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# SCHELER'S FOUNDATION OF ETHICS

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## *abstract*

*In this paper I would like to deal with Scheler's emotional ethics and its relationship with a possible ontological foundation. I want to address the theme of values and acts, asking whether they are rooted in being or whether they possess their status autonomously, and where they obtain their legality and consistency from.*

*I will face first of all Scheler's original discovery of the special status of value as intentional object and the correlated human capacity of grasping it, realizing the corrected order of values and fulfilling the "moral good".*

*In the end, as I will underline how Scheler's gain lies in the avoidance of reducing the foundation of ethics to a transcendental deduction or to an inductive-empirical method, I will stress the problem of his personalistic ethic, in the attempt to hand over to the person the whole discretion of letting values emerge and affirm in the history.*

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## *keywords*

*Scheler, ethics, foundation, personalism*

The  
Relationship  
Between *Sein*  
and *Sollen*

In this article I would like to explore Scheler's account of the role of emotion in ethics and its possible ontological foundation. In particular, I will address the theme of value and act, asking whether they are rooted in being or whether they possess their status autonomously, and where they obtain their legality and consistency from.

I will start with Scheler's affirmation in his *Promotionsschrift*, that "we see an unclosed rift between thinking and wanting, knowing and acting, good and true"<sup>1</sup>. In this work he distinguishes these two distinct fields of human experience: on one side, the scientific method, the world of Kantian pure reason<sup>2</sup>, that due to its lack of theological character can only improve the precision and exactness of *mathematical* knowledge. On the other side lies the ineradicable world of ethical principles, correlated with the human need for "moral laws" that can be set as goals to regulate practical behavior. According to Scheler, this need emerged and paradoxically strengthened as science became increasingly successful, thus seeming to eliminate the need for ethical necessity.

Scheler notes how modernity and the positive sciences introduced a tendency to reduce this second field, represented by cultural life and the existence of values, to the first one. Most prominent in this development was the rise of modern psychology, which in claiming the univocity of psychological, genetic laws, removed first the independence and dignity of precise areas of human experience (art and morality), and second the autonomous role of that special cognitive capacity proper to the person, namely feeling.

The same tendency can be seen in Kant's thought: even though he went one step further with his anti-psychological polemic and the recognition of the transcendental function of spiritual faculties, he made the mistake of relegating practical reason to the sphere of pure reason, reducing moral knowledge to an inner duty of intellectual nature<sup>3</sup>.

In *Beiträge*, Scheler stresses the different activities remaining in Kant's ter-

1 "Zwischen Denken und Wollen, Wissen und Handeln, Guten und Wahren, eine unschlussbare Kluft sehen" GW1, 11.

2 Scheler's value's theory leads namely from Kant's critique to a pure formal ethic, where the morality pours out from a pure fact of the reason, formal and empty, lacking any intentionality to experience's contents ("Kant sieht offenbart den Tatsachenkreis nicht, auf den sich eine apriorische Ethik, wie jede Erkenntnis, zu stützen hat" GW2, 67). Scheler contrasts indeed a *material ethics*, where values, although a priori, are feelable phenomena and exist thanks to a value's bearer.

3 Cf. GW1, 57.

minology, of pure and practical reason: while the first presents just an organizing power, that through transcendental categories *rearranges* and gives form to the chaos of perceptible material, operating therefore in a *scientific* way, the second carries out the task of partially suppressing the givenness of particular drives, exhibiting thence a *plus* of activity. The power of the practical reason consists in another “spiritual happening”<sup>4</sup>, which does not mean to gain an exact knowledge of being, but rather to set goals that can regulate and guide actions. With this statement, Scheler wants to take distance from the empty concept of the Kantian moral imperative, which presents itself as free of any empirical contents, setting a formal law, applicable in any possible case. Morality is indeed first of all not knowledge or recognition of a duty, but a grasping of values, which do not manifest themselves in an intellectual process but in feeling.

Scheler reevaluates the cognitive capacity of the function of feeling, establishing the statute of a new intentional object, value, which represents the area of an independent experience, provided with its own laws.

### Values and Intentional Feeling

In the *Systematischer Teil* of his work, Scheler attempts a definition of the concept of value, and what he stresses first is how value resists to dissolution in being<sup>5</sup>. This goes back to Hermann Lotze's *Logik*<sup>6</sup>, where *being valid* itself is fundamental and thus cannot be deduced from other fields or spheres<sup>7</sup>.

Scheler affirms that the history of philosophy is replete with attempts to deduce being from value and value from mere being. In this regard, he recalls Kant's critique of the traditional ontological proofs for God, where the philosopher of Königsberg shows how it is impossible to deduce the reality of God from the concept of value of the supreme Being. Scheler explains that because something has value, it does not mean that it has to exist, and since something exists, it does not mean that it has to have value. “As value does not give a thing existence, so the existence of a thing does not make it more valuable”<sup>8</sup>.

This strict separation between value and being brings Scheler to the task, as we have just indicated, of re-establishing the nature of value and its possible experience, which is of course different from any acts which can “set

4 Cf. *ivi*, 59.

5 Cf. *ivi*, 98.

6 Hermann Lotze (1817-1881) affirms, in the wake of Bolzano, the independence of logic from psychology, and its irreducible status to the one of “being”. Furthermore, he anchors the autonomy of the reign of logic and of the idealities in the notion of “validity” (*Geltung*).

7 The problem of the spheres concerns the core of Scheler's ontology, it states the existence of “essence's regions” (*Wesensregionen*), which are independent from each other.

8 “*Wie der Wert ein Ding nicht existent macht, so macht aber auch die Existenz ein Ding nicht wertvoller*” *GW1*, 98 (my translation).

existence”<sup>9</sup>. Value remains inaccessible to thought (*Denken*) and to the intellect (*Verstand*), as it belongs to the axiological sphere of experience and can only be caught through affective perception, feeling (*Fühlen*).

Values are therefore for Scheler original essential *qualities*, which can be known in this particular essential intuition of the feeling. It is very important to understand how for Scheler the feeling of something has an intentional structure, which distinguishes it from mere feeling-states (*Gefühlszustände*): while the latter are sensible localized conditions of our body or psychological state (bad or good mood, etc.), not immediately related to an object, in the case of feeling-of there is

“... an original relatedness, a directedness of feeling toward something objective, namely, values. This kind of feeling is not a dead stare or a factual state of affairs that can enter into associative connections or be related to them; nor is such feeling a ‘token’. This feeling is a goal-determined movement, although it is by no means an activity issuing forth from a center (...). This feeling therefore has the same relation to its value-correlate as ‘representing’ has to its ‘object’, namely, an intentional relation”<sup>10</sup>.

Thus, there is a difference between a simple sentiment (pain, sadness, joy), which, so to speak, ends in itself, and the cognitive grasping values such agreeable-disagreeable, good-evil, beautiful-ugly.

Values are therefore given in the intentional personal act of the intuitive feeling, and Scheler – according to the phenomenological principle, which says that the sense of a thing discovers itself in the structures of the intentional consciousness –adopts the thesis that the existence of a value, even though not depending properly on the acting person, can be realized in the fulfillment of this act.

Having said that values are qualities and do not settle in being, but rather appear strictly related to the grasping act of the person, it is necessary to prove their possible objective status, and in what way the function of a person’s acts can set or collaborate with their ontological status.

<sup>9</sup> This is a phenomenological statement, it refers to Husserl’s judgment theory, where he speaks about judgment (*Realbedeutungen*) which sets the existence of individual existing (*Dasein*). This cannot be elaborated here.

<sup>10</sup> Scheler, Max, (1973) *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values: A New Attempt toward the Foundation of an Ethical Personalism*, Northwestern University Press, pp 257-58.

### The Hierarchical Ranks of Values and the Moral Good

A phenomenological principle affirms that intentional objects do not dissolve into the intentional act, but rather reveal themselves in it, retaining their ideal, a priori status. That means that they cannot be brought to coincide with specific things or goods (*Dinge* or *Güter*), remaining immaculate from any possible attempt at relativisation. As Scheler affirmed in his course on Ethics in Cologne (1921): “if there is – as we believe – an intentional relationship between feeling and value, then there can also be an a priori value theory, independent from goods and independent from the constitution of the recognizing being”<sup>11</sup>. With this assertion Scheler intends to prove the particular a priori character of values, i.e. their being objective and not to be sought in the web of empirical contingency<sup>12</sup>. Second, as axiological qualities and not just indifferent things like unities, values must be structured in a hierarchical rank. In this regard it is now necessary to understand exactly what Scheler means by *values hierarchy* and how it can be realized by the comparison with this relation of being higher. In his Cologne course Scheler says again:

“The theory of the hierarchical rank of values builds the crucial part of the whole ethic, and represents its last foundation. It has to be a priori, independent from the experience of men’s moral actions. The hierarchical rank has to be sought among the self values qualities and not among ‘goods’”<sup>13</sup>.

At first we wish to briefly explain the structure of this rank according to Scheler’s theory. This rank is not to be transcendently deduced or empirically induced, but it is an immediately evident fact, which makes ethics “the science of intuitive experience”<sup>14</sup>. In his main work, *The Formalismus*, Scheler distinguishes four classes of value, while in the later Cologne course he adds another type. Resting securely on *The Formalismus*’s exposition we want now to abide by this last one<sup>15</sup>:

1. Values of agreeable-disagreeable: the function of sensible feeling corresponds to this class. The respective feeling-states are pleasure and pain.

11 ANA 375 B III, 23, 39 (my translation).

12 Cf. Spader, Peter H. (2002) *Scheler’s Ethical Personalism, It’s Logic, Development and Promise*, Fordham University Press, New York.

13 ANA 375 B III, 98 (my translation).

14 Ivi, 13 (my translation).

15 It has to be underlined that every value’s class corresponds with a precise stratum of the emotional life and not just what we generally called “feeling”: the feeling distinguishes itself namely in sensible, vital, psychic, spiritual feeling. It exists therefore as a meaningful and progressive pattern of levels of affective structures of the person.

2. Values of utility: Scheler does not comment explicitly on this precise category but from his notes he seems to understand these as “civilisation’s values”, related to society as its “noticeability threshold” (*Merkbarkeitsschwelle*).
3. Vital values: are correlated with vital feeling, which include all modes of the feeling of life (health, illness, weakness, strength,...). Its thing-values are such qualities as those encompassed by the noble and the vulgar.
4. Spiritual values: are apprehended in functions of spiritual feelings and acts of spiritual preferring, loving, and hating. The main types of spiritual values are: beautiful-ugly, right-wrong, cognition of truth.
5. Values of the holy and unholy: the very definite condition of their givenness is that they appear only in objects given in intention as “absolute object”. The feeling-states belonging to this class are “blissfulness”, “despair”, and specific reactions in this are “faith” and “lack of faith”<sup>16</sup>.

Now that Scheler’s objective rank of values has been clarified to a certain extent, a further question is to understand how it is humanly possible to “reflect” and respect this corrected hierarchy by means of one’s behavior, i.e., in his or her understanding of ethics, that is how proper morality can be realized by the acting person.

First it is not of less importance to stress that moral “good” and “evil”, values which actually do not emerge in the hierarchy, are indeed dependent on fulfilling the right values order, making the person an authentic *bearer* of moral values.

In *Formalismus* Scheler affirms:

“The value ‘good’ – in an absolute sense – is the value that appears, by way of essential necessity, on the act of realizing the value which (with respect to the measure of cognition of that being which realizes it) is the highest. The value ‘evil’ – in an absolute sense – is the value that appears on the act of realizing the lowest value”<sup>17</sup>.

As Spader comments, this definition allows Scheler to set a relationship between moral values and all other values, contesting Kant who says that eth-

<sup>16</sup> Cf. GW2 122, Form 105 – 10; ANA 375 B III, 12.

<sup>17</sup> GW2, 47; Form, 25.

ics is just a content of will<sup>18</sup>. Faithful to his phenomenological view, Scheler claims: “this value appears *on* the act of willing. It is for this reason that it can *never* be the content of an act of willing. It is located, so to speak, on the back of this act, and this by the way of essential necessity; it can therefore *never* be intended in this act”<sup>19</sup>.

Value as intentional term is thus not something to be created or conceptualized in an active reflection; it is not the object of a previous decision but, phenomenologically, gives itself in a passive way, inhering to specific personal acts. Particularly, in the case of realization of higher values, special kinds of acts come into play, which are situated on a more important level of the “stratification” of the emotional life, namely the act of *preferring*, and in the case of the realization of lower values, the act of *placing after*.

“preferring’ and ‘placing after’ are not conative activities like, say, ‘choosing’, which is based on act of preferring. Nor is preferring (or placing after) a purely feeling comportment. It constitutes a special class of emotional act-experiences. The proof is that we can ‘choose’, strictly speaking, only between actions, whereas we can ‘prefer’ one good to another, good weather to bad, one food to another etc”<sup>20</sup>.

These two acts, as Scheler asserts in the Cologne course, are “grasping functions” (*aufnehmende Funktionen*) of emotional and value’s cognitive character, possibly definable as attraction and repulsion acts<sup>21</sup>. They are neither a striving (*Streben*) nor a volitional behavior, but have a discerning task<sup>22</sup>, namely a passive discerning.

Scheler’s solution about the definition of value and its givenness helps to point out some observations relating our previous question, i.e., the ontological status of value and the role of the person, which we now wish to tackle.

## Person and Value

As we have shown, as values possess an ideal objective statue which cannot be abolished from any historical statement, they need a tendency of human affection to come into existence. Values coincide neither with positive goods, nor are they norms which can be rationally settled once and for all. History, with its changeable “laws of preference”, illustrates this clearly: values need the implication of subjectivity, which affirms and promotes the content of their ideal.

18 Cf. Spader 2002, 126.

19 GW2, 48-49; Form, 27

20 GW2, 265; Form, 260

21 Cf. Henckmann, Wolfhart (1998) Max Scheler, Verlag C. H. Beck, München, p 120.

22 ANA, 49

But once we ascertain this objective rank thanks to the “middle’s kingdom” of the affective intentional relationship – the only place where values emerge, so to speak, regardless of the free will of consciousness’s discernment<sup>23</sup> – we need to better understand how to locate the foundation of value, and what it depends on, for, in history, certain values have asserted themselves, even though they were not at the top of the objective axiological hierarchy, over other higher values.

As we saw, Scheler’s theory is strictly personalistic: the corrected values hierarchy can just be reflected and realized from the acting person. In his Cologne course Scheler says:

“Ethical values are person’s values. Absolute, spiritual feelings adhere to the being and so-being (so-sein) of person. Person’s values are the highest values and have to be preferred to all the other values. All morality becomes efficient for us thanks to persons. The spiritual person is the real good”<sup>24</sup>

Morality, as observed, can only be generated from the personal preferring of higher values, and only by embodying this axiological ideal character, the person, carrying a moral exemplarity<sup>25</sup>, becomes the primary source of values experience for others. Criticizing an ethical model based on paralyzed norms, Scheler claims a right to an individual, personal ethics, which cannot overlook the concrete being of a person.

In a section of *Formalismus* entitled “Microcosm, Macrocosm and the Idea of God”, Scheler explains how every singular person represents a microcosm of values, a personal order which reflects the precise values which in the course of life and circumstances have been experienced, known, followed (preferred) and which constitutes the so-called *ordo amoris* of a person. Scheler does not understand this in the sense of a relativism, where every person, according to their own experience, brings to comprehension just a personal order of the objective order, but more in the sense of a collaboration in *solidarity*, where the single person (*Einzelperson*), incarnating his special vision or intuition of some values, can promote and be an example for those

23 According to Scheler, the primary emergence of values in the intentional relationship is the condition for the pure will to act in the practical world, which in this meaning presents already an axiologically structured configuration.

24 ANA, 149 (my translation).

25 Scheler develops a proper theory of the model person. In the Cologne course he lists five categories of “types of models”, any of them correspond to a particular class of values. The saint is the model in the religious life, the genius in the spiritual life, the hero in the vital sphere, the “economy’s leader” in the sphere of utility’s values and the “artist of life”, or “artist of pleasure” in the sphere of agreeable. Every particular model realizes a special rank of values, becoming possibility of experience and example of those. ANA, 120.



particular values, thus becoming jointly responsible for ethics as a whole<sup>26</sup>. This theory of the exemplarity helps to take a step forward about the question of how and in which conditions values emerge in the course of history: there are always personal models, especially models who became such, thanks to a particular right comprehension of higher values, and, so to speak, hold the helm of history.

“A model is, like a norm, anchored in an evidential value of the person. But a model does not pertain to mere action, as is the case with a norm. It pertains first of all to a To-Be. One who has a model tends to become similar or equal to it, in that he experiences the requirement of the ought-to-be on the basis of the value seen in the content of the model person. In addition, the individual value-essence of the person who serves as a model is not extinguished in the idea of the model, as is the case with a norm, which is universal by virtue of its content and validity”<sup>27</sup>.

So Scheler can affirm, in the Cologne course, that “all the sense of history lies in the person”<sup>28</sup>.

But we want to turn back briefly to our first question, namely, the relationship of values and person to being, in some final considerations about the autonomy of the ontological foundation of Scheler's ethics.

### The Foundation of Ethics

In the first part of the article we saw how values do not have any kind of entrenchment in the being of things: the originality of Scheler's position consists namely in the affirmation of the autonomy of spiritual formations in the moral world from the logical and cognitive structures of any rational knowledge. Scheler's moral knowledge is not based on an existence's judgment, it has nothing to do with what can be recognized as true or false; is neither based on the capacity of the reason nor on the capacity of the being of the things.

The positive of this position consists surely in pointing out the meta-historical and meta-ontic necessity of values, which underlines their irreducible and therefore objective nature. But if the strength of Scheler's theory succeeded in avoiding reducing the foundation of ethics to a transcendental deduction (pure reason) or to an inductive-empirical method (confusion between thing

<sup>26</sup> It is to be noted that certainly every person has necessarily a limited vision of the whole axiological rank (*Daseinsrelativität*), but every person can be a model and can collaborate with the whole good, in so far as he realizes higher values despite lower ones. Not every person can be a model in Scheler's way, since a person can also be “morally bad”.

<sup>27</sup> GW2, 560; F, 574.

<sup>28</sup> ANA, 160.

and good), the risk is to leave values ungrounded in an ideal world. Scheler's solution is to turn back to the person and his immediate and evident discernment (*Fühlen, Einsicht*) of the axiological classes plus the moral discernment (*sittliche Einsicht*) of good and evil. But this ontological autonomy of the moral discernment and the definition of person as a "concrete and essential unity of being of acts of different essences" does not maybe suffice to establish a precise rank of values where spiritual values are the highest and where on that basis the holy resides: Scheler could have proposed a stronger definition of person, where his relation to the divine could work as the foundation of the correlated rank of values, which by its side finds indeed the holy as own basis. That would have been even more essential for the fact that the very place where values reveal themselves is, as pointed out, precisely an act of the person, namely feeling.

Scheler wanted surely to avoid to fall in an ontologism, like the one of Malebranche, which he strongly refuses, and we could affirm that the problem of the foundation of ethics assumes in him a gnoseological-intentional character, but, again, when we speak about classes of acts, it would be necessary to precise where the respective acts settle, and whether they have the capacity to discover and fulfill the moral world.

As we deepen herein Scheler's personalistic theory, we now notice that his ethics seems to have two tendencies: an attempt to preserve the ontological autonomy of morality, without leading it back to an external divine legislator who would configure ethics as normative or voluntaristic, and the unavoidable affirmation of man as a spiritual person, who acts morally since he realizes the axiological rank, where the highest value is the holy.

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