

# Transgressing Borders with Human Geography

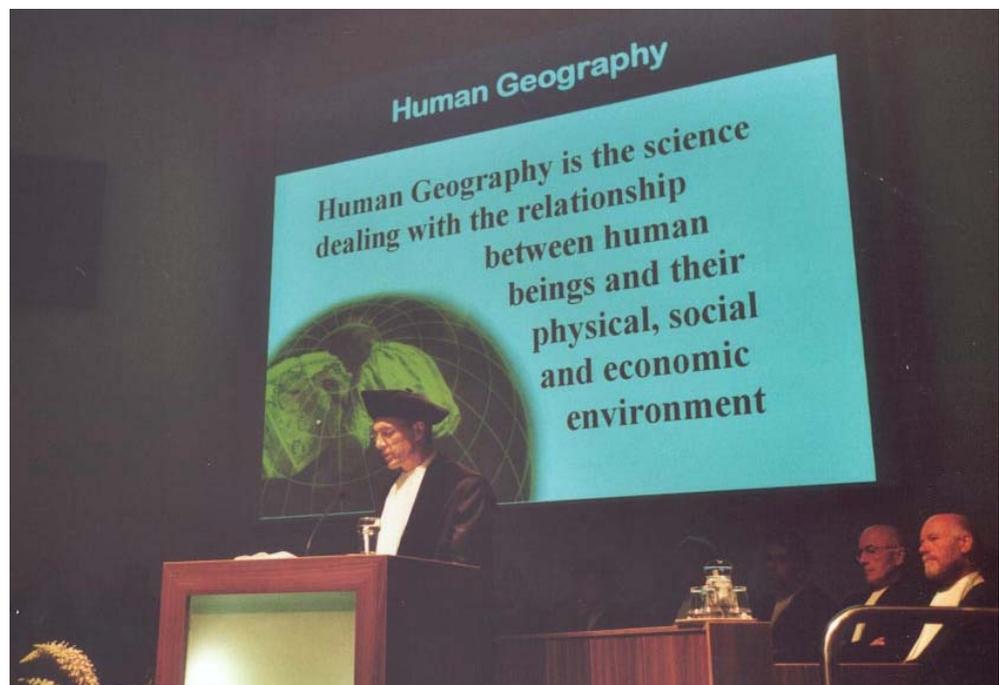
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# Transgressing borders with human geography

Transgressing the borders of the geographical being and of its conceptualisations

*Huib Ernste*



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# The pragmatism of life in post-structuralist times<sup>1</sup>

Huib Ernste<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

Dear Rector, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Human geography is the science dealing with the relationship between human beings and their physical, social and economic environment. It focuses on the spatiality of all kinds of human action. It is about the space and place of human being and human becoming. Human activities as well as their spatiality unfolds on different social and spatial scales, ranging from individual day-to-day actions, via complex bundles of actions taking place in enterprises, state organisations, non-governmental organisations at local, regional, national and international or even global levels. Nowadays these formerly so easy identifiable and locatable institutional entities have emerged to spatially diffuse flexible multi-level networks. Nevertheless all these human activities have their spatiality, their spatial specificity, which confines or enables them. The core business of human geography is to explore this relationship and to help us to find optimal ways for dealing with our physical, social and economic environments.

Today, one can recognise two broad streams of thought at the human geographic research front. One, which seems to be well rooted in the Franco-Anglo-Saxon world, is broadly associated with a post-modernist or post-structuralist approach. The other one finds its origins in the continental European sphere and is largely inspired by late-modernist, critical and some fashions of pragmatist thinking<sup>3</sup>. In continental European human geography the latter approach is sometimes also associated with what is called an *action-theoretic approach* in a more narrow sense<sup>4</sup>. Traces of its elements can also be found in the rather scattered ideas of some humanistic geographers. Nijmegen is now one of the places where this approach is given substantial attention next to the more traditional behavioural approaches. However as we will see below, we will also exceed it. What both approaches have in common is their joint interest in human actions and performances as the linkage between the active subject or the passively subjectified human being and the physical, social and economic environment. In both traditions the constitution of the subject as a person with a more or less specific identity, able or unable to take effective action towards those physical and social environments is of central importance. Still in many respects both approaches seem to be incompatible with each other.

Today, I want *first* to give a rough sketch of the two aforementioned approaches - the post-modern or post-structuralist approach and the action-theoretical approach in its more

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<sup>1</sup> Revised version of the paper presented in the session 'What Next?' at the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers, 19-23 March, 2002, Los Angeles, USA.

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<sup>3</sup> Of course many nuances can be found which relativise this crude classification and especially in neighbouring disciplines the situation looks rather different.

<sup>4</sup> See for a specific human geographical exposé of the action-theoretical approach Werlen (1988, 1995, 1997) (the latter two in German) or shorter framing the most important concepts involved Werlen (1999). One can refer to Miebach (1991) (in German) for an introductory overview over related sociological action theories. For a very accessible introduction (in Dutch) from an analytical philosophical point of view see for example van den Beld (1982).

narrow guise. In doing so, I will focus on their respective conceptualisations of the *geographic actor*. Both versions of the broader action-oriented approach are of central importance to the kind of geographical work done in Nijmegen.

*Second*, and this is again typical for critical stance of human geography in Nijmegen, I will point to some of the blind spots of these approaches and suggest a third conception that might bridge the initial opposition.

*Third* and last, if you do not run out of me, I will explore what this means for the positioning and identification of the geographic self in future human geographic research and for the positioning of the Department of Human Geography at this university within a wider whole.

This means that from the very broad field of human geography I have decided today to focus on a more theoretical and philosophical, or one could say, on a more fundamental research question. This probably differs from what one would expect from the dominant approach within our own faculty of ‘management’ sciences. Indeed, in this sense, we are probably different from some of our neighbouring disciplines and closer to some others. My focus today also contrasts with another branch of our own human geographic research dealing with equally topical problems in local and regional economic development, corporate location management, international governance and international migration and development. It is rather characteristic, however, that in our aversion to cheap praxis oriented slogans, we prefer combining deep and critical theoretical reflection with very applied forms of research and consultancy. Today, however. I will focus on an issue of basic theoretical (and indirectly practical) importance, the debate between the late-modernist action-theoretical approach and the post-modernist or post-structuralist approach.

Concerning the way this debate has developed until now both approaches have interjected themselves in the more strategic spheres of the current scientific debates and have become engrossed in the almost self-referential worlds of their scientific soul mates. In this way human geography then could easily become a rather eclectic endeavour without any progress. This puts the pressing question of *what is going to be next* on the top of the agenda<sup>5</sup>. For many it is not clear what draws us ahead. We often seem to dance in circles.

In this situation, interesting enough, the reflection on the reconstruction of the ‘geographical self’ in each of these approaches, all of the sudden uncovers a breath taking field of commonalities, of traces of relationships and of refined differences and nuances. Maybe only now, after post-structuralism, we have sharpened our eyes and our analytic instruments for the deconstruction of the *place* we, as geographers, stand with our own approaches. Whatever it is, the geographically inspirational but still rather unknown work of Helmuth Plessner (1892-1984)<sup>6</sup> could play an important role in it. His work is undergoing a real revival. Some expect it to be highly fashionable in social science within five years. This specific piece of thought seems to fit well in both strains of thought. It seems to fill many of the empty spaces between the conceptualisations of the geographic self, of both post-structuralist and action-theoretical approaches. It focuses on the issues excluded in our separate frameworks and on questioning the politics of the differentiation of these approaches. But first let us see what we are talking about.

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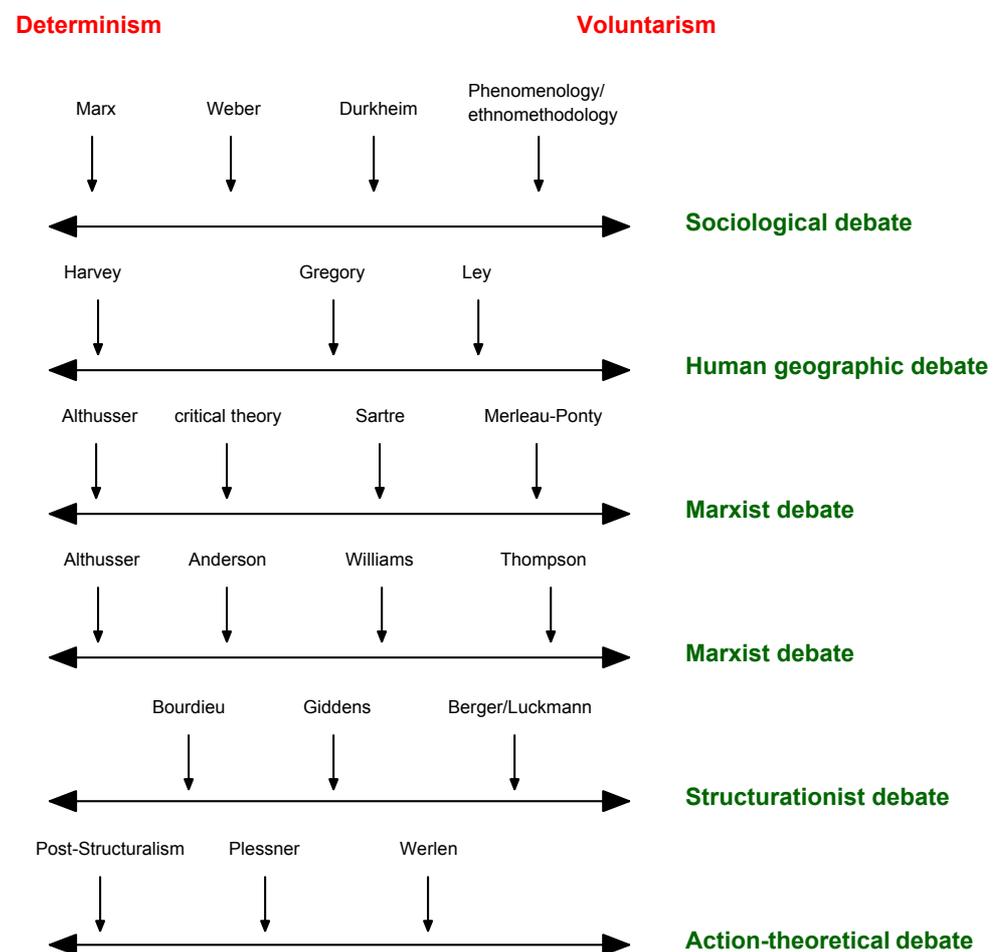
<sup>5</sup> This refers to the title of a series of sessions at the latest meeting of the American Association of Geographers in Los Angeles, in which I had the privilege to participate.

<sup>6</sup> Only small parts of his voluminous work has been translated into English, although in the course of his ‘renesceance’ a number of initiatives have been taken to translate central pieces of his work (see the website of the Helmuth Plessner association (<http://www.soziologie.uni-freiburg.de/hpg/e-index.htm>)). The list of references to this contribution contains a selection of the most important publications on his work.

## Setting the Scene

Action theory in a more general sense deals with the activities human beings employ in relation to their social and physical environment. Within this broad framework, Nigel Thrift, in his seminal paper published in 1983 (see Fig. 1) distinguished different approaches that, in an updated version, ranged from behaviourist, structuralist and post-structuralist approaches, via structurationist including habitus (Bourdieu, 1984) and resistance (Touraine, 1988) theories towards action-theoretical approaches in a more narrow sense (Blumer, 1969; Garfinkel, 1996; Cicourel, 1974; Mead, 1934).

The main difference between these positions is exemplified in different conceptualisations of the *actor* as the *subject* of his or her own actions. Accordingly, on one extreme, the term 'subject' is interpreted as the 'subjected', the externally determined self, while at the other end it is interpreted as the 'subject', as the origin and agent or author of its own free actions.



**Figure 1:** Determinism and voluntarism in various social theories and subject areas – an approximation (adapted and enhanced from: Thrift, 1983)

## The Action-theoretical Approach

Before I elaborate further on the differences and communalities, let me first recapitulate in just a few lines what I mean, when I talk of an action-theoretical approach in a more narrow sense:

The action-theoretical approach in human geography unites a number of different developments and traditions in social sciences and applies them in the field of human geography. Its essential characteristics are:

- 1) Instead of spatial patterns, it puts spatial actions, activities or action projects at the centre of our scientific interest. This clearly goes further than just bringing back the human actor behind these spatial patterns. It does more than just look at the attributes and situations of human beings as explanations of their behaviour and of the spatial patterns they thus create. That would more or less be the behavioural approach. In contrast, the action-theoretical approach focuses on the actions themselves – on that what people do, and on how and why they do it.
- 2) Action theory assumes the free will of each individual actor. This free will is executed with respect to the intentions and not with respect to the realisations of these intentions. Therefore this should not be mistaken for freedom of any restrictions, resistance, punishments or counteracting powers in the realisation of these freely chosen intentions.
- 3) In creating these intentions, actors dynamically interpret and give meaning, however ambivalent or uncertain these meanings might be, to their action-situation, their action-objectives, their action projects and concrete actions and to the intended and unintended consequences, as the process moves along. This also implies that it is theoretically impossible to model these processes in a mechanical or causal way.
- 4) Since every action is by definition directed towards the environment, every action seeks to create a certain relationship with that environment. Actions of other actors are an important aspect of this environment and, consequently, the action-theoretical approach conceives spatial actions and the subjective meaning we give them as truly social.
- 5) Taking this together we recognise a clearly subjectivist and social constructivist approach, where there is only a single source for human spatial action, which is the human 'being' or rather the human 'becoming'. Actions can therefore not be explained from objective situations including the objective attributes of the actors themselves, but only understood on the basis of the reasons the actors provide us for their actions or on the basis of an external reconstruction of these reasons. Both the understanding of the actions of the agent by the social scientist as well as the interpretation of, and giving meaning to actor's own actions is a process of sense-making, with again all the ambivalence and uncertainties that accompany it.
- 6) Historically this specific kind of action theory was developed as a critique of behaviourist and behavioural theories trying to explain spatial behaviour. It should also be contrasted with the culturally more informed structuralist, action-theoretical approach of Talcot Parsons<sup>7</sup>. The action-theoretical approach presented here follows the phenomenological strain of thought, as exemplified e.g. by Alfred Schütz in sociology and Benno Werlen in continental human geography. For them the interpretation of human action has to start with the consciousness of the self and the life world of the individual actor.

Who is this conscious or self-conscious actor? Who is this person, which is the source of human spatial action? Who is this human being? What kind of consciousness does he or she have that grants this or any other specific theoretical approach?

### **The Scattering of the Self**

In the eyes of most poststructuralists, drawing on Freud and Nietzsche, the subject is not the main or most relevant origin of action and mostly not the origin at all. Nietzsche described the subject as self-deceptive, lacking in consciousness, wilful, vengeful and power seeking, while Freud defined the subject as decentred, fragmented, heterogeneous and unaware of its unconsciousness. Following these strains of thought, post-modernists and post-structuralists

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<sup>7</sup> ...who explains human actions by referring them to objectively assessable cultural norms, role patterns and institutionalisations, which the actor has internalised.

argue that larger internal and external structures and processes, the rules by which large societal systems function – and, predominantly, the broader discourses and power relations within them -, determine the social processes and the specific position of the subject in them. In their view the subject does not have the causal power to determine the conditions around them effectively or to effect outcomes<sup>8</sup> (Rosenau, 1992, p. 46, referring to Baudrillard, 1983, p. 167; Booth, 1985; Derrida, 1978; Foucault, 1970, pp. 261-262 and Wellmer, 1985, pp. 436-449). This culminated in the proclamation of the ‘death of the subject’. There is no such thing as an autonomous spatial actor as a generator of authentic spatial actions.



Salvador Dalí  
Exploding Rafaellesque Head

As far as some post-structuralist thinkers still retain the subject, it is always in the guise of someone who is very aware of his or her own fictionality. The post-structural subject could then be typified as a relaxed and flexible individual who actively constitutes his or her own social and spatial reality, by pursuing a personal quest for meaning and self-promotion without making truth claims. He or she seeks fantasy, humour, a culture of desire, immediate and personal satisfaction. An attitude of ‘live and let live’, focused on the here and now, feeling more comfortable with the spontaneous than with the planned is typical of this floating individual without a strong, singular identity - or as Pauline Marie Rosenau (1992, p. 53ff.) writes, a patchwork person consisting of a multitude of incompatible juxtaposed logics in perpetual movement without possibly ever reaching a permanent resolution or reconciliation, a ‘non-identity’, as others have portrayed it.

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<sup>8</sup> This to a large degree corresponds with the positivistic idea of a subject who is fully determined and conditioned by laws operating behind his back. It was this idea that became so prominent in Western science. Both structuralist and post-structuralist scholars indeed seem to deploy a rather positivistic approach locating the subject in the facticity of discourse (Dunn, 1998, p. 178).

Nevertheless, most post-structuralists oppose what they describe as a typical *modern* conception of the self as a centred, sovereign and coherent rational ego and as a intentional and knowledgeable human agent, capable of spontaneous and volitional (re-)actions, of creativity and of cultural innovation, progress and change. ‘In this [modern] view, the category of subject designates autonomy and free will, implying a capacity for conscious identifications, reflection, choice, and control’ (Dunn, 1998, p. 178). Hence this unconditioned subject constitutes itself internally through a split between subject and object, between inner and outer worlds (Habermas, 1987b, 1992). It assumes for the subject an autonomous mental life governed by reason, involving a sovereign consciousness prior to already existing structures.

Nowadays, the post-structural position declaring the dissolution of the subject in the workings of language, power, and desire has become a hegemonic idea, also in current human geographic debates. ‘The theoretical movements at the base of this idea’, as Robert Dunn (1998) – whose argumentation I largely follow here – nicely observes, ‘have [also] precipitated sharp intellectual divisions with devout followers and stubborn dissenters, a polarisation characterised by uncritical loyalties, on the one hand, and unfriendly neglect and sometimes bitter attacks, on the other. In this respect, post-structural theory marks a major exclusionary break with earlier traditions, a radical paradigm shift giving rise to antagonistic theoretical and political camps. In practice, it frequently assumes the form of a language game, a performance, a self-validating epistemology and style that at its worst operates as a self-enclosed system of discourse and power. Yet those who would simply repudiate poststructuralist theory as mistaken or obstructionist miss the challenge and complexity of poststructuralist arguments while denying the failures of the older philosophy of consciousness’. ‘The relocation of the subject within the instabilities of discourse and power added insight and strength to the political struggles over identity and to new doctrines of contingency and relativity serving these struggles, and the wider attack on established political, cultural, and scientific authority’ (p. 184). Importantly, poststructuralism has invented new possibilities for the project of reconstructing a ‘postmetaphysical’ and a ‘post-dualistic’ conception of the subject (p. 180).

Still, despite the obvious power of its critique, poststructuralism has by and large left the problem of the subject unsolved (p. 184). While post-structuralist scholars dissolved the subject into discursive heterogeneity, they nevertheless claim to speak from the position of a knowing subject. Jürgen Habermas (1987b) already pointed to this reproduction of the subject-object dualism in new guise through the knowing, autonomous subject standing apart from and against the world of knowing objects. This also means that the post-structuralist conceptualisation of the self is not free of idealism and positivism which it initially attempted to overcome. It leaves us with a rather unsatisfactory subject that is stripped of a particular social location and the social capacities of original and authentic communication and action (Dunn, 1998, p. 188). In the face of the unresolved dilemmas in the conceptualisation of the self as the geographic actor, the poststructuralists seem to be imprisoned in two ways - first, by their own rejection of the modernist project of scientific progress and, secondly by the self-enclosedness of their own discourse and power system, because of which they sometimes fail to execute their own assumptions or follow their own advice (Rosenau, 1992, p. 176). No wonder, that at the recent meeting of the American Association of Geographers in Los Angeles the question: ‘what next?’ was posed as a real dilemma.

### **Othering the Self: Eccentric Positionality**

‘Next’ could be the exploration of another ontology of the self – one, that does not lose itself in the idealism of classical philosophy of consciousness, and one, which provides the human actor with a firm non-metaphysical foundation; a conception of the origin of spatial

actions that does not surrender rationality nor the possibility of constructive critique or progress. As an answer to the question ‘what next?’ I strongly recommend the anthropology or rather anthropological contentions of Helmuth Plessner, who anticipated much of post-structuralist thinking and can be seen as an invitation to bend some of the post-structuralist dilemmas towards an action-theoretical solution, and the other way around.

Although the massive, very dense work of the physician, biologist, sociologist and philosopher, Helmuth Plessner, has been highly neglected, it is now increasingly being rediscovered by architects, in literary critique, by philosophers of law (Glastra van Loon, 2001), in technology (de Mul, 1995, Procee, 1997a, 1997b), in policy sciences (Coultre, 2001) and of course in biology. The work of Helmuth Plessner is nowadays merited a sophistication and profoundness comparable or even excelling the work of Martin Heidegger. Instead of Heidegger’s existential analysis of human being in the framework of time, he proposes to start off with an analysis of life in the framework of space<sup>9</sup>.



**Foucault**



**Derrida**



**Plessner**



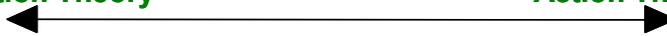
**Werlen**



**Schütz**

**Post-Modern  
Action Theory**

**Late-Modern  
Action Theory**



**Determinism**

**Voluntarism**

So while Husserl with his transcendental phenomenological method was searching for pure consciousness, as it would reveal itself to us in our natural attitude towards it, Heidegger shifted the transcendental character of consciousness to the consciousness of being. Not the Kantian consciousness makes the world to what it is, but existence and the existential caring for things and human beings. First, we exist and then we contemplate. Heidegger thus replaces transcendental phenomenology by existential phenomenology. Plessner, however, accuses Heidegger of eschewing the core issue. He believes that Heidegger’s ‘existence’ is still an extension of the ‘mind’. In Plessner’s view, being is in the first place a bodily being. Only those who live can exist. In turn, the a-priori therefore shifts from ‘existence’ to ‘life’.

Plessner follows the phenomenological method of asking what are the preconditions of the possibility of perceiving objects in the world around us<sup>10</sup> (Fischer, 2000, p. 271; Haucke, 2000, p. 19ff.) and those of the possibility of human being and human action. In doing so he differentiates between non-living and living being. Non-living things do not have relations with their environment. They are completely separated from that environment in such a way that they are confined, or bounded, but do not have boundaries. They only have

<sup>9</sup> Heidegger takes temporality as a starting point, by which temporality mainly has to be understood as mortality and the human being (‘Dasein’) as the consciousness of the boundedness in time, of mortality, as a being-to-death (‘Sein zum Tode’). By doing so he grossly abstracts the human corporeality. In contrast to Heidegger Plessner takes the finiteness in space, the positionality as a starting point and conceives the human existence as consciousness of its eccentric positionality. In doing so he puts the emphasis on the relationship to the body (de Mul, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Plessner speaks of the phenomenal ‘perceptual thing’ (*Wahrnehmungsding*).

contours that delimit them. They only fill a certain space, but they do not occupy or inhabit that space.

Only living things really *have* boundaries, within which they have a certain degree of independence. The boundary is an interface and regulatory device for the entity's interdependencies with the environment. Within modern biological systems theory this is described as autopoiesis (Maturana & Varela, 1980). Only through this boundary as property, as realised relation between the inner and outer system, this border, which is not just an edge at which the organism stops, but is a constitutive part of the physical body, the thing becomes an organic living thing<sup>11</sup>. Living organisms do not just take place but have a place, which they actively occupy. And indeed, this living body is nowadays a crucial object of geographic study<sup>12</sup> as the body is 'the geography closest in' (Rich, 1986, p. 212). Living things therefore become, change, adapt and die. They have a beginning and an end. Life is a process and a project. Plessner calls this specific characteristic of living things 'positionality' (note the spatial connotation in his approach.). Positionality in this case does not imply a positioning by and only by a thinking subject, as in a more idealistic thinking. Rather this positioning juxtaposes the idealistic 'I' with a self-dynamic 'it' (environment) to which the subject relates through dynamic bordering. Those things, that are set into an environment, into a position, to which they pre-reflexively have to take position, are positional. This concept of positionality therefore always relates the inner *and* outer aspects and is therefore always more than just a position *in* time and space; it is something, which asserts itself *as* time and space (Fischer, 2000, p. 275). As such, it is also always already beyond any realisation or embedding in factual relations to the environment. Every realisation is realised as a one-sided appearance, as merely one aspect of the self, which as such always points to the otherness of the aspects lacking (Hauke, 2000, p. 39).

Within the class of living organisms Plessner distinguishes between three *ideal*-types<sup>13</sup>, corresponding to what used to be known as 'plants', 'animals' and 'human beings', each having a specific kind of positionality. Let me focus here on the characterisation of human beings in contrast to animals.

The animal lives within its specific environmental niche with which it interacts selectively, but in which it is also functionally imprisoned through its specific stimulus-response mechanisms. It is being driven and it cannot break out. At the same time it is also secure in its niche and does not have to care. The higher degree of closedness of the animal implies also a higher degree of centralised organisation of the organism. The different parts now also clearly have a functional relationship for the organism as a whole and are constitutive for its identity. This central organisation also gives the relationship with the environment a clear direction. The animal develops an intentional directedness towards the environment in the sense of Husserl, but this intentionality is not reflexive. It cannot do anything about its own intentions. The animal has consciousness but does not know it has consciousness, it is not conscious of its consciousness. So, notwithstanding its consciousness the animal still lives in the here-and-now and it possesses neither time nor history.

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<sup>11</sup> This argument echos the contentions of the Dutch biologist Buytendijk (1928) and the Swiss zoologist Portman (1970, 1972; see also Greene, 1968, Schröter, 1985, Müller, 1988). By determining 'life' as having a boundary, Plessner goes beyond the Cartesian dualism (with its either inner or outer world), by means of which one could not come up with an adequate concept of 'life'. At the same time Plessner does not conceptualise life as a stream of energy broken and bounded by the factuality and materiality of our world as in vitalistic philosophy. For him life is only possible through the process of breaking and bounding (Fischer, 2000, p. 273).

<sup>12</sup> See for example the recent textbook by Valentine (2001, pp. 15-62), but also Longhurst (1997, 2000), Nast and Pile (1998) or Teather (1999) as well as Pile and Thrift (1995).

<sup>13</sup> As ideal types, they do not exclude any more diffuse or intermediary forms of life.

This is radically different for human beings. According to Plessner, the human being lives self-consciously, reflexively at a distance from itself and from the world around him, which he can only reach via his culture, his language and his body. Instead of the centric life of the animal, the human being lives eccentrically. By means of this typical eccentric positionality, the human being is able to negate his worldly being and he is able to do something about himself. He can refuse, resist, destroy, change, make, create, construct himself and the world around him. In this ability to say no (or yes) lies the necessity of making choices and of the freedom of will along with the awareness of the contingency and ambivalence of all these actions. Here again, we notice very directly how central this anthropological insight is for both the action-theoretical approach and for post-structuralist approaches.

Eccentric positionality does not imply the reproduction of the classical Cartesian dualism with its separation of bodily existence and human consciousness. No, on the contrary, it is



an essential element of Plessner's theory that these are two sides of the same coin. The human being is both structured as centred and eccentred. This partly reiterates the view of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who stated in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945, pp. 136 and 157) that intentional actions always and inseparably involve both the corporeal intentionality as well as the intentionality of the mind. The human being is both natural and artificial. In both, however, the human being will never fully succeed and will never find a peaceful home, the way an animal can find that in his niche and respective mode of living and therefore restlessly has to keep going, to continue his actions. The human existence is that of a 'natural artificiality'. This is just the first binary Plessner used to emphasise the dialectics<sup>14</sup> of human being. He formulates three constitutional laws:

- 1) the aforementioned law of *natural artificiality*, saying that each human being has to create and is the creator of his own life and has to compensate for the natural place he has lost;
- 2) the law of *mediated immediacy*, according to which the relation between human eccentric beings and their environment is actively mediated by the human corporeality, enabling them to objectify (and subjectify) themselves and the environment; to create a distance to himself and to the environment. Our cognitive consciousness of objects in the world presents an illusion of unmediated, direct and objective perception of the objects as we forget the mediating role of our senses. The mediatedness of this relation to the environment can be revealed through reflection from the eccentric position. But the bordered body is not just an interface but also a face, an instrument of human expressivity. Human being and human life are essentially and necessarily (inter-)active, and again mediated, expressions of one-self, of one's identity as a human-being. These

<sup>14</sup> Plessner avoids this term in a strict sense, and prefers the term of 'dual-aspectivity' since this two-sidedness should not be associated with two separate realities which only find their synthesis in a third one, but rather as two simultaneous and inseparable sides of the same being.

expressive actions are bound to the media in which they are realised and through which they are communicated. The subjective intention is biased by the inter-subjective media and obtains a meaning and creates a sense, which is not in line with its original intentionality any more. Or in action-theoretic or post-structuralist terms: its effect becomes an unintended and unpredictable consequence and a potential playing ball for the power of discourse. Therefore human beings never know what they are doing and will only learn what they have done through history. In Plessner's view this does not however mean that they are dis-empowered by this fact. Rather the notion of this contingency will initiate new actions, linking former ones to future ones and as such create an ever continuing search for sense;

- 3) finally, the law of *utopian position*, which points to our eccentric positionality, from where we are at a distance to our own physical existence and to our passive experience in a world of praxis. Because of his eccentric positionality every human being experiences his or her 'constitutive rootlessness', which impells him or her to transcend the achieved and thus to keep searching 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, p. 383)<sup>15</sup> or 'non-place' (Augé, 1995, pp. 75ff.) or maybe also in a counterfactual ideal speech situation (Habermas, 1984). From there we experience the traces of the 'other' excluded from our own factual being, doing and saying. This detachment, which is constitutive of personhood 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. The specific particular being, in one's own limited, parochial situation, is a concretion, as every particular human being is, of this utopian generality providing a firm basis for the sociality of human actions in general.

The oppositions in these three anthropological laws declare that we cannot be either or and that we always have to be both.

### The Future of the Geographical Subject

As a conclusion I would like to ask: 'What are the consequences of Helmuth Plessner's conceptualisation for today's human geography?' The answer to this question is still a field to explore. Nevertheless we can hint to some interesting and promising linkages to both the action-theoretic and the post-modern or post-structuralist programme within human geography, which might also unveil what could be next in human geographic research:

*First* I would like to mention the issue of *progress*. The action-theoretical approach assumes the possibility to *re-construct* the reasons for certain actions, the sense they make with respect to these reasons and to the situation in which these actions take place. It also assumes that it makes sense to want to re-construct and thus understand spatial actions retrospectively to learn from them for our future actions. As such this approach is rooted in the modern view of progress. It assumes that on a certain level of abstraction social-spatial processes repeat themselves, which makes it possible to understand what has happened before from the our position now. It is also this continuity, which makes it possible to productively use this knowledge in future situations. The post-structuralist Derrida, on the other hand, points to the fact, that the process of reconstruction is not just a repetition of what has happened but is always also a re-writing of history. As such there can be no such thing as continuity, and re-construction seems impossible and senseless. The only thing we

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<sup>15</sup> Deleuze and Guattari describe 'smooth space', as a nomad space providing room for vagabondage through simultaneously occurring as a place – in this place. It is a place that is not just *here*, in a pinpointed spot of space, but in a 'non-limited locality'. As such it belongs neither to physical reality nor to the mind. 'Nomad space is "exterior" without being extended, and "pure" without being imaginary' (Casey, 1998, p. 304).

can do is *de-construct* the historical processes, pointing to the contingency of every action and of every attempt to understand them, tracing those other reasons and sense-makings and meanings which were left out but still present. In this view history and progress seem to have become impossible.

Plessner's conceptualisation of the self does not drop the idea of historical development or progress. The law of natural artificiality makes it inevitable to create artificial structures in the framework of which it makes sense and it is possible to accrue one's cultural competences and to have progress. In this same framework human beings make their own (free) choices and have to take their responsibility. At the same time the law of mediated immediacy leads us to the necessity to relativate and deconstruct our actions and their outcomes. Plessner (1980-1985, v, p. 163) writes: 'A new responsibility is being conferred upon mankind [...] *to let reality just in spite of its relativity be reality*'<sup>16</sup>. Every action creates something and is to be understood as *construction* or production and not just *re-*construction or *re-*production. The power to which every human being is compelled, is in this sense an over-production, which always has to go beyond the before-going, which adds something new to the old and an co-production as always other things and other actors interfere and simultaneously play their own game (Seitter, 1985, p. 187 and 189). This means that every human being will have to recognise, that he or she is not the cause of his or her actions but that they are just realised by the occasion of their doing (Plessner, 1980-1985, iv, p. 310). To be powerful and the compulsion to use power implies a need to participate in productions, which exceed human doing, which connect to past productions and are directed to future ones. Not every act results in a great work, but under certain conditions still can have great effects. What ever its effect, it still is a creative and causal act which makes some sense, even if it is not a unitary sense<sup>17</sup>. By his or her nature, the human being cannot just exist in direct continuation of ones own self-being, as an expression of an identity that is interior and pre-given. His or her own heterogeneity, which consists of different determinations and indeterminations would also deny that. Identity therefore is not substantial or essential. Rather it is a generic construction based on corporeal performances as part of a discursive praxis. Human activities are not externally determined by natural necessity nor internally by a reasoning power to maintain one self.

*Second* I would like to point to the issue of the *pragmatism* of living identities. As we have seen, post-modern and post-structuralist thinkers broadly see 'the world as heterogeneous, composed of a vast plurality of interpretation in which knowledge and truth are contingent and therefore ultimately undecidable. In this world, identity is inherently decentred and fluid because constituted in unstable relations of difference' (Dunn, 1998, p. 175). In this way everything becomes a question of interpretation and thus easily defers to the rule of power. The subject is seen as a destabilised and socially disembodied, discursively constructed and disconnected subject, devoid of self-identity, historical context, or social relationality (Dunn, 1998, p. 188). As an answer to the metaphysics of the philosophy of purely mental consciousness the subject is turned into the subjectified. As an alternative within the pragmatist tradition the subject is not located in the *res cogitans*, but in the interaction with the environment and more specifically in inter-subjectivity, in inter-actions. Here we can mention the work of the behaviourist and social pragmatist George Herbert Mead, the language pragmatics of Jürgen Habermas but also the neo-pragmatics of Rorty (1989) and company<sup>18</sup>. Just as the post-structuralists and Helmuth Plessner, they are all exemplary of a post-metaphysical endeavour. Both Helmuth Plessner and George Herbert

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<sup>16</sup> Eßbach (1994, p. 40) notes that this formulation of Plessner corresponds to Derrida's interpretation of 'crossing out'. Under the erasure the presence of a transcendental signified disappears and still is readable.

<sup>17</sup> It was Derrida (1972) who once claimed that the production of sense necessarily implies the production of non-sense, where there is no unity of sense, but only dissemination.

<sup>18</sup> See also Rehberg (1985).

Mead who developed their anthropologies at about the same time, point to the reciprocity of perspectives as the typical aspect of human relations with the social environment. Mead and Habermas derive this reciprocity from language and other kinds of symbolic gestures, while Plessner derives it from the eccentric positionality of the human being (Habermas, 1987a, p. 140). Plessner however defines eccentric positionality as the natural pre-condition for the reflexivity of the subject. To substantiate that reflexivity and the specific personal identity, that person will have to engage in expressive actions and at that moment the pragmatics of George Herbert Mead and Jürgen Habermas come in. Only through the acts, gestures and desire as corporeal significations and expressions on the surface of the body an effective identification can take place. This is what Judith Butler calls the performativity of identity (Butler, 1990, p. 336). Like Plessner she describes the concrete discursive praxis as contextually and pragmatically restricted and hence as to a certain degree inherently unsuccessful, unsatisfactory and unauthentic. It is this tension between unavoidable performative pragmatism of active identification and the incomprehensibility of that same self from his or her eccentric positionality, which compels every human being to keep on going, to keep trying, to continue to act, to seek power, to go on making sense of the world and of one self and to keep on living.

While most post-structuralist scholars see this indeterminacy as weakness in which the subject disappears and loses its causal power in the face of the external constructive power of current discourses, Plessner as well as the social pragmatists such as Mead see in the experience of contingency the emergence of the bounded powerful subject.

*Third* I would like to underscore the consequences of Plessner's contentions for the conceptualisation of *space* and of *spatial identities*, which have become of great topicality in the framework of latest and future technological and cultural developments overcoming space and distance: While both for Plessner and the post-structuralists the body as spatial existence disciplines human being, it was Plessner who at the same time conceived the human being in his or her eccentric positionality as out-side that space. From there by the law of natural artificiality the human being seeks to overcome this situation by means of his or her active creations: culture and technology. The world of technology and culture is thus an expression of the human desire to bridge the distance, which separates the human being from the world, from other human beings and from him or her self (de Mul, 1995). As such culture and technology limit and enable us to be and to become what we are, to take and receive an identity and to take 'place'. On the one hand we see that new technologies such as simulation, tele-presence and virtual reality drive our experience of being able to stand outside our own corporeal existence in an eccentric position to the extreme. These developments can even be continued in the direction of cyborgs or even total robotic existence, where the natural body is replaced by a robotic one, thus totally separates the mind from the body and makes it downloadable into any kind of body or robot. This displaces and re-places the human being and further increases our ability to create our spatial identity and maybe even enables a multiplicity of artificial spatial identities. On the other hand we cannot escape a bodily existence.

What is described here as a technocratic development is also recognisable in cultural-historic development in general and in emerging post-modern times. From the human beings eccentric position and equipped with these technological and cultural tools, space and time are not to be perceived as simply given (as transcendental forms of judgement preceding every empirical experience) but rather as technically, socially and historically produced (Spren, 2002). The spatial identity of the self is then to be conceived of as a node, as a dynamic equilibrium in a network of relations, as a space of flows (Castells, 1996-1998).

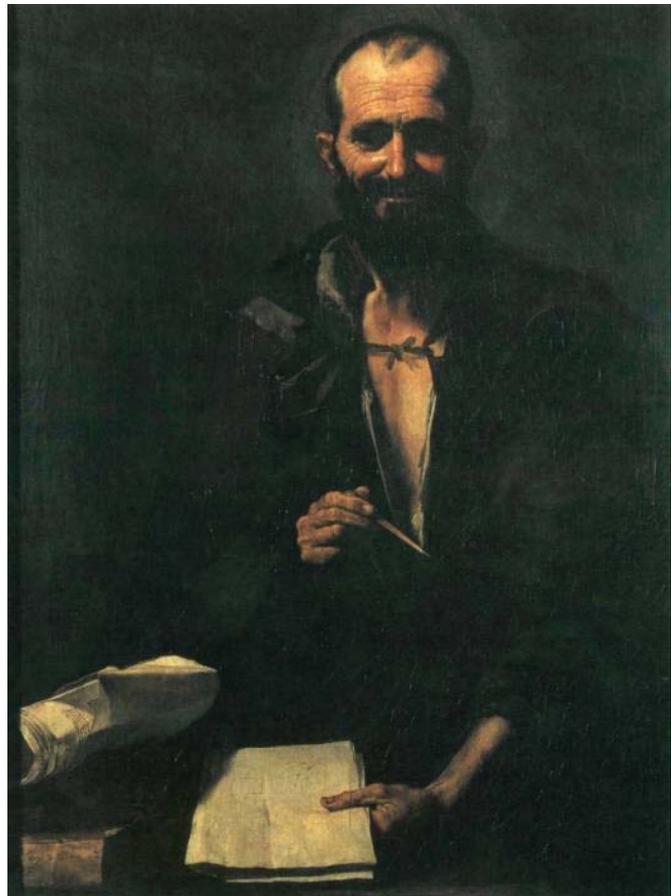
These are just a few hints for further thought, but what does this new ontology of the geographic self mean for our position and practical research tomorrow? Let me just list a few aspects:

- action-theoretical contentions can be *combined* with post-structural insights, through a renewed post-metaphysical and post-dualistic conceptualisation of the spatiality of the actor and his or her actions;
- spatial decisions of individuals as well as of enterprises, state- and non-governmental organisations, their spatial identities are to be conceived as contingent subjective trials to make *sense* of the world and of ourselves. Identities are never totally fixed nor totally fluid;
- they do not just have a place but actively *take* (a) place and *make* (a) place. As such they also have a special responsibility for the development of that place;
- whereby social and spatial pragmatics determine the dynamic success and failure of these processes. The criteria for the pragmatic success are both rooted in the facticity as well in the counter-facticity of the eccentric position;
- in analysing these processes we should be both constructive and re-constructive methods;
- in doing so we inescapably have to be *critical* and self-critical, while at the same time we need to recognise plurality and be open to otherness.

This very much sounds as the quadrature of the circle, but this multi-aspectivity without being dialectic, is probably one of the most important lessons to be learend in the framework of the action theoretic approach from the post-structuralist lessons.

This of course also does not only relate to the practical actions and positions of the spatial actor as the object of our study, but also to us as a research group and group of university teachers here at the university of Nijmegen. We will continue to carve out and shape our place and position. In this comportment I would like to conclude with the following quote by Archimedes.

‘Give me a place to stand and I will move the world’ (Archimedes, 220 BC)



Finally, dear rector, dear ladies and gentlemen, everyone who it concerns knows that what our department has done in the last few years and what they are up to in the future is a collective endeavour of its members and of many more and today's meeting is just one step in this ongoing project. For this engagement and for your attention today I want to thank you all.

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