

GIVING FORM TO LIFE ACCORDING TO MAX SCHELER

PART I: PROCESSES OF FUNCTIONALIZATION AND OF WORK

1. *The Philosophical Problem of Functions in Scheler*

Precisely at the heart of his most mature phenomenological work, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik*, in the section “Fühlen und Gefühle”, dedicated to showing the existence of an “ordre du coeur”, an affective intentionality on the same level as cogitative intentionality, Max Scheler brings up “the class of the intentional affective functions”.¹ In doing so he refers to a type of operation for pure feeling which is subsidiary to acts and analogous to that which is found in the intentional movement of representative consciousness.²

However, the use of this term to describe the operative process connected with affective intentionality is not a simple concession on Scheler’s part to the more fashionable studies of the epoch, which used functions in mathematics, logic and the theory of knowledge, psychology and biology.³ Certainly, in the culture of the late 1800s, the functional and procedural dimension bore considerable relevance in various sciences, giving philosophers incentive to apply themselves to it in order to offer a contribution to the understanding of newly apprehended phenomenon. In this way, Scheler demonstrates that functional operativity is enacted not only at the level of biological and psychological or logico-mathematical being, but also and equally in the area of ideal-axiological being. Therefore, every time one has a pure feeling of values, or whenever “we have the feeling of something” independently from the psycho-physical organization of our human species, even in the alogical field, the intentionality of consciousness is expressed, through operations of the “self”, termed “affective functions”. These functions, enacting themselves according to their own automatism, execute in the vital sphere the spiritual acts of pure feeling that the person accomplishes, inasmuch they are “psycho-physically indifferent”, as Scheler says, that is, free from psycho-physical conditioning. The affective intentional functions thus belong in the ambit of that “by means of and because of” which the intentional acts of the spirit can effectively relate themselves with object-entities, reaching them not only on the plane of ideal intentioning but also in reality.⁴

At the same time, however, the application of philosophical cognition to the field of affective or non-affective functional relations demonstrates that the operatively self-sufficient universe that a function tends to regulate is not in its turn capable of self-establishment. For example, in the expression “I perceive my I”, Scheler observes, it is clear that the “I” which accomplishes the act of perceiving is on a different level than the “I” which is the object of that perception. In fact, the first “I” in linguistic terms represents someone who is capable of activating a function, the perceptive function, in the ambit of which the second “I” is gathered.⁵ Thus for each functional relationship which is established, the philosophical question arises of the activating agent, that is, of the originary point from which that way of being active departs. After all, philosophy arises from wonder at that which is the ultimate, that which has nothing beyond itself to go back to cognitively. Philosophy, that is to say, does not issue from the observation of that which one can do, from a field of operativity, but from an astonished gaze upon that which is and could instead not be. In fact, only being, which by its own forces impressed itself on nothing and which as such manifests itself to us, can constitute the authentic principle of everything which is, both in the sense of simple ontological existence and in the other, newer and pregnant sense of life in its onto-poietic character.⁶

Scheler is well aware of all this. Thus, it is not by chance that in his *Philosophische Weltanschauung*, a work published a few days before his death, he notes that, starting with Kant’s critique of reason, a revolution occurred in Western metaphysics with the result that “modern metaphysics is no longer cosmology and objective metaphysics, but meta-anthropology and metaphysics of the act”. In fact the idea has taken hold that “the supreme ground of everything which is objectivisable is not itself objectivisable; rather it is only pure fully realized actuality as an attribute of Being, which eternally produces itself”.⁷ Therefore by now “the entire objective world and its ways of being are not a being-in-itself, but only a repercussion and a ‘section’ of this being-in-itself, compared with the entire spiritual and bodily organization of man. Only moving from the image of the essence of man, which ‘philosophical anthropology’ investigates, it is possible to draw a conclusion — as a backwards prolongation of the acts of his spirit, which originally come from the center of man — about the true attributes of the supreme ground of all things”.⁸

Therefore if philosophy wants to be itself in the twenty-first century as well, and wants to guide men to participate, by cognition, in the essentiality of all possible things,⁹ its main task will be to keep awake consciousness of

the nexus between all the active spheres of the human being, none of which can be repressed or neglected without damage. In particular philosophy will seek to keep open and accessible the road connecting the extensive realm, anthropological and nonanthropological, regulated by functional relations (i.e., psycho-physical being) and the metaphysical dimension of originary being, attainable only by acts of the spirit. In fact it seems that there is no other way that the human being can proceed, if he, as the only entity capable of influencing the course of life consciously, wants to exercise his irreplaceable ontological function of operator of the accomplishment of being to his advantage.

2. *The Acts of Pure Feeling and the Intentional Affective Functions*

In order to examine the intentional dimension of the sentimental sphere and its qualification in a functional sense, Scheler inquires into affective lived experiences of particular complexity. Simple affective states such as "losing one's temper over something" or "enjoying a beautiful sunset" are not enough. In fact, in these states one is driven in the first place towards the cause of the feeling, gathered thoughtfully and by representation in the empirical events. Only in a second moment does the question arise regarding what gives meaning to the feeling, that is, regarding what makes the beauty of the sunset felt and what configures an empirical object as a source of rage.¹⁰

Vice versa, there are lived experiences involving not only an empirical affective state, but also a harkening back to the a priori dimension of feeling, in which an immediate and immanent "feeling something" is given, so that this harkening back does not need representative go-betweens. For example, when "we become sad for not having been able to rejoice in an event, as it deserved to be",¹¹ it is the very feeling of sadness we experience, which sends us on to a different and better axiological perception: that which characterizes that present affective state is, in fact, a sense of inadequacy vis-à-vis a quality of value, which our empirical feeling was not able to achieve, even though knowing it and being oriented towards it. Thus we are driven towards a level of affective experience in which "the feeling directs itself originally towards a kind of object that is its own, precisely, to values".¹² Here, all extrinsicity in the relationship between feeling and its object is removed, nor is the psycho-physical organization of our human species relevant, since this dimension pre-exists our empirical self-reference to it, and it maintains itself even when we abandon it, leaving it in shadow. In fact, Scheler affirms: "This feeling has with its correlative value the same relationship that 'representation' has with

its object, that is, an intentional relationship". In addition, pure feeling which gathers the value constitutes an event completed in itself, which can find, from the empirical point of view, either "fulfillment" or "non-fulfillment", without its essential validity being modified.¹³

Scheler first describes the dynamic of affective intentionality generically as "feeling's original self-reference, self-orientation towards an object, towards values",¹⁴ but then he soon specifies that it expresses itself in "an instantaneous movement in which something is given to me and 'comes to manifestation'".¹⁵ In other words, the act of feeling truly draws its determination from that which meets it, since the latter turns out precisely to be the appropriate termination of the movement of the former. Thus every act of intentional feeling qualifies itself as a "goal-determined movement",¹⁶ being induced neither by its spontaneity nor by an extrinsic end. Rather, in pure feeling there is a sort of "entelechy" or inborn inclination to its own end, driving it to fulfill itself in the direction of values: in other words, it manifests that it possesses the nature of a pure "tendency" (*Erstreben*) and, therefore, that it is totally directed towards its own completion (*Ziel*).¹⁷ In fact, Scheler adds, when we find ourselves in the presence of a behaviour directed toward a value, the qualities-of-value contained in it seem to require, proceeding from itself, corresponding qualities in the responding reactions,¹⁸ to the point that, as seen in the case of the lived experience "I am saddened for not having enjoyed an event as it deserved to be", when close to an affective state, we perceive the inadequacy of our affective reaction as well.

In the intentional affective relationship, therefore, there is in force a complete equation between feeling and the felt which in the concrete axiological experience takes place through affective functional processes. In fact, the latter extend the nexus between pure feeling and the quality of value to the psycho-physical level of the individual "I" and of empirical objects. Thus, even in real axiological experience, it happens that, on the one hand, a feeling-movement, emerging from the psycho-physically indifferent level of persons, pinpoints itself in acts which converge totally on the quality of value, while, on the other hand, a value completely pours itself into feeling, causing feeling's complete actuation. Intentional affective functioning unifies the two poles of the intentional relationship so closely that objective knowledge of feeling and the felt requires of us a deliberate act of reflection.¹⁹

Unlike cogitative intentionality, which is pure intuition of essences, the intentional relationship between feeling and value completes an accomplishment of feeling. In this accomplishment of feeling, in external lived experiences as much as in interior lived experiences, we are met only by that

which has the character of a value (*Wertqualität*).²⁰ In other words, the act of pure feeling, inasmuch as it is equipped by the affective intentional functioning, rather than proceeding to the intuition of one or other essentiality, gives rise to the axiological adherence of the spirit itself. In this way, feeling enters into contact with values and brings them to manifestation, that is, by becoming one with them before reflection, it overtakes and introduces the distance needful for knowledge: for this reason Scheler holds that affective experience is more original than cognitive experience.²¹

Thus, the denomination of “affective intentional functions” suits well the psycho-physical operations that connect feeling with values. In fact, in these peculiar dynamics, the two ideal poles of affective intentionality, pure feeling and values — can have results on the psycho-physical level and can concretely express themselves in terms of each other: in the same way in which continuous quantities are effectively represented in space, as delimited along Cartesian axes, by the mathematical functions of axis and ordinate. In the act of feeling a value, the spirit finds its full affective accomplishment in the same way in which the value is entirely grasped by the corresponding pure feeling. Even the very sensory functions of seeing, hearing, etc. draw from that perfect ideal adaptation their model and their measure.²²

In the case of the affective functions, therefore, that which is achieved is not an immediate and immanent vision-of-essence, but rather a unification of the movement of the spirit with a quality, that of a value. In pure feeling, the phenomenological experience (“in which is understood only as much as is given and in which nothing is given outside of the understood”)²³ comes from an adaptation of the spirit to the felt value, which disposes it, for example, to select knowledge in order to process it into a vision of the world. Scheler affirms that this is seen in analysis of the guiding role of the unities of feeling and of value in the formation of the world view that comes to be expressed in language.²⁴

Unlike Kant’s synthetic functions of the intellect, or categories, Scheler holds that the affective functions in themselves do not open us up to the axiological ideal world: rather, they represent the psycho-physical enactment of a spiritual itinerary which starts out with spontaneous acts of love and hate, “discovers” the axiological horizon, and is thus capable of enlarging or restricting it. This itinerary continues with acts of preference and of deferring which assemble the hierarchic order of values. In fact, the affective intentional functions are a mechanism which is set off in the presence of an already defined axiological context. They are receptive to the a priori axiological dimension, already configured by the “ordo amoris” of each

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Book I

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