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AN ETHICS OF THE “INDIVIDUAL ESSENCE” A REVIEW ABOUT THE NEW ITALIAN TRANSLATION OF SCHELER’S “FORMALISM”

**A New completely
Revised Edition**

The new Italian issue of Max Scheler *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik. Neuer Versuch der Grundlegung eines ethischen Personalismus* is published by Bompiani and edited by Roberta Guccinelli (2013). Guccinelli new Italian translation replaces the last one, edited by Giancarlo Caronello with Edizioni San Paolo in 1996, and features a double language text as well as an enriched subject index.

With the exception of rare cases¹, Scheler thought has been ideologically read and understood in Italy almost until 1996, as it sometimes happens unfairly and unfortunately with the best authors. Specifically Scheler works have been partially abused by the Magisterium of Catholic Church to justify some dogma; consequently unlucky and non genuine translations have often been released. Some of them include categories which are not adherent to original Scheler thought. Guccinelli translation aims to give new life to Schelerian contribution, letting the “things themselves” speak, as the author did. The challenge was hard, but the result is a translation in plain language, where every term is balanced with the others and lexical care corresponds to conceptual clarity.

**The “individual
essence” as
the core of
Schelerian
Ethics**

Scheler’s *Formalism* is a continent, the new translation gives voice to. Guccinelli new edition vastly introduces it to the reader². Since it is practically impossible to consider here all the aspects of Schelerian ethics, I will focus on a single topic, which represents the core of Schelerian ethics, as Guccinelli says. It is the concept of “individual essence”, identified by the translator with the correlate of “the betrayed beatitude and love experience” each person can experience during his life. Such experience provides the *Leit motiv* of Guccinelli Introduction to the *Formalism* new edition.

**Beyond
Kantian
Ethics**

‘Individual essence’ is the concept starting from which Scheler revises and expands Kantian ethics. Scheler identifies Kant with the only philosopher who has really attempted to give a foundation to ethics in the modern age. Nevertheless Scheler goes further and tries to provide a new foundation of ethics (and of the practical thought in general), the most complete we still have in the twenty-first century. The brief present contribution aims to highlight the

1 See De Monticelli (2013).

2 See Guccinelli (2013).

innovation of Scheler ethics, being aware that Scheler thought and productions are ampler than a mere criticism of Kant, as Guccinelli points out in her essay.

Trying to explain Scheler criticism of Kant in a few words, it is worth pointing out the modernity of Kantian concept of autonomy, that is the idea according to which the man is law to himself and neither God nor natural law nor particular goods or ends give law to him. Nevertheless the further Kantian idea according to which the Rational Will determines the concepts of good, and not vice-versa, is not so modern. To Scheler, if Kant could overcome theological voluntarism, he could not overcome voluntarism tout court. In this way, Kant comes to the "paradox" of an ethics which is not founded since Good Will has not corresponding evidence in feeling. The main problem of Kantian ethics is having barred emotional life from the rationality sphere, whose enlargement is the most original contribution of Schelerian Ethics.

A Material Ethics of Values

Kantian emotional life exclusion from ethics is connected with Kantian worry that an ethics of feeling could lead to an ethics of goods or ends or to the eudemonism in all its declinations. Scheler criticizes this passage maintaining that not everything that is "material" is reducible to particular goods or ends: *values* are not reducible to these last ones and we can have cognitive access to them.

For Scheler Kantian ethics is indifferent to the existence of value-qualities and of their corresponding normative features. A development of Kantian ethics is possible only if the prejudice, according to which the existence of a "*formal a-priori*" but not the existence of a "*material a-priori*" is justified, is overcome. Scheler agrees with Kant that ethics cannot be empirically founded, since – to be ethics – it requires a universal feature. In the same way Scheler shares with Kant the criticism of the ethics of goods and ends and of the eudemonism in all its declinations, since such ethics are empirical. Nevertheless, differently from Kant, Scheler argues that not only the epistemological property, concerning the nature of the moral evidence – "the moral law inside me" – but also the "*type-structure of objects* in the big spheres of experience" (Scheler 1916, 151), is *a-priori* (from formalism to a material ethics).

Schelerian material ethics has important implications both *a parte subiecti* and *a parte obiecti*. *A parte subiecti* it opens to *feeling*, the mode of intentionality concerning *emotions*. By virtue of feeling, the subject structures his own order of values. *A parte obiecti* Scheler material ethics opens to values as essential qualities of things *given* through feeling as a

mode of access to reality. Universal axiological world is hierarchical but not undynamic: laws of essence identify hierarchical relationships between spheres of value (from the higher to the lower: values of pleasure, vital values, values of the person, value of the holy), but they do not prescribe particular goods or ends. As already to Kant, to Scheler the autonomy, the faculty of the individual to structure his own order of values, ought to be respected. Nevertheless, according to Scheler this faculty ought to be respected precisely by virtue of two discoveries unknown to Kant (because of his emotional life exclusion from ethics): *a parte subiecti*, the discovery of the commitment that emotional life implies for the person, since it provides the place of the "individual essence" flourishing; *a parte obiecti* the discovery of the value spheres variety and richness, the access to which legal systems should extend so that more and more people could flourish.

**'Person' and
'Human dignity':
a Testing Ground
for Scheler
Ethics**

The concept of "individual essence" extends Kantian concepts of person and human dignity, providing the testing ground for Schelerian new foundation of ethics (and practical thought in general), also interesting for its implications on law.

Scheler shares with Kant the concept of person as a whole non-reducible to parts or data, as well as the Kantian concept of human dignity as irreducibility of the person to physical-psychical and social data. Kantian – and also Schelerian – concept of human dignity justifies the duty to never treat the person merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end. Nevertheless, Scheler does not share with Kant the idea that the essential trait of personality should be identified with the potential capacity of morality or even with the morality itself. According to Scheler this idea brings Kant to identify the person with the *x* of an abstract rational activity, rather than with the concrete individual. The individual is essentially characterized by his acts, first of all the act of feeling: the person, before being an **ens cogitans** or an **ens volens**, is an **ens amans**³. If the person is identified with the *X* of an abstract rational activity, the risk is that the respect of person is identified with the respect of "humanity" or "morality", rather than with the respect of the concrete individual, as Scheler underlines. Paradoxically the risk is that Kantian ethics may suggest a concept of human dignity as a *limit of autonomy*, with dramatic consequences for law, where the respect of autonomy was Kantian ethics starting point. According to Scheler, a person should not be identified with the abstract activity of rationality [*Vernunftperson*] but with the concrete individual who accesses the world of values and who reveals in his particular access

3 This famous statement appears in Scheler (1913).

an "individual essence" [*individuelle Wesen*], the flourishing of which *engages* the individual. In other words, Scheler opinion, autonomy is safeguarded if it grants the possibility for men to flourish rather than prescribing moral duties to themselves.

In addition to the general trait of personality, Schelerian enlargement of human dignity Kantian concept highlights an *eudemonological* trait⁴: the beatitude for the individual to be himself. The enlargement opens to a phenomenology of self-acknowledgement which the experience of the betrayed beatitude and love reveals, as Guccinelli explains in her essay. This beatitude passes through anguish, as a philosopher of the last century reminds, asking herself what kind of self- perspective a person could have at the end of his life⁵.

Furthermore the importance accorded to beatitude by Scheler does not imply that Schelerian ethics is eudemonistic. Scheler also considers a *deontic* trait of human dignity: each person ought to be granted the possibility to realize his own order of values insofar as he recognizes the same possibility to the other⁶. This point is so interesting in the perspective of a plural universalism that someone defined Scheler a theorist of multiculturalism⁷. In my opinion starting from material ethics of values, Scheler conciliates cultural demand of pluralism and ethical (and juridical) demand of universalism. A contribution to the conciliation of these two demands is given by Schelerian concept of "reality transcendence on experience", according to which the world always reveals new aspects of value that people and cultures are called to answer. From schelerian point of view, possibility of a plural universalism is embodied by the existence of a "good in itself for me": not "for" me (person or culture) something is good "in itself" (relativism), but something is good "for me" independently from the fact that I know it (realism) and in the limits of minimal universal obligations given by *reciprocal* respect ("apriorical structure of the world" (Scheler 1916, 769)).

4 The adjective 'eudemonological' appears for the first time in Rosmini (1841-1845).

5 Hersch (1947).

6 See Scheler (1955).

7 See Simonotti (2008).

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