
Plessner's Conceptual Investigation of 'Life': Structural Narratology

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Abstract

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Plessner's theories presented a distinctive opportunity to formulate biological perspectives within cultural anthropology. In organizing the foundations of philosophical anthropology, he resisted a linear or naturalistic placement of anthropology emerging out of biology, but insisted that "the construction of a philosophical anthropology has as a presupposition the investigation of such facts which concentrate around the circumstances of 'life.'" This essay will consider Plessner's conceptual investigation of life and suggest ways that its "concrete natural philosophy" involves a structural narratology, suitable for pursuing knowledge in the life and human sciences. Rather than insist on special domains of *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften*, Plessner proposed unifying the sciences through reconceptualizing how philosophical anthropology reclaims scientific knowledge in narratable construction. By properly conceptualizing life and life sciences, philosophical anthropology includes its own basis for observation.

As Ernst Mayr pointed out, the nature of biological knowledge deals necessarily with individuals rather than types. Such investigations are inherently narrative. This essay will examine several characteristics of contemporary views of biological evolution that are reflected in procedures of narrative analysis, and suggest isomorphisms in analysis of cultural practice parallel these biological characteristics: an instance of using just the same direction to treat the natural world and its human inhabitants, to articulate a philosophical anthropology based on organic nature in the way Plessner imagined. This essay will trace out implications of Plessner's writings for the way anthropology conducts cultural analysis.

Ernst Mayr. 1982. Chapter Two, "The place of biology in the sciences and its conceptual structure," *The Growth of Biological Thought*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, pp. 21-82.

Helmuth Plessner. 1928. *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch: Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co.

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