

A PHENOMENOLOGY OF DISCERNMENT: APPLYING SCHELER'S 'RELIGIOUS ACTS' TO CASSIAN'S FOUR STEPS¹

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Abstract. This article argues that Max Scheler's conception of "religious acts" and his criticisms of types of "difference" help rethink the relevance of discernment and decision making, especially today, in an age in which we are faced with an unprecedented range of "options" in nearly every area of social lives. After elucidating Scheler's engagements with religion in *On the Eternal in Man*, his work is then applied to rethinking more deeply the four steps of Christian discernment developed by the 5th century Mystic, John Cassian. Since Scheler's work offers detailed and passionate depictions of the religious relevance of "values", it is an untapped resource for expanding upon Cassian's still relevant work on discernment; an expansion that is necessary in order to demonstrate the often overlooked importance of discernment. This article concludes by employing the work of these two thinkers to show how discernment can help us sort out, like good "money changers", the differences between 1) finite values and supreme values, 2) an authentic and inauthentic doctrine of God 3) true differences and superficial differences (which cultivates indifference), and 4) the social imaginaries of theomorphism and anthropomorphism.

I. INTRODUCTION

This article offers an interpretation of Max Scheler's highly understudied work on religion in *On the Eternal in Man*, then applies it towards reflection upon John Cassian's four steps of discernment. Religious and theological themes are addressed in Scheler's other works, yet in this book he uniquely develops religion as the problem *sine qua non* of the human condition, and points to how a misappropriation of "religious acts" — especially after the First World War — has left unique nihilistic challenges in its wake. Although Scheler does not reference discernment explicitly, a central ambition of that text is to describe how his conception of the "eternal in man" opens up the possibility of engagement in what he calls "religious acts." These acts can lead to a careful determination of true *differences* (as opposed to mere superficial differences), which is accessible only when "whole spiritual persons" are committed to absolute value, have humbled their natural egos, and have achieved a certain level of "self-mastery."²

To attain access to these true differences, as well as these ideals, values, and states of humility and mastery, something like discernment — or in Scheler's terms, the religious act — is necessary. The religious act allows for a kind of ontology of participation in the Absolute, leading to a certain "deliverance" from our entanglement in everyday human activities. Such entanglement, and the distractions from the Eternal and Absolute that come along with it, are clearly demonstrated in *how* we do philosophy. As he critiqued his contemporary (circa 1920) German academic context at the time, the classification and establishment of "differing" worldviews and a diversity of "viewpoints" had become the overwhelming focus of interest. However, this actually achieved very little, and merely highlighted our all-too-human

1 This article was made possible due to the generous support of two research grants from the Austrian Science Fund (FWF). It was conceived within the framework of the project "Secularism and its Discontents. Toward a Phenomenology of Religious Violence" [P 29599], and concluded within the project "Revenge of the Sacred: Phenomenology and the Ends of Christianity in Europe" [P 31919].

2 Max Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man* (Transaction Publishers, 2010), 95.

tendencies to attribute to difference itself a certain unquestionable value. Such differing perspectives too often become “isolated from each other...cocooned and petrified,” ultimately limiting us from arriving at “any fruitful statement of differences.”³ Although we should value the determination of difference that truly makes a difference, the merely external or structural “multiplicities” that do not plumb the depths of metaphysical life serve only to further trap and “cocoon” us in a strangely autonomous contingency whereby truly meaningful and personally challenging difference is conspicuously absent.

This article argues that Scheler’s critical depictions of religious acts and the proliferation of “petty” or superficial differences are highly relevant for rethinking discernment *today*. First, the article more hermeneutically describes Scheler’s engagements with religiously significant themes of the absolute, the eternal, and the valuable, relying especially upon his *On the Eternal in Man*. And second, the article then more constructively applies aspects of Scheler’s work towards thinking specifically about the four steps of Christian discernment developed by the 5th century Desert Father, Ascetic, and Mystic, John Cassian (a contemporary of Augustine, and an Origenist indebted to Evagrius’s teaching). Cassian’s four steps involve determinations of quality, correspondence, source, and potential social impact, all of which are topics that Scheler, in his own way, dealt with in great and rigorous detail, thus making him a valuable resource, not simply for “updating” Cassian’s understanding of discernment for 20th and 21st century challenges, but more so for highlighting what seems to be their continued relevance still today. More specifically, in the final section of this article I will expand upon Cassian’s four steps of discernment by employing what I conceive to be four essential aspects of Scheler’s detailed depictions of “religious acts” to make distinctions and engage in meaningful discernment. I will demonstrate how we are in need of discerning and sorting-out the differences between 1) finite values and supreme values, 2) an authentic and inauthentic doctrine of God 3) true difference and that which cultivates indifference, and 4) the social imaginaries of theomorphism and anthropomorphism.

Given our present cultural context in which we face an unprecedented quantity of “options” accompanied by calls for immediate decision, and to which we often respond with indecision, delay, or difficulty, rethinking discernment seems not only helpful, but also necessary. And given the ever intensifying speed of industrial globalization, the proliferation of media and its concomitant technologization, and the unprecedented demands of being immediately up-to-date and informed (via news or social media) in order to *make good decisions*, it is only natural that we are at risk of feeling easily distracted, overwhelmed, internally divided, and pulled in multiple directions simultaneously (*mérimna*). Such variance has the potential to create an internal division of self-distrust, or to breed passive indifference. Since it is nearly impossible to escape this culture (globalization allows little room for retreat), it is helpful to establish productive means by which we might frame these options differently, and ultimately thrive under the conditions, tensions, and even dangers they can create. In short, my exposition of Scheler’s work on religion, combined with Cassian’s description of the process of skillful discernment, may help to see the complexities involved not only in the discernment between good and evil, but also in any attempt to employ discernment that seeks to be wise, engaged, and more authentic.

II. CHRISTIAN DISCERNMENT

This cultural backdrop does not necessarily change how we engage in discernment entirely, but rather calls for renewed attention to both its importance, and the core aspects of how we engage in it. One way to understand discernment, especially in light of the aforementioned challenges, is as an activity that can help

3 These viewpoints exist “isolated from each other, next to each other, sealed in and buttressed — not to say cocooned and petrified — in the ‘organization’ of narrow academic circles...” and in ways that they scarcely arrive at “any fruitful statement of differences. The multiplicity of ‘viewpoints’ has led in the outcome not to any vital ‘wrestling of minds’ but to the most arid academicism...” Scheler, *On The Eternal in Man*, 128-29. See here Anthony Steinbock and Zachery Davis, “Scheler”, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/scheler>. There they claim that Scheler also gave attention to different religions, and to how, despite the potential our knowledge of them might bring, they also can be detrimental: “How we reconcile and live in a smaller world with these differences will determine whether the future will be one of war or one of peace.”

convert the often challenging options and decisions we face into possibilities of putting a faith in practice that is not simply a matter of *selection*, but of *active discovery* that puts such options in the context of how truth corresponds to goodness and virtue. Christian discernment is traditionally understood to be the means by which one determines and interprets the revelation of God's wisdom in the context of everyday life decisions, symbols, and ideas; all according to a prior determination of values, supremely the *Imitatio Christi*. Although one need not believe in the Christian God to engage in discernment today, discernment traditionally has been understood as one means or facet of hearing God, which is built upon the pre-understanding that an interactive and interpersonal relationship with a "self-manifesting" God is possible.

Such determination and interpretation in discernment also involves sorting *out* false beliefs and attitudes. Thus discernment is not merely a way of making "better" decisions or of seeking secret and divine information in order to arrive at final answers to our questions about what concerns us ultimately. That would threaten to eradicate the element of faith, making the engagement in discernment no longer relevant. Instead, discernment concerns how one arrives at faith *interpersonally* in decision, and how one determines that one thing/person to whom one sutures oneself in loyal commitment as demonstrated *through a kind of active passivity*. This all seems to be rather consistent with the work on the topic developed by Cassian. Research on Christian discernment often traces back to his depiction of four practical means of engaging in *discretio spirituum* through his metaphor of the "skilled money changer".⁴ As interpreted and summarized by Waaijman, Cassian's money changer:

First examines a gold coin on the point of its genuineness: is it gold or not? Next, he asks whether the effigy is that of the king or has been falsified. After that, he checks whether the coin was minted legally or by a counterfeiter. Finally, he determines whether the coin has the stipulated weight. These four actions metaphorically portray the complex action of discernment.⁵

These four aspects of discernment concern *seeing a difference, recognizing meaning*, "producing a profile" by interacting with others, and determining the temporal applicability of information in order to relate my present to future possibilities.⁶ In order to be a good moneychanger, one must learn the craft, and similarly in discernment one must verify the "quality" of one's contemplations and their origins. Contemplation is so important for Cassian that one does not merely confess wrongdoing, but also wrong-thinking to a confessor.

In this specifically Christian context, God works out a transformation within the discernor, not only at particularly critical times of decision making, but in every moment at which she seeks some sense of her options, awareness, direction, and growth.⁷ Each of these aspects of *discretio* concern judgment, divi-

4 The command to "become like skilled money changers" is attributed to Jesus in extra-canonical literature, and is given attention in Section 2, book 20 of Cassian's *Conferences (Conlationes)*, written around 426-429. Cassian was highly interested in the moral life but did not focus upon human efforts to being moral. His approach concerned finding moral effort in *caritas* or *cordis*, a kind of soul contemplation that concerned self-examination (despite the soul never being "decipherable."). The money changer metaphor is one of three for thinking about discernment. The others are the millstone grinding grains, and the officer discerning which soldiers are permitted to hold which specific duties. In Cassian's words "So we must...analyze with astute discernment all the thoughts which arise in our hearts, primarily investigating their origins, causes, and authors. In this way, then, on the basis of the worth of whoever suggests them, we will be able to figure out the kinds to which we ought to give our approval, and so become, according to the Lord's precept, good money-changers. For the supreme skill and expertise of such persons lies in determining if something is the purest gold, or if it has been too little boiled by the fire's purification; and in not being fooled through their most prudent discernment by a cheap denarius when passed off as a precious coin under the guise of shining gold; and not only in shrewdly recognizing coins minted with usurpers' faces, but also in detecting through their acute skill those which bear the true king's image but are counterfeit; and finally in carefully investigating, by the test of the balance, whether coins are less than the proper weight." John Cassian, "De institutiones coenobiorum and Collationes patrum (Conferences)", in *A Selected Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Vol. 11*, §2, ed. Phillip Schaff (Edermans, 1973), §2.20

5 Kees Waaijman, "Discernment: Its History and Meaning", *Studies in Spirituality* 7 (1997), 5-6.

6 Ibid., 5-6.

7 As Waaijman continues: "not only at critical moments, however, but consistently the transformation in God is accompanied by an awareness of a starting point or of a goal, a sense of direction, the perception of options, intuitions with respect to the outcome, learning experiences, points of recognition in the journey of others, experiences of growth (etc)." Waaijman, "Discernment: Its History and Meaning", 5-6. For lexicographical engagement on discernment see François Dingjan, *Discretio: Les origines patristiques et monastiques de la doctrine sur la prudence chez Saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Van Gorcum, 1967). 8-13.

sion, and separation, making discernment relevant on the moral (good vis-a-vis evil), hermeneutic (interpretation of scripture), historical (balancing out history in relation to cultural trends), and individual (personal relation with God) levels. Such actions of discernment — *diakrisis*, *discretio*, *discretion* — directly concern “separation, difference, [and] division in the physical senses of the word”.⁸ And thus, it seems some philosophical reflection on the *ways* we are to understand these *acts of division* can help make an important intervention in how we might think about discernment today. Before returning to discernment, a next step is to situate the overall context of Scheler’s work.

III. THE PHILOSOPHY OF MAX SCHELER

III.1 *The Broader Contours of Scheler’s Work on Religion*

Scheler’s personal experiences with religion are all but straightforward: He was born to a Jewish family, was baptized within the protestant faith, converted to Catholicism in 1910, then in the 1920’s set a different path away from traditional Christianity, agnosticism, and atheism. In both early and late writings there is a certain generality with which Scheler deals with the idea of “religion,” and although this generality bears its discontents (which religion? whose? what of the complex history of the very establishment of the word “religion,” which has been used to oppress people especially from non-western cultures?) it allows for a certain continuity between earlier and later works. This could be for various reasons, ranging from how his early and unexpected death in 1928 prevented him from bringing his publication plans to fruition, to how his turn from Christianity did not annul one of his most central claims: that we are never to install a finite good in the place of absolute value.

Yet the most obvious reason that his general understanding of religion does not seem to be contradicted in later works (even when he no longer professes to being a part of the Christian faith) is that he is highly influenced by his *Doktorvater*, the neo-Kantian Rudolf Van Eucken, whose “noology” sought the eternal truth of values.⁹ Eucken’s influence upon Scheler cuts deep — Scheler’s *On the Eternal in Man* shows similar patterns to Eucken’s 1901 *Der Wahrheitsgehalt der Religion*, in which Eucken develops a philosophy of mind committed to the promotion of religious life.¹⁰ Along with metaphysics and science, religion “form[s] the anchor of his sociology of knowledge”¹¹, and Scheler progresses on Eucken’s agenda, “the idea that religion is the core of culture.”¹² In fact, various negative socio-political facts (e.g. the Great War, the lack of a substantive ethics of technology, “external” values of material culture) have been in part the result of a loss of religion and the cultivation of inner life (*Innerlichkeit*). Both Scheler and Eucken held to a kind of “universal” religion because of the common, observable features in world religions, yet also because each religion bears its own unique characteristics that point to a deep, driving, and operative religiosity; the kind that Scheler and Eucken both sought to promote in order to reestablish a human trust in “eternal truth” (*Vertrauen auf ewige Wahrheit*).

Such an influence helps us understand how, for Scheler, philosophy is imbued with a quasi-religious task to some degree, to the point that in later years it seems philosophy *absorbed* his understanding of religion. Despite the diversity of options a philosopher faces, when one becomes a *thinker* one becomes

8 Waaijman, “Discernment”, 5.

9 Quentin Smith, “Max Scheler”, in *Twentieth-Century Philosophy of Religion: The History of Western Philosophy of Religion, Volume 5*, ed. Oppy, Graham Robert, Trakakis, N. N. (Routledge, 2014), 79.

10 See Rudolf Eucken, *Der Wahrheitsgehalt der Religion* (Verlag von Veit und Comp, 1905), 195. Eucken and Scheler’s emphasis upon inner development of the spiritual life is highly reminiscent of Thomas a Kempis attempt at a similar, more explicit revival of the individual *Imitation of Christ* (especially in Book one “Helpful Counsels of the Spiritual Life”), which involved a similar depiction of movement, not only towards imitating the Christ in removing oneself from the world, but also, from out of that movement, developing “contempt” for its “vanities” — *De Imitatione Christi et contemptu omnium vanitatum mundi*.

11 Michael Barber, *Guardian of Dialogue: Max Scheler’s Phenomenology, Sociology and Philosophy of Love* (Bucknell Univ. Press, 1993), 138.

12 Sylvain Camilleri, “The ‘German Fathers’ of the Theological Turn in Phenomenology: Scheler, Reinach, Heidegger”, *The Heythrop Journal* 55, no. 4 (2014), 548.

committed to being of one mind in this “Eternal” life. He critiqued two prevalent tendencies in philosophy of religion: it is a mistake either to argue for a non-personal Being of revelation (for this amounts to a Gnosticism that leaves religion impersonal); or to proffer a certain metaphysical conceptualization of philosophy in order to “protect” religion, for this ends up leaving the construction *atheoretic*. Both approaches overemphasize the philosophy/religion separation, and contribute to the problem of an “arid academicism” parsed into a “kind of ghetto-spirit” that drives a deep wedge between the sciences of thinking God and those of the so-called secular-everyday.

Another aspect of his work that remained important throughout his career concerns how an understanding of eternity helps overcome idolization. Scheler remained convinced that we all hold the responsibility to perform a kind of reduction upon our absolute values — to not fall prey to elevating finite values to the level of infinitude — and to demonstrate the importance of community and solidarity “despite religious denominations.”¹³ With little nuance, he sovereignly claimed that a certain “law stands: every finite spirit believes either in God or in idols.”¹⁴ We thus are to engage in, and not “willfully or artificially suppress”¹⁵ religious acts that help us to become actively passive, seeking salvation. Salvation must originate from somewhere other than the self: “need, the empty heart, the heartfelt want ... are beacons, drawing souls on to explore new ground. But *more* they cannot do.”¹⁶

Although such a “heartfelt want” can contribute positively to one’s transcendental reaching beyond oneself, it also can lead to a nihilistic “mass indifference,” not only to religion, but also to anything that extends beyond how one already sees the world. A lack of attention to “the highest concern of man” (religion) indicates more than indifference. It amounts to a sterile negation.¹⁷ This critique is aimed at both the religiously agnostic, as well as the “theoretical” agnostic, a self-proclaimed “believer.” Although salvation is from God, your human responsibility is to cultivate “your absolute sphere” and what will inhabit it.¹⁸ Scheler furnishes a helpful description of what happens when this sphere goes uncultivated and unattended:

[Regarding] the metaphysical *disquiet* and religious *dread* experienced in the presence of the absolute, nothing which here fills the sphere of the absolute can have the effect of intensifying and stabilizing the energy expended on clinging to the motley assemblage of appearances. But such clinging, such vain love of the world, in turn restores the void to the absolute religion of consciousness. This is the tragic round of the mind indifferent in matters of religion.¹⁹

Even when “nothing” fills this sphere, there still remains an act of clinging to a certain ad-hoc, un-thought-through, collection of values. These finite values come to reassert the invaluable, and the soul is left wandering, tragically, in spiritual adolescence. Before continuing to engage Scheler on religion, it is helpful first to highlight his overall approach to values, the social, ethical, and political.

13 Peter Gaitsch, “Max Schelers Reformation der Religionsphilosophie”, *Labyrinth Philosophy Journal* 20, no. 2 (2019), 15.

14 Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man*, 267.

15 As Frings interprets “Every human being possesses within himself a sphere of the absolute, toward which he is continually directed. Man has the power, however, to willfully or artificially suppress this sphere by clinging, for instance, to only sensible, visible, verifiable or provable objects and their relations, making them the sense of his life. But in such cases, too, the essential religious sphere of human consciousness persists as such, although more or less empty. Furthermore, it is possible for man to fill, so to speak, this absolute sphere with earthly and finite goods — ‘idols.’” Manfred S. Frings, *Max Scheler: A Concise Introduction into the World of a Great Thinker* (Duquesne Univ. Press, 1965), 153.

16 Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man*, 19.

17 In Scheler’s words, “It was skeptic indifference and unbelief which enabled the Churches to live such an easy life before the war and to be so content with ‘maintaining’ their position. But the time will come when unbelief’s sterile negation and the apparent tolerance of religion by lazy indifference will have come to an end. Then religion will once again be recognized and attacked from all sides for what it is — the highest concern of man.” *Ibid.*, 121.

18 “You cannot choose between having and not having a good of this kind. You can only choose whether your absolute sphere will be inhabited by God, as the one good *commensurate* with the religious act, or by an idol. This even applies to men who call themselves ‘indifferent’ in matters of religion, even to theoretical ‘agnostics.’” *Ibid.*, 269.

19 *Ibid.*, 270.

III.2. Scheler and the Aims of Philosophy

Three preliminary points about his philosophical approach allow for a better grasp of his work on religion:

A. Philosophy does not simply *begin* with wonder; It also must *sustain* wonder, value, and virtue through a “loving act of participation, at the center of the human being.”²⁰ This assemblage of *acts is* philosophy. This loving participation also concerns a social element of turning back Modernity’s over-industrialization of the human, and calling humanity to higher ideals of itself in order to reinvent its lifeworld. This element of “love” should not be mistaken for a vague sentimentality, however. Its aim concerns an actively rigorous and philosophical approach that is irreducible to an affective passion (although for Scheler the affective dimension precedes ontologically the cognitive one).²¹

Love is not mere sentiment, but rather a hard-fought activity rooted in moral and ethical relation with others. This entails that ethics is “non-formal”, or not universalizable: if values indeed are immutable, ideal, and independent from the human, then an ethics (of love) should be understood as non-formal, opposing especially Eudaemonistic ethics and utilitarianism.²² The advantage of such a non-formal approach lies “...in the fact that here the whole of man is the object of investigation, i.e., not only the ‘animal rationale,’ or the ‘homo faber’ as an evolutionary result and blind alley of nature, or any other variation of the ideas of man.”²³

B. Similarly, philosophy concerns the active *formation* or ordering of values: *Ordo Amoris*. Instead of *Wahrnehmung* or perception, Scheler is interested in *Wertnehmung* or value-ception. For example, when we make an aesthetic judgment, we are not simply visually *seeing* things as beautiful, but rather are recognizing that they rebound us towards our fundamental values, which are ontologically prior to the presentation of a “beautiful” material object.²⁴ One’s ordering, determining, or ranking of her values will furnish a blueprint for *who she is*, from which follows certain behaviors and life conduct: “*Whoever has the ordo amoris of a man has the man himself*. He has for the man as a moral subject what the crystallization formula is for the crystal.”²⁵

The values and the person are co-extensive, namely because we relate with our values as if they accord to one another a fundamental unity and hierarchy based upon our felt priorities. Values feed the ethical experience (as an ethos according to which one implicitly operates in a universalizable and non-relativistic way) and lead us toward greater moral relation with “the other” and ourselves. This individuation does not begin with the uniqueness, difference, or singularity of the other, but rather with difference itself, which we are able to detect affectively.

C. Yet, philosophy is inherently inter-social: the I-other relationship (*miteinander-erleben*) is more primordial than the I-I relationship because it is there that I gain a point of *reference*. There is no “me” without the other, even though I lack access to the other’s mind. Philosophy thus should concern itself with a relation between persons, a form of participation with others (*Seinsverhältnis*, or ontological relation). Yet this in fact (non-formal) ethical relation leads me and motivates me to my continuous task to

20 Max Scheler, *Vom Ewigen im Menschen*, (GW V), ed. Maria Scheler (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1954), 68.

21 By no means, however, might one depict Scheler’s approach as a whole to be entirely based upon the “affective” or emotive. He also attends, for example, to helpful delineations of how we are to understand the very idea of evidence/proof, referring to three types: *Aufweis* (a-pointing-to kind of truth, or demonstration), *Beweis* (a proof that is “conclusive”), and *nachweis* (a recapitulation of a truth that already has been established or accepted).

22 For Frings such judgment typically “reveals intuitive cognition of values, which are independent in their being and of their realization by man. Values are ideal objects, and immutable. But if such values are realized by any one person, correct moral acting is the result. Moral judgments presuppose the cognition of values-qualities in the same sense as in perceptive judgments something is said about sensible qualities of things.” Frings, *Max Scheler*, 109.

23 *Ibid.*, 109.

24 Max Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik: Neuer Versuch der Grundlegung eines ethischen Personalismus*, ed. Maria Scheler and Manfred S. Frings (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1980), 40.

25 Max Scheler, “Ordo Amoris.” In *Selected Philosophical Essays* (Chicago, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1973), 100.

juxtapose where I end and another begins. Here again love is essential, for in outstretching towards the other I learn the content and ordering of my values.²⁶

This being-with or “co” of inter-personal relation gets worked out by Scheler in five different types of feelings: *Nachfühlen* (feeling vicariously, empathy), *Miteinanderfühlen* (feeling something simultaneously with another), *Mitgefühl* (feeling as sympathy, an intending to feel for the other). *Gefühlansteckung* (getting lost in a feeling with others, such as at a concert), and *Einsfühlung* (mystical experiences of “becoming” the other’s feeling). These feelings support the claim that I have a responsibility to a community of persons via solidarity, without sacrificing a sense of individuation. This supports claims made elsewhere that “In the capitalist age of the bourgeois, an age of systematic rationalism” we believe we hold the “technical blueprints for an authentic metaphysics.”²⁷ The modern attempt to develop a “formal” blueprint of ethics has failed, and a different metaphysics of ethics is necessary, one founded in the ultimate “source” of difference — the eternal.

IV. SCHELER ON RELIGION IN ON THE ETERNAL IN MAN

Returning now to more explicit reflections on religion in *On the Eternal in Man*, Scheler engaged it in an unapologetically Christian, and even traditionally theological fashion, often unlike some of his contemporaries. Yet to reduce his engagements with religion in *On the Eternal in Man* to a mere rehashing of Christian theology would be a vast underestimation. Again reflecting Eucken, religion is not simply a phenomenon of cultural construction, but is fundamentally “load bearing in culture” carrying the weight of our values.²⁸ There are four facets I determine to be central to Scheler’s engagements with religion in this particular text: religion and acts; religion and surrogate gods; religion and salvation; and religion and the Eternal.

IV.1 Religion and Acts

First, religion is not to be understood simply in terms of doctrinal beliefs, but particular *acts*. The absolute or “the value of the holy...is given to us, offered to us, in the religious act alone”²⁹ and “the most conclusive...sign of a religious act, as distinct from all other acts of mind or spirit, is an attendant insight into the fact that *of its essence it cannot be fulfilled* by any finite object belonging to, or itself forming, the ‘world.’”³⁰ One evidence of a religious act is that it cannot result in any conclusive “fulfillment” or dissolution. This concerns Scheler’s primary thesis of *The Eternal in Man*:

My conviction...is that this experience by man at the very core of his being in personal contact with God *always* and *necessarily* accompanies the fulfillment of two conditions, one positive, one negative. The negative is what I have called disillusion with idols, i.e. removal from the centre of the *absolute* sphere... of all finite things and finite goods.... The positive condition is that the spiritual person itself, hence also its acts... should be independently active and active of its own spontaneous accord, and at the same time see this principle, with its mechanical teleological functions, ‘below’ it in a figurative sense as its purely objective area of *command*.³¹

In short, the two conditions are 1: the smashing of surrogate gods and finite idols, and 2: a raising of the spiritual within persons to a plane higher than the physical, so as to be in closer touch with the absolute and to achieve one’s individuation in independence and freedom. These conditions lend to a person’s attaining an “*indivisible and indestructible unitary experience*” in God, and to knowing God *as a person*.³²

26 Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materielle Wertethik*, 383.

27 Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man*, 276.

28 *Ibid.*, xi.

29 *Ibid.*, 282.

30 *Ibid.*, 251.

31 *Ibid.*, 27-28.

32 For Scheler, “The kernel of our meaning is therefore this: if these *two* conditions are fulfilled, the negative and the positive, and if in the progress of concentration it attains its own substance, i.e. detaches itself and knows itself detached from all control

Next, like most of his contemporaries, Scheler would easily agree that there is an ever-operative unconscious or subconscious metaphysical structure to how we make meaning and sense of the world. Yet Scheler goes one step further, suggesting that there is an ever-operative *religious drive* in humankind that always, in one way or another, finds expression or sublimation. Religious acts (which nevertheless also are depicted as phenomenologically “intentional” and not merely passive acts) help understand, through the description of different characteristics, what happens in the attempt to *discern* the Absolute. To transcend the world is one intention of the religious act, yet only the Absolute can “fulfill” this religious act as a response. The eternal, that is to say the infinitude of value and meaning in a religious act, comes about through an *Aufnahme* or “assimilation” in which the Absolute is given to someone in a very particular and unique way *for* that person.³³ Thus, the personalist, individuating givenness of the Absolute furnishes the experiencer a kind of evidence (*Aufweis*) that is applicable only to that person. The religious act is by no means undertaken by only religious people. Even the attempt to prove there is no God, to demonstrate and counter-argue that religion is insignificant, is inherently a “religious act.”

IV.2 Religion and Salvation

Religious acts are driven towards the end-goal of salvation, an inherently human need. Prior to any development of a personal theology or metaphysical system, the individual has an inborn sense of salvation, in part by merit of the seeking of value and evaluation, which secure one’s place in the world. We should turn attention to the belief structures and prejudgments surrounding both our own sense of what it would mean to be saved, as well as what salvation means for the broader culture in which we find ourselves: “The human being always ‘has’ some kind of credence and assumption concerning his own and the world’s *weal* or way of salvation before he ever adopts the metaphysical frame of mind. He ‘necessarily’ has this assumption, whether he will[s] or not, and whether or not he is reflexively aware of it. For in order of origin...the religious act is *antecedent* to the act of philosophical cognition.”³⁴

Following his overall negative/positive schema of religious acts, salvation follows suit as a repentance of both turning from idols, and turning towards what can subsist individuation. Negatively regarded, salvation must attend to some depiction of that *from which* one needs salvation, even though various cultural forms seek to distract us from our need for it. “Religion is thus pre-eminently a *way of salvation*” and “Religion is...founded in the love of God and longing for a final *salvation* of man himself and all things.”³⁵ One of course might critically inquire here: what keeps this qualification of salvation from being yet another form of capitalist production? Is not the overemphasis upon personal and individual *redemption* through activity (read: work) one of the very signposts of the protestant ethic Weber warned us about? Although Scheler does not furnish a satisfying answer to such questions, he does see salvation as heteronomous: salvation motivates the religious act, and inspires moral engagement for the good of all. It thus is ethically oriented upon values, not simply an individually detailed dogmatic credence, and here again a non-formal ethics and the ordering of values both appear to be intertwined with religion. For “The *first* intentional object of the religious act is not the absolutely real and its essence, but the *summum bonum*.”³⁶

Although one might wonder from where this telic end of the *summum bonum* originates (as if from a search for the Kantian sublime, presuming the human soul has an internal clock set to an inherent knowledge of omnibenevolence and the infinite good), Scheler’s idea of salvation seems to go beyond metaphysical or even moral abstraction, also concerning everyday salvation, even from ourselves. War

by the physical principle, the person necessarily attains at one and the same moment, in an *indivisible and indestructible unitary experience*, to its substance in *God*, while in it the reality of God as a person becomes simultaneously discernible.” Ibid., 28.

33 Scheler, *Vom Ewigen im Menschen*, (GW V), 245.

34 Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man*, 152.

35 Ibid., 138.

36 Ibid. Regarding this sum of all good: “the specific goodness of God’s will is already a consequence of the fact that his will is eternally one and coincident with what he loves. God does not love what he wills, loving it because he wills it, but wills it eternally what he loves and affirms in love as value.” Ibid., 225.

and human sacrifice attest to our darker sides; the first World War was one in which all of “humanity itself was in the war. [...] Humanity itself was suffering violence committed by humanity.”³⁷ Yet even prior to that war, modern industrialization (the second industrial revolution) had hollowed out the German soul, leading to a kind of religious indifference. War — at least, as he depicted it in 1918-1921 — had the positive effect of turning one away from self-destruction via indifference and drawing one back to an inner passion via the Absolute.³⁸ Industrialism, combined with times of war and crisis, created a *mélange* of idolizations like never before. Thus, the “eternal” becomes a means of countering our idolization that has kept us from being fundamentally human. The object and act of religion demonstrate that there are indeed “God-surrogates” seeking to control us (as observable in the instrumentalized sacred fury of the great War). Nevertheless, Scheler at this point remained optimistic about humankind’s returning to its religious acts, and its subsequent bringing them under investigation.³⁹

IV.3 Religion and Surrogate gods

This leads to a third, and perhaps his most detailed engagement with religion as a *commitment to the Absolute*, which allows for the salvation *from idols* through their being “shattered.” When we mistakenly raise a particular finite *difference* or value to the level of having an absolute or infinite status, we fall into idolization. Since we all believe in either God or idols, instead of demonstrating to someone that they should believe in God, it should be a goal to demonstrate their idolatry:

[He has] installed a finite good in place of God, i.e. that within the objective sphere of the absolute, which he ‘has’ at all events as a sphere, he has, in our sense, ‘deified’ a particular good — or ‘become enamored’ of it, as the ancient mystics would have said. In thus bringing a man to disillusion with his idol, once we have exposed it in analysing his life, we bring him *of his own accord* to the idea and reality of God. Hence, what I have called the ‘shattering of idols’ is the principle (and only) way to prepare the religious development of the personality.⁴⁰

To be enamored by something *particular* within the objective sphere quickly amounts to that thing’s being raised, even if only gradually, to the level of idolization. Whereas a mark of the person who is oriented towards the infinite will be that they take up a sort of evangelical task to demonstrate to others their a) worship of finite idols, and b) implicitly operative religious acts. This is not a “conversion” as usual, however, for it seeks to activate the individual towards their own religious values and actions, and in a way entirely different from how we typically understand philosophy of religion today. The aim is not a proof but an “awakening and activation of the religious act, the guiding of it to its proper object and objective good. This principle is no more than strictly consequent upon our theory of religion.”⁴¹

In the *Weltgrund* we are confronted by two opposing interests: those of spirit and those of *Lebensdrang* or life-urges. This amounts to a kind of internal dualism to which we must respond in order to actively engage in de-idolization. The risk of superficial values looms large, and thus it is the task of the individual to bring into proper balance her “sense of spirit” and sense of “life-urges.” Our *Lebensdrang* force us to seek fulfillment of needs, wishes, and drives. In developing a sense of spirit, one is able to remain “world open.” This all is entirely necessary because “an incessant drift from the superior to the inferior value is the reigning *tendency* of this fallen world...”⁴²

37 Ibid., 109.

38 Scheler places high emphasis upon the effects of the Great War: “False belief in the inventive, creative or even revelatory power of need has led very many people today to the opinion that the Great War must of itself bring to birth a *new religion* or perhaps a new phase in the development of religion, as it were a miraculous pin-bright new Word in answer to the Question of suffering humanity, which I described at the beginning.” Ibid., 120.

39 “A book could be written on all the God-surrogates whose ruin has been encompassed by this War in such a way as to release men’s souls for God; its title might be ‘The Decline of the European Idol.’ For European social democracy the surrogate has been the *ideal State* of the future, the faith in automatic, smooth-running progress and ‘evolution, which was to make Paradise of its own accord.’ Ibid., 443.

40 Ibid., 267.

41 Ibid., 268.

42 Ibid., 241.

IV.4 Religion and the Eternal

The fourth necessary correlate of Scheler's understanding of religion concerns "the Eternal." As the title of the book indicates, the eternal *in man* is an ineradicable, transcendental search for the non-contingent.⁴³ Christianity's sense of the eternal in particular is "the most revolutionary force in history"⁴⁴ as it helps form a non-egalitarianism of values that can bracket our constant preference for novelty and difference, and assists in overcoming the decay of moral knowledge. We should oppose any human welfare closed to spirit, even if it appeals to universalization or "equality", for without reference to spirit it ultimately betrays through a deep depersonalization that can birth alienation and isolation. Yet also a strong individualism, void of the heteronomy for which Scheler advocates, may also result in an indifferent kind of equality.

Here, God is implicated directly. God is supratemporal, not proceeding in time "but as changing" without being reducible to changing itself, for God holds a consistent identity throughout time. As the eternal, God "bears within it the *contents* of all possible changing".⁴⁵ This follows from a rather important, more theological point that God is not *only* sempiternal (ever-being) but *also* supratemporal (eternal). Such eternity entails that God is not, Godself, changing, but that God might lord over time itself in a synchronic way so that change is always possible. The eternal can take up a "temporal form of being" and is yet "above change and duration."⁴⁶ Metaphysics and religion form two sides (sempiternal + supratemporal) so that the eternal can take on a temporal form while also maintaining itself above and beyond the temporal. This is a premonition of what later in the text (191-192) Scheler will address as the temporal state of God's absoluteness and infinitude in relation to the eternal.

The eternal can be understood according to absoluteness and infinitude, both of which are essential to our having relation with God. We, contingent, finite things, can relate with the holy as "the formal attributes of absoluteness and infinitude — two properties which, as we have shown, are inherent in the relationship to contingent things of the absolutely holy *ens a se*..."⁴⁷ "Absoluteness" concerns God's being founded (as Eternal) solely within Godself with a freedom of self-determination, an absolute creative power, and a self-contained non-contingency (*ens a se*).

Whereas "infinitude," although it bears consequences for God's designation as *ens a se*, an infinite *being*, concerns more so a matter of God's "infinite mind".⁴⁸ In a nutshell, the temporal vis-à-vis infinite relation = *the eternal*. The infinite and absolute make for the possibility that humankind can relate with the eternal: the eternal is *in the human* (and thus not in some hidden metaphysical reservoir) insofar as humans are finite things as "possible correlates of infinite mind."⁴⁹ God's infinitude is described according to four correlates that we, of finite mind, can conceive: number (uniqueness), time (eternality), space (ubiquitousness) and magnitude (Immeasurability).

First, the correlate of "number" or quantity, which often is thought according to how God is "one", actually should go deeper: God's absolute uniqueness *precludes* numerical qualifications. God is "quantitative restriction and is therefore incalculable."⁵⁰ This sheds further light on supratemporality/sempi-

43 Ibid. xi.

44 Ibid., xii.

45 Ibid., 141.

46 God is not sempiternal (ever-being) but eternal (supratemporal). And it is the eternity of God which not merely permits but demands that to a finite creature, whose life proceeds in Time, the eternal supratemporal being shall *appear* in any vital communion between them not as sempiternal, filling all Time, but as changing; though God *is* not changing, and eternity *also* contains the being and essential identity of the eternal one in every part of Time. However, such sempiternity does not *exhaust* eternity. The eternal also bears within it the *contents* of all possible changing — though the form of change is lacking. If metaphysics represents the eternal's temporal form of being, i.e. sempiternity, religion represents the *fullness* of the eternal, as a sublimity above change and duration. Only by putting religion and metaphysics together can we obtain an — inadequate — picture, an — inadequate — expression of the eternal." Ibid.

47 Ibid., 190.

48 Ibid., 191.

49 Ibid., 192.

50 Ibid.

ternality, for our sense of “number” can be overcome by the Eternal’s possible revocation of the second correlate, time. And if time can be overcome, so can the experience of quantity or number. In regards to time, God is the eternal and able to “fill every instant...not prescribed to him by the order of time... [.] Precisely *by virtue of his eternity*[,] God is also able to enter *any* irrevocable moment of history in his oneness and undivided state, without thereby detracting one jot from his eternity.”⁵¹

The third correlate, space, points to how the infinite is ubiquitous and exercises complete superiority, capable of being everywhere simultaneously. Yet this is “distinct from omnipresence” in that God is “supraspatial, can be and act whole and undivided (being simple) at *whatever point in space he choose*.”⁵² God expresses infinitude by creating spaces, entering them, or leaving them at will. God’s omnipresence, *immanentia Dei in mundo* (immanent God in the world), concerns existence and *presence* to all without being *in* everything (pantheism) or everything being *in* God (panentheism).⁵³

The fourth correlate, magnitude entails that God is immeasurable, not as *having or obtaining* magnitude “but rather that as an *absolutely* simple being[,] God has no part at all in the category of *divisible* magnitude and is immeasurable only because whatever is measurable *postulates magnitude*. God can therefore *be and act whole and undivided* in whatever thing he chooses that possesses magnitude...”⁵⁴ By paradoxically sustaining this indivisibility while also producing *difference itself*, God is unique from an idol, making God a proper object of adoration. Overall, the very infinitude of this difference (to space, time, quantity, and magnitude) is awe-inspiring, and should lead us to *discerning* how we are to organize our lives *in relation to these four correlates*.

V. APPLYING SCHELER TO RETHINK CASSIAN'S FOUR STEPS OF DISCERNMENT

Cassian referred to discernment as the true fountainhead of all virtue in order to overcome the carelessness of thought. Scheler’s work makes it possible to expand upon each of the four steps of discernment. Cassian’s good “money changers” exemplified the conscientious determination of the quality, image, source, and social weight of a coin. Building constructively upon these observations about Scheler’s work on religion, I will now expand upon how 1) the determination of quality can be supported by the ordering of values; 2) the judgment of the authenticity of one’s theology can involve a reduction to what one is “directed towards” as eternal and omnibenevolent; 3) the assessment of a source can be supported by perceiving whether the thought corresponds with the *totally different* in a way that counteracts *indifference*; and 4) the determination of the social “weight” of a thought can be supported by attending to the need for *balance* between the social imaginaries of anthropomorphism and theomorphism.

V.1. The Determination of Quality

Cassian’s first step of discernment is the act of determining *quality*, namely, of information, a thought of God, or a sense of a “right path” to take. One must not be fooled by appearances, and a kind of trial by fire determines the purity of the thought (like a gold coin being melted down). Either the thought is pure

51 “This is not simply the sempiternal, that which has absolute duration or fills all time, for that is an attribute which may at least meaningfully be predicated of matter and energy. No, what it expresses is that God, as ‘supratemporal’ may (just as he please) be also intratemporal, is *able* to fill every instant and period of time in a manner and order chosen by himself and *not* prescribed to him by the order of time (that is, the natural laws appropriate to time). Precisely *by virtue of his eternity* God is also able to enter *any* irrevocable moment of history in his oneness and undivided state, without thereby detracting one jot from his eternity.” Ibid., 192.

52 Ibid.

53 Regarding pantheism, for Scheler: “In this sense Augustine’s dictum *Inquietum cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te* is a basic formula for all religious acts. Even pantheism does not refute but complies with this essential law. For there never yet has been a pantheism which dared to make a *finite* world the object of religious devotion. It even seeks to concord with the law by declaring the world *itself* to be infinite.” Ibid., 251.

54 Here on this point regarding God’s in-the-worldness, Scheler presents a paradox: “For the world is according to reality distinct from God, and only because God is infinite mind can God notwithstanding be in everything.” Ibid., 193. Scheler rejects pantheism/panentheism for a number of reasons, but he also addresses its inadequacies because evil is an empirical fact with which God cannot be complicit (and because love is the precondition of the highest of values).

(corresponding to the fruits of the spirit) or overly materialistic in a way that lends to righteous vanity. Cassian likely has in mind St. Paul's explanation (Romans 12:2) of how discernment of the good, and of the will of God is a matter of "testing" (δοκιμάζω), which is a word that very specifically refers to how one *proves* or *scrutinizes* the genuineness of a metal.⁵⁵ Cassian's depiction of this first step points to the need to be skeptical so as to ensure that one's "idea" does not originate in the wish for one's own benefit.

Understanding quality from another angle, Scheler's depiction of religion as the *conditio sine qua non* of the human concerns a transcendental reaching out *beyond* the "fallen" (human-all-too-human) condition towards that which supersedes the individual and human. This "totally other" to which we find ourselves disposed to *outstretch* in the religious act is not only *different* or other than what we know, think, value, or see. It more specifically also concerns an Absolute that runs *contrary* to such finite knowledge, thinking, valuing, and apprehension, upon which we tend to overly rely in our usual "world-experience": "Both mind and heart, our temperament as much as our will, find themselves directed in the religious act toward something which 'is' and has value, something which hovers before our mind over against all possible world-experience as the 'totally other', 'essentially incomparable' thing, which the forming can in no wise contain."⁵⁶

By directing this religious activity towards the totally other, which holds incomparable *value*, we are afforded a possible plumb line for the establishment of the ordering of values, which could prove essential in developing the ability to determine *quality* in an act of discernment: if one is not trained on the ability to determine one's own values first, then this would severely limit the likelihood that one can discern the *quality* of a thought.

Scheler's process of value-ception and *Ordo Amoris* do not concern out-of-body metaphysical experiences. Rather, they are acts whereby one imaginatively conceives finite particularities of human engagement to be imbued with the infinite and eternal (again, thus the title of the book, the Eternal *in Man*). The interactivity between finitude and infinitude is much more fluid than we tend to think, and our marked tendency to elevate finite differences to the level of the Absolute demonstrates this fluidity.

Scheler's notion of value-ception, which feeds our ordering of values, can compliment Cassian's approach in the first step of discernment to determine quality. Cassian demonstrates an understanding of human moral activity that is akin to a cognitive-behavioral model of perception: change your mind, perceive things differently, and the corresponding actions will be sure to follow.⁵⁷ While Scheler's work does not seem to run contrary to either an approach based in "orthodoxy" (he indeed still offers a systematical theory of knowledge) or in "orthopraxy", he has a different starting point.⁵⁸ He begins with *Wertnehmung*, or value-ception because values are more ontologically accurate and specific of engagement in the world than manifestations to consciousness. The things we perceive or "take as" such and such, rebound us

55 Further, as St. Paul argues, the humility of prodding ideas, beliefs, values can bring about a transformation that runs counter to attempting to fit into "the world", and to follow its mandates: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." Romans 12:2.

56 Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man*, 253.

57 It is here worth mentioning that Scheler's grounding his ontology in the affective dimension of *values* (value-ception) over the priority of cognition and perception runs contrary to one of his teachers, Edmund Husserl. In the context of discernment, it is worth mentioning that Willard, a strong proponent of Husserlian phenomenology, and a well-known evangelical Christian, also interprets the New Testament references to God's self-manifestation and the human's role of discernment in a highly cognitive way that privileges the will of perception in a way much like Cassian and Husserl. For Willard "we live at the mercy of our ideas. This is never more true than with our ideas about God." Dallas Willard, *Hearing God* (InterVarsity Press, 2012), 10. Even "Our preexisting ideas and assumptions are precisely what determine what we can see, hear, or otherwise observe. These general ideas — which so often we hold because they express how we want things to be — determine what stories can mean to us. They cannot, therefore be changed by stories and miraculous events alone, since they prevent a correct perception of those very stories and events." Ibid., 64-65. Willard then makes this reliance upon cognitive knowledge even more strongly: "What we do or do not understand, in any area of our lives, determines what we can or cannot believe and therefore governs our practice and action with an iron hand. Careful instruction and hard thinking... will not be done on our behalf." Ibid., 193.

58 See here Christoph Seibert, "Religion aus eigenem Recht: Zur Methodologie der Religionsphilosophie bei Max Scheler und William James" 56, no. 1 (2014).

affectively to what in fact is ontologically prior to those things' very existence.⁵⁹ Those things, ideas, or objects of appearance can affect us only because we first place a certain value upon them. By performing a kind of reduction to value, our very notion of quality can be transformed, refracting what we think to be of quality through the lens of what is ultimately of value. In a nutshell, value-ception is the first step to determining quality in discernment.

It is in this context of the *loss* of being able to discern our values that Scheler critiques post-industrial capitalism for its limitation of *value* to a finitude of *quantity* wherein “maximal acquisition” and possession of values external to oneself has replaced the bringing, attaining, or ordering of value *into oneself*. This cultural development of the externalization of values has made it even more difficult to determine what *quality* even *is* in the first place. We do not know what it would look like, even if we saw it.

Value-ception can be a voluntary willful act that helps discern (again, like a good “money changer” who first determines differences in value and quality) the eternal from the finite, and to determine in what cases the eternal is expressing itself *in* or *through* the finite precisely in terms of a thing's quality. One reason for this is that a determination of *supreme* value can transcend the everyday *context-relevant* value. This cuts against the grain of the prevalent form of understanding value that follows from the economic model of assimilation, interchangeability, flexibility, and dispersion. Although this immediately can raise important political questions (e.g., are there ever values that are simply immaterial? who controls the mode of value production and labor? Is this idea of value simply a matter of a vague “self-actualization” that distracts from the everyday economic concerns of the poor?), it suffices to mention that Scheler's understanding of supreme values are not ignorant of socio-political concerns, yet indeed are irreducible to a simplistic understanding of substance, matter, and production.

V.2. Determination of Authenticity

Cassian's second step of discernment determines the authenticity of the image stamped upon the thought. Even if the coin is gold, the money changer still can be deceived by an incorrect effigy stamped upon the coin. In short, a thought may be pure, but if what one thinks about “God” is incorrect or a heretical image of God, then the thought and action immediately lose their value, leading to self-deception. One should not fall prey to thoughts that falsely promise works of religion, and this gives rise to one's reassessment of their doctrines of God.

This step can be supported by Scheler's call for renewed attention to the religious act. Although we constantly are acting religiously (recall, religion is ever-operative), drawing attention to it, and directing it purposefully makes it more meaningful. This act is the central means by which we sort-out *the origin* of the differences with which we find ourselves faced in order to make decisions and *judgements* upon the values we find ourselves *always already* holding. By turning attention to our active determination from whence these differences derive — whether from a finite source or an eternal one — we might ask: does that which attracts my attention with novelty (which to some degree calls out for love and adoration) reflect infinitude in regards to magnitude, space, time, or quantity in a way that a finite source never could?

In the religious act we envisage a being which is *different* from any finite being and also from any being which is non-finite or infinite in some specific *way* (such as infinite time, infinite space, infinite number, etc.); we find ourselves directed toward something whose place cannot be taken by any finite good, however worthy of love, since religious love transcends the essential nature of all such goods.⁶⁰

Similar to Cassian's call for us to ensure that the image stamped upon the coin is truly the king and not a false-image, Scheler calls us to trace back to the root of true difference and to phenomenologically — or meontologically — imagine “things otherwise”, which helps determine the uniqueness of the image. As the passage above mentions, we are to direct ourselves to the inscrutable doctrines of God, such as infinite goodness (omnibenevolence) and infinitely unlimited spatio-temporality (omnipresence). In doing so, we can begin to make an important separation between not only what conjures worship within us, but

59 Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materielle Wertethik*, 40.

60 Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man*, 251-52.

also — and here reflecting Scheler's claim that even the agnostic or atheist performs religious acts! — what *could* be *worthy* of worship. This determination of testing the worthiness of the divine image impressed upon us in a thought helps discern if it truly is worthy of eternal worship.

Further, religious activity and language serve to point beyond the human as non-contingent. God communicates in and through the finite and “natural”, and here one is called to locate what Scheler calls a “meaning hint”; that is, the clue to how God “speaks” non-contingently through the contingent, how the infinite is embedded within the finite, contingent, and natural.⁶¹ The location of this meaning hint or signification takes us beyond contingency, leading us to true faith in something unconditioned.⁶² The willingness to take the wager of faith in what one deems to be God, and to do so with intent and without condition, is another *test* by which the “image” of the source (in the second step of discernment) can be proven.

V.3 Determination of the source

Cassian's third step of discernment concerns determining the *source* of the thought, whether it is “Godly” or not. This is different from the previous step, which determined *who* God is. Now the concern is whether a thought is *attributable* to such a God. It is possible to have thoughts that pass a test of quality, and pass a test of being theologically non-heretical, yet do not pass a test of being true to a certain divine source: is the image “rightly cut and stamped” as Cassian would ask?⁶³

The German word most similar to discernment, *Urteilsvermögen* indicates more clearly that the act of judgment has a certain *telos*: to judge *rightly*. This should draw attention to how prudent moral character attained through developing higher spiritual *values*, and gaining love for others is of essential consequence whenever engaging in discernment. A certain underlying motivation for Scheler is an inter-social recognition of action, value, and the socio-political factors influencing our religious activity and sources of divine action.

In order to better determine “the source” of a thought, Scheler's means of sorting out *difference* proves to be a helpful resource. Scheler associates God with difference itself, insisting upon *etwas ganz und komplett anders*: an eternal source, a wholly different difference, a great differentiator who makes eternally-relevant difference even possible.⁶⁴ Whatever has substance or “thisness” possibly can direct us towards this total otherness. We tend to translate *anders* as “other” or “otherwise,” yet it also could reference a kind of “difference itself”. Thus, in order to “determine the source” in an act of discernment, we might seek out whether or not the thought can correspond to what/who is “totally different” (as opposed to minimally different) by performing a reduction upon the uniqueness, singularity, and fecundity of the thought.

Along with this positive activity comes a negative one — the pinpointing of what can create indifference, yet masquerading as a “kingly source” (as Cassian would say). If differences *cannot* be traced back to the Absolute and Eternal, then one is more prone to idolization, which further instills indifference and attraction to flashy and glossy replacements for difference itself. Our ever-operative religion-before-religion is never in a neutral position, and if by succumbing to idols we feed an indifference to difference, and blindness to higher value. The more we attend only to finite differences (thus losing sight of the crea-

61 “When therefore the language of religion ‘glorifies the works of the Eternal’, when it finds that the concrete forms of nature ‘express’ or ‘proclaim’ a creative will, eternal reason and goodness, etc., or that all things show traces and footprints of God, it does no more than reproduce the objective speech of things themselves, their meaning hint, their significant pointing beyond their contingency.” Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man*, 275.

62 “Essential to the act of faith is the *unconditionality* with which faith is pledged, and this of course is in accordance with the object's location in the sphere of the absolute. In this sense very man must *needs* have an ‘object of faith’, and every man performs the act of faith. Everybody has a particular something, an object bearing (for him) the hallmarks of the supremely valuable, to which he knowingly, or by the unconscious test of practical conduct, accords precedence over all else. This object is for the leading minority in this capitalist age, to give an example, the maximal acquisition of economic goods...” Ibid., 269.

63 Cassian, “De institutiones coenobiorum and Collationes patrum (Conferences)”, xxi.

64 This association of God with the “totally different” is consistent with Frings' interpretation: “The impossibility of the fulfillment of religious acts by finite beings lies, for Scheler, in the very existence of reality itself, i.e., in its thisness (*Sosein*) A genuine religious act is always directed to a ‘totally different.’” Frings, *Max Scheler*, 157.

tive source from which those differences originated), the less we can resist the driving forces of “marketable” values (such as productivity, efficiency, pragmatic use value).⁶⁵

Thus, this activity of more negatively sorting-out one’s indifference or forms of detachment can bring one closer to a determination of the source of a thought in this third step of discernment; namely, by investigating not just the “theology” of the source (step 2), but also the more implicit soci-cultural frameworks that elevate finite difference to the level of infinitude. This can help break the vicious cycle of the proliferation of finite differences. They constantly bombard us and can create fear and division that a) continuously feed the avoidance of active engagement in discernment, and b) allow for the blind elevation of finite values to the level of the infinite, further distorting our ability to determine what an authentic source *could even look like*. In order to determine the source, the individual’s determination of the *assimilation* (*Aufnahme*) of value and meaning in a religious act can provide a basis for perceiving how the Absolute is manifested in a unique way *for* a particular person and in a specific moment. Such assimilation places a new responsibility upon the discerner, as the only one in that particular moment capable of discerning the source.

V.4 The Societal Weight of the Discerned

Cassian’s fourth step of discernment concerns an examination of “the weight” of a thought or particular action in order to determine a certain social “balance”; whether it be “full of good for all, or heavy with the fear of God...sound in meaning, or...light with human display or some conceit of novelty.”⁶⁶ Important about this particular step is the attempt to project and imagine the impact of one’s thought or activity on the community more broadly. This step is a contemplative projection of how *action* upon this thought *could* affect real, particular people in real, specific circumstances.⁶⁷

Since this effort of discernment a) retains both active and passive aspects, of balancing between self-elevation and self-renunciation, and b) seeks to raise the recognition of the moral and socio-political consequences of decisions, Scheler’s attempt to think beyond *both* anthropomorphism of God, and Theomorphism of the human could prove useful. Scheler does not shroud his disdain for the modern Anthropomorphism of God, which empties the concept of God of all indistinguishable characteristics, making God at best a super-human. On the other hand is the concern for the Theomorphism of the human, which raises the human to the level of divinity, inadvertently making the human an object of worship.⁶⁸

Applying this insight to this fourth step of discernment, a specifically concentrated effort to not fall into one or the other problem of anthropomorphism/theomorphism — within this process of “weighing” what one claims to be discerned — can serve to widen the horizon of the individual to conceive of not just the broader *future implications* of the action, but also the *past socio-political imaginaries* that are always already influencing our religiosity. By *balancing* (or “weighing”) oneself between these two extremes, one is afforded an opportunity to momentarily turn attention away from oneself and towards one’s institutions, community, society, or family.

A determination of God’s effective will (the discerned) is never final, always in relation to others (God’s effective will always concerns a community, *basileia tou theou*), and appropriately arranged according to action in *this present* world. And thus devices for developing a greater sense of *recognition* and awareness of what is taking place in *this*, our present world (we, after all, are *in* this world, no matter our theological commitments) are necessary. As Cassian wisely directs in this fourth and final step, if discernment lacks recognition of the social web in which we all are cultured, we run the risk of abandon-

65 This also is a problem regarding media, which proliferates images of a supposedly good life achieved by monetary goods. This has lent to how “Nearly everything which today is a need of the masses was once a luxury of the few.” Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man*, 118.

66 Cassian, “De institutiones coenobiorum and Collationes patrum (Conferences)”, xxi.

67 David Lonsdale, “The Church as Context for Christian Spirituality”, in *Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur G. Holder (Blackwell, 2011), 256.

68 For Scheler, the idea of anthropomorphism is “wohl das allerdümmste, was die ‘Modernen’ ausgeheckt haben” and is then “so falsch, daß vielmehr die einzige sinnvolle Idee von ‘Mensch’ ganz und gar kein ‘Theo-morphismus’ ist!” Max Scheler, *Zur Idee des Menschen*, *GW Band III Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Maria Scheler and Manfred S. Frings (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1972), 187.

ing what was attained in the first three steps of discernment. This turn to the outside world is a highly imaginative endeavor. It paradoxically calls for attention away from oneself through a concentrated effort to project the social weight of one's individual activities. Here again anthropomorphism/theomorphism point to the broader culture influences, the contemplation of which helps prevent falling into the abstraction of pure autonomy, and the naiveté of the symbolic or institutionalized violence interlaced in our everyday lives and "moral" practices.

Yet on an even deeper level, the very act of discernment should involve, from the very beginning (and even within the more "individualized" steps of contemplation) a strong sense of the heteronomy of faith. Faith is an *inter-personal* wager or act that concerns the very realization that one does not have complete volitional control over the one to whom faith and fidelity are sworn. This should entail that discernment concerns both active recognition — via asking questions or developing curiosity — and passive reception.⁶⁹ Despite attempts to support our autonomous, iron-clad will or desire as the "creators of cultural and technical civilization" they "have *not* the power nor the means to achieve [even] their own satisfaction."⁷⁰

VI. CONCLUSION

Discernment is not a magic genie for attaining holiness or life direction, and cannot promise that the existential tension brought about by the plurality of options we face, can ultimately be resolved or dissolved. These steps of discernment are acts of faith that do not conclude with a pure assurance of good decisions for the discernor. Rather, they are merely tools for at least a) burrowing down towards that which is *ir-reducible* and *non-contingent*, b) reinstalling the status of the object of faith, which always entails risk and wager, and c) leading to a greater sense of integrity. It is possible that others of different religious perspectives could adapt these updated four steps of discernment, even towards a general philosophy or "phenomenology of discernment." Philosophers are professionals at *making distinctions*, but these four steps of discernment could help cultivate the ability to make more meaningful distinctions. As Dewey once put it, "Moral decline is on a par with the loss of the ability to make delicate distinctions, with the blunting and hardening of the capacity of discrimination."⁷¹ Although Dewey's claim may seem a bit nostalgic, there certainly is a cultural loss of the celebration of discernment. Is it a mere coincidence that, in a time in which we rarely celebrate discernment, we also are witnessing social expressions of alienation, estrangement, internal separation, and greater social division?

Since this article has specifically focused on developing a depiction of how these tools of discernment are consistent with scholarship within the Christian tradition, it has begun with the presumption that God self-manifests (*Selbstmitteilung*) in the world, opening up lines of communication.⁷² This opens the possibility for the act of discernment to be interpersonal, even as a responsive prayer, which always

69 Lonsdale develops steps of discernment in an order different from Cassian: "The basic pattern of discernment, then, consists in: first, engagement, in liturgy, contemplation, and study, with the events of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; second, contemplative engagement with people and circumstances in the present in all their awkward concreteness and particularity; third, openness to and trust in the Spirit as the self-gift of God who enables the church continuously to find what its foundational events mean in relation to particular situations here and now." David Lonsdale, "The Church as Context for Christian Spirituality", 256.

70 Reflecting this cultural introspection: "for however strong may be a pressure, a need, a deeply felt want, an emptiness of heart that might be filled, the pressure itself, the need itself, have *not* the power nor the means to achieve their own satisfaction. Yet the attempt has been made to turn the need, the lack, the necessity into the creator of cultural and technical civilization." Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man*, 118.

71 For Dewey "Moral progress and the sharpening of character depend on the ability to make delicate distinctions, to perceive aspects of good and of evil not previously noticed, to take into account the fact that doubt and the need for choice impinge at every turn. Moral decline is on a par with the loss of the ability to make delicate distinctions, with the blunting and hardening of the capacity of discrimination." John Dewey, "Three Independent Factors in Morals", in *The Essential Dewey: Vol 2 Ethics, Logic, Psychology*, ed. L. A. Hickman and T. M. Alexander (Indiana Univ. Press, 1998), 316.

72 Robert Russell, "Natural Sciences: Chapter 19", in *Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur G. Holder (Blackwell, 2011), 329-33.

“dispossesses us of our egocentricism.”⁷³ Paradoxically described, the religious act of discernment is a receiving act that *intends* the Eternal. The wisest of all kings in the history of Israel, Solomon, did not ask God for autonomous wisdom, but instead discernment. The Hebrew בִּינָה (*bīyn*) used in I Kings 3 can be defined precisely as a discerning act of distinction and separation regarding differences, with the aim of righteous *social* judgment. Discernment thus should be an act of making distinctions also for the sake of solidarity and the unification of persons.

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73 Jean-Louis Chrétien, “The Wounded Word: The Phenomenology of Prayer”, in *Phenomenology and the ‘Theological Turn’: The French Debate*, ed. Dominique Janicaud (Fordham Univ. Press, 2000), 153.

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