of eccentricity. Without a self that momentarily delimits a boundary between the being and its external world, nothing but a unified consumption of becoming without the creation of meaning occurs. This not only results in a complete halt to the dialectical positing of self and other, but also the reification of tools into decontextualized transcendentally true structures that cannot be appropriated to a new context. Cis-normative politics, when they occur *all too human*, stop the creation of new embodied possibilities by passively holding onto old tools that hold Trans people actively hostage in past socio-medical categories expressed in deadly waiting lists.

On the other end of this radicalizing spectrum are the politically *Inhumane* acts, which vastly expand one's self and force all others to be integrated into it as simple tools.

> *"Unmenschlichkeit ist an keine Epoche gebunden und an keine geschichtliche Größe, sondern eine mit dem Menschen gegebene Möglichkeit, sich und seinesgleichen zu negieren."* (Plessner 1982: 205)

Objectification, racism, sexism, ableism and speciesism are all immediately recognisable cases of this behavior. These exemplify a misunderstanding of one's double-aspective contextual being and respond to the need to be something by placing oneself as an essentially authentic creature with a clear goal to achieve. This power to simplify oneself and others may not hold forever, but it leaves scars that are palpable for generations.

Both modalities of applying violence then respond to the difficulties of eccentric positionality with an oversimplified answer that forecloses the actual capabilities of dialectical self-other creation. If these radicalizing tendencies are not kept in check, the institutions built on top of stories will become progressively unable to respond to resistance against its particular simplifying violence, allowing only a spiral unto further silence the other as disabled. Despite, or especially because of this danger, Plessner proposes to enact politics with an earnestness that takes into account the need for an-other for self-creation yet does so carefully as to not enact essentializing violence that disallows change. This approach is summarized in the politics of the masked self:

> *"Das Individuum muss zuerst sich eine Form geben, in der es den Kampfplatz betritt. (…) Der Mensch verallgemeinert und objektiviert sich durch eine Maske, hinter der er bis zu einem gewissen Grade unsichtbar wird, ohne völlig als Person zu verschwinden."* (Plessner 1981: 82)

To act politically with a mask is then to momentarily exhibit a singular positionality through which one can meaningfully engage with others as something in relation to a context without limiting oneself/another to any essential characteristics. The application of this into Trans politics may express itself as a pragmatic usage of intelligible vocabulary and a great focus to allow the struggling Cis person to not feel that they are being attacked and be channeled into radicalized destruction of us. On the other hand, the cis-normative person ought to stop engaging with each Trans person as if they were a copy of the beings they see framed as strangers on TV or non-existent in a biased cis-history. Instead, they should be open and respectful to the particular individual's expression of self which, while challenging the heterosexual matrix, does not need to be interacted with as a threat of cis-identity.

In short, masked Trans political acts allow the experience of my own experience as a contingent *becoming*, while also *being* a self that creatively allows an-other to co-create worlds with me through an active attempt to not collapse my entire potential for becoming something else by taking my current being as all that I will ever be. Therefore, for Plessner politics must reflect

the fact that just as we arise by responding to a context we shape, so must our engagements with one another be defined by a willingness to be someone who faces something openly in order to shape each other for the better.

Conclusion

I have begun this essay by asking the broad question of what it is to be a human that encounters another who does not share your worldview, and I hope that after reading this piece you have gained an understanding of exactly why I find Plessner's response to this line of inquiry so captivating and useful. According to him, we are thrown into a world of seemingly endless potential without a clear guide regarding how to correctly live our life. Narratives and institutions that structure our identity are therefore indispensable to our survival as something. Yet, as many can attest, predetermined ideas of who we are often cannot capture what we deep down know ourselves to be, nor can they weather the test of time forever. A kind of disconnect may arise, a violent clash of ought and envelop all our kin. And while most, if not all, human beings will recognise this as their reality, it is Trans people who are living out this condition on a public stage.

However, instead of disparaging at the inevitability of conflict, Plessner supplies us with a dire but hopeful call. Returning to the core quote I employ: "*Take one's existence in earnest and put oneself together to become a self* ."[7] We can see that we ought to understand our existence as a deeply intersubjective being that arises out of an environment within which we need to put our influences together into a self that can dialectically (be)come home in opposition to the other. Political work in Plessner's conceptions asks us to navigate the inherent violence of our existence and employ it to creatively work toward a utopian vision that we may never attempt to achieve in unifying completion forever. Practically, putting on a mask protects and emboldens us only insofar as they are like every tool, useful if true to the double-aspectivity of things. Therefore, to perform politics on an intersubjective level productively may require us to take the other and ourselves not as an essentially authentic being, but as an individual response to a given circumstance. Yet, when we then come together to find that the other is uncanny, we may not fall to be consumed or destroyed, but instead have to find our soul reflected in the other and reflect on whether that is truly who we want to be. While it is of course not the responsibility of the oppressed to educate and talk to those who wish to eradicate them, I believe that there are many more encounters with cis-normative people that are in dire need of communication.

Getting biographical for just a moment, in my own life it is exactly this endless project of staying true to the becoming of queer identity while at the same time being a presence in another's life that led me to more seriously engage with gender studies. I found myself unable to simply think of another that is struggling to understand the state of being I myself fought years to conceptualize as merely ignorant, so I had to find a different answer.

By thinking about the politics of masks I have hoped to have given you at least some insight into the process of finding that alternative. And I want to state once more that in this I in no way argue that Trans identities are anything but valid, or that gender transitive people are not to be taken as valid epistemic agents that can best account for their life experiences. I am merely proposing to reconsider the fundamental ontological and hermeneutic starting point from which public Trans-debate can be analyzed and shifted. The claim I hope to have substantiated then is that this often polarized discourse we find filling our screens arises by way of an underlying ontological commitment that focuses on decontextualized subjectivity and a call for being

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[7] Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*.

authentic to one's essence within a political teleology of progressive self/other understanding. The ethics in political intersubjectivity therefore arise before and during the moment of encounter with alterity, which reveals that we have been living as a response to the otherness of a thing that may always reveal itself to be more than we thought.

And I know there is much more research to be done, and that this is to an extent just me trying to entice my reader to read an obscure German phenomenologist. However, it is in following the ideas of this Jewish thinker fleeing from Nazi Germany, who against all odds remained convinced that people can live together and support each other, that I have begun to be far more optimistic. I am firm in my belief that not every person invested in cis-normativity is so deeply convinced of their story, that they do not reconsider their myth when they find it reflected in the blood of a Trans person who wants to do nothing but exist and co-create stories with them.

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