

Ethical *A Priori* According to Max Scheler

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The goal of the article is to provide a focused analysis of Chapter 2, Section B, entitled “The Non-Formal *A Priori* in Ethics,” in Max Scheler’s Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values through a three-step procedure: 1) the formulation and exposition of the thesis in question, 2) its philosophical interpretation, and 3) appraisal and criticism. The investigation takes into view the broader context of both Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values as a whole, as well as two other relevant works by Max Scheler – *On the Eternal in Man* and *On the Nature of Sympathy*.

Keywords: order of ranks of values, value-modalities, *a priori*, phenomenology, axiology, ethics, Max Scheler.

It is worth noting that although Max Scheler wishes to home-in on specifically ethical values and their *a priori* interrelations, the content of the section suggests that he is still very much preoccupied with a general outline of what he calls a “pure theory of values and valuations”¹ and thus examines the ethical *a priori* only insofar as it is a part of the whole sphere of values. For instance, in Sub-Division 1, which is concerned with ‘formal essential interconnections,’ all observations but one, i.e., that about the ‘ideal ought,’ have to do with essential characteristics pertaining to values per se, and so not limited only to ethical values. Again, in speaking of “higher” and “lower” values in Sub-Division 3, and in particular of essential value-properties intimately connected with their height, Scheler offers a series of theses

which by no means are exclusive to just ethical values. Or, to give one last example, his remarks on *a priori* relations of ranks among value-modalities extend to such value-categories as ‘beautiful’ and ‘holy,’ respectively representing esthetical and religious values, both of which, no matter how closely bound up with ethical values, are nevertheless qualitatively different from the latter. As a consequence, judging in accord with the section’s content, it would perhaps be more purposeful to call it “The Non-Formal *A Priori* in Axiology.” Let us not, however, busy ourselves with names and titles but turn to Scheler himself and his account of the value *a priori*.

Formal essential facts regarding values in general

Such facts, comprising both the *a priori* characteristics and interconnections of

1 Scheler, Max. *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values: A New Attempt toward the Foundation of an Ethical Personalism*, p. 81.

values, are called 'formal' because they apply to values as values and are not as such restricted to any particular type or quality of value or its bearer.

One of these essential axiological facts is that all values diverge into two groups: negative and positive; as, for example, 'ugly' and 'beautiful' or 'evil' and 'good.' This basic dual feature of all values is rooted in the objective content of values themselves and is not based on modes of perception and apprehension such as cognition/intentionality, value/liking, or resistance/volition.

Four axioms become evident when value-positivity or -negativity is unfolded in connection to the being of value: 1) the existence of a positive value is itself a positive value; 2) the existence of a negative value is itself a negative value; 3) the non-existence of a positive value is itself a negative value; 4) the non-existence of a negative value is itself a positive value². Each of these axioms in an identical form Scheler has already once stated in the Formalism on page 26. They are also alike formulated on page 311 in *On the Eternal in Man*³.

Let us carefully examine the meaning of the above assertions. First, the existence of a value is distinguished from the value itself. The argument must needs run in the following manner (though it is not presented in the text): the categories of 'existence' and 'value' must be different, since alteration in the one is not ensued by alteration in the other. It is, as a result, obvious that the state of affairs of the 'existence of value A' and that of the 'non-existence of value

A' differ as to the category of existence, yet are identical as to the value itself. This manner of reasoning is most likely due to the phenomenological method, as understood and employed by Scheler as well as Husserl, wherein essences are scrutinized after having discarded their existential modes. In discussing his conception of the 'a priori and the formal in general' Scheler states: "The point [...] is to leave aside all kinds of positing, including the positing of 'real' or 'non-real,' 'illusion' or 'real,' etc."⁴ From the preceding it is entailed that the positing of the existence of an entity, which was previously analyzed irrespective of its ontological status, is a palpable addition to the phenomenological situation. Second, the reflexive impersonal pronoun 'itself' makes it clear that existence itself is considered as a value over against the value of which it is predicated.

In regard to the first observation, it should be noted that, though the presence of infinite regress in itself can neither justify nor disprove a judgment, even so, it is exactly the destination of the Schelerian axioms. Let us momentarily treat of a certain value A, whose content or what kind of value it is we do not know, as the object of our consideration. Accordingly, the existence of value A is itself a value – let us call it value B. Yet, what is to prevent us to hold that the existence of value B is just as well an original value C which is different from B. Moreover, value A was described by us as a certain value, thus offering a genuine possibility that it may have been itself the

² *Ibid.*, p. 82.

³ Scheler, Max. *On the Eternal in Man*, p. 311.

⁴ Scheler, Max. *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values: A New Attempt toward the Foundation of an Ethical Personalism*, p. 48.

existence of some value X. By now it is apparent that such second-order predications are never to reach an end. One is simply left with the question whether in encountering some existing value he indeed undergoes such ad infinitum of values, or rather he faces that value as that value alone in its unique and inseparable unity of meaning and being. Is it not the concreteness and singularity of a given value that impel and attract our powers of appreciation toward a definite value-reality and its wondrous import, powers which would be quite perplexed and dissipated, if they had to take on an endless sea of “values times values?”

The second observation, to wit, that ‘existence’ is an original value in addition to the value whereof it is predicated, we are inclined to submit to the doubt, whether Scheler does not use the concept of value in an ambivalent and thus confusing fashion. A strict terminological separation must be effected between ‘value’ as an idealized entity whose essential structure is undertaken without having the least concern with the problem of its realization in the world and ‘value’ as a concrete real datum springing, so to say, here and now in the ambit of the ever-moving and vigorous life of an individual. For in the first sense of the term, what is at stake is not itself a value, to which an act of valuation would be the proper cognitive response, but a mere meaning-unit completely lacking the momentum of value-substance, its existential appeal, as it were, which alone is capable of kindling the moral dimension of our being, a meaning-unit, furthermore, whose corresponding subjective act of cognition is not valuation but categorial intuition. Necessary and

irrevocable as the kinship between ideal value-contents and real obtaining value may appear, the essential contrast between them must just as stubbornly be guarded. If we are able without any strain of the will to tell a cup of hot morning-tea from the meaning of “hot morning-tea,” or “what it means to pass an exam” from actually passing one, then no matter how lofty the things we mind of, this simple intuition is never diminished in its validity; it should remain the principal guide of our intellects.

It is my humble suggestion that perhaps the insight latent in Scheler’s formulation of the axioms is that the acts of ‘bringing into existence’ or ‘putting out of existence’ of a value or a disvalue must be regarded as events autonomous enough from the values themselves to carry their own distinct values and thus represent at least a quantitative increase in realized values.

A further essential fact about values qua values reveals that the “same value cannot be both positive and negative; every non-negative value is a positive value; every non-positive value is a negative value.”⁵ Scheler admonishes the reader that the preceding insight is not derived from a mere application of the law of non-contradiction, nor from the law of excluded middle, since it has nothing to do with the being or non-being of values but with their intrinsic essential character. The insight into the absolute self-exclusiveness between positive and negative values is established from the very content of values themselves, whose essential interconnections parallel the rules of pure logic, but do not emanate from

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

them. In effect, the above-mentioned two logical laws, in so far as the order of foundation is concerned, in Scheler's opinion, must be viewed as subordinate to the order of being. Thus he says that the "principle of contradiction is valid for being [...] because the essential interconnection fulfilling it is fulfilled in all being."⁶ Or again, in his words, the "propositions 'A is B' and 'A is not B' cannot agree with each other *a priori*, because being excludes this possibility."⁷

Based on the aforementioned essential fact is the principle of valuation: "It is impossible to hold that the same value is both positive and negative."⁸ Eventually, Scheler transposes this principle to the domain of the will and gives it the following enunciation: "We cannot at the same time desire and despise the same value-complex."⁹ It is an evident proposition; that is to say, it reflects an *a priori* feature of all value-apprehension and consequently cannot be refuted by any number of inductive experiences. Indeed, Scheler does stop to consider several instances from life, wherein the individual in identical circumstances seems to opt for different things, which *prima facie* assumes the appearance of undermining the principle of valuation. So, he relates the example of two legal cases which are in every respect the same except that in one a man's friend is involved, in the other – his foe, and the man is said to behave differently in each of those cases. Again, what shall we make of a man who denies the other what he permits himself

in the same situation, or of someone, who changes his mind with respect to one and the same thing without supplying us with the least reason why he did so. Are we not here confronted with tangible exceptions to the principle of valuation? Scheler thinks we are not. The truth is that every change in preference is preceded by a change in one's vantage point which leads to the perception of a new aspect of a value or simply of a new value. The object may bear manifold values, and the intention which now addresses itself to one value now to another in the same being is therefore attributed to one and the same being, though different aspects of it. Thus, of the above examples Scheler says that the "one concerned considers situations as different when they are the same, he takes his own situation to be of a different value than that of the other, and he takes the state of affairs to be changed when it is the same."¹⁰

Ethical values and their bearers

The ethical values of 'good' and 'evil' pertain exclusively to persons. Let us avail ourselves of the passage found on page 28 of the Formalism:

That which can be called originally 'good' and 'evil,' i.e., that which bears the non-formal values of 'good' and 'evil' prior to and independent of all individual acts, is the 'person,' the being of the person himself.¹¹

This conviction of Scheler's debates Immanuel Kant's assertion that goodness and evilness are moral attributes which

6 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 82.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 84.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

are possessed fundamentally and without further qualification only by acts of willing. Thus the value of a person for Kant is circumscribed by the value of his will. On this item Scheler disagrees with the eminent philosopher and – though he merely intimates it and does not actually pronounce it – Scheler at least entertains the question, whether vice versa is not more admissible, to wit, whether it is not the case that the “value of the will” is assessed “by the value of the person.”¹² Later on in his work, however, Scheler converts this precocious suggestion into solid persuasion of his and argues that “everything else [besides the person] can be good or evil only by reference to persons.”¹³ All actions, deeds, inner dispositional states, nay, even volition itself, therefore, are good or evil insofar as the person who possesses them is good or evil.

A plausible reason for appropriating such a view, which, it must be noted, Scheler does not purveyed in the immediate text, may still be learnt from certain passages found in his other work, *On the Eternal in Man*. There the author maintains that “it is always the features, qualities and activities which retain a mere abstract and general character, so long as we do not know the individual to whom they belong.”¹⁴ Later on he appends that an “experience only becomes a concrete experience (and not just the notion or semblance of such a thing), inasmuch as I thereby apprehend an individual self in it [...]”¹⁵ We are forced

to somewhat prescind from the context of the just quoted passages, wherein Scheler is occupied with the demonstration that our perception of other persons can by no means be accounted for and thereby reduced to the bare conglomerate of sensible experiences. Nevertheless, one thing should not escape our notice: namely, that to insulate acts, which are moral by being personal, and personal – by belonging to a definite individual, from the person, who commits them, is to divest them of their ethical significance. Even a will, if distanced from its personal proprietor, can be neither good nor evil, for these values may be extended to it only as a derivation of the values borne directly by that person and him alone.

If Scheler’s argumentation and conclusion are endorsed – which I still hesitate to do – it still remains an intricate task to explicate the mode in which a person is said to be good or evil. We may rightfully wish to be informed, whether the qualities of good and evil are something acquired by a person in the course of time and chosen activities; or is a given person, just by being the person he is, already good or evil. The latter assertion is outrageous, a monstrous sort of “deterministic personalism,” which is, apropos, a contradiction in terms, while the former may either lead us back to Kant in that the goodness or evilness of a person is due to the goodness or evilness of his will, or else the values of a person must be recognized as a distinct value-modality, though not unrelated, to that of ethical values. The latter is my personal conviction. Persons qua persons, I hold, are neither good, nor bad, but personal – and personal,

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁴ Scheler, Max. *On the Eternal in Man*, p. 166.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

moreover, in such a way as to prevent the possibility of its negative counterpart, the disvalue of the anti-personal, since a person, inasmuch as he loses his personhood, is de-personalized. Unfortunately, we must set aside these problems for some other occasion.

From Scheler's last thesis, i.e., that 'good' and 'evil' are essentially personal values, it instantly follows that all bearers of ethical values must be "real."¹⁶ That is to say, concrete persons – good or evil, better or worse – are conceivable only as existing, for a person's personal value and its real being stand and fall together¹⁷. Without an existing person, all one is left with is, at best, words and notions, yet no material, i.e., existing instance of good and evil.

Moreover, since for Scheler no person may be treated as an object – and this is not a moral injunction but an essential fact about persons and their experience – and, since, as we have seen, the ethical categories of 'good' and 'evil' may truly signify only persons, any bearer of ethical values, in the degree in which he bears them, cannot be an object.

Scheler's theory of the person is propounded in Chapter 6 of the Formalism. In addition, it will likely be of benefit as well as of interest to consult some of the motives, found, but with few exceptions, in writings

16 Scheler, Max. *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values: A New Attempt toward the Foundation of an Ethical Personalism*, p. 86.

17 "It is intrinsically impossible for the value of personality to be given in advance of its existence (and not merely of its character), for there can be no such thing as value apart from existence, either in appearance or in reality." (Max Scheler, *On the Nature of Sympathy*, p. 228.)

other than the Formalism, which surround Scheler's conviction that it is "out of the question" to approach persons as objects. Without attempting to be comprehensive, I shall simply enumerate some of these motives, while at the same time supplying the relevant passages in the footnotes.

There are times when Scheler closely associates the notion of objectivity with that of thingness. As a result, a person is never a thing and therefore never an object¹⁸.

Scheler distinguishes between the being of objects and non-objects and the objective identity of that being. The two, according to him, need not to coincide. In any case, philosophical knowledge, being by nature a kind of conceptual knowledge, may never stretch beyond the objective identity of being. Yet, a person in its 'dynamic unfolding' cannot be summed up and, as it were, "encapsulated" in a concept or an idea, which are fixed meaning-units, whereas a person is alive, free to develop in a multitude of directions. But all that cannot be conceptualized, cannot also be objectified¹⁹.

18 "For the person is not a thing; nor does the person possess the nature of thingness, [...] the person is, above all, outside the entire sphere of thingness, which is a part of the sphere of objects" (Max Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values: A New Attempt toward the Foundation of an Ethical Personalism*, p. 29).

19 "At all events, philosophy is knowing" (*Ibid.*, p. 74). "But we have to make the sharpest possible distinction between the being of objects (and non-objects) and the objective identity of that being; *a priori*, the final limits of that identity are also the limits of which the objects may be known. The entity may in fact extend far beyond the objectifiable identity (*Ibid.*, p. 77). "For to conceive means to reduce the object of a concept in terms of other concepts" (Max Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man*, p. 170).

Persons, in contrast to the world of organic and inorganic items, can never be submitted to objective observation, analysis, or any other sort of spontaneous investigation. Persons as such have both the freedom and the power to conceal or reveal themselves and thus cannot be reduced to mere truths about objective facts²⁰. (It must be recalled that in Schelerian terminology the objective essence of, say, motion is very different from the real act of motion; similarly, the essence of personhood is not to be confused with a concrete person as an act, for it is only to the latter that the personal value applies.)

In Scheler's view, philosophical knowledge is but one way of participating in what he dubs "essential reality."²¹ It is, likely, not even the most direct and ultimate way. There are also other channels of participation such as emotionality, love, hate, willing, all of which are modes of partaking in reality, yet most of which relate to the world of experience in a fashion free from

the need to objectify. Scheler maintains not that persons cannot be given to us by way of other types of participation, but that they cannot be given in one specific sense, that is to say, as objects²².

Finally, let us address one more question. Scheler holds that persons, who are original bearers of ethical values, are under no circumstance given as objects. Still, what about this very proposition? Does not it make a claim to some truth? Is not the object of that truth persons themselves? Is such an assertion even conceivable without reference to some facts, in our case persons, as objective? These, I deem, to remain valid questions even without undermining Scheler's insight. For him only an individual concrete existing person can be a bearer of ethical values. And it is this same person who cannot be approached as an object. Now, the proposition that persons are non-objectifiable rests on the general essence of personhood, which, no matter how much it may tell us about living persons, is not, alas!, a person, thus can carry no ethical significance, and is indeed a piece of "objective knowledge."

20 "[P]ersons cannot be objectified, in love or any other genuine act, not even in cognition. Personality is that unity of substance, baffling observation and eliding analysis, which the individual experiences as inherent in all the acts he performs; no 'object' therefore, let alone a 'thing.' That part of others which does present itself objectively to me is never more than (1) the physical body; (2) its corporeal unity; (3) the self and the (vital) 'soul' belonging to it" (Max Scheler, *On the Nature of Sympathy*, p. 167). "Personality and spirit represent something which is quite beyond the bounds of spontaneous scrutiny, since it is free to decide whether to make itself available and knowable or not. Persons, in fact, can be silent and keep their thoughts to themselves, and that is quite different from simply saying nothing. It is an active attitude, whereby they can themselves conceal their qualities from spontaneous scrutiny to any desired extent [...]" (*Ibid.*, p. 225).

21 Scheler, Max. *On the Eternal in Man*, p. 74.

22 "The (spiritual) person, as such, is intrinsically incapable of being treated as an object, for its mode of being is only accessible by virtue of participation (or reproduction) in thought, volition or feeling, just as an act is [...]" (Max Scheler, *On the Nature of Sympathy*, p. 224). "Thus it would, in effect, be a major error to assert that a being capable only of feeling, loving, hating and willing (without any trace of a theoretical capacity, i.e. for the apprehension of objects), could have no sort of evidence for the existence of other people" (*Ibid.*, p. 229). "In the nature of things our emotional sensibility has a less limited and more inclusive range of value-apprehension than our mental perception and intellect" (*On the Eternal in Man*, p. 351).

Higher and lower values

All values form among themselves a unified and closed system, which Scheler terms the 'order of ranks of values.' It should be heeded from the beginning that there is but a single order, though many ranks and values. The existence of such a system, wherein each value stands in mutual *a priori* relations to each other value, reveals one more essential datum pertaining to values as such, to wit, that values exhibit 'levels' of being 'higher' and 'lower.' This intrinsic arrangement of values into higher and lower one is grounded in the objective nature of values and is therefore "absolutely invariable,"²³ being thus quite indifferent to the subjective variations which may occur in the faculty of preferring or other means of value-cognition. Scheler notes that,

This order lies in the essence of values themselves, as does the difference between 'positive' and 'negative' values. It does not belong simply to 'values known' by us.²⁴

The special act through which one apprehends values as higher or lower is called 'preferring.' A value and its height are given in the actual preferring, never in advance of it. Furthermore, Scheler warns the reader that value-preference is an authentic capacity for value-cognition not to be equated with that of choosing, which is always a subsequent act upon preferring. One cannot choose without having prior made a preference in favor of a higher value, yet for Scheler one is still able to prefer a higher

value and yet undergo no actual choice. In the words of the philosopher, "I can prefer roses to carnations,' without thinking of a choice."²⁵ All choosing consists in discrimination among deeds, whereas preferring is ever directed towards goods and values. The kind of preferring which has to do with various goods is termed by Scheler "empirical preferring"; and the kind of preferring which has to do with "values themselves" is termed '*a priori* preferring.'²⁶

Two additional points about preferring: 1) its effectiveness is not constricted by the givenness "in feeling" of a plurality of values, to wit, a single value can be preferred regardless whether it is or it is not consciously accompanied by other values. 2) Even when such a plurality of values is given, it, nevertheless, plays no founding role for the act of preferring. To substantiate these claims, Scheler conceives of those situations where a "deed is given as preferable to other without our thinking of these other deeds or our representing them in detail."²⁷ He thinks as well that "there may be given, in the act of preferring, the fact that 'there exists a value higher than the one given in feeling' without the givenness of this value itself in feeling."²⁸

It is due time now to voice some critical remarks: firstly, Scheler seems to shift the respect under which he posed his initial observation by, on the one hand, saying that a value given in feeling can be preferred without there being given other values (supposedly also in feeling!), and, on the

23 Scheler, Max. *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values: A New Attempt toward the Foundation of an Ethical Personalism*, p. 88.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

25 *Ibid.*

26 See *Ibid.*

27 *Ibid.*, p. 88.

28 *Ibid.*

other, that a value given in feeling can be preferred without there being given other values – this time, however – in thinking and representation. The difference between the two statements is apparent from the fact that the former may be false, while the latter is true, i.e., it might in effect be the case that whenever a value given in feeling is preferred, it is done so only over against some other value(s) contemporaneously given in feeling, while it still remaining true that a value given in feeling can be preferred without other values (behold, even that value itself!) being thought of or represented.

Secondly, to speak of something as “preferable to” something and than to qualify that it is preferred without that something amounts to speaking something as preferable to something regardless that something, which, I must concede, is not very intelligible, especially when it is a facet of a philosophical discourse. Thirdly, it is my contention, that the awareness that “there exists a value higher than the one given in feeling without the givenness of this value itself in feeling” is in fact not given in the act of preferring but is derived by way of inference from another more basic intuition stemming directly from the act of preferring. This basic intuition is the following: “Here and now, in my own personal act of preferring this concrete existing value, I simultaneously perceive that this value is not the highest or the lowest one.” Perhaps it will sound paradoxical, yet the same value would be the highest, even if there existed no other values. In contrast, the same value could not be higher or lower, if there were no other values, be-

cause to be higher or lower is to be higher or lower than.

These unfortunate theoretical entanglements emerge because Scheler is just not clear enough concerning the distinction obtaining between ‘simple preferring’²⁹ and ‘preferring to.’ The former may also be called ‘preferring by affirmation’ or ‘absolute preferring’ and the latter – ‘preferring by contrast’ or ‘relative preferring.’ Here are some of the features that set the two apart: 1) ‘Absolute’ or ‘simple preferring’ is immediately and exclusively focused on a specific value or value-group without regard to other values or value-groups. ‘Relative’ or ‘preferring to’ makes a value its theme always in the context of other values by literally preferring this value to that value. 2) Absolute preferring is directed only to positive values. That is to say, no negative value or disvalue can be preferred in the absolute sense. Relative preferring can be directed to both values and disvalues, though not both at the same time. It is possible to image a case in which a man, wandering through the jungle, is captured by a tribe of primitive people who practice cannibalism and circumcision. To the man’s surprise he is allowed to stay with the tribe – which is the only means for him to survive in the fatal jungle – yet under the condition that either he gets circumcised or else he must partake of their cannibalist

²⁹ Most of currently prevailing sense of the word ‘prefer’ have in one way or another to do with two or more things to one of which is given some sort of priority. Nevertheless, there exist senses which do not of necessity imply relationality as, for instance, “to promote or advance to a rank or position” or “to bring forward or lay before one for consideration” (*Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1990).

practices. Now, both proposals seem to the man as disvalues, yet he is bound to prefer one of them to the other, though at the same time in the absolute sense he prefers none. 3) In as much as there is preferring of positive values at all, absolute preferring must necessarily take place, while relative preferring must not. On the other hand, no relative preferring is possible without one of the values in question being preferred absolutely, since, if it were not preferred for its own sake, there could be no reason why it should be preferred to anything else. 4) The opposite counterpart of absolute preferring of a value is absolute rejecting of a disvalue. The opposite counterpart of relative preferring of a value to (an)other value(s) is relative placing-after.

Scheler issues a caveat that the order of the ranks of values can be described and exhibited only from its inner *a priori* evidence, yet “never be deduced or derived”³⁰ by a mere logical procedure. This, however, appends the philosopher, must not hamper one from inquiring into those essential properties and interconnections of values which tend to accompany their variations in height. At least three times, nonetheless, the reader is cautiously instructed that such an inquiry cannot be expected to demonstrate the “basic nature of ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ values”³¹ or the “ultimate meaning of value-heights.”³² At best, it should be construed as a “confirmation, but not a proof”³³ thereof.

30 Scheler, Max. *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values: A New Attempt toward the Foundation of an Ethical Personalism*, p. 89.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 94.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 97.

33 *Ibid.*, pp. 98–99.

Endurability

Common wisdom has it that goods which stay with us for longer periods of time should be favored above those which vanish and expire rapidly. Scheler reasonably objects that, if taken at its face value, this maxim must be cast aside from philosophy. For it takes just a preliminary glance at the world around us to see its futility. Fire in a wink of an eye can destroy a lofty work of art; a drop of hot water is apt to frustrate the life of a man – to use Pascal’s image or a brick may bring to a halt the consciousness of a genius³⁴, – all these are the simple examples by which Scheler indicates the apparent weakness of the wise-saying just quoted. He explains that such and similar errors arise from the naïveté to confine the phenomenon of endurability merely to goods and their lasting effects in objective time-span. Even so, once the notion of endurability is deepened and appropriated to values qua values, it will indeed, according to Scheler, bear positive results in the philosophy of value.

To begin with, it is values as such which are properly said to endure or vary respectively to their being higher or lower. Secondly, the enduring of a value is a phenomenally distinct datum from the enduring of its actual or possible bearer. “A value is enduring,” tells Scheler, “through its quality of having the phenomenon of being ‘able’ to exist through time, no matter how long its thing-bearer may exist.”³⁵ Enduring can be understood, thus, as a kind

34 See *Ibid.*, p. 90.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 91.

of *a priori* value-disposition with respect to the possibility of its temporal existence that is founded in the very “being of value.” Moreover, the phenomenon of endurance or variation is witnessed both in a given value and the act of its apprehension. Scheler illustrates this by pointing out that in love both the personal value of the other and the act of love manifest an indelible characteristic of “unceasing endurance.”³⁶ If it is authentic love, and not a case of delusive fascination, then exclamations such as “I love you now” or “for a certain time” are out of the question, that is, they are incompatible with an essential feature in love, i. e., that it endures. On the other hand, the value and act of, say, partnership, which is another example given by Scheler, by its nature rests on a “bond of interests” and their usefulness in pursuing common purposes and is thereby, on contrast to love, “transient.”³⁷

In a similar fashion, our experiences of values in preferring and feeling exhibit the same awareness of value-duration or variation. Thus, to cite Scheler’s words, “it lies in the essence of ‘blissfulness’ and its opposite, ‘despair’, to persist and ‘endure’ throughout the vicissitudes of ‘happiness’ and ‘unhappiness,’ no matter how long they may last in objective time.”³⁸ This insight, correspondingly, applies to happiness versus joy as well as joy versus mere comfort, and so on.

Another essential mark closely associated with the height of values is their divisibility or non-divisibility as they [values]

come to be shared by several people. The less a value is divisible in the preceding sense, the higher it is. Scheler brings this characteristic into relief by contrasting the values of the sensibly agreeable to spiritual and holy values. The former type is divisible in that a given value stands in such a relation to its bearer that both must be parted in strict accord with the number of those participating in them. As a result, three people can partake of the value of a piece of bread only by cutting it in three halves; moreover, the value of bread diminishes in parallel to its material size or extension. “It is therefore,” states Scheler, “essentially impossible for one and the same value of the value-series of the ‘sensibly agreeable’ to be enjoyed by several beings without the division of its bearer and of the value itself.”³⁹ At last, it must as well be noted that essentially divisible values, far from uniting, possess the inherent potency to introduce similar divisions amidst those who experience them.

Quite the converse holds of spiritual values. Here the experience of a value, such as is detected, for instance, in the beauty of a painting or the holiness of a sacred object, in no way requires that the extension of that value or its bearer be partitioned according to its distribution. It is claimed by Scheler – and I fully consent – that, “It lies in the essence of values of this kind to be communicable without limit and without any division and diminution.”⁴⁰ Finally, in apprehending and feeling such values we undergo a profound sense of unity

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

and communal reciprocation. Scheler's philosophical verdict, as a result, namely, that less divisible values are at the same time higher values, seems to rely on a solid phenomenologically based argumentation.

Further, values are higher or lower in as much as they mutually found and are founded by each other. To follow is Scheler's formal definition of founding: "A value B is the 'foundation' of a value A if a certain value A can only be given on the condition of the givenness of a certain value B."⁴¹ Consequently, a useful thing is always preceded by something agreeable, for which it serves as a means. Likewise, the value of the sensible agreeable is conditioned by the givenness of the value of vitality or life, since if life as a whole is not appreciated, nor is anything agreeable, which is a constitutive part of that life. The same interconnective pattern occurs as one ascends the scale of value. Under the guidance of Scheler we are directed to observe that "life [...] has a value [...] only insofar as there are spiritual values and spiritual acts through which they are grasp."⁴²

In his opinion, this time rather dubious, "If values were 'relative' to life alone, life itself would have no value."⁴³ I said, "dubious," because, on the one hand, we have the value of life that is founded in some higher value, on the other hand, there exists at least one value, which for Scheler is the "value of an infinitely personified spirit,"⁴⁴ that is not founded in a higher value, since it is the highest. Would this, we may wonder,

also imply that it must possess no value on account of it's being not founded in a higher value? Besides, animals possess both the value of the sensibly agreeable and the value of life, though we have no evidence that they are also proprietors of spiritual values. It seems to follow therefrom that in the case of animals the value of life happens to be the highest value and is not founded in any higher value. Similarly, I see no reason why this must be different with the humans or any other beings which rise beyond vital values to encompass higher spheres of value, as well.

Now, that I have surreptitiously begun a series of criticisms, allow me to continue. As early as in his definition of what he means by the notion of foundation, Scheler overlooks certain ambiguities attached to the term 'foundation' and the object of its reference. Thus, he begins by construing 'foundation' as a relation among values themselves, yet in the course diverts to a relation among the 'givennesses' of those values. In general, no clear distinction is given, let alone maintained, between the role of foundation as it may function amid values themselves, or in the genesis of certain values with respect to others, i.e. their realization which must lead to an essential inquiry as to foundational relations among actual value-bearers, and, finally, amid diverse value-perceptions in the sense of which of them has founding precedence over which.

Can it not be the case that the order of foundation in objective values represents just the opposite to the order of foundation in value-apprehension such that value A which is objectively higher than value B, and therefore is a condition for the latter's

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

existence, in the sphere of value-cognition can be given only under the condition of the prior givenness of value B? Scheler himself, though not in the section on “The Non-Formal *A Priori* in Ethics,” implies that there must exist at least one sense in which higher values do not operate as a foundation for lower values, when he asserts in a somewhat different context the following:

This world and human nature are everywhere so ordered that the lower, natural and instinctive forces can unleash higher forms of activity, but cannot create them; they bid them to seek, but not necessarily bring them to find.⁴⁵

Nor can we close our eyes to Nicolai Hartmann’s insight regarding the relative strength of lower value-categories and the relative weakness of higher ones⁴⁶. These observations, of course, cannot be worked out immediately, yet they do call for a critical approach to the texts under question.

A further essential interconnection among values, which, according to Scheler, manifests itself hand in hand with value-heights, is the “depth of contentment.”⁴⁷ Put briefly, a higher value affords a deeper contentment in its percipient. By ‘contentment’ Scheler does not mean the experience of pleasure. He describes it, rather, as an “experience of fulfillment” evoked by the “appearance” of an (objective) value which

has been intended⁴⁸. In addition, Scheler stresses the distinction between the “degree” and “depth” of contentment, even though he refrains from explaining the precise difference. I, personally, am inclined to surmise that various degrees of contentment may be attained at the same depth of contentment; to wit, should there were a grain of truth in such an interpretation, then ‘degree of contentment’ would signify the relative intensity of experience inasmuch as a given value is fulfilled in one’s intuition, and ‘depth of contentment’ would signify the kind of experience inasmuch as this or that kind of value is fulfilled in one’s intuition.

Although the meaning of ‘depth of contentment’ is left off for the (let us hope) fine imagination of the reader, Scheler does define the sense of ‘deeper’ (and less deep) contentment. His formulation thereof is the following:

The contentment in feeling one value is deeper than the contentment in feeling another value if the former proves to be independent of the latter while the latter remains dependent on the former.⁴⁹

Scheler illustrates this by leading us to observe that such commonplaces as enjoying a stroll, a party, or a fleeting joke may easily be frustrated if the person feels discontent in, say, his moral life, which represents a sphere of values higher than those in danger of frustration. The conclusion, therefore, suggests itself that there does exist a real relation between the fact that moral values are higher than sensibly agreeable ones and the fact that the contentment

45 Scheler, Max. *On the Eternal in Man*, p. 113.

46 See the relevant footnote on page xxxviii of Max Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values: A New Attempt toward the Foundation of an Ethical Personalism*.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 96.

48 See *Ibid.*

49 *Ibid.*

of experiencing the latter is dependent on and thus less deep than the contentment of experiencing the former.

It is of significance, I think, to notice that phenomenally Scheler's statements are valid only under one supposition (which is again unarticulated in the text); namely, that the contentment in feeling of a higher value is a condition for the contentment in feeling of a lesser value only when the subject of contentment is consciously awakened to the rank of values to which the higher value belongs. It is true that a moral or spiritual crisis among lovers may incapacitate their sexual life and its proper appreciation, yet this already presupposes that the lovers are acquainted with such values, they know, in other words, that there is a moral and spiritual dimension to the world. On the other hand, one must be exceptionally heedless not to see that copious multitude of humans who are "vivacious" in their uncurbed sexual activities to the very extremities of their bodily strengths, entirely uninhibited, and, for all we know, quite content with the range of experiences yielded by their life-style. Cut away from its spiritual thrust as their sensible contentment appears, it is nevertheless a contentment of experiencing certain values, though the possibility of such a contentment is no evidence in the least that these people are all well and content with their morality. Indeed, neither they are content with their moral lives, nor discontent, they simply, and no less tragically, endure in the dungeon of being where morality is a thing unheard of, let alone a thing encumbering the few and puny sensations they may hope for.

The last essential interconnection between the nature of values and their height lies in the (progressive) relativity or absoluteness of values. There are types of values that may be said to exist relative to certain types of acts through which a perceiving being grasps them. Scheler has in mind the values of the sensibly agreeable. For the latter exist only for beings of sensible constitution. As a result, "for a non-sensible being there are no values of the agreeable."⁵⁰ Similarly, the values of nobility and vulgarity are relative to "living beings in general."⁵¹ The sort of value-relativity, which is also called by Scheler the "first order" relativity, ought not to be confounded with a "second order" relativity of the "kinds of goods."⁵² The latter emanates from the interaction between the psychological and physiological character of some concrete organism and how it is affected by its object. Scheler illustrates this by pointing out that the same things could be poisonous for one creature, while healthy for another. Let us, however, make no haste to approve of Scheler's thesis, since its claim, though it is apparent in the domain of sensibility, becomes less obvious once we move on to consider higher goods as, for instance, a work of art. Here, it seems, the analogy with sensible objects must instantaneously be renounced, because, to follow my own conviction, it is impermissible and erroneous to speak of the possibility of the same work of art being beautiful for a creature of one constitution and ugly for some other creature of a different constitution. Consequently, the second

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁵² *Ibid.*

order relativity is not merely the relativity of the “kind of goods” but, more accurately, a relativity of some kinds of goods as opposed to others.

According to Scheler, there are other kinds of values which are different from relative values. They are termed “absolute.” The faculty of perception corresponding to such values is described as a “type of [‘pure’] feeling that is independent of the nature of sensibility and of life as such.”⁵³ All moral values are absolute values.

Both the relativity and absoluteness of values is discovered by way of “emotive immediacy”⁵⁴ in the values themselves. In other words, we know that a value is relative because as such it has been given to us. Any introduction of deliberation, inference, or induction is superfluous. In Scheler’s opinion, it is even unfortunate, since it tends “more to cover the immediacy of the fact of the self-given ‘relativity’ or ‘absoluteness’ of a felt value.”⁵⁵

Having thus elucidated the two principal notions, let us notice together with Scheler that it is an “essential interconnection that values given in immediate intuition ‘as higher’ are values that are given as nearer to absolute values in feeling and preferring.”⁵⁶ It follows, then, that every value the higher it is, the closer to absolute values and the less relative it is.

I must confess that the above statement, which is supposed by Scheler to capture an ‘essential interconnection,’ has the countenance of a tautology. To recapitulate, values

are said to be higher when they are nearer to absolute values. Now, by an ‘absolute’ value Scheler means the ‘highest’ value. So, the preceding statement may be re-phrased in the following way: A value is higher when it is nearer to the highest value, or, to render it even more primitive, to be higher is to be closer to the highest. But is not this the very sense of “higher” irrespective of the context in which it is used, be it values or any other entity?

Moreover, Scheler’s reasons for distinguishing values which are relative from those which are absolute does not strike as satisfactory, either. For the paradigm of relativity which manifests itself between sensibly agreeable values and sensible creatures, who alone may perceive them, is just as valid even when one reaches as high and sublime values as the absolute ones. For these, too, in the same sense are relative in their existence to a faculty of apprehension, namely, what Scheler calls “‘pure’ feeling.”⁵⁷ There is a further parallel which is detectable in both so-called relative and absolute values. Scheler indicates that on account of their relativity the values of the sensibly agreeable (which are relative) do not exist for beings which have not a sensible nature and are purely spiritual. Even so, a very similar, if not identical, ‘non-existing-for’ may as well be observed in a creature who has got no spiritual faculty whatsoever, though it is still capable of enjoying both agreeable and vital values. Hence, for such a creature there could exist no spiritual value just as no agreeable one could exist for a creature which is purely spiritual. We

53 *Ibid.*

54 *Ibid.*, p. 99.

55 *Ibid.*

56 *Ibid.*, p. 98.

57 *Ibid.*

conclude, therefore, that it is by no means enough to explain the difference between relative and absolute values in terms of 'existing for,' for in this respect there is more similitude between relative and absolute values, as they are designated by Scheler, than difference.

Value-modalities and their *a priori* relations

Scheler's description of value-modalities as the "systems of qualities of non-formal values"⁵⁸ assists us but very little in understanding what he intends by that notion. Once, however, we familiarize ourselves with the examples and additional remarks provided by the philosopher in the course of sketching the cardinal divisions among value-modalities, we shall have achieved, let us hope, more clarity.

There are, according to Scheler, four mutually irreducible value-modalities: 1) sensibly agreeable values, 2) vital values, (3) spiritual values, and 4) holy values. Let us briefly consider each of these value-ranks separately.

The first value-modality designates those values which are given in preferring as sensibly agreeable or disagreeable. In the presence of such values, we undergo various sensations given as pleasant or painful ('feeling-states') on account of which we either rejoice or suffer ('function of experience').

Scheler states that the "difference between the values of agreeable and disagreeable as such is an absolute difference,

clearly given prior to any cognition of things."⁵⁹ Moreover, in the sphere of preferring the agreeable is always preferable to the disagreeable. This evaluative mode, which is rooted in the *a priori* structure of values, must of necessity accompany any being capable of value-perception. Should, as a result, somebody declare, continues Scheler, that he has witnessed an animal in whom this order of preferring is reversed, we must disbelieve him, since no experience of contingent facts can run counter to what is *a priori* determined in an essence. The odd conduct of the animal must thus have been guided either by "things" whose agreeability or disagreeability is opposite to ours, or by a higher value-modality which motivated the animal to persevere the disagreeable for the former's sake, or by the depravity of the animal's drives which enables it to experience as agreeable what is in fact harmful for its life. Consequently, no inductive observation can overturn this essential truth about preferring, for the success and intelligibility of any such inductive observation rests on the "presupposition" of that truth⁶⁰.

The next higher value-modality in the order of ranks of values is that of vital values. They are given and preferred in "vital feeling"⁶¹ with its corresponding feeling-states of health and illness, bodily strength and weakness, etc. In so far as a being bears vital values or disvalues, he is said to be "noble" or "base" as well as "excellent" and "bad."

Scheler emphasizes time and again that vital values represent an "entirely original

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁶⁰ See *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

modality,”⁶² because life as such has a value which is not reducible to either agreeable or spiritual values. “For there is,” according to him, “ultimately one life only, and one vital value which comprehends all things living.”⁶³

Spiritual values make up yet another original value-modality which is underivable from either biological life as such or its agreeable aspects. Spiritual values comprise three groups: aesthetic values or the values of the beautiful and ugly, ethical values or the values of the right and wrong, and intellectual values or the values of the pure cognition of truth. The appropriate acts corresponding to spiritual values are the spiritual feelings of love and hatred which engender in the percipient the feeling-states of spiritual joy and sorrow. The two sources of evidence for the autonomy and originality of spiritual values, which, I believe, must also apply to the rest of value-ranks, according to Scheler, are the fact that there exist values that “ought’ to be sacrificed for them [spiritual values]”⁶⁴ or other values for which spiritual values themselves must be sacrificed, and the fact that “spiritual feeling-states vary independent of changes”⁶⁵ in lower values. As I understand, thus, one way of observing the irreducibility of one value-rank to another value-rank is to observe the latter’s irreducibility to the former. It is that irreducibility which allows for a possible value-conflict and the subsequent preferring of one value to another based on

the order of axiological primacy. Further, it is phenomenologically evident that the source of an original mode of perception lies in an original object. In the area of values, as a result, from an encounter with an original experience in value-apprehension one is necessarily led to an original class of values as its objective correlates.

Values of the holy and unholy constitute the final and highest modality in the order of ranks of values. Scheler notes that the things bearing values of holiness belong to the sphere of “absolute objects” and are given as such in intuition. The absoluteness in question, moreover, is not grounded in some determinate quality which unifies a set of objects into one species versus other possible species of objects. For Scheler, in fact, “any object” is absolute which is “given in the ‘absolute sphere.’”⁶⁶ The peculiar act through which we apprehend values of the holy is a “specific kind of love” that has as its intention a person. Consequently, the being which is holy must be personal, or, as Scheler puts it, it must possess a “value of the person.”⁶⁷ Finally, the feeling-states born as a result of the above kind of love extend from “blissfulness” to “despair” which are related to one’s proximity to the divine.

As matters stand presently, barely any criticism is due, nor is there anything in the text that merits a serious pause of doubt. It was not Scheler’s instant goal in the Formalism to undertake a comprehensive discussion of all the possible questions directly or indirectly associated with the order of ranks of values, questions which have to

62 *Ibid.*, p. 107.

63 Scheler, Max. *On the Nature of Sympathy*, p. 106.

64 Scheler, Max. *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values: A New Attempt toward the Foundation of an Ethical Personalism*, p. 107.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 108.

66 *Ibid.*

67 *Ibid.*, p. 109.

do with the “ideas of person and community” such as the “pure types of persons” and the “pure types of communal forms of togetherness.”⁶⁸ Rather, his concern was with the “most elementary points” which must needs suffice – and in this I give him a heartfelt consent – to establish the truth

that there exists an order of ranks of values such that the “modality of vital values is higher than that of the agreeable and the disagreeable; the modality of spiritual values is higher than that of vital values; the modality of the holy is higher than that of spiritual values.”⁶⁹

68 *Ibid.*

69 *Ibid.*, p. 110.

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