

# ON CONCEPTS OF THE BOUNDARY IN CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGY

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of the boundary plays a very important role within the philosophy of Georg Simmel, the philosophical anthropology of Helmuth Plessner, and the social systems theory of Niklas Luhmann. As a basic idea of their theories, the key concept of the boundary allows one to understand the specifics of human existence, the organizing principles of society and social differentiation, and relations between individuals in social interaction. The article tries to reconstruct the systematic content of the concept used by these thinkers, as well as its common roots, and both the similarities and differences between the three perspectives.

## PREMILINARY REMARKS

Around a hundred years ago, Max Weber noted in an oddly modern sentence in his 'Wissenschaftslehre,' that, "[...] it is not the 'factual' inter-relatedness of 'things', but the intellectual inter-relatedness of problems upon which scientific fields of activity are based." (Weber 1904/1968, 160). If this is also true for the historiography of the concepts and ideas in those fields, then it should equally be applied to the construction and deconstruction of problematics, only against the backdrop of which the formation of ideas may be comprehended for the first time. It is in this manner that problems, repeatedly posed, understood and revised, may be identified, and hence tracked over a period of time. It is true that as a form of academic history, in common with any other historiographical task, the history of a problematic is concerned with the "bygone present." In order to be able to sufficiently reconstruct just this alone, a

grasp of the 'present past' of the period under investigation is likewise necessary, but yet this is barely conceivable without knowledge of the reception of works which have previously contributed to the historiography in question, and of their influence on the formation of theories and ideas specific to the research focus. Thus the adoption of a position in opposition to a historiography concerned with selection criteria of a purely archival, not problem-oriented nature may be achieved, which, as Nietzsche so aptly had it, would otherwise lose itself in a blind mania for collecting, an unceasing accumulation of what has once been (Nietzsche 1995).

## 2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEMATIC

Cartesianism and the Enlightenment left to posterity two problematics concerning our understanding of the world; on the one hand, the philosophy of reason which sought to investigate the inherent logic of thought and knowledge, and on the other, naturalism which attempted to understand the inherent logic and laws of nature. It was ultimately within this opposition that *philosophy of life* and *vitalism* came into being, the emphatic focus of enquiry of which consisted in the comprehension of the inherent logic of the living and of life. While it is true that such life is made up of matter, yet the behaviour of living organisms is not governed exclusively by natural laws, neither in terms of its evolution and extinction or demise, nor in relation to its reactions, which are determined, in part, by specific forms of response to environmental stimuli. The investigation of the specifics of *human* life as a particular form of life per se with its own inherent logic ultimately led to the development in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century of philosophical anthropology, which link with the social sciences. In their turn they claim to shed light on the inherent logic of *social* life. It is within the scope of this problematic, which still requires further clarification that the notion of the boundary comes into play. This is the subject of what follows.

The problematics that interest me in this arena originate in the more recent history of science, which began around the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and had a formative influence on contemporary theoretical discussions within the social sciences. Within the context of social theory above all, which attempts to provide definitions for categories funda-

mental to all of the social sciences, such as “man”, “agency” and “inter-subjectivity” and so on, the problem of the boundary and delimitation is of vital significance. Three notions of the boundary thus come up for attention. Not only are they, as far as I can see, of particular importance to contemporary theoretical developments but they are inter-related. They are laid out in Georg Simmel’s sociology of reciprocity, inspired by *philosophy of life*; in Helmuth Plessner’s bio-philosophical rationale of philosophical anthropology; and finally also in Niklas Luhmann’s social system theories, which are strongly influenced by cybernetic thought. Let us start with Simmel’s sociology of space of 1903, in which he develops his quintessential notion of the boundary.

### 3. SIMMEL ON THE BOUNDARY AND DELIMITATION

Very few classic sociologists have expounded at such length and in such a distinctive manner on the problem of the boundary, as did Georg Simmel. In doing so he emphasized that the metaphors of space, which is internal to all reflections on the notion of the boundary, incorrectly suggests that boundaries are primarily to be understood as spatial phenomena. In opposition to this Simmel contra-intuitively defines the phenomenon of the “boundary” within the focus of his sociological enquiry as a specific form of “reciprocity”, “(E)ach of the two elements affects the other, in that one sets the boundary for the other, but the content of this influence is simply the qualification beyond this boundary, thus still *not* in general meant to or able to affect the other. [...] The boundary is not a spatial fact with sociological effects, but a sociological reality that is formed spatially.” (Simmel 2009, 551) The notion of the boundary is primarily utilized in theories of interaction and communication in the subtle analyses of the “[...] real *psychological* boundary-establishing processes alone.” (ibid.), which in the sphere of human co-existence manifest themselves as ‘secrets’, or in the form of knowledge or lack of knowledge about others. However, it is primarily this lack of knowledge to which Simmel accords a constitutive meaning in respect of all social interaction, “Every close association thoroughly rest on each one knowing more of the others through psychological hypotheses than is exhibited directly and with conscious intent. For if we were dependent only on that which is revealed, we would have before us, instead of a

united people whom we understand and with whom we can deal, only numerous accidental and disconnected fragments of a soul. We must then through inferences, interpretations, and interpolations supplement the given fragments until as whole a person emerges as we need, internally and for life's praxis." (2009, 552)

Simmel identifies boundaries and delimitations as constitutive of socialization, and at the same time he claims that precisely these boundaries are insurmountable (in terms of our mutual lack of knowledge) since they function as basic to all forms of social relationship. According to Simmel, "[...] there is no other interaction and no other society at all thinkable than that resting on this teleologically determined ignorance of one for the other." (2009, 311) Thus boundaries are always relative to the form of social interaction as it is determined by the choice and ordering of the necessarily fragmentary knowledge of the other. Therefore, the structure of social action proves itself not only to be the correlative of this boundary demarcation, but also a process of social differentiation, including an attendant increase in complexity, since reciprocal expectations in relation to what lies either side of the construction of alterity are not determined individually but by society. Simmel also interprets the process of modernisation in this way, as a particular form of shifting and transformation of boundaries. A characteristic of the modern is thus an increase in mutual lack of knowledge, which builds to "[...] an immeasurably changing degree of mutual concealment". (2009, 314) Given our limited insight into the consciousness of another person, those closest to us as well as anonymous others, all forms of interaction and socialization are based on an investment in trust. And not only this - communication and communicative action remain the sole possible reactions to our experience of these boundaries. Only they can be substituted as a fundamental mechanism for the co-ordination of actions, which cannot be co-ordinated other than by means of communication.

#### 4. PLESSNER ON BOUNDARIES AND DELIMITATION

Plessner came to his notion of the boundary with a completely different motivation in mind, and from a totally different background in philosophical history, even if Dilthey's *Lebensphilosophie* was a reference point shared by both authors. It is true that the concept of life had already been

the starting point for new systems of thought in the work of Schelling, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, yet it was much later before anti-Cartesianism, initiated by Dilthey and Bergson and reaching into the human sciences, provoked discussions, which crystallised at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in a dispute about the concept of life between the neo-vitalist concept of entelechy primarily represented by Hans Driesch and Wolfgang Köhler's Gestalt-theoretical mechanism. Where Aristotle is well known for having conceived the notion of entelechy in terms of energy, it was developed by Driesch in his *The science and philosophy of the organism*, published in 1909, in a consideration of thermodynamics. In his efforts to have biology founded as an independent science, Driesch wanted to free the concept of life from physical and mechanistic values. Countering Aristotle he conceived of entelechy not as an energetic value, but as a form of linking factor, which permits and governs the formation of whole entities. Plessner, who had an academic background not only in philosophy but also in biology and thus was receptive to both the natural sciences and natural philosophy, made the critical point in debate with Driesch and Köhler, that in the determination of the living it was precisely the evidence for wholeness, form and supersummativity, the consolidated layers of living organisms, that was lacking.

In order to demonstrate this, Plessner drew amongst other things on the works of the behavioral research scientist, Jakob von Uexküll and his contributions to theoretical biology, which are particularly concerned with the relationships of living beings to their environments and from today's perspective are considered to be the beginnings of modern cybernetics and bio-semiotics. In his book, *Theoretical Biology*, published 1920, von Uexküll first introduced to biology the notion of environment as a theoretical concept, in order to determine the functional connection between perception and effect or between perceptual organs and effector organs, which act in the interests of the purposeful behavioural regulation of living beings. The *perceptual world*, in the sense of that which an organism can perceive to be signals with its specific sense organs, and the *operational world* equally in the sense of its specific possibilities for movement, constitute a recursively structured functional connection, which determines the specific form of existence of the organism in its specific environment, and distinguishes it from other organisms. This loss of substance from the notion of the boundary, which ensues when seen from this functional viewpoint, contributes decisively to the com-

prehension of boundaries no longer as organic entities (for instance, as skin or membrane). Instead they are conceptualised as a form of specific selectivity when faced with an environment, which comes about by means of an organism's inherent possibilities for perception and movement. It is in this way that it was understood for the first time that as an organism becomes increasingly complex, its relationship to its own environment changes. Within this construction the notion of environment acts – aside from its function as constitutive of objects – as an instrument for freeing biology from anthropomorphic norms and for overcoming hitherto ingrained analogous meanings based upon human experience by means of the sober analysis of the forms of living things and their structures, which incidentally lead to the reception of this work by Heidegger (1929), Gehlen (1940) and Cassirer (1944). Even if the subsequent generalisation/extrapolation of this model to encompass the world of the human was clearly rebutted by Plessner and by Gehlen, it is the investigation of boundary relationships, which living beings maintain with their environments that Plessner is able to employ as a rationale for his philosophical anthropology.

In his investigation of boundaries as something existing [in the space] between an entity and contiguous media, Plessner now distinguishes two cases. In the first case (a) the boundary only belongs in a *virtual* sense to the entity, in so far as it is neither solely integral to that entity, nor to the surrounding media, but belongs to both, because the Being-at-an-end of the one is the start of the other. Here the boundary is, “[...] the pure transition from one to the other, from the other to the one” (Plessner 1975, 103). This is the case with inanimate objects, since the boundary is something different, something extrinsic, to the real, to the delimitation belonging to the entity in the form of its contour, because “[...] the transition to the other may well be ensured by means of the delimitation, it is true, but does not belong to the performance of its nature, that is to say, is not necessary to the existence of the entity.” (ibid.) In the second case (b), however - and this is the starting point for the theory of the living - the boundary actually belongs to the entity itself, “[...] which thereby not only by means of its delimited contours ensures the transition to the surrounding medium, but is performed by this delimitation and is itself this transition.” (ibid.) All beginnings and ends are therefore independent of the medium in which the entity finds itself. This analysis demonstrates firstly that only where the boundary itself belongs to an entity,

can the entity react to this boundary. And it is this reacting to a boundary that constitutes an inner-outer relationship in the first place, since an entity's boundaries not only enclose it, but also open it up even further to its medium. Contrary to this the inanimate entity is "[...] free of this complication. It is, in as far as it extends. Where and when it comes to an end, its being ceases. It terminates." (Plessner 1975, 129) Thus it is not possible to claim of an inanimate object that it has an environment or an exterior world. In contrast to the inanimate entity, outer-inner relationships are constitutive for every living being, "To remain what it is *and* to merge into that which it is not (beyond itself), as well as into that which it is (within itself), all must be enacted within an individual entity in order that the nature of the organic be revealed." (Plessner 1975, 133)

Against the background of the theory of the constitutive features of life acquired in this way, which rebuts the mechanistic and Gestalt-theoretical explanations of the living - as we have seen, having form [formedness] is an insufficient characteristic of the living on its own - Plessner takes a step towards a philosophy of human nature. For this the notion of the boundary is *the* fundamental notion; all other specifically human characteristics, the use of tools, language and references to transcendence are founded upon this. Above all the relevance which is accorded to such a notion of the boundary is not the only thing that is suggested; also indicated is that the relationship of the living body with its boundaries and thereby the nature of its apprehension of boundaries is completely different in plants, animals and man. While it is true that man is determined by his boundaries like all other forms of life, he is able to transcend them to the extent that he is in a position to assume a relationship with himself and beyond that with precisely these boundaries, or rather, that he *is obliged* to strike up such an essential relationship. Above all it is characteristic of the human environment that one finds in it agents who are also maintaining relationships with themselves, in so far as they react to their own boundaries and understand this to be mutually the case. And this is the difference between a reaction to an external world and a reaction to oneself, which constitutes the difference between the lived body and the corporeal body. Thus an inner being-for-onself and an external physical appearance rest in the non-identity of corporeality as a structuring moment of specific human existence, on the one hand, and the possession of a physical body, on the other, ultimately that which Plessner conveys in the expression, "eccentric positionality".

Man's living form is eccentric, because he is forced to experience himself in the outer world among other bodies due to his inherent relationship with boundaries, both as a feeling, living body *and* as a material, corporeal body (Loenhoff 2009).

Plessner's initially formal analysis demonstrates that the decision as to what should be determined as a boundary cannot be made by sensual perception alone, but also requires hermeneutic reflection. In as far as the notion of the boundary in Plessner is primarily a philosophical concept, philosophical anthropology should not be accorded the status of an experiential science, but instead one of a general hermeneutics. It is ultimately concerned with the analysis of the presuppositions of experience and the praxis of life, which cannot be substituted or investigated by scientific theories. While it is true that the human spirit is a product of natural history, this can no longer be said of its own productions in the form of meaningful and significant interactions and objectifications. Plessner thus sees no reason to be obliged to positivist naturalism, focusing instead on the resolution of its problems by means of his notion of boundary apprehension.

A theory which comprehends living organisms as apprehending of boundaries and in which man features as a unity of living and corporeal bodies, has decidedly anti-Cartesian motives, since it wants to transcend the fundamentalisation of the difference between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. Moreover, beyond that the unfathomableness of man rests in the state inherent to him of having to constantly react to his boundaries, as does his existential form *homo absconditus*, which forces him to constantly restablize himself in his reactions to boundaries, as Plessner has described, for example, in his book, *Laughing and crying. A study of the limits of human behavior* (1941). It is this anthropologically qualified contingency and the associated necessity for reduction of a complexity caused by the individual, which ultimately determines the work of Luhmann, even if it is within the framework of a completely other focus of enquiry using a correspondingly different terminology.

## 5. LUHMANN ON THE BOUNDARY AND DELIMITATION

Hardly any modern social scientific theory has attempted so comprehensively to integrate social and societal theory-related motives, as has the



theory of social systems. Its foundations, aside from information theory and cybernetic thought, are to be found astonishingly within a philosophical, anthropological context, although Luhmann himself tended to conceal this in his later work. Although the essential assumption of Luhmann's social theory, the reduction of complexity by means of system formation, can be reconstructed as a system-theoretical transformation of Arnold Gehlen's theory of unburdening, the notion of the boundary (incidentally irrelevant for Gehlen) is accorded a central value in Luhmann's scheme. Without making direct reference to Plessner, he also analyses boundaries in the first place as the foremost characteristic of living systems, since the kind of boundary will determine the effect of living systems on their environments and equally which environmental effects may be directed at the living system. However, in contradistinction to Plessner, Luhmann sets the notion of the boundary free from living systems and relates it in a more general way to social and communicative systems, the constitutive operations of which are no longer vital processes, but instead meaningfully structured communication occurrences, which connect to one another. Here as well, however, the apprehension of boundaries, in a strict analogy with the biological paradigm, ensues by means of self-referentiality and self-regulation. Not the whole, which consists of parts or is more than its sum, but instead this self-reference, the referencing of oneself and the being-able-to-react-to-oneself are all-decisive characteristics of social systems, and it is these operations, which alone lead to the delimitation of the system from its environment. Thus Luhmann develops in the closed self-referential/operative system, borrowed from cognition biologist, Maturana, a notion of systemic boundary which aims to be appropriate to the complexity of social systems. In their communicative operations social systems can also make reference to their environment ("other-reference") or to themselves ("self-reference"), "[...] the system boundary is thus nothing other than the self-produced difference between self-reference and other-reference, and as such this is present in all communication." (Luhmann 1997, 77) Therefore the boundaries of social systems lie where communicative operations no longer reach and the pre-conditions for their enactment are lacking. Like Simmel and Plessner, Luhmann deconstructs the spatial dimension of the notion of the boundary. In system-theoretical terms, boundaries are only produced and reproduced within communication, "[...] the boundaries of the system are nothing other

than a form of concretion of their operations, which give the system individual character. This is the form taken by the system, the other aspect of which becomes the environment." (Luhmann 1997, 76f.) The apprehension of boundaries by living entities is also something Luhmann could not escape. While it is true that vital processes are only an enabling marginal condition of communicative operations, yet their own apprehension of boundaries ensues on another level of emergence exclusively in the form of "meaning" or meaning-led communication.

## 6. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The preceding deliberations should have demonstrated that the concept of the boundary in all three approaches discussed is accorded the status of a strategic, fundamental notion, in as far as it consistently determines the architecture of the theory. In Simmel as well as in Plessner and Luhmann the spatial dimension of the notion of the boundary is deconstructed and transformed into a procedural event. Boundaries are not static forms; they exist in the performance of specific operations. The effects which result and the functions associated with the process permit and constitute according to differing given circumstances. Within the context of his philosophical anthropology, in Plessner they underlie the eccentric positionality of man and his exceptional position in the realm of the living. In Simmel, quite simply put, boundaries constitute sociality and society and the continual processes of social differentiation, which Simmel described primarily in his theory of the modern. In Luhmann's theory of social systems both concepts of the boundary ultimately merge into a system-environment paradigm, which makes reference not only to the boundary-ensuring functions of social systems but also to their differentiating effects which can only be achieved where boundaries are apprehended.

It is not difficult to see that the notions of the boundary discussed here are not identical with other frequent debates about boundary relationships occurring within the history of philosophy and science, such as the boundary of the sayable, of the descriptively or conceptually apprehendable, the boundary of knowledge per se or other related problematics. In opposition to the notion of the boundary as it appears in phenomenology, which – as Husserl (1913) constantly stresses – has the character of a

horizon, the notions of the boundary discussed here aim at a sober analysis of which operations can take place and which cannot. All three theses, however, lack the pathos of the boundary crossing. On the contrary: in the delimitation itself and even more in reactions to the delimitation is the potential for progression which sets the human apart from other living beings and gives dynamism to social evolution. In this regard in the cases discussed here the considerations of the boundary in the Hegelian sense do not amount to its crossing. These deliberations also stand in opposition to those approaches from within cultural studies which proceed, in the establishing of their theories, paradigmatically on the basis of the textual model, which they perceive as having semiotic form, the boundaries of which can be permanently transgressed and interpreted or deconstructed in an unlimited way. It is, therefore, not surprising that semiotic, pragmatic and neo-structural approaches do not have a developed or explicit notion of the boundary. Given the background to the history of this problematic, the finding that contemporary investigations on the subject of boundary relations in modern societies correspond to the understanding of the boundary as outlined here, is all the more interesting. They are concerned with those societal and cultural practices, by means of which the boundaries between normal and sick, dead and living, human and non-human are apprehended. In as far as current debates on brain death, organ replacement or reproductive medicine and bio-technology, neuro-scientific questioning of free will, the promotion of human rights for primates, and so on provoke a form of anthropological release, a renewed classification of the human is at play, which may be read as an on-going discourse on the subject of the boundary.

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