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## Wojtyła's view on Kant's formalism and Scheler's material ethics of value, or the ethics of material duty

Analyzing Wojtyła's dissertation on Scheler, we can say without exaggeration that early on in his academic career Wojtyła revealed himself as someone who builds bridges (*Pontifex*), trying to preserve and combine in a coherent theory accurate readings of reality present in various philosophical concepts. It is probably no coincidence that in his later works Wojtyła repeatedly uses the conjunction “and” (rather than “or”) — “act and lived experience”, “love and responsibility”, “person and act”, which seems to result precisely from this effort to build bridges between different conceptions of ethics and different visions of the human person.

### Scheler as a critic of Kant

In his habilitation dissertation, Wojtyła focuses on Scheler's major ethical work *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik* — *Formalism in Ethics and the Material Ethics of Values*. As the title already indicates, Scheler's work is devoted to a discussion of the concept of ethics developed by Immanuel Kant. Apart from criticizing Kant's concept, the work contains a positive proposal to build ethics beginning with the experience of morality. The essence of Scheler's proposal can be expressed as follows: he contrasts Kant's formal ethics with the ethics of material values, which are cognized in an experience specific to ethics. Thus, in Scheler's concept, ethics acquired an empirical character, which, according to this German phenomenologist, was the condition for the legitimacy

of any cognition. As Scheler wrote: “All cognition is rooted in experience. Therefore, ethics, too, must be based on «experience»”<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, it should be remembered that the epistemological assumptions Kant shares with David Hume in this case did not allow him to regard ethics as a discipline based on experience. However, Kant would not subscribe to Hume’s well-known assertion: “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions” (*A Treatise of Human Nature*, II.3.3, 415); for he did not consider the realm of morality to be entirely subjective and removed from the guiding role of reason. For him, however, the objective and categorical character of morality does not flow from the cognition of „material values” given in experience, but from the fact that the moral imperative is given *a priori* to every rational being (he finds morality to be a „fact of reason” that is given independently of all experience). Moral norms, on the other hand, are formulated in the procedure of universalization of maxims of action, which is also purely formal — it is a kind of generalization of norms, which does not take their content, but their form as a starting point<sup>2</sup>. In this way, the normativity of ethics is guaranteed, but at the same time its empiricity is rejected. Hence, we can say that in the case of Kant’s ethics, we are dealing with ethics that is normative, but not empirical.

It was this negation of the experiential character of ethics that prompted Scheler’s protest. In a sense, we can say that Scheler’s proposal is an exact reversal of Kant’s conception: Scheler defends the empirical character of ethics, but does not take into account its normative character; above all, he does not sufficiently consider the relation of the moral good to the person’s causality<sup>3</sup>.

1 “Jede Art von Erkenntnis wurzelt in Erfahrung. Und auch Ethik muss sich auf «Erfahrung» gründen” (M. Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik*, Francke Verlag, Bern 1954, p. 179).

2 On the procedure of formulating moral norms according to Kant, cf. J. M. Palacios, *Istota formalizmu etycznego*, “Roczniki Filozoficzne” (1997–1998) no. 2, p. 187–202.

3 We have already pointed out that this very point was the focus of Ingarden’s critique of Scheler’s concept. Here the great Polish phenomenologist’s assessment coincides with the criticism of Scheler developed by Wojtyła in his habilitation dissertation.

It must be remembered, of course, that the phenomenologists extend the concept of empiricism, which in the empiricism of Hume and his continuators was limited only to sense cognition. Thanks to this extension, moral experience can be recognized by them as a legitimate form of experience, i.e. direct cognitive contact with an object (in this case, value). However, there is something that is common to the concepts of Kant and Scheler, and which makes it possible to say that both of them — each in their own way — are in a certain sense continuators of Hume. This is because both believe that values are not the object of rational cognition. In other words: reason is blind to values.

But if this is the case, then can the empirical character of ethics be salvaged, and in what way? While Kant's answer is negative, Scheler answers this question positively: Yes, ethics has an empirical character (and, if it is to be a science, it must have such a character), but it is based neither on sense cognition nor on rational cognition. In his phenomenological analysis of moral experience, Scheler tries to show that values, along with their hierarchy, are given to a person in emotional experience. According to Scheler, emotions — like other cognitive acts — are intentional: they put us in direct contact with their objects — in this case, values.

## Experience and moral duty

Such a conception of experience, however, raises some difficulties. The first one is the very understanding of intentionality, from which phenomenologists exclude the condition of existential transcendence of the object. The transcendental *epoché* of which phenomenologists speak amounts to reducing the object exclusively to its content given in the intentional act (to put it in the phenomenologese, exclusively to its *noema*), and thus to recognizing the existential transcendence of the object as an irrelevant condition. As Tadeusz Styczeń, a student and continuator of Wojtyła's ethical concept, writes:

In place of existential transcendence, a proposal is made of a transcendence that is allegedly guaranteed by the very structure of the cognitive act

itself, namely, intentionality [...] Well, by putting a clamp on the existential transcendence of the object of moral experience and experience in general, phenomenologists simply miss the very object of ethics, not to mention the fact that they remove — in our view — the very basis of the immediacy of experience, that is, the feature that they themselves have recognized as its indispensable condition<sup>4</sup>.

According to Styczeń, a moral duty that would not be real would lose its truly normative character, and thus would cease to bind us morally at all.

The second difficulty that Wojtyła points out is the very emotional character of moral experience itself (Wojtyła calls it the “emotionalist assumptions” of Scheler’s concept). For, in essence, emotions are a kind of response to values, and cannot be subjected to any norm in the sense that the subject cannot “command” himself to experience them. Emotions appear in the subject in a spontaneous manner, independent of his will. To use Wojtyła’s terminology from *Person and Act*, we can say that emotions belong to the domain of what “happens” in man and as such do not yet constitute his act in the strict sense (of rational and free choice). In this way, Scheler concludes that there is no place in ethics for the experience of duty, i.e. there is no place in ethics for that moment which, according to Kant, constitutes the very essence of moral experience. In one of his essays devoted to the comparison between Kant’s and Scheler’s concepts, Wojtyła writes:

In the name of values, Scheler steps forward to fight against the ethics of Kant, who detached man’s entire ethical life from values, from goods, and closed it in the noumenal sphere, subjecting it entirely to duty. Scheler goes so far as to reject duty in ethics in general as a fundamentally negative and destructive factor [...] Value and duty oppose each other and are mutually exclusive<sup>5</sup>.

4 T. Styczeń, *Problem możliwości etyki jako empirycznie uprawomocnionej i ogólnie ważnej teorii moralności. Studium metaetyczne*, Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, Lublin 1972, p. 117–118.

5 K. Wojtyła, *Problem oderwania przeżycia od aktu w etyce na tle poglądów Kanta i Schelera*, in: K. Wojtyła, *Zagadnienie podmiotu moralności*, Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, Lublin 1991, p. 172.

It is because of the exclusion of the moment of duty from ethics, which is based on emotionalist assumptions, that Wojtyła concludes that Scheler's ethical system is unsuitable for scientific interpretation of the Christian ethics.

We do not want to enter here into a more detailed justification of this claim. Still, it is worth pointing out that Wojtyła's evaluation of Scheler's ethical system is not exclusively negative. It is true that the emotionalist presuppositions behind this system are considered by Wojtyła to be insufficient to give an account of the totality of moral experience, above all of the experience of moral duty given in conscience, and of the relationship between the duty experienced and the person's act, but this does not imply a rejection of the phenomenological method as such. In other words, according to Wojtyła, the emotionalist assumptions are not justified by a thorough description of the experience of morality, but follow from a pre-conceived concept of experience. In Wojtyła's view, it is the phenomenological method itself that leads us to go beyond these assumptions. Thus, confrontation with Scheler's ethical thought leads Wojtyła to develop his own concept of ethics, in which an important place is given to Kant's categorical imperative.

And so Wojtyła adds a positive thesis to the negative evaluation of Scheler's system.

Although the ethical system created by Max Scheler is not essentially suitable for interpreting the Christian ethics, we can find it incidentally helpful in our scientific work on the Christian ethics. This is because it makes it easier for us to analyze ethical facts on a phenomenal and experiential plane.

## **Towards empirical and normative ethics**

As we can see, the negative evaluation of Scheler's system as a tool for the scientific interpretation of the Christian ethics, and — it should be added — the experience of morality as such, does not at all give rise to a negative evaluation of the phenomenological method in the analysis of moral facts. Moreover, Wojtyła proposes that this method should be applied even

more consistently than Scheler himself did. In his partly justified polemic with Kant, Scheler went too far in excluding the normative moment from the experience of morality, while the very phenomenological analysis of experience — above all, the judgments of conscience — shows that normativity is given in the originary experience of morality. This experience tells us that we are often faced with situations in which we do not emotionally experience the value that obliges us to take (or not to take) action. It happens — and these seem to be the most paradigmatic cases of moral action — that we act against those values that emotionally attract us. It is not the husband who abandons his wife because he has fallen in love with another woman who acts well, but the one who remains faithful to the marriage vows once made, even if he does not experience the same emotions during this period of his life that accompanied the making of the vows. To express this even more generally, the action of a person as a person is characterized precisely by the fact that he is able to pursue the values whose obliging power he recognizes independently of his desires and emotions (although it would naturally be better if he were supported in this pursuit by his emotions).

Therefore, Wojtyła fully shares Scheler's postulate whereby ethics should begin its analysis from experience. In his opinion, the limitation of Scheler's proposal lies in the fact that he did not fully utilize all the resources of the phenomenological method in revealing the entire richness of the lived experience of morality. Therefore, Wojtyła's own concept, the first foreshadowings of which can be found in his treatise on Scheler, could be described as an attempt to preserve in one coherent vision those aspects of moral experience that are present in both Kant and Scheler. One might say that Wojtyła does not consider Kant's and Scheler's concepts as disjunctive alternatives; rather, he thinks that it is possible to preserve elements of both of them in one coherent concept. Therefore, in the article cited above, Wojtyła states:

The totality [...] of the ethical experience contains not only value as an object content, but the normative moment in which values are ordered and set as

a task to be carried out. Such a task itself arising from the normal character of a lived ethical experience entails an obligation<sup>6</sup>.

It is not difficult to see that in the evaluation of Scheler's concept of ethics there are already evident some concepts that will be crucial in the philosophy of person developed by Wojtyła in his main anthropological work, i.e. *Person and Act*. The thing is, first and foremost, the concept of causative agency and, more generally, a person's act, which will become for Wojtyła a kind of window revealing to the philosopher's gaze the person's inner self. It is through the act that the person expresses who he is (*logos*) and at the same time fulfils himself (*ethos*). Of course, Scheler too analyzes the actions of a person. However, according to Wojtyła, in Scheler's analyses, the act is ultimately reduced to an intentional act, and is therefore not related to the person's causative agency, which leads (or does not lead) to his fulfilment. In other words, the metaphysical categories of act and potency are missing from Scheler's analyses. "The act of which Scheler speaks is not an act in the Aristotelian sense; it does not imply the actualization of potency"<sup>7</sup>. In an intentional act, a person refers to an object (although, as we pointed out above, the ontic status of this object is not entirely clear). In the case of an intentional act which is an emotional experience this object is value. The development of the idea of the intentional act was a valuable achievement of phenomenology in its polemic against subjectivism (it is worth noting that through this idea — through the agency of Franz Brentano — phenomenology revived an idea that was already present in medieval philosophy). Wojtyła fully shares the idea of the intentional act, but at the same time he is convinced that in the field of ethics, a person's act cannot be limited to an intentional act. An ethical act involves the entire person, all dimensions of the person, but above all it is an expression of what constitutes the core of a person's personal subjectivity, namely his

6 K. Wojtyła, *Problem oderwania przeżycia od aktu w etyce na tle poglądów Kanta i Schelera*, p. 179.

7 K. Wojtyła, *Problem oderwania przeżycia od aktu w etyce na tle poglądów Kanta i Schelera*, p. 171.

reason and will. According to Wojtyła, Scheler's concept lacks this very element. In his polemic with Kant, Scheler went too far, leaving out of sight that aspect of the truth about human action, which is present in the German philosopher. We can express this as follows: In the face of values, man is not only a subject of intentional acts, but he is also a subject of action.

In Wojtyła's opinion, Scheler's ethical system lacks an adequate analysis of human causative agency. Man realizes his personal subjectivity primarily when he is the cause of his actions. Besides the experiences of "something is happening in me" or "something is happening to me", there is the experience of the act in which a person experiences himself from within as the cause of his action. This experience can also be a subject of phenomenological description. Here Wojtyła corrects Scheler while still remaining in the field of phenomenology itself.

Moreover, in the second of his concluding remarks, Wojtyła states that the phenomenological method can be of great help in revealing what has remained somewhat overshadowed in the analyses of classical philosophy, i.e., to show not only *that*, but also *how* man is a person. Thus, we can say that already in Wojtyła's treatise on Scheler we have a foreshadowing of what would later become the hallmark of Wojtyła's concept realized in the study *Person and Act*: an attempt at combining realist metaphysics and realist phenomenology into one coherent whole.

## Philosophy as trans-phenomenology

The attempt at linking metaphysics and phenomenology allows Wojtyła to introduce into anthropology the metaphysical categories present in Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy, which, however, thanks to the phenomenological method, gain their originary support in experience. For it is one thing to say that every act is a realization of the potency inscribed in a given being, and another thing to "peep", as it were, at the transition from potency to act in the case of one's own action. We can describe the transition from potency to act, because we experience such a transition in our inner selves. The same can be said with regard to the concept of cause. From the outside, we only observe a succession of events and its possible



regularity, but what it means to “be a cause” we learn from our inner experience of the act, since we experience ourselves as the efficient cause of our actions. This use of the phenomenological method leads to metaphysics, but it is a metaphysics that grows out of personal experience. It can be described — following an Italian expert on Wojtyła's philosophy — as “trans-phenomenology”. It is a phenomenology that, starting from what is directly given in experience, leads, as it were, to the threshold of realities that go beyond what is given in empirical knowledge and at the same time explain it<sup>8</sup>.

However, let's return for a moment to the critical evaluation of Scheler's ethics, in order to point to that moment in which, according to Wojtyła, the normativity of moral experience is born. The problem to which Wojtyła draws attention can be expressed thus: Even if we can agree with Scheler as to the fact that value is in an ordinary fashion given to us in the emotional experience, we must at the same time say that emotions alone do not yet determine what practical attitude I should adopt towards the emotionally experienced value. It can happen — and indeed it often does — that at the emotional level we feel a fascination with a value — and this may be a value that stands high in the objective hierarchy of values — which, for one reason or another, should not become the motive for our actions.

What then is the criterion by which we should be guided in our choices? We can already find the answer to this question in the study on Scheler, but in a deeper way Wojtyła presents it in his work *Person and Act*, especially in the second part entitled “The Transcendence of the Person in Act”. This entire work can be considered an illustration of how Wojtyła carries out his project of trans-phenomenology. In a nutshell, Wojtyła's answer to the question of the criterion according to which a person makes his decisions can be summarized as follows: An analysis of moral experience shows that our free and conscious decisions are not made on the basis of the emotional impact of the values we experience, but on the basis of the cognition

8 Cf. R. Buttiglione, *Mysł Karola Wojtyły*, Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, Lublin 1996. A comparison of Wojtyła's philosophy with phenomenology can be found in the last chapter of this study.

that concerns their truthfulness. I feel an obligation to choose a value that I have come to know as a true value, and this involves not only emotion, but also reason. According to Wojtyła, it is here that we find the source of the normativity of moral experience and ethics, which is the rational reflection on this experience. What binds me in conscience is truth, the truth about the good, which I recognize and at the same time recognize as the truth that binds me morally. This is where the value-related moment of normativity, which Scheler left out of the field of attention, comes in. We cannot adequately describe moral experience by omitting the moment of the binding power of truth. Wojtyła writes:

For truthfulness is most closely coupled with morality. It is not only about the objective truthfulness of norms *in abstracto*, but also about the experience of this truthfulness, which is expressed in the conviction, or subjective certainty, that one or other norm indicates the true good [...] For duty is, as it were, a special degree of dynamization of the will in its proper relation to truth<sup>9</sup>.

According to Wojtyła, it is the moment of the “normative power of truth” as the source of ethics normativity that was not included in Scheler’s concept. At the same time, in *Person and Act* Wojtyła shows that normativity is not something imposed on a person from the outside, but is born inside of him, although it flows from the cognition of reality independent of the subject — it is already *in nuce* present in the very act of truth cognition. In this way, moral duty turns out to be an experiential expression of the person’s dependence on truth — in this sense it is a material duty (and not just a formal one, as it was for Kant).

Moral duty is an expression of the normative power of truth. Man as a person is an entity endowed with freedom — he is not dependent on the objects of his intentional acts (as is the case with animals). However, the freedom of a person is not complete independence. A person — and this is inherent in the dynamics of freedom itself, which is the freedom of

9 K. Wojtyła, “Osoba i czyn” oraz inne studia antropologiczne, Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, Lublin 2020, p. 207, 209.

a rationally free being — spontaneously recognizes his dependence on the truth that he himself knows and recognizes. A simple thought experiment is enough to see the accuracy of this assertion. Let us try to deny, not to someone else, but to ourselves, a truth that we know with certainty. Unless we are suffering from some form of mental or moral illness (e.g. succumbing to the mechanism of self-deception), we immediately notice that this introduces a kind of discord, a contradiction, into our inner self: I myself am trying to deny what I myself recognize as true. On the other hand, it is, of course, true that we happen to deny a learned truth, for example, when such a negation brings us some benefit. However, if we do not feel good about it later, if we feel remorse, it means that earlier — in the accompanying reflection, called by classical philosophy reflection *in actu exercito* — we have already recognized ourselves morally “dependent” on this truth.

In this way, Wojtyła introduces into ethics the moment of normativity that Scheler omitted. However, this does not mean, of course, a return to Kant's apriorism. Since the phenomenological method allows Wojtyła to discover normativity within human experience, moral duty ceases to be an *a priori* form of practical rationality and becomes — if we choose to express it in Scheler's terminology — “material duty”. In this way, Wojtyła avoids the one-sidedness of both Kant's and Scheler's concepts: He presents material ethics of values (preserving Scheler's postulate), which is at the same time ethics of material duty (preserving that which is accurate in Kant's concept).

The problem of ethics necessarily refers us to the problem of man, to whom, according to Kant, all philosophical questions ultimately boil down. Scheler addressed the problem of man in his famous work *The Human Place in the Cosmos*. Wojtyła, too, after analyzing issues related to morality, recognized that they required a transition to anthropological issues, which he did primarily in his study *Person and Act*. Of course, the answer to the question of man is different for each of these three authors. Kant remains within the framework of transcendental idealism, while Scheler moves towards a kind of pantheism.

For Wojtyła, on the other hand, the problem of man is the starting point for a return to classical metaphysics. However, the categories of this

metaphysics are elaborated by starting from the experience of man, so that one could say that Wojtyła makes his own the great postulate of modern philosophy, that is, the postulate of starting from the experience of man, but at the same time he goes beyond anthropology at the end point. This could be expressed as follows: At the starting point the metaphysical problem is identical with the problem of man; in posing the question of being, man starts from his own experience, and his question is primarily about his own being. However, in order to answer the question of his own being, man must pose the question of being as such, that is, the metaphysical question.

According to Wojtyła, the only adequate answer to this question lies in radically posing the question of the existence of being, which finds its ultimate explanation in the Absolute. Although Wojtyła did not devote any separate study to the metaphysical question, some clues as to the direction such a study could take can be found in John Paul II's commentary on the first chapters of the Book of Genesis, which can be found in the catecheses delivered by the Pope in the first years of his pontificate (today we know that the commentary too was written before Wojtyła was elected to the See of Saint Peter).

John Paul II said:

The first account [...] of the creation of man contains hidden within itself a powerful metaphysical content. One should not forget that precisely this text in the Book of Genesis has become the source of the deepest inspirations for the thinkers who have sought to understand “being” and “existing” (perhaps only The Book of Exodus 3 can be compared with this text). In it man is also defined [...] in a way more metaphysical than physical<sup>10</sup>.

Of course, the Pope's reflections belong to a different literary genre than a philosophical treatise and go beyond the limits of purely rational analysis. However, I think that an attentive reader will find in them elements of the

<sup>10</sup> Jan Paweł II, *Mężczyznę i niewiastę stworzył ich*, Wydawnictwo Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, Lublin 2008, p. 12.

philosophy of man developed by Wojtyła, to which the first step is the study on Max Scheler's ethics<sup>11</sup>.

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## Abstract

*Wojtyła's view on Kant's formalism and Scheler's material ethics of value, or the ethics of material duty*

The article presents the concept of ethics developed by Karol Wojtyła in his polemic against the ethical systems of Immanuel Kant and Max Scheler. Wojtyła negatively evaluates Scheler's system as a tool for scientific interpretation of the Christian ethics, and at the same time as a tool for interpreting the experience of

11 On the presence of Wojtyła's anthropology in the aforementioned catecheses by John Paul II, cf. J. Merecki, *L'antropologia filosofica nella teologia del corpo di Giovanni Paolo II*, Cantagalli, Siena 2015.

morality as such. However, he does not negatively evaluate the phenomenological method itself, which, in his opinion, is an indispensable tool in the analysis of moral facts. Moreover, Wojtyła proposes that this method should be applied even more consistently than Scheler himself did. This is because in his — partly justified — polemic with Kant, Scheler went too far in excluding the normative moment from the experience of morality. Wojtyła argues that the very phenomenological analysis of experience — above all, the judgments of conscience — shows that normativity is given in the originary experience of morality.

**Keywords:** morality, ethics, experience, moral duty

## Abstrakt

*Wojtyła wobec formalizmu Kanta i materialnej etyki wartości Schelera, czyli etyka powinności materialnej*

Artykuł przedstawia koncepcję etyki opracowaną przez Karola Wojtyłę w jego polemice z systemami etycznymi Immanuela Kanta oraz Maksa Schelera. Wojtyła negatywnie ocenia system Schelera jako narzędzie do naukowej interpretacji etyki chrześcijańskiej, a zarazem jako narzędzie interpretacji doświadczenia moralności jako takiego. Nie ocenia jednak negatywnie samej metody fenomenologicznej, która w jego opinii stanowi niezbędne narzędzie w analizie faktów moralnych. Co więcej, Wojtyła postuluje, aby metodę tę stosować jeszcze bardziej konsekwentnie niż czynił to sam Scheler. W swojej częściowo uzasadnionej polemice z Kantem, Scheler posunął się bowiem zbyt daleko, wykluczając moment normatywny z doświadczenia moralności. Wojtyła stwierdził, że sama fenomenologiczna analiza doświadczenia — przede wszystkim sądów sumienia — pokazuje, że normatywność dana jest w źródłowym doświadczeniu moralności.

**Słowa kluczowe:** moralność, etyka, doświadczenie, powinność moralna