

Tadeusz Biesaga SDB

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0863-4422>

The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow

Karol Wojtyła's dispute with Max Scheler over the concept and role of conscience in morality

Despite Karol Wojtyła's appreciation of the phenomenological method and Max Scheler's insightful description of emotional axiological experiences and, among them, the experiences of moral values, he evaluated the usefulness of his proposal for the approach to the Christian ethics negatively. In the concluding remarks of his habilitation dissertation he stated: "The ethical system constructed by Max Scheler is fundamentally unsuitable for the scientific interpretation of the Christian ethics"¹. He demonstrated that "the fundamental truth of the Christian ethics, which states that the human person is the agent of the ethical good and evil of his acts, cannot be properly grasped and objectified with Scheler's system"².

An ethical experience and ethical value

The difference between the two proposals for ethics turned out to be fundamental. In M. Scheler's ethics, such basic concepts as ethical experience, ethical value, moral duty and moral norm, or the norm of morality along

1 K. Wojtyła, *Ocena możliwości zbudowania etyki chrześcijańskiej przy założeniach systemu Maksa Schelera*, in: K. Wojtyła, *Zagadnienie podmiotu moralności*, eds. T. Styczeń, J.W. Gałkowski, A. Rodziński, A. Szostek, Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, Lublin 1991, p. 119 (Źródła i Monografie, 119; Człowiek i Moralność, 2).

2 K. Wojtyła, *Ocena możliwości zbudowania etyki chrześcijańskiej przy założeniach systemu Maksa Schelera*, p. 120.

with the role of reason, conscience, will, freedom and with the view of the personal subject, are understood improperly, that is, too narrowly. In his critique of this tightening or omission of the basic elements of the Christian ethics, Wojtyła does not so much use Kant's ethics against Scheler's ethics, but, as it were, independently responds equally to formal apriorism and material apriorism, i.e. Kant's pure duty apriorism, and Scheler's pure value apriorism. He also critically addresses the phenomenological or transcendental ego in the philosophy of both the thinkers. Reaching directly to the understanding of ethics in the Christian tradition, and to the realist philosophy that shaped these understandings, Wojtyła aims to overcome idealism in favour of a realistic presentation of the person's fulfilment in and through the act, including the morally good act.

An ethical experience and ethical action are not, in his view, something merely theoretical or emotional, since they belong to the practical sphere. The mere act of reason or the act of feelings is insufficient, since in moral conduct we are also dealing with the involvement of the will, with normative acts of conscience, and with the realization of an act with transitive and non-transitive effects. It is an act fulfilled by a person that is the one in which we distinguish between good and evil, between a good act and a morally evil act. I consciously experience that I am the agent of the act, and therefore the evaluation of the act in the non-transitive aspect is an evaluation of myself as well. An order or prohibition of an act, as a dictate of conscience, precedes the choice of the goal and the means conducive to its realization. A norm — a precept, an obligation — absorbs moral values into itself, but at the same time it is something separate from them. A precept in relation to a value is something new, something stronger than the emotional experience of a value. An ethical experience is an experience that encompasses the richness of what takes place in a person before and after his act. One cannot exclude from an ethical experience the normative function of conscience, the duty or obligation to fulfil an act, along with the causative function of the will in making choices and carrying out an act. An ethical value cannot be narrowed down to the content of emotional acts, which include only one element of an ethical experience. There is more to an ethical experience and an ethical value than what Scheler presented by

limiting himself to describing the content of emotional axiological acts. On the basis of a phenomenological-eidetic description of the content of intentional, emotional experiences, it is impossible to grasp and understand the dynamics of personal causality, its origin, its real basis and its effects. The mere emotional experience of values, even with the experience of giving precedence to some values over others, is not causality; it is not recognition of an imperative of duty, it is not an imperative of conscience, it is not an act of will involving our freedom, it is not a person's fulfilment.

In general, Wojtyła does not conduct his critique with a view to showing that Scheler inaccurately described what is given in the intentional, emotional experiences of values, but revealing that these descriptions were narrowed down to the structure of these experiences; that he did not reach for what is given in the structure of a person's cognition and action, he did not embrace the entire ethical experience, which includes not only our emotional experience of values, but the causative agency of these acts and involvement of our cognition, our will and freedom, the imperatives of conscience and personal fulfilment. In other words, the emotional experience of values is something passive, narrow, detached from other experiences and facts occurring in the personal subject of morality.

The isolation of data in the experience of values also confirms Scheler's position that these values are indifferent to existence.

Scheler invariably asserts, writes Wojtyła, that "good" and "evil" appear whenever object values, previously learnt through intuition and emotion, are realized. There is no doubt that in view of such a statement by Scheler, we cannot regard moral values as the inner content of those acts in which the subject realizes other object values³.

Meanwhile, in the performance of an act, moral values intrinsically permeate the act, since the act is precisely ordered by virtue of its moral goodness.

3 K. Wojtyła, *Ocena możliwości zbudowania etyki chrześcijańskiej przy założeniach systemu Maksxa Schelera*, p. 67.

Essentialism, in its approach to value, combined with a person's actualism, closes the way for Scheler to properly grasp the fact that the real personal subject is not only a subject of conscious and emotional sensations, but is also an agent of an act, which, as a morally good act, perfects the person.

For we use the term of ethical value to call that, writes Wojtyła, by which man as a human being, as a specific person, is simply good or evil⁴.

The fact that Scheler called the pursuit of personal values, ethical values, Pharisaism is due to his confusion of the pursuit of goodness with the experience of emotional satisfaction from being morally good. The experience of good as a goal, the imperative to pursue the good, is something different from my emotional satisfaction from being enriched by that good.

In the ethical lived experience, we are oriented towards good; in conscience it is ordered to us and, as it were, necessary for our fulfilment. In this orientation we experience the principle according to which we are called upon to perform the ordered act, we experience evaluation, i.e., the valuation of the intended or performed act, and finally we experience within ourselves the consequences of this act which conscience evaluates as good or bad, and by extension it also evaluates us. In an ethical experience thus understood and an ethical value thus understood, a real personal subject is revealed — the agent of the act who is a subject, but also an object enriched by the ethical value of a good act. After all, it is precisely being good that is fundamental to an ethical experience.

Conscience in an ethical experience

Scheler addresses the issue of conscience in his work *Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Werethik* in the context of overcoming delusion, relativism and subjectivism, and in the context of the search for

4 K. Wojtyła, *Zagadnienie woli w analizie aktu etycznego*, in: K. Wojtyła, *Zagadnienie podmiotu moralności*, p. 198 (Zródła i Monografie, 119; Człowiek i Moralność, 2).

objectivism in ethics. In this regard, he draws on August Comte's position concerned with the question of the freedom of conscience⁵. Comte ruled out basing morality on the freedom of individual conscience, since, in his opinion, this path leads to anarchy. Such a position was the result of his philosophical presumptions, in which he placed the previous view of conscience within the religious or religious-metaphysical era. In his opinion, it was necessary, in the name of the positivist era, to overcome or reject the approaches from bygone eras, and rely on the approaches developed by positive sciences. Within their framework, conscience was reduced to a psychological or sociological reality. For in the religious-metaphysical era, conscience was treated as the "voice of God" that speaks inside the individual man. According to Comte, an approach like this disappears with the transition from the theological and metaphysical era to the positivist one. From the position of positive science, conscience is neither the voice of God nor any objective norm stating the truth about good, but is an expression of social and cultural moral prohibitions. On top of this, as a subjective judgment of the individual, it leads to moral anarchy. Therefore, to establish a social order, positivists proposed a social contract and statutory law.

Max Scheler accepted the critique of conscience as the "voice of God" (*Stimme Gottes*)⁶. God cannot be wrong, but we have no way of knowing His judgments. The collapse of religious consciousness is also a collapse of such justification. Conscience can be interpreted as a manifestation of religious tradition, but it is not thereby an objective legitimate insight into what is right and wrong. There are people, Scheler argues, who do not experience the voice of conscience, or those in whom instinct impulses weaken or overcome it⁷. Therefore, it is necessary to reach out to other sources of cognition to correct the judgments of conscience that are imposed on us. This is because according to Scheler conscience is neither the voice of God

5 M. Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik. Neuer Versuch der Grundlegung eines ethischen Personalismus*, Verlag von Max Niemeyer, Halle 1916, p. 332.

6 M. Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik*, p. 335.

7 M. Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik*, p. 333.

nor a statement of objective values, but is a form of capitalization (*Ökonomisierungsform*) of religious norms and social authorities, norms internalized as one's own. Conscience expresses a psychological and social ethos. Thus, it cannot play an essential role in a person's objective morality. It can only determine what is subjectively good for me, but it cannot determine what is good in general, for others, for everyone. In order to achieve this, one must reach, within the insight into values, what is generally important for everyone⁸.

According to Scheler, both the idea of "species instinct" and the idea of "general species intellect" cannot be the basis of generally valid, universal values. Nor is this problem solved by Comte's appeal to exact sciences — mathematics, physics or biology. Therefore, in Scheler's opinion, Comte himself came to the conclusion that moral settlements are ultimately founded on feelings, in which we prefer some values to others⁹. In this regard Scheler opts for an emotional moral insight (*sittliche Einsicht*), which is obvious and available to every human being. The authority of this experience is radically different from the power (*Macht*) or violence (*Gewalt*) of dictates or prohibitions. Trust in it grows out of our direct, emotional insight into values. This authority has qualities of general validity that transcends our individual preferences¹⁰.

Besides the above statements and distortions of the view of conscience, Scheler treats it as a negative experience. It is not about our conduct being directed towards the good, but rather about a negative evaluation of evil. It is love, and not imperatives of conscience, that directs us towards the good. Conscience is neither love nor an originary, positive insight in value¹¹. According to Scheler, the so-called "good conscience" also boils down to this experience of "bad conscience", since a good conscience does not command us anything, but only prohibits, warns, judges and accuses. In this way, Scheler actually excluded conscience from a person's moral life.

8 M. Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik*, p. 337.

9 M. Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik*, p. 338.

10 M. Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik*, p. 339.

11 M. Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik*, p. 334.

Scheler's negative attitude to conscience is connected with his negative attitude to moral duty as such, to the moral norm, imperative or command. This may stem from an extreme reaction to I. Kant's ethics of categorical imperatives, in which the world of values and even more so the emotional acts of experiencing values were relegated to the realm of egoistic sensations that destroy morality. In rehabilitating the role of feelings in morality, Scheler rejected injunctions, duties. It is not only the external injunction that destroys morality, but also the internal injunction in the form of moral duty or the imperative of conscience does so. Our emotional experiences, or our love cannot be enjoined. As regards the commandment of love we are outside morality. The commandment to love God and the neighbour cannot be enjoined.

Scheler finds wanting good, aiming for good, good as the goal of our striving to be Pharisaism, for in this striving we are concerned — in his opinion — with experiencing the satisfaction from a realized moral value. Thus, morality in Scheler's ethics is played out, as it were, passively in emotional experiences, in emotionally experienced love in the experience of following the model of the Master. Reason, or conscience does not motivate the will with the duty of goodness; we do not experience moral duties; we do not know why we should perform good acts and avoid evil ones. In this proposition, however, the mere intuitive emotional experience of values is quite passive, and it does not encompass the entire ethical dynamism. It does not follow that I should make a decision and perform a good act. In moral conduct, however, we know why we undertake an act; we distinguish the norms of logic and aesthetics from ethical norms, which by moral duty encourage our freedom and influence our performance of a good act. Love cannot be reduced to an emotional, passive experience and stripped of its effort of reason, will, or conscience to realize it in rationally prescribed good and right acts.

Conscience in a person's causality and fulfilment

The objections to Max Scheler's ethics, revealed by Karol Wojtyła in his habilitation dissertation, found their continuation both in the *Lublin*

*Lectures*¹² and in his seminal work *Person and Act*¹³. These objections were raised not only on the ethics plane, but also on the anthropology plane, as well as on the plane of ontology or metaphysics, which were absent in Scheler. On the one hand, they were analyses close to the philosophy of consciousness; on the other hand, they drew on the ontology of personal being, critically referring to both Kant's and Scheler's idealism.

All that Scheler omitted from his ethics, namely the fact that the person is an agent of his act, that conscience as the closest norm directs us to perform this act, that the will and our desire for this good are involved, that by self-determination the person becomes the cause of the occurrence of the act in question, resulted from narrowing the research perspective to the structure of emotional experiences of values. The structure of a person's cognition and action determines a broader, fuller perspective of ethical experience and its constituent elements. Within his presumptions, Scheler equated "wanting good" with "the emotional feeling that I am good". The latter excluded the former, because it reduced it to egoistic self-satisfaction, which Scheler called Pharisaism. Meanwhile, wanting good is about essential good, not my emotional satisfaction with it. In the act we focus on good as such. Moral value permeates our act, determining the goodness of the act in its moral aspect. The imperative of conscience, or moral obligation has its source not in subjective, emotional satisfaction, but in the goodness and rightness of the act in question, which is determined by objective truth. The norm, the imperative of conscience appeals to the person telling them that this good should be done and that it is our goal and duty.

In Scheler's view of the person as a unity of emotional experiences, as a subject of intentional value content, the real subject of action cannot be shown or explained. This is because the real personal being is capable not only of intentional emotional experiences, of reflecting on his acts of

12 Cf. K. Wojtyła, *Wykłady lubelskie*, eds. T. Styczeń, J. W. Gałkowski, A. Rodziński, A. Szostek, Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, Lublin 1986 (*Źródła i Monografie*, 120; *Człowiek i Moralność*, 3).

13 Cf. K. Wojtyła, "Osoba i czyn" oraz inne studia antropologiczne, eds. T. Styczeń, W. Chudy, J. W. Gałkowski, A. Rodziński, A. Szostek, Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, Lublin 1994.

consciousness, but also of making commitments to act, to fulfil himself. This capacity is explained by the potentiality of the nature of the human person. "If the human person, writes Wojtyła, were the so-called pure act, then there would be no possibility of any actualization in him"¹⁴. Thanks to potentiality, the dynamism of the personal being is directed towards real good, which, recognized, engages our will, becomes the goal of striving, imposes itself on us by the duty, or obligation to realize it. Classical metaphysics explained this by the accidentality and potentiality of the human nature. The unity of dynamisms in the person is not only a phenomenal unity, a unity of conscious acts, but the ontological unity of the conscious subject with the causative subject, with the subject who realizes personal fulfilment. These are not different subjects, but the same personal subject.

Conscience is an act of a personal subject. By formulating an injunction or prohibition before the act, and by making an evaluative judgment after the act, it reveals its rational dimension, and by binding our freedom with an obligation, it reveals its normative dimension. The categorical nature of the duty of conscience grows ontologically out of the necessity for personal development and excellence, and cognitively out of the fact that conscience, taking into account the moral goodness of my act, also takes into account whether I will become a good or evil person through the act. In his concept of conscience, Scheler focused on the second moment captured in an emotional experience, while ignoring the first one, in which conscience commands action because of the moral goodness of the act.

The measure of good, or the axiological goodness of an act permeates our actions, for it is something fundamental to personal fulfilment. In this way, the axiological and moral order becomes embedded within the ontological order, the practical order and the normative order. For the thing is about a person's fulfilment, which can only happen through the goodness of his act.

14 K. Wojtyła, "Osoba i czyn" oraz inne studia antropologiczne, p. 198.

Moral values are so essential to the person, argues Wojtyła, that the person's true fulfilment is achieved not so much by the act itself, but by the moral goodness of that act¹⁵.

In this context, conscience is the guardian of a person's fulfilment through a good act. As the closest and autonomous norm, it attributes our freedom to the truth about good. In this way, it serves as the basis of a person's transcendence. The moment of self-dependence (self-mastery, self-possession, self-determination) is connected with the moment of a person's dependence on moral duty, on the normative truth. It is in conscience that our freedom in the two aforementioned moments is attributed to the truth about good. This attribution manifests itself in the form of moral duty. "Duty, writes Wojtyła, is the experiential form of dependence on the truth, to which a person's freedom is subject"¹⁶.

Conscience should not be identified — which is what Kant wanted — with the power of our freedom, our autonomy, which would aspire to establish norms for itself. "Conscience, writes Wojtyła, is not a legislator; it does not create norms on its own — rather, it finds them as if ready-made in the objective order of morality or law"¹⁷. It does not create such an order, but rather finds and discovers it. Nor is it a deduction of specific norms from abstract general norms, much less a deduction from the norms of statutory law. In discovering the moral order, it combines a sense of truthfulness, the goodness of an act, and rightness. It cannot be reduced to a habit of repeating the same judgments, as it is creative in formulating norms in specific situations. Such conditioning as *ratio recta*, *voluntas recta*, or wisdom, prudence or other forms of moral excellence, i.e., virtues, favour the functioning of a righteous conscience. Conversely, unintegrated inclinations and acquired vices hinder the functioning of a righteous conscience. However, this must not lead to its rejection, but on the contrary to a deeper concern for its proper functioning. For conscience, as *norma*

15 K. Wojtyła, "Osoba i czyn" oraz inne studia antropologiczne, p. 197.

16 K. Wojtyła, "Osoba i czyn" oraz inne studia antropologiczne, p. 199.

17 K. Wojtyła, "Osoba i czyn" oraz inne studia antropologiczne, p. 208.

normans, normalized our actions, but as *norma normata* it is shaped by the natural law, present in the nature of the human person, and ultimately is justified by the creative act of God.

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Abstract

Karol Wojtyła's dispute with Max Scheler over the concept and role of conscience in morality

The article, following Karol Wojtyła's study of Max Scheler's ethics in his habilitation dissertation, reveals the above-mentioned phenomenologist's overly narrow view of ethical experience and, for this reason, a narrow and erroneous account of conscience and its role in morality. Scheler's narrowing of his analyses of ethical experience down to the emotional experience of values and insight into their essence led, as a consequence, to the exclusion of the causality of the real subject of action, i.e. to the exclusion of the objective desire for good, which is an act of self-determination guided by the fact of moral duty and the categorical normativity of conscience. Scheler equated "wanting good" with "the emotional feeling that I am good". However, the emotional, passive experiencing of values alone is not the causation and performance of an act. The performance of an act is about good as such, permeated by value and moral duty along with the categorical imperative of conscience. The moral goodness of an act internally permeates the entire dynamism of its performance. The explanation for this kind of personal fulfilment in the act is the potentiality and realization of the nature of the human person. Thus, in the ethical experience, we are dealing not only with the emotional experience of value, but with the experience of moral duty, with the experience of the norm, including the one closest to us, that is, the imperative of conscience, with the involvement of our will towards the performance of a valuable and morally commanded act, as the apex of personal fulfilment.

Keywords: Karol Wojtyła, Max Scheler, conscience, value, duty, norm, causality, act, personal fulfilment

Abstrakt

Spór Karola Wojtyły z Maksem Schelerem o koncepcję i rolę sumienia w moralności

Artykuł, za przeprowadzonymi w swej habilitacji przez Karola Wojtyłę badaniami etyki Maks Schelera, ujawnia zbyt ciasne ujęcie przez wymienionego fenomenologa przeżycia etycznego i z tego powodu zbyt wąskie i błędne ujęcie sumienia oraz jego roli w moralności. Zacieśnienie przez Schelera swych analiz przeżycia etycznego do emocjonalnego przeżywania wartości i wglądu w ich istotę, prowadzi w konsekwencji do wykluczenia sprawczości realnego podmiotu działania, czyli do wykluczenia obiektywnego pragnienia dobra, które to pragnienie jest aktem samodeterminacji, kierowanej faktem powinności moralnej i kategorią normatywności sumienia. Scheler utożsamiał „pragnienie dobra” z „emocjonalnym odczuciem, że jestem dobry”. Samo emocjonalne, pasywne przeżywanie wartości nie jest jednak sprawczością i realizacją czynu. W spełnianiu czynu chodzi o dobro jako takie, przeniknięte wartością i powinnością moralną wraz z kategorią nakazem sumienia. Dobroć moralna czynu przenika wewnątrz cały dynamizm jego realizacji. Wyjaśnieniem tego rodzaju spełniania się osoby w czynie jest potencjalność i realizacja natury osoby ludzkiej. W przeżyciu etycznym mamy więc do czynienia nie tylko z emocjonalnym doświadczaniem wartości, ale także z przeżywaniem powinności moralnej, z przeżywaniem norm, w tym najbliższej nam, czyli nakazie sumienia, z zaangażowaniem naszej woli do realizacji wartościowego i moralnie nakazanego czynu, jako szczytowego spełniania się osoby.

Słowa kluczowe: Karol Wojtyła, Max Scheler, sumienie, wartość, powinność, norma, sprawczość, czyn, spełnianie się osoby

