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Wiesbaden presents Helmuth-Plessner Award 2020 to Onora Sylvia O'Neill, Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve

The City of Wiesbaden this year presents the Helmuth-Plessner Award, now in its third year, to Onora Sylvia O'Neill, Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve. Helmuth Plessner, born in Wiesbaden in 1892, provided important impetus for European philosophy, biology and sociology and is considered one of the most important representatives of "philosophical anthropology" until our day. The Helmuth-Plessner Award comes with EUR 20,000 prize money and is presented every three years by the state capital of Wiesbaden in cooperation with the Helmuth-Plessner Society to a renowned figure with outstanding merits in philosophy regarding aspects of Plessner's work.

Reasoning of the Decision: Onora O'Neill, born in August 1941, is one of the great figures of contemporary international philosophy. After completing her doctorate under John Rawls, she made a name for herself as researcher of Kant; "Construction of Reason" dated 1989 is one of the most important books for understanding the practical philosophy of recent decades.

O'Neill's international impact especially on the field of ethics - a branch of philosophy in which Plessner's thinking has so far received little attention - was an important aspect in the Board's decision.

An excellent contemporary diagnostician, differentiated and clear in her analysis, she places questions of ethics in a broader anthropological and political framework.

In recent years, she has focused her scientific and political attention on threats to democracy in the digital world.

The Anglo-Saxon philosopher with international appeal is very familiar with the German philosophical tradition. Through her earlier research focussing on Kant, she has developed an anthropological perspective on Kant's ethics in important contemporary issues.

Onora O'Neill is an eminently political figure as a member of the House of Lords and former president of the British Academy of Sciences. She has served on many important commissions and received numerous awards.

The meeting of the award board was attended by the scientists of the Helmuth-Plessner Society, Prof. Dr. Carola Dietze, Prof. Dr. Volker Schürmann, Prof. Dr. Marcus Düwell, Prof. Dr. Joachim Fischer, as well as the members nominated by the city, Prof. Dr. Tilman Allert, Dr. Lorenz Jäger and the head of the cultural affairs department, Jörg-Uwe Funk, on an equal footing.

Axel Imholz, Head of Cultural Affairs, explains: "This year's Plessner Award winner is a scientist who, with her scientific work, underlines the important contributions and impulses philosophy can make to our cultural and social life. This is precisely one of the aims we are pursuing by presenting the Helmuth-Plessner Award".

The award will be presented at a ceremony in the town hall on 4 September. In addition to the award ceremony, a lecture by the prize winner, a walk in the footsteps of Plessner and a discussion with Wiesbaden schoolchildren are planned.

Background Information about Helmuth Plessner

Helmuth Plessner, born in Wiesbaden in 1892, lived in the "World Spa City" until the age of 20. His father was of Jewish origin and a highly recognised sanatorium physician and director. After obtaining his school-leaving certificate at the Alexander-von-Humboldt grammar school, Plessner studied zoology and philosophy in Heidelberg, then philosophy in Göttingen and Erlangen. After his habilitation in 1920, he consistently pursued his career as a private lecturer in philosophy at the newly founded Cologne University alongside Max Scheler.

In 1933 he was dismissed from university service because of his father's Jewish origins and went into exile in Groningen in the Netherlands. After his remigration in 1949 he became

one of the most important intellectuals of the young Federal Republic of Germany ("Verspätete Nation") as a Göttingen sociologist together with Horkheimer, Adorno and Gehlen.

Plessner's work "The Levels of Organic Life and the Human", which has been available in an English version as of late, is among the most frequently discussed approaches in philosophical anthropology. His study on the "Limits of Community" also received substantial attention outside expert circles after 1989.

In 2014 the Helmuth-Plessner Award went to the world-renowned US researcher Michael Tomasello. 2017 saw the Award being presented to the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk.

Detained Reasoning for the Board's Decision

O'Neill's view of ethics is distinguished by her awareness of the methodological problems of ethical judgment: No ethical consideration is conceivable without abstracting generalization - but at the same time it is a mistake to derive ethical judgements or to construct theories solely from those abstractions or "idealizations".

The tension that Plessner addresses between unfathomability, on the one hand, and the need to institute or establish law, on the other, can also be found in O'Neill's work.

Remarkable in this context is the importance that O'Neill attributes to trust in human coexistence (Autonomy and Trust in Bioethics) and which she sees as endangered if one succumbs to the idea that interactions could be secured and perfected through codification, supervision, quality management etc. Joint action, she stresses, is always imperfect, and aspects of unavailability cannot be erased from it. The latter, however, is suggested by modern methods of formalising joint action, which pretend to preserve the autonomy of those involved in it, while in reality they present an unrealistic picture of the possibilities of individual-rational autonomy.

A core theme of O'Neill's philosophy is the situatedness of moral judgment. Her reflections on the primacy of obligation - which she says is always addressed to concrete persons in concrete contexts - over the concept of rights, whose weakness she sees in the fact that the addressee of legal claims is often unclear, are very interesting.

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