

The Contemporary Significance of the Anthropological Turn

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Abstract: The fundamental questions of "What is human place in Being" and "What is man" are being marginalised by human proprietary from Modernity, such as capital, political institutions, natural sciences and modern technology. Traditional metaphysics is deaf to Modernity, and general anthropology also does not touch human Essence and the Being of human beings. The result is that the human existence is at stake. German philosophers, Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner and Arnold Gehlen, predicted these realities and endeavoured to establish all-encompassing and epochal philosophical anthropology, dedicating to exploring the issues of the times. This paper follows the philosophical anthropology paradigm where in reference to other creatures and in the midst of the liberation of self-consciousness, humans gradually reveal a unique place and project themselves into the human social realm, starting with the two core categories, Person and Man. Finally, it concludes that philosophical anthropology clings to *Zeitgeist* (spirit of the times) and creates a worldview and a basic rationale for the contemporary to develop the methodology in response to the issues of Modernity.

Keywords: Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, Arnold Gehlen, paradigm, category

1. Introduction

Jacob Collins argues that French political thinkers would use the anthropological turn as a means of reexamining important societal concerns after the late 1960s. However, from the perspective of political anthropologists, social groupings or ideologies will always lead to the central question of what it means to be man, as everything that is unique to human beings—including art, state, religion, science, and so forth—originates from the fundamental structure of Being of human beings [1]. Furthermore, humans are able to be independent entities and possess objects because of their most basic nature as *Dasein* (Being-in-the-World). Thus fundamentally, the study of the Being of human beings and the Being of human proprietary is a philosophical issue, not a political or anthropological one. Moreover, the study of human beings and proprietary is an anthropological issue, but it falls under the philosophical anthropology established by Max Scheler (1874-1928) rather than political or general anthropology per se.

In Scheler's view, Modernity, which is called the spirit of capitalism, has contributed to the permeation of all aspects of civilization with the utilitarian and materialistic worldview that emerged from modern natural science. In this worldview, humans intended to have unlimited control and domination over everything in the world, including human self and human proprietary. Thus, those who were controlled and dominated were obliterated of their individuality and agency, becoming

victims of Modernity, or rather, slaves of capitalism. At the same time, philosophy was thoroughly at the mercy of ideology and science. Both Helmuth Plessner (1892–1985) and Arnold Gehlen (1904–1976), two of Scheler's most illustrious students, recognized the tension between the human alienation and homogenization of existence and the need for freedom and democracy as the primary contradiction of the issue of Modernity. As a result, they developed a system of thought that goes back to the fundamental characteristics of human beings as a paradigm, based on a range of radical social ideologies and the rapidly evolving fields of science and technology. Even though their research in medicine and biology took diverse paths, they jointly constructed a system of thought on Modernity that went back to the fundamental characteristics of human beings [2]. Therefore, Scheler and his students not only promoted a genuine anthropological turn, but also maintained the sole focus of philosophical anthropology, the human being, in the perspective of the issue of the times.

Scheler published *On the Idea of Man* in 1915, marking the formal establishment of philosophical anthropology, and *Man and History* in 1926 outlined the fundamental task, which is to how the basic structure of Being of human beings produces all human proprietary. The contemporary social climate has changed a lot since Scheler's times, particularly in the view of life and technology, but the fierce contradiction still remains. Meanwhile, humans are increasingly aware of the enormity of their problems. Therefore, the task of this paper based on Scheler aims to explore how philosophical anthropology as "meta-anthropology" can re-instruct contemporary societies where human Essence is shaken under the onslaught of Modernity, including capital, science and technology.

2. Scheler's Anthropological Categories in the Contemporary Vision

Different philosophers have responded to the question of "what is man" in different ways throughout the history of philosophy, dating back to Socrates' advice to "know thyself" and the development of metaphysics. Plato proceeded from mind-body dualism, equating human Essence with the soul, which developed into Aristotle's hylomorphism. After "the subject of thought" (*ego cogito*) from Descartes, Kant was credited as the forerunner of philosophical anthropology by introducing the concept of "practical anthropology" and the fact that the most fundamental issue of philosophy was man [3]. Although in Kant's anthropology, *Homo sapiens* (rational man) proposed by him represents the eternal and sublime personality as God, it is incapable of understanding ethical personalism and rationality in *ordo amoris* (the order of love), both of which have gotten attention since Scheler's early period [4]. Far more than that, *Homo faber* (instrumental man) from positivism and pragmatism had a strong influence on Scheler's times, and ranked on his list of critics [4].

Furthermore, surveying horizontally across multiple branches of anthropology, Kirsten Hastrup is committed to organizing categories about pragmatic enlightenment in the context of the geographies turn, like some kind of metaphorical expression, and Rongling Ge has detailed a system of categories for landscape anthropology, derived from subject-object dichotomy. Regardless of what categories anthropologists organize to paint the pictures, they are far from touching the most general and basic descriptions of human beings. In fact, what anthropologists think should be and presuppose is precisely what philosophers pursue, and man does not have a firm foundation, because it is completely and utterly "problematic" under the impact of the fierce contradiction mentioned above [1, 4].

Scheler has dedicated his life to studying human beings. He started with the issue of the times and said that man became the problem itself. That is to say, he implies that the fundamental task of philosophical anthropology and the research on man should always be placed in the contemporary vision because human science and technology are developing, and so are human society and contradictions. Prior to this view, however, there is an important premise here, that Scheler's philosophical anthropology is closely tied to metaphysics, or rather, it is Scheler's metaphysics as "meta-anthropology", determined by timelessness and universality of its object [4]. While external knowledge of all kinds cannot affect what is known, humans transcend this law of nature by the

subjective initiative of human beings to create both knowledge and culture, as well as the human self [5]. Thus, philosophical anthropology has both metaphysics as its background and man as its direct object, and it derives its material from both facts of *philosophische Eidologie* (i.e., phenomenology) and scientific facts [4]. Its most basic concepts, the categories, are likewise based on man and oriented towards evolving scientific issues and social contradictions.

In Scheler's anthropology, there are two major categories, *Die Person* (Person), and *Der Mensch* (Man). Based on the understanding of Category, Person and Man certainly do not mean what they originally meant, a person or a man. According to etymology, "person" is derived from the Latin word "*persona*", which is a direct translation of the Greek word "*prosopon*", and which, more importantly, is synonymous with "hypostasis" and "subsistence", and afterwards, Aquinas regarded the three hypostases of the Holy Trinity as the three persons and the three subsistences [3]. In *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values* in 1913, Person is defined as the Being of all essential acts united in the single and unique world of man, which is given (*gegeben*) through Husserl's phenomenological intuition (*Wesenschau*), in accordance with phenomenological facts [6]. In contrast, Scheler abandoned the conceptual sophistry of medieval philosophy about the Otherworld, but he absorbed certain elements from "subsistence" into the Being of human beings. Another category, Man, is undoubtedly at the heart of Scheler's anthropology and the whole anthropological turn. "What is human place in Being" and "What is man" are the central questions, which reflect Scheler's research interests and confirm the need of the times [7]. Besides, the former touches on Being and encircles Person, while the latter relates to Essence and environs Man. With the principle of "*Die Existenz geht der Essenz voraus*" (Existence precedes Essence), logic elaborated below will follow it. Moreover, the two categories become a key to the contemporary vision.

2.1. Scheler's Person

As mentioned previously, the Essence of Modernity is about man. Scheler's focus on the issue of man means that he cleared ideas from ideological collisions of all ages from his contemporary vision and offered constructive ideas for man in the present and the future. Modernity was born at the rupture in this timeline. Scheler, like the older generation of philosophers, took "*Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*" (The Human Place in the Cosmos) as the starting point for all philosophical issues, but here is a difference that Scheler did not look to God or the other for Being of human beings as the older generation of philosophers did, directly from the orientation of metaphysics [7].

At the beginning of *On the Idea of Man*, Scheler distinguished three types of views about the human place, and the older generation of philosophers was the first type. The second type started at the boundary between history and natural history, engaging in metaphysical activities in the name of historical perspective, whilst the third was based on the theory of evolution and included man into the species research object of natural science [7]. In accordance with the third type, man exists merely as *Homo biologicus* (biological man), or not much superior to it. This view treats man as both the Being of objects leading to misunderstanding Being as an object instead of the Being of acts, and a thing leading to abandonment of the human Essence instead of the human self [4]. The latter is related to Man and will be discussed later. Objects come from subject-object dichotomy, which reflects attempt to interpret and dominate nature, including human beings. It follows that humans treat the human self as explainable objects. Additionally, this process of explanation and domination gives rise to various forms of Being of colony, *Gemeinschaft* (community), following the same needs. Once man is cognitively objectified, man is reduced to the same level as animal, plant, and inorganic kingdoms, completely controlled by humans, and the stratum and hierarchy formed by the colony of man will gradually become firm.

Scheler attributed the reason why man was objectified and controlled to the appearance of capitalists, and he thought that they have had a strong desire to have the power of interpretation and

domination [4]. As Marx said that, under the capitalist system, those who have formed the working class, i.e., capitalist labor, have become commodities for the capitalists [8]. In Scheler's times, modern physics, chemistry, and evolutionary biology contributed to the ascendancy of atheism and materialism including positivism, social evolution, Marxism-Leninism, etc., whose ghosts still pervade contemporary socialist and non-democratic societies, propagandizing isolated Person of totality and obliterating interactive Person of individual, even though this is not the fault of natural sciences. Furthermore, natural sciences have been promoting the four great revolutions of modern technology to date. It provided trains, electric lights and telephones, bringing benefits to humans, it provided chemical, biological weapons and nuclear warfare, bringing disaster to humans, and it also brought about the controversial Internet and artificial intelligence, in which humans have been struggling to explore their Being. It seems to be understood as the cyclical rate of Modernity from expansion, and collapse to resurrection. Scheler believed that there was no such thing as pure science, because behind any science there are all kinds of wills driving in order to systematically dominate nature for capital accumulation [4]. However, in the 1920s, the Second Industrial Revolution was a great success while the Third Industrial Revolution was just beginning, in which the impact of modern technology on humans could not be compared to the world today thoroughly. It has to be said that Scheler also had limitations of his times inevitably. He completely underestimated the essential power of modern technology from its birth, so that it could fundamentally alienate and objectify human existence form and the human place in the cosmos.

In the contemporary vision, modern technology and capital are almost equal in influence and status. Just as Peter Sloterdijk thought, engaging in Modernity means putting the evolved immune systems at risk, because everything about Modernity, including modern technology and capital, will ruthlessly overthrow human existence form and the human place in the cosmos in the past [9]. It is the power of capital that controls the dominated class through reification, while consolidating the ruling class. It is also the power of modern technology separating itself from the fetishism of capital that alienates human relationships, and obscures Person of the individual, so that each man has a similar place of Being, but humans are disconnected from each other. In short, the breakdown of Person is imminent. In Sloterdijk's anthropology, "microspheres" is used to explain that no man is essentially alone, because humans always incorporate the Other into themselves and ally themselves with the Other, proving *Du-heit* (thou-ness) as the fundamental character of Person of individual and the most basic category of existence, and describing the fact that human existence always arises in connection with the Other [9, 10]. According to human existence form and hierarchy, Scheler distinguished four units of colony:

1. The lowest *Masse* (crowds) with human instinctive needs;
2. Natural community of life with the awareness of common attributes;
3. *Gesellschaft* (society);
4. The highest *Gesamtperson* (total Person) [4, 6].

The strict juxtaposition of Person of individual and Person of totality is intended to make it clear that individual behavior is completely equal to collective or social behavior and that there is no subordination [4]. In the contemporary vision, despite the lack of specificity and its own limitations, Scheler's view on the issue of Modernity still guides humans to think about the human existence and to be extremely wary of collectivism, authoritarianism and totalitarianism.

2.2. Scheler's Man

It has already been mentioned that the question of "What is human place in Being" concerns the Being of human beings, i.e., Person, and the question of "What is man" concerns human Essence, i.e., Man. They are not completely separate from each other, and together they have their own focus around the sole theme, the human being. Man's understanding and knowledge of himself began at the dawn of

human civilization, as reflected in the Delphic Oracle about "know thyself". Since Socrates made it the centerpiece of his thought to this day, generations of philosophers have never ceased to understand human beings as the noblest representatives of humans. Consequently, in a way, human Essence is revealed in the way humans understand themselves over and over again, and by claiming that man had become the problem itself, Scheler was precisely calling humans back to the path of understanding and searching for the human self. It is both the human Essence and the most eternal and fundamental issue of human civilization. At the present time, in spite of man's constant search for all proprietary of human civilization, man has become problematic because humans have put the cart before the horse. Humans have created modern technology, but have gradually become its tools rather than its users, while humans created the modern system but gradually became its slaves rather than its masters. Fundamentally, this is actually a stage in man's journey of self-understanding, in which humans forget to explore what Man is or misunderstand it altogether. In *Man and History*, Scheler delineated five basic types of human self-understanding based on historical knowledge of human Essence:

1. *Homo sapiens* of classical theories from Plato and Aristotle to Descartes, Leibniz, Kant, Fichte and Hegel;
2. Theistic teachings of Jewish-Christian theology;
3. *Homo faber* of many kinds of naturalistic theories from Machiavelli and Hume to Marx, Nietzsche and Freud;
4. Vitalism of romantic theories from Schelling to Nietzsche, Theodor Lessing and Ludwig Klages;
5. Postulatory atheism of *Übermensch* (Over-man) from Nietzsche to Leopold Ziegler, Nicolai Hartmann and Dietrich Heinrich Kerler [1, 3, 4].

As can be seen, Nietzsche dealt with several types of human self-understanding, which are enough to show how varied his thoughts were, and to confirm the fact implicitly that Nietzsche had a profound influence on the issue of human beings on Scheler, as indeed he did. Furthermore, as Scheler described types of human self-understanding as a gradual rise in human self-consciousness, they paved a path for the human type proposed by Scheler to step into metaphysics [7]. In Scheler's human type, *Allmensch* (All-man), surpassing Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, was intended to become universal and infinitely close to human Essence on the basis of transcending "ego". From this perspective, human Essence cannot be defined, only described. However, when writing *On the Idea of Man*, Scheler has not yet moved from theism to pantheism. This idea merely fulfilling Scheler's metaphysical aspirations from German national tradition, was not yet relevant to the issues of the time, and hardly guided the current, because not only did humans return from the Otherworld to reality for a long time, but humans have become more and more oriented to immediate utilitarianism. Stemming from Scheler's focus on the contemporary, he did on to propose a relative *Allmensch*, in order to reflect the various types of humans at the present time. Even so, his return to the present was still not enough. In *The Human Place in the Cosmos* in 1928, Scheler had turned completely to pantheism, even Modernity, modern science and technology. Returning to the controversial creation of Modernity, *Homo biologicus* mentioned earlier, Scheler delineated five human psychological stages:

1. *Gefühlsdrang* (emotional urge) as the lowest chaotic stage of organism;
2. Instinct as the higher particular form of *Gefühlsdrang*;
3. Associative memory as the human liberating tool;
4. Practical sense incarnating the human particular place in the cosmos;
5. *Vernunft* (reason) or *Geist* (mind) centered on Person with *Weltoffenheit* (cosmopolitanism), *Sachlichkeit* (objectivity) and self-awareness [1].

After inheriting the rational tradition of Western philosophy, Scheler brought metaphysics from heaven back to earth, and this initiative is undoubtedly great and ahead of his times. First of all,

Scheler connected the ideal human stage with humanity and Modernity, explaining that the pursuit of any value must be motivated by "urges", and that modern science and technology or any other creation of human proprietary share "urges" as a common motivity, and a commitment to *Geist* as the highest human values. Afterwards, *Körper* (trunk), *Leibseele* (body-soul) and *Geist* together form the Holy Trinity of the fundamental Being, but *Geist* is the only one that embodies the fundamental difference between human beings and animals. Scheler inherited and considered it as the starting point of self-certainty, and so did Plessner and Gehlen. Besides, as Joachim Fischer said that the postulatory comparison between human beings and animals was a development of their argument, philosophical anthropology became philosophical biology with describing some relationships [11]. However, some scholars believe it is too narrow. Modernity by no means contains only evolutionary Darwinism, and what humans are dealing with by no means refers to only *Homo biologicus*. Darwinism, positivism, pragmatism and Marxism all coincide with the science scientific logic of cause and effect in the 19th century, and *Homo faber*, *Homo oeconomicus* (economic man) and *Homo politicus* (political man) from different fields of proprietary point together to Modernity [5].

In the 21st century, this may be the more complex case, for example, where a man may be both a *Homo biologicus* and a *Homo politicus*, and where humans have disdained the pursuit of common human ideals, like animals with living to live. In any case, Scheler offered an approach of meta-anthropology to recognizing the crossroads where human destiny and human proprietary intersect, starting from *Geist*, even though humans are much more alienated today than they were in Scheler's times, and Scheler's thought drove the anthropological turn that prompted Plessner and Gehlen to look more deeply at Man in the technical and social realm from the perspective of Modernity.

3. Plessner and Gehlen's Anthropological Categories in the Contemporary Vision

Under the great influence of *The Human Place in the Cosmos* as the guiding principle, Plessner and Gehlen vehemently pushed up this great turn. Despite diametrically opposed styles of their doctrines, they developed the theories successfully from philosophical biology to philosophical sociology around *Geist*. The focus of this section is not on their comparative study, but on exploring how they directed Modernity in their respective ways via particular categories. In their doctrines, the categories are much less singled out in isolation, especially like Plessner. Thus, the ensuing exposition continues to follow the emphasis of their theories.

3.1. Plessner's Person

Fischer described Plessner's rationale as a third way between Darwinism and Foucaultism because, in Plessner's rationale, philosophical anthropology has been framed as a paradigm taking man out of biology and then into society, to balance these two radical thoughts on behalf of biology, humanities and social science respectively [12]. To illustrate this, Plessner introduced *Grenze* (boundary) throughout the basic biological categories from plant, and animal to man. That is to say, the search for what Man is presupposes the search for the human place in the organic kingdoms. Universally, *Grenze* becomes more pronounced as the creature rises in rank (plant does not have it), and humans have brought it into the social realm. In biology, animals have independence because their expression of life interacts indirectly with the environment and is independent of the life cycle. In society, humans have independence because humans are free to participate in various public affairs and shape Person of totality through their independent Person of individual. Nevertheless, this social model needs to be underpinned by self-awareness. Blurring of *Grenze* is a dilemma that humans are facing, yet most of them do not perceive that. Distorted socialisation reflects the breakdown of *Grenze* between individuals, and human alienation reflects the breakdown of *Grenze* between the individual

and the colony. Self-awareness is rooted in biological superiority, but if the unique place of the individual is materialized in Modernity, the "self" will be destroyed.

3.2. Plessner's Man

In Plessner's anthropology, it is *exzentrische Positionalität* (eccentric positionality) that brings superiority. The positionality arises from the disconnection of *Leib* (body) with nature as a process where Man as *Leib* (subject) is bound by *Hier-Jetzt* (here-now) when experiencing in the *Außenwelt* (outside world) and Man as *Körper* (object) is examining the experience in the *Innenwelt* (inner world), and therefore man is both free and feels lost about the human place [13]. However, there is *Geist* in *Mitwelt* (environment). Although Plessner overcame subject-object dichotomy via the new paradigm, in the face of the ideal human stage, *Geist*, the uniqueness of the individual can hardly escape the catastrophe of being erased, and humans feel helpless and powerless against the human alienation even if they struggle in reality. In short, under the stimulus of Modernity, humans will eventually abandon unique Person and forget the Being of human beings of necessity.

3.3. Gehlen's Person

To some extent, Gehlen's rationale inverts Plessner's, and his idea is closer to Scheler's. In Gehlen's anthropology, man is described as *Mangelswesen* (deficiency management), because humans have lost the powerful instincts and focused senses that animals possess [13]. Humans, in turn, have also degraded their great athleticism and adaptability to the environment, so they are more self-protective and wary of *Außenwelt* than any other creature. Nevertheless, it is the lack of conditions for humans to survive more than any other creature that forces them to fight more desperately to survive, and thus humans value action as much as they are born with it that stems from a surplus of *Triebüberschuss* (drive excess). Based on this, Gehlen took in Scheler's *Weltoffenheit* to assert that humans are always emphasizing the initiative in order to maintain their survival during any period when humans pay a lot of price, including human existence. The human condition is as it is today because humans have brought *Triebüberschuss* from nature into the cultural realm as the second nature of human beings.

3.4. Gehlen's Man

Because of the pressure of survival, humans constantly transform and break through themselves to preserve their existence and meet their own needs. Consequently, *Unfertigsein* (unfinished) is part of the human Essence, and with it, humans unlike animals, always live in the future [14]. Due to the precariousness of survival, Gehlen trusted in *Handlungskreis* (circle of action), guaranteeing human existence, to seek higher freedom [11]. Yet as seen, his ideal of Modernity, *Oberste Führungssysteme* (top management systems), is precisely what is responsible for bringing Modernity and humanity to collapse. Collectivism, authoritarianism and totalitarianism root out vivid individual Man and create ruthless overall Man with *Gattungswesen* (species-essence) through restraining Person of individual and advocating Person of totality. From here, humans are enslaved by their own system, becoming goods, machines and slaves. Likewise, in the context of the primacy of collective values, man is dispensable because humans all simply have commonality above worthless personalities just like screws. Although it seems a little ridiculous in the contemporary, ideals and happiness should be pursued by the human self at all times and should not be left to the mercy of the institutional framework, because humans pursue great aspiration essentially via *Ens per se* (existence itself) and not via human proprietary phased [1]. Furthermore, precisely because proprietary particularly political products, is phased, its unpredictability, uncertainty and risk are so intense. Therefore, it is both illogical and unworkable for humans to rely on their own eternity on unstable worldly possessions.

4. Conclusion

As great figures of 20th-century German philosophy, Scheler, Plessner and Gehlen pioneered philosophical anthropology and promoted it as a great philosophical turn where the paradigm proposed by Scheler and moulded by Plessner, bridges natural science, humanities and social science around the fundamental categories of human beings, to reveal and guide Modernity till today. Since Scheler combined his anthropology closely with human beings in the contemporary vision and times, *Zeitgeist* is the eternal keynote and the relationship between humans and human proprietary is the core theme. Thus, through specific analyses of the paradigm and the categories, philosophical anthropology remains of profound contemporary significance, even if our times are widely distant from Scheler's.

Owing to space constraints, it is a pity that this paper can hardly expand the discourse on anthropological categories in modern science and technology. Biotechnology, big data and artificial intelligence are seriously threatening and replacing the human place. Economic turmoil, local wars and the Second Cold War are causing fear and insecurity. Philosophical anthropology remains steadfastly committed to human cause and investigates ultramodern proprietary, conceiving posthumanism and postmodernism. It is hoped that this paper will serve as a conspectus to future broader and deeper research in philosophical anthropology.

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