

## **Wiesbaden Helmuth Plessner Award 2026 goes to Jay M. Bernstein**

Helmuth Plessner, born in Wiesbaden in 1892, was a significant driving force for European philosophy, biology and sociology and is still considered one of the most important exponents of “philosophical anthropology”. The Helmuth Plessner Award is endowed with Euro 20,000 and is presented every three years by the state capital Wiesbaden in cooperation with the Helmuth Plessner Society to a renowned figure rendering outstanding services to aspects of Plessner’s work.

**The Wiesbaden Helmuth Plessner Award, presented for the fifth time now, goes to the American philosopher and critical theoretician Jay M. Bernstein this year.**

For decades the philosopher Jay M. Bernstein has been among the best connoisseurs of German-speaking philosophers in the USA and has engaged intensively with Helmuth Plessner’s Philosophical Anthropology. Bernstein decisively contributed to making Plessner’s work known beyond the German-speaking world, especially in the Anglo-Saxon sphere, stressing his topicality for current debates in philosophy and sociology.

Prof. Dr. Gesa Lindemann, Prof. Dr. Julien Kloeg, Dr. Steffen Kluck, Prof. Dr. Volker Schürmann on behalf of the Helmuth Plessner Society, Prof. Dr. Robert Gugutzer, Jürgen Kaube and Prof. Dr. Andreas Brensing as members nominated by the city, and the Head of the Cultural Affairs Department Dr. Hendrik Schmehl all took part in the meeting of the Awards Committee with equal voting rights.

“It was an interesting meeting where the decision in favour of the award winner Jay M. Bernstein was very clear,” explains Head of the Cultural Affairs Department Dr. Hendrik Schmehl. “Bernstein’s work promotes the transatlantic dialogue in which Plessner’s thinking is revisited as an important contribution to the analysis of modern societies. Europe and America are connected by a long-shared history of ideas – from enlightenment to critical social theories to the current discussions,” says the Head of the Cultural Affairs Department and continues to stress: “Especially these days it is very gratifying to see that the Award goes to an American who feels so deeply connected to this transatlantic tradition in his research, teaching and as an intellectual.”

### ***Detailed reasons for the decision:***

*Jay M. Bernstein has been among the most knowledgeable experts in German-speaking philosophers in the USA for decades. His Kant and Hegel lectures in New York are legendary. He has created standard works on classic and romantic aesthetics in Germany, on literature philosophy – from Georg Lukács’ Romanticism to Derridas’s Deconstruction, from the re-discovery of ethics in the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School to Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno’s philosophy and especially aesthetics in their wide-ranging references to 20<sup>th</sup>-century music trends. A particular focus of Bernstein’s aesthetic interest is the visual arts in modern painting, as a contrast to the depictions of the body in advertising. His own aesthetic focus on the Transformation of Kant and Hegel made him consistently expose the idealistic traditions to their hiatus in the physical existence here and now, thereby disrupting them dialectically through forms of materiality.*

*This is also why Bernstein increasingly dealt with Helmuth Plessner’s Philosophical Anthropology over the past decade. In Bernstein’s essay **Torture and Dignity** (University of Chicago Press 2015) he very convincingly works with the distinction Plessner makes between being a body and having a body for individuals. Since Plessner does not split*

*individuals into atomised self-consciousnesses in a dualistic manner but situates them in interpersonal relationships with the surrounding world and in the being-having-a-body distinction, Bernstein is able to develop a very wide and differentiated understanding of dignity to be respected and of violent, both mental and physical violations of this dignity by torture. This Essay met with great interest in practical ethics and political philosophy.*

*Over the past few years Bernstein has earned special merits in the reception and dissemination of Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology in the Anglo-Saxon world. 2019 saw the English translation of Plessner's "**The Levels of Organic Life and the Human**" published with a comprehensive introduction by Jay Bernstein. In this introduction he worked out the originality of Plessner's engagement especially for the present US debate on bio and natural philosophy in view of the Life Sciences (Fordham University Press). In 2020 the second edition of Plessner's **Laughing and Crying** was published in English (Northwestern University Press), featuring a new foreword by Jay M. Bernstein for the first time. In this foreword he highlights Plessner's originality in the philosophically integrative discussion of limits of personal lifestyle choices for the current US debate. This makes for a meaningful criticism of both the removal of boundaries to self-realisation and the conformism of going along with the crowds.*

**More information on the award winner:**

*Jay M. Bernstein is professor of philosophy at the New School for Social Research in New York City, which rose to fame through accepting many emigrants forced to flee from national-socialist Germany, and at which Helmuth Plessner held the first Theodor-Heuss Chair in 1962/63. He lectured at the University of Essex in England for 25 years and at Vanderbilt University, where he served as W. Alton Jones-Professor for philosophy. Bernstein obtained his doctorate at the University of Edinburgh in 1975; his dissertation dealt with the relationship between physics and biology in Kant's Critical Philosophy.*

*Jay M. Bernstein is currently busy finishing his book entitled "**Earth Justice**". This work deals with the ethical challenge of climate change and the significance of the Anthropocene for understanding human life on planet earth. In the book he argues that humans must not only be understood as part of living nature, like in Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology, but that they also have to be integrated morally and politically into the ecological community of the inhabitants of the earth. "The Anthropocene is an ethical event; climate change has caused severe damage to the ecological integrity of the living earth and we are now responsible for its future well-being, for its restoration and future-proofness. We can only assume responsibility towards and for other humans, including future generations, if we apply principles of "earth justice", including an international ecocide convention, which would rank as high as the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide."*

On 4 September 2026 the Award will be presented at a ceremony in the Town Hall. In addition to the award ceremony, a lecture by the award winner and a scientific conference on his work are planned.

## **Background:**

### *On Plessner*

Helmuth Plessner, born in Wiesbaden in 1892, lived until the age of 20 in the “world health resort”. His father was of Jewish origin and worked as a sanatorium doctor and director recognised in the city.

After obtaining his school-leaving certificate at Alexander-von-Humboldt-Gymnasium Plessner concurrently studied zoology and philosophy in Heidelberg, then philosophy in Göttingen and Erlangen. After his habilitation in 1920 he consistently pursued a career as private lecturer for philosophy at the newly founded Cologne University alongside Max Scheler.

In 1933 he was dismissed from university service due to his father’s Jewish origin and went into Dutch exile in Groningen.

After his remigration in 1949 working as Göttingen-based sociologist, he became one of the most prominent intellectuals alongside Horkheimer, Adorno and Gehlen of the young Federal Republic of Germany (“The Delayed Nation”).

Plessner’s work “The Levels of Organic Life and the Human”, which recently appeared in English translation, ranks among the most discussed lines of thought in Philosophical Anthropology. His study on the “Limits of Community” also garnered considerable attention beyond expert spheres after 1989.

Previous award winners:

- 2014 Prof. Dr. Michael Tomasello (US anthropologist and behavioural researcher)
- 2017 Prof. Dr. Peter Sloterdijk (German philosopher, cultural scientist and author)
- 2020 Prof. Dr. Onora O’Neill (British philosopher and politician)
- 2023 Prof. Dr. Gérard Raulet (French philosopher and German teacher)