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The value universe of the person: Scheler's personalism as a contribution to analytic discussions in value ethics with special reference to Moore and Nagel[i]

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Introduction

Ever since the split between values and existence occurred in philosophical thought the question of values and their nature has been of major importance in philosophy, particularly in the discipline of ethics. The split increased even more so in the late 18th and more prominently in the 19th century. One of the most prominent and strongest challenges came from Friedrich Nietzsche who famously declared, after God's death, the need for the revaluation of all values as the goal of his philosophy.[ii] In the 20th century the problem of values was taken up anew by particular strands of Continental philosophy, mainly by phenomenological approaches, but also by thinkers who developed meta-ethical concepts. The final death blow for Continental value theory is considered to have come from the rising

star of phenomenology, Martin Heidegger, who, in the wake of Nietzsche's value critique, accused the objective value theories of "pseudo-objectivism" – a critique that is still widespread today. This seems to have left behind a gap in ethics which neither normative nor meta-ethical approaches in Contemporary philosophy have found a way to overcome – how can one operate with values in morality and at the same time presuppose their limited validity?

An additional but related problem was posed by the American philosopher Thomas Nagel: How can the perspectives of a particular person within the world be combined with an objective view of the same world?[iii] The importance of reconciling these positions is particularly urgent for ethics. We can of course ask why we should not just be content with adopting relativism as the logically necessary ethical stance. But the problem with relativism or any kind of scepticism (from whence moral relativism stems) is that, when taken to an extreme point, it defeats its own purpose. With his attestation that he has discovered the truth that there are no truths Nietzsche manoeuvres himself into a clearly aporetic position. [iv]

The question of the nature of values, their realness and the possibility of acquiring knowledge of values did not disappear from the subsequent philosophical debates. Just as Nietzsche had focused on the question of moral values so too did the debates of the early 20th century philosophy since ethical questions seemed extremely difficult to answer without touching upon value judgements.[v] On the analytic side Scheler's contemporary George Edward Moore published in 1903 his influential book *Principia Ethica,* in which he, just like his Continental colleagues, discussed the questions of intrinsic values and their knowability. Scheler knew of Moore's approach though it is difficult to know how familiar Scheler was with Moore's work. But Scheler refers to Moore in an approving way in the *preface* of his principle work *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik* (1926). Here Scheler claims that Moore in many ways has approached the subject of values in a similar way.[vi] To the present day Moore has remained one of the most influential thinkers in the analytic tradition in the area of ethics and value discussions. His arguments against many ethical approaches on the basis of the open question argument (ethical questions must be open questions, i.e. the answer must not be implied in the premises) and the naturalistic fallacy still remain the main arguments against many classical approaches in ethics.[vii] Furthermore, Moore argues for the inseparability of knowledge (which is relevant for the value question) and ethics: "The direct object of Ethics is knowledge and not practice; and

any one who uses the naturalistic fallacy has certainly not fulfilled this first object, however correct his practical principles may be."[viii]

But if we talk about the relevance of the question (if values are real) for Contemporary ethical debates then it is also necessary to go beyond the historical perspective, relevant as it may be. How can we otherwise address problems of the current debate? In recent years one of the most influential thinkers who engaged in the question of the reality of values is the American philosopher Thomas Nagel, who claims to have a realistic tendency when discussing the possibility of objective values.[ix] Although Nagel is critical of Moore and cannot be said to follow either Moore or Scheler (to whom there are no references in his work) his contribution to value theory is interesting as he touches upon the many rejections that have been raised against all kinds of value realism in recent debates. Nevertheless Nagel argues that (certain) values are indeed a) real, b) objective and c) knowable. Even though Nagel claims that parts of his approach are indeed "moral phenomenology" he does not refer to the thinkers normally connected with such an approach such as Scheler or Nicolai Hartmann.

But Scheler's philosophy of value ethics offers a response to the problem of values and the reality and objectivity of values that Nietzsche and the subsequent hermeneutics of suspicion brought into question. Scheler's position that the value "universe" must always be a personal one addresses a problem that is not sufficiently discussed by either Moore or Nagel: that is, that value debates only make sense when discussed with reference to the person and his world. On these grounds we can develop the following position: certain ethical values can be simultaneously personal and objective, i.e. they can be affirmed from beyond the individual who holds that value (Nagel) but they can never exist outside the (inter)personal world .But Scheler allows us to take the value debate further. After all the question is not only if there are some objective values but furthermore, how can we develop a coherent and convincing system of preference that will allow us to choose one value over the other if necessary? Scheler's answer to these questions is centred around an approach that describes how the structure of a "moral universe" coincides with the personal universe of values which in itself is centred around and structured by the value of the person. To develop this approach which we might call in short "Scheler's personalism" is the aim of the second part of the paper. Rather than making a case for Scheler's value theory it might be more interesting to ask where he fits into the overall discussions on values.

The Question of Objective Values

The first point that would need to be clarified is the question of the realness and objectivity of values. Nagel states in his book *The View from Nowhere* that "(o)bjectivity is the central problem of ethics. Not just in theory but in practice".[x]

The question of how objective values are possible (and this would include as an assumption that they are real also) is one that interests both Scheler and the analytic tradition. Objectivity is defined by Nagel as supra-personal, meaning that the value can be affirmed from a standpoint outside of the individual who holds that particular value. This does not mean that we necessarily need a proof that meets the requirements of scientific methodology to argue for the objectivity of values but one can rely on plausibility as being sufficient. If we look at the three positions of Moore, Nagel and Scheler we see general agreement that certain values can be considered to be objective and knowable on the grounds of the following points:

a) truth claims can be made;

b) even though values are felt by a particular person or individual the reason of why they are good (i.e. why pleasant is perceived to be good) cannot be founded only in an psychological account. In that case they would be incomplete, because, as Nagel notes, "normative explanations are an additional element or because they are [somehow] already present in certain types of psychological explanations".[xi]

c) at least some values are cognitive in the wider sense, i.e. they can be known by intuition.

For all three thinkers these facts point towards an at least partial ethical objectivism. Here, in order not to commit a natural fallacy, all agree that those values must not be founded in natural properties. Thus, the claims that the values are real say nothing about the reality of the object. Without going into too much detail at this point it is fair to say that both Moore and Nagel argue convincingly for why certain values can be seen to be recognizable in an objective way. The downside to both of their approaches seems to be that both of them can only come up with a very limited set of objective values. The only supra-personal or impersonal values that Nagel seems to accept straight away are pleasure and pain, while Moore expands them to friendship and beauty. This leads Nagel to the consequence that ethical judgements and reasoning cannot be solely based on impersonal values (which he

calls "overobjectivication") such as pleasure and pain.[xii] What is missing is, I believe a specific point of reference which corresponds to values. It is at this point that Scheler's approach might provide a possible answer. His solution is grounded in a strict personalism. But what is meant by personalism and what does it solve?

Scheler's personalism

For Scheler, any kind of ethical perspective is only possible from a personal perspective. The person, according to Scheler, is the concrete unity of acts, which founds all intentional acts.[xiii] This means that both the judgement of values and acting according to values can only stem from this personal unity of experience, which must not be understood as some kind of empty starting point of acts but rather their concrete being.[xiv] Moreover, to every person corresponds a world which is the world of the person, which is not identical with the "psychological ego" or "self".[xv] Since the person *is and lives only in the performance of the acts* he always escapes being grasped. In order to know anything about the person we must look at their acts and it is here that the question of ethics, values and the person coincide.

For Scheler just as for Moore, values are not rationally known. Scheler, following Blaise Pascal, refers to this type of knowing as *logique du coeur* – the logic of the heart. The *logique du coeur* describes the emotional acts of loving and hating as a means to recognize values and make them appear in the act of recognition. Values appear in an "in between", i.e. *between* the loving/hating act of the person and the object. By performing the same intentional acts with the person, Scheler argues, we can gain an understanding of what values this person prefers since he acts according to them. [xvi] This "acting with" gives us the *ordo amoris*, the crystal formula of the person. The argument can only work, if we assume that the values can be known which again relies on the fact that they have some kind of objective quality. If the latter would not be the case we could not recognize them at all.[xvii] Just as we share as natural living beings a natural world, the different value worlds can be shared in mutual recognition.

If some values have some kind of objective quality in them, then we can move to the next step and ask ourselves about the value preferences according to which each person chooses to act. The person is characterised by a specific value, the value of the person which

not only becomes real in the person but is also the carrier for all other values of virtue. Scheler's value theory is constructed as a complex system that consists in each level being composed of an opposing set of value pairs (with the exception of the value of the person, which stands at the top and has no opposite) with a corresponding feeling, a form of social organization and an ideal role model. The "lowest" values, those of the pleasant and unpleasant are shared by all life forms but already with the next level of vital feelings we step into a value sphere that belongs to the personal and thus human value universe. Here we find the value modalities of the noble and the ignoble and sometimes also the modalities of the useful and the useless. With the third level we step into the sphere of spiritual values. Aesthetic (beauty and ugliness) and judicial values (right – wrong) can be found here. The final one is again a different level and here we find the values of the holy and the profane.[xviii]

For Scheler, all these values have an objective quality to them. Scheler grounds his idea in a phenomenological approach in the wider sense: A particular value is experienced by different persons *as valuable*, e.g. the feeling of pleasure is always recognized as valuable and what is not pleasant as the opposite (Scheler calls those opposites "negative values"). Nagel has made a similar argument for the objectivity of specific values regardless of the specific contents in terms of the values of pleasure and pain. In addition Scheler argues that ethical preferences are *a priori*, meaning that the recognition of these values is not dependent on knowledge deduced from experience. Rather, having recognized the value intuitively, i.e. having "seen" it once, a starting point is created from the person who gains access to the whole value sphere. Therefore, from the starting point of the value of the person (*Personenwert*) all other values unfold in a structured hierarchical way, creating a "value universe". It is important to note, that this "universe" neither belongs to the natural world nor is it in any way abstracted from it. In order to seek and see objectivity we need to refer to the appropriate sphere and subject which are the value cosmos and the person. Thus this concept would suit Nagel's claim that, if we want to avoid Hume's subjectivism, we need to find objectivity claims that fit the particular subject.[xix]

Nagel also analyses the major objections against objective value theories.The second of his objections, from a philosophical point of view, is the most interesting as it takes the position of presenting the unreality of values as an objective discovery. As Nagel states, the problem is not that "values seem to disappear but that there seem to be too many of them".[xx] If we push this argument in a slightly different direction that is not directly implied in Nagel's position, we could argue for the fact that, because there are so many different ways and

traditions of acquiring values, they cannot be real. This argument, however, appears to be based on a genetic fallacy, as the validity of a certain truth claim (e.g. this value is real) does not necessarily rely on the origin. This argument is ruled out by the distinction between genesis and validity. But there might be, if we look at Scheler's approach, a different answer to that particular problem. For is it not true that the actual values are not that many? For although a countless number of objects might be considered to be pleasant, useful, beautiful etc. the value itself would be the pleasant, the useful, the beautiful rather than the multitude of objects being pleasures in themselves. In other words: The counterargument Nagel refers to confuses the value with a particular content, thus committing not only a genetic but also a naturalistic fallacy.

Conclusion

It is easy to see now where Scheler goes beyond the approaches of Moore and specifically Nagel. Moore's approach does not allow for any kind of hierarchy while Nagel seems to accept only pain and pleasure as impersonal and thus objective values. There appears to be no basis in Nagel's approach that would allow him to "ascend" into the other values spheres and at the same time claim that those values are objective values. Scheler's approach on the other hand offers a solution to a particular problem: the question of how to maintain objectivity in normative judgements. Scheler argues that the value contents must be "goods" (*Güter*) in their own right and not reduced from any other facts or properties. Their reality is affirmed by their appearance which again relies on them being seen/felt/recognized by the person. This could be enough for value theory to remain part of the contemporary debate it might be reasonable to follow Nagel's advice not to try to prove as such the possibility of realism but rather to refute the impossibility arguments.[xxi] As those felt values then inform normativity we encounter a normative realism found in values as motivational content which equals objectivity, i.e. we can make truth claims about them. Thus the argument made by Mackie that they are "not part of the fabric of the world"[xxii] is false. Scheler supports Moore's argument for value properties and value qualities being non-natural properties. This does not necessarily mean to crowd the universe with extra quite mysterious entities,[xxiii] but rather to expand what seems to be a very limited view of reality, and thus take the lived human experience as real experience seriously.

Scheler does not argue that a particular act is objectively good, but offers a sensible structure which can provide a guideline to how we approach values and ethics and to understanding how we structure our own value universe. As this structure emerges, the whole value system through which we see the world becomes constantly restructured with every new value that appears in it. This universe has the person as the centre and starting point and includes self and world in it. In other words: It is impossible to take the person out of the equation. Actions and decision making are then constantly adapted to reflect these changes. We can see a similarity to Nagel's judgement that "(r)easons for actions have to be reasons for individuals, and individual perspectives can be expected to retain their moral importance so long as diverse human individuals exist".[xxiv] But Scheler argues for more: Without the person we would have no starting point from which the value universe would unfold.

[ii].Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, Warum ich ein Schicksal bin, 1; *Genealogie der Moral: eine Streitschrift,* (Leipzig: Reclam 2006), III, 24.

[iii] Cf. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

[iv] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nachlass*, KSA 12: 7[60]; *Ecce homo*, Warum ich Schicksal bin, 1.

[v] One of the exceptions is Levinas's concept of Ethics as first philosophy.

[vi] Max Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik*, (Bern/München:Francke Verlag, 1980), 15.

[vii] George E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* [http://fair-use.org/g-e-moore/principia-ethica, last accessed on 10/12/12].

[viii] Ibid., chapt. 1.

[ix] Cf. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere,* 69.

[x] Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 138.

[xi] Cf. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 145.

[xii] Cf. ibid., 162.

[xiii] This is a shorter version of the definition he gives in *Der Formalismus in der Ethik*, 382.

[xiv] Cf. ibid., 383-384.

[xv] Cf. ibid., p. 392.

[xvi] Cf. Max Scheler, *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie*, (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1999), 168-169.

[xvii] This line of argument reminds again of the hermeneutical principles employed by Gadamer and others who all emphasise the fact that some objective quality must be recognized in order to understand something, or as Gadamer phrases it: Understanding must take place between the foreign and the familiar.

[xviii] Cf. Scheler, *Formalismus*, p. 122ff.

[xix] Cf. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, p. 143.

[xx] Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, p. 146/147.

[xxi] Ibid., 144.

[xxii] John L. Mackie, *Ethics*, Penguin 1977, 38.

[xxiii] Cf. ibid., quoted in Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 144.

[xxiv] Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 188.