MAX SCHELER
Eugene Kelly

Life and works

Max Ferdinand Scheler was born in Munich in 1874. He began studies in philosophy and psychology in Munich and for a short time studied in Berlin with the intention of becoming a physician. Two Berlin professors, the philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey and the Neo-Kantian sociologist Georg Simmel, influenced him to turn to philosophy, and he moved to Jena in 1896 to study with Rudolf Eucken. In 1897, he completed his dissertation under Eucken’s direction, a study of the relation between logical and ethical principles; in 1899, Eucken approved his habilitation, a study of the problems of method in philosophy. In that year, he was baptized a Catholic in Munich and, until he renounced theism in or around 1923, exerted considerable influence in Germany and abroad as a Catholic thinker. His first marriage was to Amélie Wollman, who brought with her a child from her first marriage. He was appointed to Munich as Privatdozent in 1906, but lost his tenure in 1912 after a scandal involving presumed improprieties with a woman. After his divorce from Amélie, Scheler married Maerit Furtwängler, sister of the conductor Wilhelm.

After 1912, Scheler was forced to seek employment as a private scholar. He lectured for a fee, and worked as an editor, notably with the main publishing organ of the newly emerging phenomenological movement Jahrbuch für Philosophie und Phänomenologische Forschung (Yearbook for Philosophy and Phenomenological Research), whose first edition in 1913 published both Husserl’s Ideen I and the first part of Scheler’s Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik (Formalism in Ethics and Non-formal Ethics of Values). His phenomenology of sympathy and of love and hate appeared that year; it was enlarged and published as Wesen und Formen der Sympathie (The Nature of Sympathy) in 1923. He lived during these years in both Berlin and Göttingen; Husserl was professor in Göttingen, and Scheler became a leading member of the Göttinger Kreis, which included such phenomenologists as Adolf Reinach, Hans Lipps, Hedwig Conrad-Martius, Edith Stein, and Roman Ingarten.

After the war, the efforts of Konrad Adenauer, the chief administrator of the city of Cologne, to restore the university of that city to its former status as a great Catholic university led to a new opportunity for Scheler, for he accepted a position there as professor of philosophy and sociology. After the completion and
publication in 1921 of his phenomenology of religious experience, “Die Wesensphänomenologie der Religion” in Vom Ewigen im Menschen (“The Phenomenology of Religion,” in The Eternal Man), his interests turned to the sociology of knowledge and to a critique of the pragmatic idea of knowledge, which were included in the volume entitled Die Wissensformen und die Gesellschaft (1926; The Forms of Knowledge and Society). The content of a never-completed work on metaphysics was limned in Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos (1927; The Place of Man in the Cosmos). A work on philosophical anthropology, which Scheler believed to be the culmination of his thought, never appeared, but its outlines may be seen in his last published work, a set of essays under the title Philosophische Weltanschauungen. He left six volumes of posthumous writings from all creative periods. He died in Frankfurt on May 19, 1928. The task of editing and publishing his Gesammelte Werke was left to his third wife, Maria Scheler née Scheu. After her death in 1969, the collected works were completed under the editorship of Manfred S. Frings of DePaul University in Chicago.

Scholars commonly divide Scheler’s academic output into three periods. The first includes his student years and immediately thereafter, when he was fighting his way free of Neo-Kantianism and psychologism; it culminated in a work entitled Logik, which he eventually withdrew from publication. The second period may be dated from 1901 or 1902, the contested date at which he first met Husserl. It is characterized by his adoption, transformation, and application of the phenomenological method; it centers around the nature of love as the source of human openness to knowledge of all being and essence and about the unobjectifiable human person as bearing the highest moral value. In a third and final period, usually dated after 1921, the phenomenological method is turned to ontological ends, in that the givens of phenomenology are used to construct what Scheler called a “possibly true” metaphysics of the Ground of Being as Spirit and Impulsion (Drang), and to interpret the moral role of human beings in the coming-to-be of the Deity as Person. These “periods” are used as a general rule of thumb, for Scheler would work on several manuscripts simultaneously; he revised his work frequently, and seems to have concerned himself little with the organization and coherence of the whole. We consider in this chapter those aspects of his thought that are contributions to phenomenological research.

The phenomenological standpoint

As both Husserl’s and Scheler’s concept of phenomenology evolved, it is difficult and perhaps not useful to make point-by-point contrasts between the two men’s conceptions. We must keep in mind that Scheler, the younger man, was for a time Husserl’s colleague as editor, and was dependent on him for professional advancement. In an early but posthumously published essay, “Phänomenologie und Erkenntnistheorie” (Scheler 1957–97: Vol. 10, “Phenomenology and Theory of Knowledge”), Scheler nonetheless registered his distance from contemporary representations of the phenomenological movement. Scheler insists, “A phenomenologically grounded philosophy must have as its basic character the most living, most intense
and unmediated experiential contact with the world itself, that is, with the things that are in question.... The phenomenological philosopher, thirsty for the beings given in reflective experience, seeks to drink from the ‘sources’ themselves in which the content of the world opens up’ (ibid.: 380). The phenomenologist reflects intuitively upon the meaning-elements “carried” by objects given to experience on the natural standpoint, where they function in language, and brings their contents to perfect givenness in a single intuitive act (Erlebnis), in which there is a congruence between the act and what is intended in it (ibid.: 443–45). He then seeks to “exhibit” these contents; that is, to describe and to dispute with others about what is given in some experience until the parties to the dispute are in agreement (ibid.: 397). In his later years, when Scheler developed his metaphysics of Spirit and Urge, the chief reason for his youthful alienation from Husserlian phenomenology becomes clearer. The phenomenological reduction, which in Husserl is an intellectual technique intended to bring a phenomenon before consciousness, requires an inward technique similar to that of Buddhism for repressing the vital drives so that the pure “being thus” of what is given to the human spirit may be given in all its fullness.

The a priori

According to Husserl, Hume and Kant had partial and inadequate conceptions of the notion of an a priori. Husserl extended the term beyond its designation of the analytic relation of ideas, and beyond its function as the formal condition of empirical, moral, and aesthetic judgment, and used it to denote the “material” content that conditions all knowledge upon the natural standpoint. This a priori content becomes an object of phenomenological reflection called “ideation” or “essential intuition,” terms used early on by both Husserl and Scheler. This concept of the a priori was the subject of the two men’s discussion of phenomenology when they first met in 1901 or 1902, of which Scheler’s description survives. He expressed to Husserl the opinion that “this writer [Scheler], dissatisfied with Kantian philosophy, ... had come to the conviction that what was given to our intuition was originally much richer in content than what could be accounted for by sensuous elements, by their genetic derivatives, and by logical patterns of unification.” Husserl, Scheler adds, “pointed out at once that in a new book on logic that was soon to appear [Logische Untersuchungen, vol. 2; Logical Investigations] he had undertaken an analogous enlargement of the concept of intuition upon the so-called ‘categorical intuition’” (Scheler 1957–97: Vol. 12, 308). For Scheler, these a priori “contents of categorical intuition” function in cognition neither as sensory data nor as logical form, but as the meaning-elements that fill out logical form and give meaning to the material of perception. This “enlargement” of the concept of the a priori can be expressed under five headings.

Essences and language

Phenomenological intuition is both immediate, insofar as it dispenses with all symbols for what is intended, and is immanent, in that the act is an intuition of its
immediate object alone, and points to nothing beyond itself. One grasps a single “phenomenon” in a single eidetic act. “The phenomenological experience is the one in which the totality of the signs, instructions, or kinds of determination in question find their last fulfillment” (Scheler 1957–97: Vol. 2, 70). The complex world of objects is “reduced” to the simple meanings a priori upon which all perceptions, imaginings, and emotions are founded. “As a priori we refer to all those elements of meaning and judgments that can come to self-givenness through an immediate intuition, apart from all forms of positing of the subjects that think them and their real natural characteristics, and apart from all positing of objects, to which they may be applied” (Scheler 1957–97: Vol. 2, 67).

**Essential relations**

The a priori phenomena are not independent of each other – atoms of meaning, as it were – but logically intertwined, both as essential relations (Wesznszusammenhände) and with reference to an order of logical priority (Fundierungsordnung). They include the formal logical structures of thought (i.e. the logical scaffolding upon which the empirical data of sense can be arranged by language), but others possess non-empirical content that functions non-thetically in the everyday perceptions in the lifeworld. All may be thematized and re-experienced phenomenologically. Thus the a priori – the Wesensreich – is a potentially endless system of logically interlocked meaning elements. The phenomena most deeply founded, that is, those that cannot be reduced to other meaning-elements that found them, are called the “pure facts.” Scheler writes,

What Kant called the “forms of intuition and understanding” are for phenomenological experience exhibitable givens. To be sure, there are such that are never at all “given” in the natural world-view and upon the scientific standpoint, but which are effective therein as principles and forms of selection. What does this tell us? It tells us that there is a firm order of foundation in which phenomena come to givenness in the two kinds of experience [i.e. upon the natural and the scientific standpoints], so that a phenomenon B cannot be given if a phenomenon A is not given “before” – in the temporal order. Hence spatiality, the quality of thingness, effectiveness, movement, change, etc., are neither added to a given object through the so-called “understanding” as forms of synthesis of its activity of relating what is given, nor even less abstracted from it – but rather all those things are material phenomena of a unique kind: each is the object of a careful and painful phenomenological investigation.

(Scheler 1957–97: Vol. 10, 415–17)

The a priori element in cognition is therefore not identical with the formal element. A phenomenon may be prior in the order of foundation to one phenomenon and yet another may be prior to it.

**Objectivity**

Human beings have the capacity for a direct intuitive awareness of the things themselves, which exist independently of their awareness of them. Neither
knowing-an-object nor being-known affects either of the terms of this relationship; human persons are noetically structured by our openness to this essential realm. We do not create essences. They are apprehended on the eidetic structures inherent in things. The mind comes to recognize meanings upon the figures (Gestalt, Bilder) that are delivered to it by the functionality of the senses. These meanings then function in the judgments we make upon the natural standpoint. Human thought thus gives voice to the structures of meaning that are carried by objects themselves. This doctrine of course implies the denial of Husserl’s idea of the constitution of phenomena by a transcendental ego, which Husserl developed in Ideen I (1913).

Relativity

A priori knowledge is not universal to human reason, but is relative to the biological and cultural organization of human beings. Moreover, our knowledge of the things themselves can therefore be distorted by diseases of the spirit such as Ressentiment or simply by the individual’s failure to attend to what is given directly in intuition. Such possibilities are discussed by Scheler in his essays, “Phänomenologische Streit” (Scheler 1957–97: Vol. 10), “The Idols of Self-knowledge,” and “Ressentiment” (Scheler 1957–97: Vol. 3). Phenomenology alone permits an objective vision of the entire realm of essence. Scheler identifies the “objective” a priori with essences, essential relations, and their order of foundation, which, for him, are the objects of phenomenological science, and the “subjective” a priori with these essences as they are learned subliminally by persons and come to function in their cognitions as principles of organization, and in their ethos and Weltanschauung.

The empirical and the rational

Kant contrasted too sharply the a priori with “material” or a posteriori knowledge. “Formal” and “material” are relative terms (Scheler 1957–97: Vol. 3: 72–73); logic and arithmetic are both a priori disciplines, but the formal structures of logic can be filled out by those of arithmetic, and the formal structures of arithmetic can be given material content by their application to things. “2 + 2 = 4” is “formal” in relation to “material” truths about two apples and two pears making four pieces of fruit. This crucial exhibition shows that the a priori element in knowledge may possess a greater or lesser formality, and is not “formal” simpliciter. Moreover, Kant identified the a priori with the “rational” element in thought and contrasted it to the chaotic material given to the mind by the senses. Scheler appears to believe that Husserl made an error similar to Kant’s in this case, insofar as he held that the non-intentional “hyletic data” given through the senses are “animated” (beseelt) by the noetic or intentional elements in the process of constitution. For Scheler, the essences function as a priori to all perception; we recognize “sense data,” correctly or incorrectly, as having some essential meaning-content. The meaning is hence logically and genetically prior to the perception, although essential meaning appears only “on” material objects. Kant assumes that a priori structures are brought to the material givens, where the understanding orders them by its synthetic activities. But, as Scheler states, “the understanding creates nothing, makes nothing, forms nothing”
knowledge is an ontological relation [Seinsverhältnis], and in fact an ontological relation that presupposes the forms of being we call whole and part. It is the relation of having-part of an existing thing in the thusness of another existing thing through which no alteration in the being-thus of what is taken part in is posited. The “known” becomes a “part” of that which “knows,” but without moving from its place in any respect, or otherwise being altered in any manner. This ontological relationship is not a spatial, temporal, or causal relationship. “Mens” or “mind” [Geist] means for us the X or the quintessence [Inbegriff] of the acts in the “knowing” being, through which such taking-part is possible; through which a thing, or, better, the being-thus – and only the being-thus – of any being becomes an “ens intentionale,” in contrast with the simple existence (“ens reale”) which is necessarily external to and beyond the sphere of knowledge. The root of this X, which determines the element of movement toward the execution of the acts that lead to any form of having-part whatever, can only be the taking-part, that transcends itself and its own being, which we call in the most formal sense Love.

(Scheler 1957–97: Vol. 8, 203)

Axiology

The epistemic certainty and objective lawfulness that are associated with the concept of the a priori are important in ethics. Scheler proposed to develop ethics understood as “primarily the formalizing in judgmental form what is given in moral knowledge. And it is a philosophical ethics if it limits itself to the a priori content of what is evidently given in moral knowledge” (Scheler 1957–97: Vol. 2, 88). Ethics must re-experience in phenomenological intuition values themselves upon which specific moral judgments are based. The material a priori structures moral judgments and founds specific normative rules as, for example, phenomena such as justice, goodness, or the sacred structure our perception of human actions and situations and found the value judgments typical of our ethos. In this re-experiencing, we gain access to these essential contents that function in normative judgments.

Scheler sought coherence and unity within the remarkable diversity of human beings and among the conflicts he discovered within human nature and in the world. The key conflict that appears in the earliest work is that between human rationality and human emotions, and it may be characterized as a concern to overcome the
dichotomy in Kant between the rational goodwill that founds the dignity of the human person and the chaotic inclinations or desires that drive the human person from her obligations. The key to his solution to this problem was to insist upon the cognitive function of the emotions. His phenomenology of human emotions demonstrates that not chaos, but rather an Ordo Amoris, an order of loving and hating, can be identified and re-enacted phenomenologically to give us a vertically structured order of pure values according to their relative worth. The highest value-types are those of the holy or sacred (and their disvalues, the profane or demonic), secondly the spiritual values of beauty, truth, and goodness, and the disvalues of ugliness, falsity and evil, thirdly the vital values of health and nobility and the disvalues of the diseased and the common, fourthly the utility values and disvalues, and finally the sense-values of pleasure and pain. Corresponding to these levels is a structured order of feeling, to which each of these values and disvalues, and their related kinds are given. The materials of our moral experiences are values, given a priori in acts of feeling or emotion. Feelings, like perceptions, are intentional acts directed upon the values carried by the objects given in perception. Feeling (Fühlen) is entirely a mental act, and may or may not be accompanied by physical feeling-states (Gefühle). Thus one may intend in feeling the beauty, nobility, and grace carried (or expressed by) a work of music without feeling viscerally moved by it.

**Philosophy of religion**

Religious experience is similarly ordered. We come to know God through a fivefold process: (1) In the experience of our Ordo Amoris, in which the world as value and meaning becomes manifest to finite spirit ontogenetically and phylogenetically in acts of love; (2) in the universal revelation of the absolute being to persons in primordial religious acts that are unified, homogeneous and simple and its threefold articulation as Being in itself or primordial being (Ursein), as omnipotent, and as holy; (3) in the identification of the divine nature by analogy with features of the world seen in the light of God, a process that begins with the identification of God as Spirit (the natural revelation); (4) in the articulation of ideas of God via the self-revelation by grace of the divine and omnipotent Ens a se to individuals, and via God’s self-revelation to prophets, according them a role as the messengers of God’s will to humanity in the form of revelation; and (5) in the mediation of mankind’s experience and knowledge of God by the historical and social contexts in which such grace and revelation occurs.

**The person**

The individuals denoted by the term “person” defy phenomenological experience, as personhood exists as the ideal unity of the various act-essences whose execution it necessarily accompanies, and cannot be brought to givenness as the object of intuition. Such a sense of one’s own ideal unity – experienced across time as one’s fate, in its origins as living within a milieu, and in one’s life situation as a calling – (Scheler
1957–97: Vol. 10, 348–55) founds the possibility of a human life’s being “meaningful.” The awareness of one’s personal existence incorporates many other kinds of cognitive acts: one perceives, one feels, one wills, one curses one’s fate, one loves another person. In all these acts, the person stands forth as an ideal unity. Scheler writes, “The person is the concrete, itself essential unity of being of acts of different kinds of essence, which in itself is prior to … all essential differences in acts (especially also the difference between external and internal perception, external and internal willing, external and internal feeling and loving and hating, etc.). The being of the person ‘founds’ all essentially different acts” (Scheler 1957–97: Vol. 2, 382–83).

Sympathy and community

In Wesen und Formen der Sympathie, Scheler sought the a priori foundation of human community, where goods and cultural values may be shared among persons. All forms of community are founded in the immediate sympathetic awareness of the moral and emotional states of others. By “sympathy,” Scheler refers to the immediate awareness of the suffering or rejoicing of others. States of other persons are given “in” or “upon” the gestures, words, and appearances of others, just as the cup next to me is immediately given “in” the color and shape of the object. I recognize the color and shape as that of a cup insofar as I have the empirical notion of cup “in” my mind, and I recognize and may respond emotionally to the suffering of others insofar as I have empirical concepts to describe it. For Scheler, there is no “inference” to the emotional states of other persons based on an analogy between my behavior when I am in a certain emotional state and the behavior of others; I do not “project” my feeling onto the other, for his suffering is directly present to me.

The examination of essential characteristics of sympathy reveals the following: (1) The emotions of another person are always given to me as the emotions of that other person, and their givenness precedes acts of sympathy with the person through whom the emotion is given. Such grasping of foreign states is presupposed by the psychological examination of them, our sympathy with them, or our moral evaluation of them. (2) We maintain the foreignness of the states in the act of true sympathy; we do not “identify” with them. (3) We can always reperform the emotional acts of others by “putting ourselves in their place” and attempting to “feel what they feel”; in this way, we may experience emotions that we otherwise would not have experienced. (4) The act of grasping the emotions of others in true sympathy is a cognitive act, in which is given the material content of the values intended by the other. I experience sympathetically the emotions suffered by a friend who has just lost a job: the emotions of fear or rejection that I apprehend in him intend such values as uncertainty, loss of self-sufficiency, or injustice.

Sociology of knowledge

Three “axioms” that Scheler considers to be phenomenologically evident lie at the foundation of the sociology of knowledge. The first axiom states that the knowledge
persons have of their membership in a community is *a priori*. Knowledge of social membership arises necessarily from our efforts to unify certain cognitive acts. For example, we could not unify the idea of the ego without reference to possible other egos. The second axiom states that the world of individuals is founded upon the *a priori* structure of their community. The phenomenology of sympathy exhibited four modes of the givenness of other persons, and it is through them that different kinds of community are constituted. On the level of ego-identification, for example, are founded a variety of social forms typical of primitives, a knowledge of which Scheler gleans from the works of anthropologists of his day. As the members of a social entity deepen their ties to each other, the quality of givenness of others will increase, in the sense that its members will experience each other emotionally as spiritual persons. When such qualitative increases occur, the community becomes capable of realizing higher values than was possible when it was in a more primitive state. The social unit that can foster the achievement of humankind’s highest political goal is a community characterized by the “solidarity” of each member with all others. Such a community would form a “unity of independent spiritual and individual spiritual persons ‘in’ an independent, spiritual and individual collective person” (Scheler 1957–97: Vol. 2, 533).

The third axiom states that there are *spheres of reality* given before all specific knowledge of objects in the respective spheres, and awareness of a sphere is only possible upon the givenness of the sphere that “founds” it. The higher sphere founds the lower. The order of foundation of spheres is as follows: (1) the sphere of the absolute; (2) the sphere of being-with (*Mitwelt*); (3) the spheres of the external and internal world, and the sphere of one’s own body and its environment; (4) the sphere of the “living” in general; (5) the sphere of extended dead objects (*Körper*). The lower orders are “founded” upon the higher, that is, it is possible to grasp the lower members only if the higher sphere is already given. This order is no doubt neither verifiable nor phenomenologically evident. It expresses Scheler’s claim that the human mind is defined by its primordial receptivity to the sacred: “[People] are directed at a Something that has the name ‘God.’ He is the sea, they are the rivers. … And from their very source [people] feel the sea ahead into which they are flowing” (Scheler 1957–97: Vol. 3, 186).

**Metaphysics and philosophical anthropology**

In the late manuscripts on metaphysics, an ontological doctrine of two fundamental agents in the cosmos, Spirit, and Urge (*Drang*), is presented. Spirit, though lacking the capacity to resist the central life-urge, is nonetheless able to “sublimate” urge and turn it to spiritual ends.Essences, to cite the terminology of the Scholastic philosophers, “exist in relation to the empirically real things neither in them nor before them,” but with them (Scheler 1957–97: Vol. 9, 90). They are created by the Universal Life (All-Leben), and by the Absolute Spirit, at the same time as things are created. This position is consistent with Scheler’s phenomenology, for he maintained always that essences are ideal, and become real only insofar as they are “carried by” perceptual objects; they are experienced upon or with things.
The pure facts that are visible in the cosmos, spirit and the life-urge, are also functional in the human being. Scheler quotes Aristotle: “In the soul of man there is, in a certain sense – everything” (Scheler 1957–97: Vol. 9, 90). All cognition rests upon an “ecstasis” of the mind toward items in its world. We share with the animals this primordial and unreflective consciousness (distinct from but not unrelated to the spiritual ecstasis Scheler calls love and hate). A form of self-transcendence originates in the drives, in the phenomenon of resistance to the will. In this phenomenon, the world as “ens reale” is given. Human beings are eventually able to distance themselves from the external realm that reveals itself to them in the phenomenon of resistance, and are able to identify the goods and the objects they encounter in conscious acts of the spirit as parts of a world. Animals remain tied to their drives alone, and live in what Scheler calls their “environment” (Scheler 1957–97: Vol. 9, 32–35). But cognition is first directed toward practical objects by the drives. The drives direct cognition toward those specific features of the world that correspond to them, and open us to objects and goods that are relative in their existence to our lived body (see Scheler 1957–97: Vol. 2, 393–95; also Scheler 1957–97: Vol. 9, 196–200). Scheler speculates that the leap of spirit beyond the drives – its ability to say “no” to them – contributes to the creation of the Ens a se as personal. In the love of all being and essence, and in our loving efforts to achieve knowledge of the ontological and axiological structure of the world, we spiritualize the urge and foster the Spirit’s coming-to-be as deity.

See also Intersubjectivity (Chapter 16); Value (Chapter 27); Moral philosophy (Chapter 38); Political philosophy (Chapter 39); Philosophy of religion and theology (Chapter 43); The social sciences (Chapter 57).

Reference


Further reading