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# 13 Eccentric Positionality and Urban Space

*Huib Ernste*

## Introduction

The recent renewed interest in the work of Helmuth Plessner also sparked the use of his philosophy, theories and concepts in other fields of science. Immanuel Kant, who from 1756 onwards taught geography for more than thirty years,<sup>1</sup> has already coined the crucial meaning of philosophy for geography as well as for history. Nevertheless, the disparity between philosophic reflection and applied human geographic research is sometimes substantial. Certainly, most theoretical positions within human geography are well founded on established philosophical positions, but as the philosopher Jeff Malpas reminded us of at the 2010 Meeting of the American Association of Geographers, there is a difference between consuming philosophical insights and having a dialogue among geographers and philosophers about these insights. On one side, this involves reflections on different philosophical positions and arguments about certain philosophical issues for geographers. On the other hand, this also involves gaining insights in the more practical use of philosophical arguments in geographic research for philosophers. This chapter focuses on the latter and therefore does not deal explicitly with the exegetic subtleties of how Helmuth Plessner's work can be interpreted, but rather tries to show how his general views could productively be used and developed further in the field of human geography. Human geography in general, and Dutch geography in particular, has a long tradition in applied research in service of sometimes also rather imperialist ruling powers (Ernste 2008; Ernste 2009). However, today's human geography is strongly influenced by a critical and emancipatory tradition (Habermas 1972). Independent of whether it is based on a critical stance or from a more mainstream point of view, in both cases, human geographers want that their research matters in practice for today's society (Massey and Allen 1985). As such human geographic research is problem oriented. Of course, it is a well-known fact that Helmuth Plessner was also not wary of critical thinking and political and social philosophy (Plessner 2003a;

1 <http://www.manchester.edu/kant/Notes/notesGeography.htm>

Plessner 1999). In this contribution, I therefore would like to explore how the core concept of eccentric positionality coined by Helmuth Plessner, can be used for the analysis of current societal problems and how it contributes to the related social theories.

In the following I will focus on a field of application at the core of human geography, namely urban development and urban living. The urban environment represents a specific spatial setting, which also calls for a specific way of life, or to put it in contemporary human geographic terminology, a specific human sociospatial practice. This is a specific example of the more general relationship between *space* and *human being*, which is the classical focus of human geographic research. As a starting point, I approach this relationship from a geographic action theoretic viewpoint (Werlen 1992; 2009a; 2009b), although my elaborations will also lead me to some outlooks to post-structural theories of practice (Bourdieu 1977; 1990; De Certeau 1984; Schatzki 2001), which are currently enjoying great popularity in human geography. I criticise both theoretical approaches on the ground that, to a large degree, they neglect a thorough conceptualization of the *human being* in their relationship with the environment, even though critical human geography has the pretention to put human beings in the center. Certainly, human geography is not just about human beings, but also about space and spatiality. Strangely enough, space and spatiality is nevertheless given much more thought by human geographers than the human being. To explain what I mean, let us first return to urban life as an example for such a concrete relationship between human being and space. One way to approach urban living would be by means of a fashionable theoretician like Henri Lefebvre (Soja 1996). But in this case, I prefer not to celebrate fashionability but rather focus on the argument itself. To do so, I chose to focus on one of the classics, Georg Simmel, who actually was one of the first to address this relationship so poignantly.

## Urban development

In 1903, Georg Simmel wrote his famous essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life." In contrast to the later Louis Wirth (1938), Simmel did not compare urban life with rural life, but rather distinguished modern urban life from pre-modern life. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the heyday of modernism, he described urban life as characteristic for a modernistic way of living. Simmel actually grew up in Berlin, at the corner of Leipziger and Friedrichstraße, during a time when the city was undergoing a trans-

formation from a provincial administrative capital into a cosmopolitan, industrialized, modern metropolis. At that time, Berlin was the world's fifth largest city in population size (Scaff 1988; Jung 1990). Simmel's deepest commitments and mental instincts were formed in a setting in which aesthetic culture, art, psychic nuance and emotive expressiveness linked to the oppositional identity of Jewish intellectuals (Käsler 1984, 357-385) and to the turn-of-the-century Viennese bourgeoisie milieu (Schorske 1981).

For Simmel, social life in modern cities was noncommittal and unengaged. Surrounded by the many others with whom one has no direct relationship, one can actually only do one thing, namely to (partly) 'switch off' or acquire a selective distance. This seems to be a recipe for how to deal with the big crowds in the city. It would not only be impossible, but also unnecessary, to actively engage with everyone one encounters. Such encounters happen, for example, when people sit next to you on the bus, when you stand in front of a traffic light next to another car, or whenever you are in an elevator with many others, not talking to each other, not even looking at each other, almost as if you are alone in this world. But even then, this kind of behavior has to be qualified as social behavior, as you do take the presence of the others into account. This peculiar kind of solitude, which seems so typical for modern cities, is a kind of togetherness based on uncommitted detachment. Being 'alone' in a full train is indeed not the same as being alone in an empty one. It demands that one coordinates one's own use of space with the movements of others, and that one communicates with each other by means of an implicit social language of indifference.

At another accession, Simmel assumes the special character of urban psyche as follows: the human being is essentially a differentiating being. People create meaning and make sense of their surrounding by selectively distinguishing different sensual impressions. We determine when and what we perceive, how we endorse certain tones and sounds, and what we simply ignore. However, this ability to filter our perceptions is heavily strained by our urban environment. In the city, we are confronted with an explosion of sensual impressions and rapidly changing sceneries, a continuously chaotic and almost random stream of impulses, which overburdens our ability to make useful distinguishments and selections about what deserves our attention. Mental life in modern cities is characterised by an overload of stimuli.

Following Simmel, Robert Park (1967, 40-41) writes in a similar fashion about the intensive stimuli of urban life, which, at least to a certain degree, may even be attractive for young and fresh nerves. The downside of this situation, especially for those with somewhat older and worn nerves, is that

one is torn somewhere between excitement and powerlessness. Such a bombardment of our senses also carries the risk that one is literally distracted, and often even agitated, causing us to respond with a blaze attitude, a kind of chronic disengagement and indifference towards our surrounding. At the time of Georg Simmel in early-twentieth-century Berlin, distancing oneself from the urban jungle still required active and perhaps forceful effort. Today, with all our mobile technologies, ranging from MP3 players to smartphones, one does not even need to appropriate such an attitude, as the technical aids pick up on this logic of detachment in a perfect way. Immersed in our private soundscape or involved in a talk with someone else at the other end of the phone, one can easily detach from the city as shared perception space or social space.

This subjective attitude also corresponds, according to Simmel, to a more fundamental aspect of modern social interaction. In this modern urban context, an increasing number of aspects of social interaction are reduced to market transactions, or the logic of our monetary economy. Walter Benjamin calls this the 'theatre of buying and consuming' (Benjamin 1986, 40). The dominance of monetary economy in modern cities also has specific effects on people's personalities, as not just the urban social constitution but also the monetary exchange relationships imply a functional, succinct impersonal way of relating to other people and the material world around us (Simmel 1997, 176). In Simmel's eyes, this latent antipathy and a kind of pre-stage of practical antagonism affect the distances and aversions, without which urban life would be impossible.

The rules of repulsion or non-participation are a part of the spatial economy of the city, according to which bodies in space are sorted and kept at a distance to minimize social exchange. This social logic on the one hand produces anonymity amongst the crowd and on the other hand encourages the urban actor to stand out and make a good performance in order to tell apart oneself from that same crowd. If nobody listens to you, it is difficult to be heard, even by oneself (*ibid.*, 184). On the street, nobody seems to be watching, while at the same time we are all trying to present our selves to the others (Goffman 1959; Davenport and Beck 2002).

The anxiety of anonymity is the driving force, which turns the city to a stage for the performance that mediates between the individual and the collective. This is the place where the tension between the recognition and respect of others, as an ethics of identity, is played out against the isolation of the self and the current social differences. Urban life is a continuous dilemma between individual concretizations and the possibilities for urban sociality. What is crucial in Simmel's observations is that he problematizes

the idea of a harmonic urban culture. He characterizes modern urban life as under-determined, flowing, permanently becoming and overcoming (Jensen 2006).

Simmel's ideas have shown to be path breaking in urban research and have been picked up and developed further by many others. One of the most influential followers was Louis Wirth, who in 1938 wrote a seminal essay with the title: "Urbanism as a Way of Life." Here, Wirth proposed a research agenda for examining how cities produced forms of social interaction that is different from those of rural settlements, hence aiming to determine how urban and rural ways of life could be distinguished.

Wirth attempted to analyze urban culture by distinguishing three 'independent variables' – size, density and heterogeneity – which he identified as causal factors behind urban cultural life. In his own words:

Large numbers count for individual variability, the relative absence of intimate personal acquaintanceship, the segmentation of human relations, which are largely anonymous, superficial and transitory, and associated characteristics. Density involves diversification specialisation, the coincidence of close physical contact and distant social relations, glaring contrasts, a complex pattern of segregation, the predominance of formal social control, and accentuated friction, among other phenomena. Heterogeneity tends to break down rigid social structures and to produce mobility, instability, and insecurity, and the affiliation of the individuals with a variety of interesting and tangential social grounds with a high rate of membership turnover. The pecuniary nexus tends to displace personal relations, and institutions tend to cater to mass rather than individual requirements. The individual thus becomes effective only as he acts through organised groups (Wirth 1938, 1).

All three traits mentioned by Wirth were seen as being characteristic of urban rather than rural life: only cities had large numbers, and dense heterogeneous social relations. Wirth thus implied that there was some connection between the type of settlement and psychic life; that certain sorts of personalities, psychic traits, and attitudes towards life, were closely associated with being in the city.

It is clear that Wirth drew not just on the work of Simmel, but also on Ferdinand Tönnies's (2002) distinction between community (*Gemeinschaft*) and society (*Gesellschaft*).

Although Louis Wirth's work sparked a tremendous body of research in the field of urban geography and even nowadays still seems to have some

sway over policy-makers, the idea of there being a generalizable 'urban way of life' was rejected as it showed that even in some of the largest urban environments, collective life persists in segregated groups. Many inner city populations consist of relatively homogeneous groups, with social and cultural moorings that shield it fairly effectively from the suggested consequences of number, density and heterogeneity (Gans 1968, 99). Furthermore, a number of counter examples were produced to the supposedly anonymous and anomic patterns of urban life, but also to the integrated community of the countryside. In summary, the evidence for the urban-rural contrast was found unconvincing.

However, it would be premature to completely write off Wirth's contribution, as some – mainly American writers – have recast Wirth's framework in somewhat different terms. Claude Fischer (1982), for example, argues that urban life allows the proliferation of subcultures and identities, since people can always choose a variety of bases on which to identify themselves. Urbanism allows such subcultures to proliferate, since a critical mass for the formation of a distinct culture is often only possible in a city of a certain size.

In general, Wirth's work went through a period of reappraisal in which it was recognized that the original critiques were, albeit justified, vastly overstated. Indeed, the issue of conflict, dispute and negotiation was often too neglected in this search for counterexamples. Furthermore, ethnographic studies continue to demonstrate that local contexts and spatial arrangements do matter. Finally, it was shown that these contradictory conditions and phenomena, such as community and society, usually co-exist with one another. So it might not be invalid but just more complicated.

And as we shall see below, the work of Simmel seems to point the way to go, by stressing the double sidedness of modern urban life; a double sidedness, which Plessner analogously describes as both, the centric and eccentric positionality of human being. Simmel's description of the double sidedness of urban life was also picked up by later authors such as Urry (1990), Jay (1996), Berman (1984), Gregory (1994), Harvey (2009), Frisby (1992) and many others. Marshall Berman, for example, writes about the double sidedness of modern urban life (1984, 123). The freedom of human beings to develop and change themselves cannot be separated from the insecurity deriving from the uncertainty of urban possibilities. Here, Berman conceives the street as a microcosm of modern life and the struggle for public space as the core of modernist striving. Encounters on a street in a big city are very unpredictable. As we walk down a busy street, we never know who we are going to meet, or what will follow as a result. On the one hand, this represents an enormous potential – for example, to meet the love of our

lives, or to meet a potential employer or an old friend – but on the other hand it is very distressing – we could be robbed, attacked, or even killed.

These ethnographic descriptions do not just show an urban setting that has certain affects on human behavior and on human mental life. They are also more than just a description of the typical materiality of urban forms and urban society, as they are not only facts about urban life, but are mutually constitutive in a complex way, from which we do not just gain a better understanding of the urban but also of the human life, as well as their intricate relationship.

What is central here is the relationship between urban environment and social relations or society, which the human being is a part of. Thus, the physical form of the city is a crucial element. In traditional sociology, as well as in traditional human geography, the material objects in the urban environment are conceived as objects on which we project a certain meaning and which we use for the expression of socially determined meanings. Space as such is symbol for society. However, this view assumes a fundamentally binary world order, in which society is, in the end, kept separate from the physical environment. Life in the city is conceived from a sociocentric point of view, irrespective of whether we, in doing so, refer to 'rational choices' (Becker 1978), 'sense making actions' (Werlen 1992), 'pure communication' (Luhmann 1996), 'binding institutionalisations' (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Hall and Taylor 1996) or determining societal discourses (Foucault 1970). In all cases, the non-social disappears behind the social, even though, as Heike Delitz (2009) expressed it, we are surrounded by these physical artefacts. These artefacts are still seen as passive objects, serving only as the symbolic representation of the social, which was constituted beforehand and to a large part independently of the physical urban forms.

An alternative possibility, Delitz (2009) continued, lies in allowing urban space to play a much more active role, i.e. treating space as an active medium of the social. A number of scholars already made propositions in this direction. For example, Benjamin (1999) conceived urban structures, especially shopping arcades, as expressions of the modern consumption society, while at the same time, such shopping arcades also played an important role in the construction of the consuming subjects. Also, Michel Foucault (1984) emphasized the role of spatial configurations in the genesis of power relations. An example worth mentioning here would be the Panopticon. These early proposals do allow a two-sided relationship between urban space on the one hand, and human being and society on the other. Nevertheless, none of these scholars were able to fully overcome the classic Cartesian duality. For this task, we are in need of other conceptualizations.



One possibility can be traced back to the French sociology of life, of which Gilles Deleuze is an important representative, as he conceived urban life as an immanent process, as a 'becoming of difference.' This urban sociology, inspired by philosophy of life, does not only conceive social being as just consisting of intentional acting subjects, but rather also includes all 'bodies' in an active constellation, which can only be described in combination, as a whole, as a *Gestalt* (King and Wertheimer 2005; Marks 1998). A similar approach is conducted by Bruno Latour (2005), though he uses different terminology. Given the limiting scope of this chapter, I cannot go into more details with respect to these approaches.

Instead, as Delitz (2009) suggested, another non-Cartesian alternative, derived from philosophical anthropology, is of interest here. This school of thought is also founded on philosophy of life and enables to think of human corporeality and urban artefacts together with the social. In contrast to the French vitalism, the philosophical anthropological approach inspired by German idealism, emphasizes the special position of human beings and their ability and necessity for stabilizing human life. This implies that one does not rush to conclude the constructive character of human nature, but takes into account the special character of human biology. Following the work of Henri Bergson (1911; see also Deleuze 1991) and Hans Driesch (1909), life is conceptualized as a process of creative differentiations and as the formation of an own individuality. In addition, the theory of environment of Jakob von Uexküll (1909; see also Von Uexküll 2001) contributed substantially to this school of thought. In his theory, each living organism is bound to its own niche, which fits to its inner world. Philosophical anthropology goes one step further, as it assumes that the human being is, after all, not just like any other animal, but rather is a uniquely unspecialized animal that is characterized by a profound world-openness. These insights turn out to be more than mere philosophical speculation, as the special position of the human being is increasingly also biologically (specifically evolutionarily) founded (Portmann 1970).

It was especially the biologist and philosopher Helmuth Plessner who has systematically developed and elaborated this position. His main work was published in the same year as Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* and indeed shows a number of parallels. However, while Heidegger takes time as a starting point, Plessner places the metaphor of space as his point of departure (Schatzki 2007; De Mul 2003). In this sense, Plessner argues that all living organisms constitute themselves by bordering themselves off from their environment. 'Living things' are 'border realizing things.' They therefore have a 'position' in space. However, not all living creatures are

the same. While non-human animals are bound to their niche, they do not just react automatically on impulses from the environment, but have the virtuous of choice, spontaneity, consciousness and intelligence. Yet, their choices are subject to the primacy of the practical, which coordinates their reactions (Eßbach 1994, 23f.). Human beings are different (though from an empirical point of view, the development from non-human animals to *Homo sapiens sapiens* may be gradual). The stimulus-response cycle, which still dominates animal behavior, is interrupted for human beings. The relationship between the inner world and the environment is not direct or fixed. Humans are not restricted to react to their environment from the central position only. This hiatus is the basis of human reflexivity. Human beings are at distance from their own living-centred bodily being (*Leib*) and thus *have* their own corporeal body (*Körper*) at their disposal and are, as Helmuth Plessner calls it, 'eccentrically positioned.' Like all living creatures, human beings also have to maintain their bodily boundaries. The main difference is that the human beings are aware of this, and therefore experience it as a task. Human beings are, as such, unadapted and unspecialized, not just with respect to their outer world but also with respect to their own inner world. The complexity of the unspecified stimuli, which patter down on us from the outside as well as the complexity of the excessive unspecified drives needs to be reduced. Here we can observe a characteristic similarity between Plessner's conceptualization and the autopoietic systems postulated by Varela and Maturana (1980). The human being, thus, needs artefacts, routines and institutions, to actively manage this border relationship. Through these artifices, affections, motives, actions, perceptions, imaginations and social relations are channelled and habitualized. As a consequence, human beings are artificial by nature. At the same time, the human being is not separated from this artificial environment, but rather forms a unity with it. The whole human existence is therefore an embodiment. Institutions, but also the built environment and even the natural environment become an embodiment and objectivation of his actions. Since this embodiment is artificial, it is contingent and can be changed. From this profuse vitality, as Delitz (2009) described it, all cultural processes are fed, history is made, and geographic differentiations emerge; or to use Benno Werlen's words, "everyday geography [is] made" (Werlen 2009b). So what the philosophical anthropology of Helmuth Plessner does not do, is defining the substantial essence of human being. To the contrary, instead of trying to essentialize the human existence, Plessner understands it as a permanently becoming. Plessner describes the human being as the *Homo absconditus*, the inscrutable being, inscrutable for others but also

for one self. The human being is to itself as well as to others, dependent on an expression, a mask, a role, a performance to become what it is. All the while, this mask or outer skin, also hides and distances the self from the outer world, and as such creates space for change.

The human eccentric positionality is the position of the self-consciousness. It is a place that cannot be located on any map. It is the point of view from a utopian position, from which the human being still experiences itself in its concrete here and now in the directness of its relation to the objects in the environment and to itself. But at the same time, the human being feels distanced from its own direct experiences from this eccentric position; a position beyond space and time from which the human being becomes aware of the contingency and relativity of concrete life (Plessner 2003b, 363). From this position, the human being also becomes consciously aware of individuality and the non-differentiated sociality (ibid., 375). In this non-differentiated sociality, the human being experiences himself as possibly equal to others, as part of a shared 'we'-world. It is the sphere between things and human beings and – last, but not least – also between places (Entrikin 1991). It is a utopian place, and seen from this place each concretization in life with all its restrictions in time and space cannot succeed. The eccentrically positioned human being, therefore, cannot avoid having to start over again, to continue to act, to create anew and to reinvent himself. Helmuth Plessner summarizes these insights into three anthropological laws:

1. *The Law of natural artificiality*, which suggests that each human being must create his or her own life to compensate for the natural place he or she has lost through the process of hominization (Nennen 1991, 20ff.).
2. *The Law of mediated immediacy*, according to which the relation between eccentric human beings and their environment is actively mediated by human corporeality and its artificial relatedness to the social and physical environment, enabling humans to objectify (and subjectify) themselves and their environment. Human being and identity is therefore partly created and limited by these physical, technical and cultural media.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the eccentric positionality allows the human being to aware of that which enables him to create a distance between himself and the environment and to transcend the limitations of a particular

2 In the context of urban life forms, the issue of the resistance or inherent logic of cities and their repercussions on the urban way of life is currently coined by Martina Löw, see e.g. [http://www.stadtforschung.tudarmstadt.de/media/loewe\\_eigenlogik\\_der\\_staedte/dokumente\\_download/artikel/martinaloew\\_intrinsiclogicofcities.pdf](http://www.stadtforschung.tudarmstadt.de/media/loewe_eigenlogik_der_staedte/dokumente_download/artikel/martinaloew_intrinsiclogicofcities.pdf).

mediatedness. Be that as it may, humans still cannot entirely avoid being somehow mediated (Hammer 1967, 170).

3. *The Law of utopian position* points to our eccentric positionality. From that position, we are at a distance with our own physical existence and our passive experience in a world of praxis. Because of this eccentric positionality, every human being experiences his or her 'constitutive homelessness,' which impels him or her to transcend the achieved and thus perpetually search for the unreachable 'home': a position of unambiguous fixation, a place in this world, and a clear identity for the self and the world around it. The eccentric positionality leads to a positioning in a counterfactual utopian home, a kind of 'smooth place' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 383) or 'non-place' (Augé 1995, 75f.), or perhaps also counterfactual ideal speech situation (Habermas 1984) can be seen as related to this utopian position with real concrete effects. In this utopian position, we feel related to the 'other' excluded from our own factual concrete being, doing, and saying. This detached positionality, which is constitutive of human subjectivity, is also the power of putting oneself in the place of any other person, indeed, of any other living thing. Where there is one person, Plessner says, there is every person. Thus, a particular being, in one's own limited, parochial situation, can be seen as a non-utopian concretion of this utopian generality, thereby providing a general basis for the sociality of human actions. But there are different sides to the transcendence of the particular through the postulation of, or even religious believe in, a concrete utopia. On the one hand, it is the human eccentric positionality, which makes this need for transcendence to a human a priori. But on the other hand, that same positionality towards this transcendence is unveiled as an unreachable utopia (Hammer 1967, 185ff.).

In one of my previous essays, I have already tried to show that these laws, which, because of their paradoxality, already sound very postmodern, indeed could mediate between classical late-modern action theories and post-structural approaches (Ernste 2004). Putting that aside, let us now return to the issue of understanding urban life.

Some patterns, as they were described earlier by Simmel and Berman, now gain a clear anthropological meaning. Urban life seems to be exemplary for the double aspectivity of human life as proclaimed by Helmuth Plessner. The law of natural artificiality expresses itself both in the performativity (Butler 1997; Jacobs 1998; Rose 1999) and in the hiding mask or blazé-ness of urban life. The law of utopian position shows that the idea that the human

being can live in perfect harmony and stability within its own niche, as Wirth's idealized description of the living on the countryside (in contrast to urban life) presupposes, is unfeasible or even impossible. The inherent discomfort with the actual embodiment and objectification of human life urges us to continue acting, to become creative and to search for new possibilities. The special attractiveness of cities seems partly explainable on the basis of these anthropological insights, as the vast potentialities and contingencies of cities, at least in some respects, seem to come closer to what has been described as eccentric positionality. It almost seems as if modern urban life provides a partial realization of what we would otherwise only experience from our eccentric positionality. Does urban living indeed strive towards an eccentric existence? What Georg Simmel described as process of modernisation might then in philosophical anthropological terms be understood as a process in which we try to get closer to an eccentric urban world. An eccentric urban world in which the city is formed in such a way that it offers a maximum of different possibilities, different forms of community with many different groups and in which the city is experienced as a playground for creativity, for masking and de-masking in multiple ways, and for socialisation and privatisation, for performativity and for selectivity. While we set boundaries in the city, we also transgress these boundaries and move on. In this sense, these anthropological insights in urban life are also an important input for the currently popular theories on cultures of mobility (Sheller and Urry 2006), where urban life can be conceptualized as being permanently on the move, as a continuous becoming and overcoming. Seen from this point of view, creating a city environment is an enormous challenge for the concretization and design of urban life.

But before we hurry to go and create 'the eccentric city,' a word of caution should also be given. One has to be careful when trying to determine how the utopian position or a particular utopian city should look like, as such kind of objectifications are bound to be unsuccessful. The oppositions in the three anthropological laws declare that we cannot be either/or and that we always have to be both at once: natural and artificial; immediate and mediated; utopian and concrete.

## Conclusion

What we learn from these elaborations is that a philosophical anthropological approach to urban geography can indeed bring forward both a critical scrutinization of hitherto conceptualizations, as well as a number of hints

for future urban design. While the work of Simmel shows a number of relationships to the philosophical anthropology of Helmuth Plessner, the conceptualization of the urban by Louis Wirth does not reflect this anthropological sensitivity. This becomes understandable once we take a look at the broader setting in which Georg Simmel and Louis Wirth operated. As Rudolph Weingartner (1960), and subsequently Deena and Michael Weinstein (1993) show, Georg Simmel felt a close relationship with the new philosophy of life, which he tried to synthesize with the neo-Kantian legacy (Windelband, Rickert, Dilthey). At an early stage, he already dealt with the founding fathers of the philosophy of life, including Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, as well as with the work of Henri Bergson, whose *Creative Evolution* [*L'Évolution créatrice*, 1907] at Simmel's instigation was translated into German by his student and mistress Gertrud Kantorowicz (Jung 1990, 13). Simmel is fascinated by the interplay between Life and Form. While Life, in the view of Simmel, should be understood as a continuous stream, forms are the points of rest and fixation as objectifications of the process of life, which, as such, also develop their own inherent dynamics. So mankind expresses itself in objectifications, which Hegel designated as 'objective spirit.' These objectifications reach from societal and state institutions, all the way to moral rules, habits, law, religion, art, and science, and not to forget, to architecture and urban design. While human beings need these objectifications to survive, they are at the same time bound, restricted and reduced by them. Life needs forms, but simultaneously also needs more than just these forms, which once established, always hamper the pulsating stream of life (Jung 1990). The tragedy of life is that it is compelled to constantly objectify itself in forms. Unable to ever find comfort in these same forms, life is urged to transcend them in a perpetual cycle. Life appears both as unbounded continuity, as well as a bounded 'I.' Life always strives for more life (Simmel 1918, 12). Simmel describes this as a double boundary, implying that our existence can only be described in such paradoxical terms as 'we are bounded in every direction, and we are bounded in no direction,' and 'man is the limited being that has no limit' (Weinstein and Weinstein 1993, 105). In other words, human beings are defined as boundaries of boundaries, never able to be just one thing, and always remaining elusive (ibid. 219). In this way, the individual urban dweller is ever-resistant to absorption into the urban social totality. The metropolis is the site of critical tension inherent in the atrophy of individual culture through the hypertrophy of objective culture (109). This ambivalence of urban life shows great resemblance with postmodern thought. As such, Simmel can be characterized as a postmodernist *avant la lettre* at the height of modernism.

Louis Wirth, on the other hand, took Simmel's description more on its impressionist face value and applied it in a modernist way, which we can also describe as a behaviourist approach, describing urban forms – size, density and heterogeneity – as causal factors or independent variables, determining human behavior and human attitudes. This also suggests that one can influence human behavior by providing a certain spatial setting in such a way that the urban dweller can feel at home and in a way that lets urban communities flourish. Thus, Louis Wirth was a child of the modernist tradition of his time. Even if one does not follow his generalized conclusions nowadays and accepts that urban realities are more complex, the behavioral and modernist implications of his observations can still hold some merit. What is missing in Wirth's conceptualization of urban life, and in the work of many urban geographers in the same tradition, are the philosophical anthropological insights Georg Simmel anticipated. Not only are they extensively elaborated in the work of Helmuth Plessner, but they gained renewed relevance in the face of today's late-modernist (Werlen 2009b) and post-structuralist (Baudrillard, Lyotard, Derrida, see also Weinstein and Weinstein 1993) social constructivism (Ernste 2004).

From this philosophical anthropologically informed point of view, we can at least enjoy an improved understanding of the dialectics of urban life, as Simmel described it. At the same time, we can better imagine urban designs, which anticipate the eccentric positionality and double boundary of the urban dwelling, as well as the eccentric and becoming qualities of the city.

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