

Arguments from the Priority of Feeling in Contemporary Emotion Theory and Max Scheler's Phenomenology

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Many so-called “cognitivist” theories of the emotions account for the meaningfulness of emotions in terms of beliefs or judgments that are associated or identified with these emotions.¹ In recent years, a number of analytic philosophers have argued against these theories by pointing out that the objects of emotions are sometimes meaningfully experienced before one can take a reflective stance toward them. Peter Goldie defends this point of view in his book, *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration*. He writes:

The point is not easy to express, but what often happens, I think, is that we first have an emotional response towards an object, a feeling which is often quite primitive.... Then, in self-interpretation, when we become reflectively aware of this feeling towards the object of the emotion, we also normally seek to make it intelligible by looking for identificatory and explanatory beliefs.... What really comes first is the emotional response itself—the feeling of fear towards the snake—and not the thought that its bite is poisonous and the thought that poison would harm me.²

Goldie argues that emotions are meaningful in a way that is different from the meaningfulness of beliefs. He describes this meaningfulness in terms of “feeling towards,” which he identifies as a unique type of intentionality characteristic of emotions.³ The independence of feeling-towards from acts like believing is most clearly brought out by cases in which there is not enough time to form a belief but in which a person experiencing feelings towards an object responds emotionally in a way that is meaningful to them.

Employing a similar type of argument, the phenomenologist Max Scheler argues that certain types of acts of feeling are phenomenologically prior to presentative acts of perception, representation, or imagination.

¹ See John Deigh, “Cognitivism in the Theory of the Emotions,” *Ethics* 104, no.4, (1994): 824–854.

² Peter Goldie, *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 45.

³ *Ibid.*, 18–19.

Scheler supports his claim about the phenomenological priority of such acts of feeling by referring to cases in which the presented contents of an object are hidden or obscured but where the object of feeling, value, remains adequately given. In what follows, I shall endeavor to show how Scheler draws support for his position from these cases and the great significance of his interpretation of these cases for his philosophical outlook as a whole. I shall close by considering some questions about his interpretation and use of these cases.

The Notion of Phenomenological Priority

In order to explain what Scheler means by phenomenological priority allow me to first say a word about phenomenology as a philosophical method or approach. "Phenomenology" in this sense should not be confused with the qualitative feel of subjective experiences or with the study of appearances as opposed to reality. Instead, phenomenology is a way of reflecting upon consciousness, understood in the broadest sense. Another way to say this is that phenomenology is concerned with "the given," the objects of consciousness. Intrinsically bound up with the given are the modes or "acts" by which the given is given to consciousness. In consciousness, object and act always accompany one another. Colors are seen; sounds, heard; goals, willed; states of affairs, represented; and things, perceived.

Scheler and the other early phenomenologists hold that not only are particular acts and objects given to consciousness but also what is given are essences of types of acts, objects, and their various interrelations. Thus, for our purposes, the phenomenological method may be conceived of as a mode of attending to and describing the essential characteristics of acts and objects of consciousness and the essential relationships between various types of acts, types of objects, and the types of acts and objects.⁴

One sort of essential relationship between types of acts or the correlate objects of those acts is phenomenological priority or priority in the foundation of acts or objects. We might say that an act is phenomenologically prior to another act if it is in principle possible for the object of that act to be given with adequation in the absence of the other act.⁵ An act is not phenomenologically prior to another act if it is in principle not possible for the

⁴ Max Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics and Non-formal Ethics of Values*, trans. Manfred Frings and Roger Funk (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 71–72.

⁵ Regarding Scheler's understanding of adequation as a measure of cognition see, Max Scheler, "Phenomenology and the Theory of Cognition," trans. David Lachterman, *Selected Philosophical Essays* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 170.

object of that act to be given with adequation in the absence of the other act. For instance, willing some action is founded upon an act of representation, since willing an action cannot be given in its fullness without also representing the contents to be brought about by the act of willing. Thus, an act of representation is phenomenologically prior to an act of willing and willing is founded upon an act of representation.

Scheler claims that certain types of feeling are phenomenologically prior to acts of perception, representation, or imagination. This is only correct if it is in principle possible through such acts of feeling for the objects of such acts to be given with adequation in the absence of acts of perception, representation, or imagination.

Presentationally Founded Intentional Feelings

By maintaining that some sorts of feelings are intentional, Scheler distinguishes between intentional feelings and mere feeling-states.⁶ Feeling-states, such as localized physical pains, are not themselves intentional, though they may become objects of intentional feelings. For instance, through intentional feelings of suffering, enduring, and enjoying, one may suffer a pain, endure a pain, or enjoy a pain.⁷ This basic distinction between intentional feelings and feeling-states is also obtained in a brief analysis of feelings put forth by Edmund Husserl in the fifth book of the *Logical Investigations*.⁸ Both Husserl and Scheler are opposed to the view that all feelings are like mere feeling-states. According to such a view, which we might call the associationist view, all feelings associated with an emotion, are not, themselves, intentionally directed at some object but are commonly associated with, or even causally related to, the presentation of a particular thing or state of affairs. According to the associationist view, feelings are meaningful only insofar as they borrow their meaning from the represented or perceived contents with which they are associated.

Husserl and Scheler agree that feelings are intentional; where they disagree has to do with the order of foundation between the object of feeling and the object of presentation.⁹ According to Husserl, the objects of intentional feelings are as a matter of essential necessity founded upon pre-

⁶ Scheler, *Formalism*, 256–258.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁸ Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, vol. 2 (London: Routledge, 2002), 106–112.

⁹ See Zhang Wei's helpful comparison of Husserl and Scheler's views on this subject in "The Foundation of Phenomenological Ethics: Intentional Feelings," *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 4, no. 1 (2009): 130–142.

sentations, such as the contents of perception or representation. Husserl attributes this view to Brentano. He writes:

Brentano thinks we have here two intentions built on one another: the underlying, founding intention gives us the *presented* object, the founded intention the *felt* object. The former is separable from the latter, the latter inseparable from the former. His opponents think there is only *one* intention here, the presenting one.

If we subject the situation to a careful phenomenological review, Brentano's conception seems definitely to be preferred.¹⁰

Thus, by contrast to the associationist view, Husserl holds that intentional feeling has its own object distinct from the presented object. Yet, the object of feeling on Husserl's view is necessarily like the object of willing or judgment or desire: the object of feeling must be founded upon the contents of the presented object. The intentionality of feeling is not like a perceptual act, since it does not bring to presentation new contents; instead, as with desire and judgment, the contents of the presented object are taken in a way distinctive to feeling. Intentional feelings intend the contents of presentation in a valuing way. One may, then, speak of "values" given in acts of feeling according to this view, but values are not something independent of valuing, since they are necessarily represented or perceived contents that are taken in a particular way through feeling.¹¹

Thus, according to Husserl's view, all intentional feelings are intentional in the same way that feelings of suffering or enjoyment are intentional. One may suffer a pain or enjoy a pain but the feelings of suffering and enjoyment both require some presented object—the pain. The sensed pain might in principle be given without being suffered, but the suffering cannot be given in the absence of sensed pain or some other presented object.

Scheler's Account of the Phenomenological Priority of Value-Feeling

Scheler agrees with Husserl that feelings are intentional and that the objects of some sorts of feelings like enjoyment or suffering are founded upon the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹¹ For a discussion of merely valuing emotions versus emotions that reveal value see, Michael Stocker and Elizabeth Hegeman, *Valuing Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 59–73.

contents of perception or representation.¹² What distinguishes Scheler's view is that besides what we might call "presentationally founded feelings," Scheler maintains there are also feelings whose objects are value-qualities, which are not founded upon the contents of representation or perception. In support of this view, he cites actual experiences in which value-qualities are given with adequation in acts of feeling but in the absence of the presented contents of the object.

Let's consider some of the more prominent examples of these experiences mentioned in Scheler's work:

A man can be distressing and repugnant, agreeable, or sympathetic to us without our being able to indicate *how* this comes about.¹³

A landscape or a room in a house can appear "friendly" or "distressing," and the same holds for a sojourn in a room, without our knowing the *bearers* of such values.¹⁴

We may feel a "deep contentment" over the day's deeds without really knowing the particular deed or comportment toward which this contentment is directed; and we may feel the pressure of "guilt" with a direction toward "yesterday" or toward a certain human being without representing to ourselves what lies in this direction.¹⁵

A man may be given a task that promises the realization of a high value. He sees this value clearly and distinctly; it may strain and unleash his entire energy! He may elevate himself in terms of the value of his task! But the *pictorial* or *conceptual content* of his task may continue to vacillate while its *value* or the value to be actualized in this task does not! The idea of *what* he has to do may at times recede, but the value of what he has to do will continue to cast its light on him and may, so to speak, illuminate his present life.¹⁶

We can for the longest time consider a poem or another work of art "beautiful" or "ugly," "distinguished" or "common," without knowing in the least which properties of the contents of the work prompt this.¹⁷

¹² Scheler, *Formalism*, 255–256.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 195–196.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

The adequacy and clarity with which a founded object is given should track the adequacy with which the founding object is given. For example, the adequacy and clarity of willing some specific state of affairs is directly dependent upon the adequacy with which the state of affairs is represented to oneself. Yet, in these cases cited by Scheler the objects of feeling are given with adequation in the absence of, or the minimal presence of, the contents of any supposed founding act of perception, representation, or imagination. This seems to suggest that it is a mistake to think, as Husserl seems to, that the felt object of all intentional feelings must be founded upon a presented object and that, instead, these acts of feeling are phenomenologically prior to presentative acts like perception, imagination, or representation.

By suggesting that feelings apprehend values phenomenologically prior to an act of presentation, Scheler does not mean to suggest that in these cases one intends free-floating value-qualities.¹⁸ In these experiences, the object immediately given is a good, that is, “a ‘thing-like’ unity of value-qualities or value-complexes that is founded in a specific basic value.”¹⁹ Goods have presentable characteristics but unlike mere things, these characteristics are organized around or founded in a specific value. Examples of goods are artworks, food, or money. The representable or perceivable characteristics of these goods are unified in relation to certain values: in the case of the aforementioned examples, aesthetic values, vital values, and utility values, respectively. When we look at a painting we do not see a mass of colors but a unity of presented characteristics bound together by aesthetic value. Without a sense of this value, the presentable characteristics of the painting, as unified characteristics of a painting, would remain hidden from us. In the cases cited above, it seems that the unifying values of the goods are all that are given, in the absence of the presentable characteristics that belong to the goods.

Thus, according to Scheler’s view, a good is not given in isolation on its own but only in the context of, or founded upon, other acts of value comprehension, situating the value-qualities of the good in relation to the value specific to that kind of good. One may feel a particular man distressing because this act is founded upon an act of feeling, apprehending the value of the distressing. While the value of the distressing is only given in and through the felt distressing good, the good cannot stand alone as distressing; it can only be comprehended in terms of the value of the distressing. So, these examples also show something about values, as axiological units of meaning or essences, and not just the value-qualities of a particular good. This is because we recognize goods as goods only in light of the founding value that makes them the kind of good they are.

¹⁸ On this point see Quentin Smith, “Scheler’s Critique of Husserl’s Theory of the World of the Natural Standpoint,” *The Modern Schoolman* 55 (1978): 395.

¹⁹ Scheler, *Formalism*, 20.

For Scheler, then, there are at least three types of intentional feelings: First, there are presentationally founded feelings.²⁰ These acts “value” or in some way respond in feeling to contents of perception or representation. Second, there are feelings of goods or what Scheler sometimes calls feeling-functions;²¹ these disclose value-based unities of presentational contents. Finally, there are feelings of values, which apprehend the values in light of which goods are recognized to be goods of a particular value. The acts of feeling that belongs to this third type according to Scheler are the fundamental acts of love and hate.²² While these levels of acts are distinguishable from each other, it is important to keep in mind that they come packaged together in actual experience; it is only through phenomenological attention and a consideration of cases like the ones above that these acts of feeling are isolated from each other.

Philosophical Implications of the Phenomenological Priority of Value-Feeling

On the basis of his analysis of these cases, Scheler draws three significant philosophical implications: the first, ontological, the second, epistemological, and the third, ethical in nature.

Scheler maintains that because value is given phenomenologically prior to the objects of cognition of essence or conation, value is a mode of being irreducible to the nature or existence of a being.²³ This claim about the ontological status of value should not be confused with a claim about the ontic or actual independence of value-qualities from their bearers. What the examples above suggest is that some feelings are intelligible and meaningful in the absence of information about the presentational characteristics of the object that bears the value-quality. We know from experience, however, that these value-qualities do not exist unless certain presentable characteristics belong to the good about which they are felt; for example, we know that there is no painting without brush strokes on a canvas. This empirical knowledge tells us something about the ontic dependence of at least some sorts of value-qualities upon the presented features of their bearers; on the other hand, this knowledge is not necessary for comprehending either the presentable characteristics or the felt value-qualities themselves. Thus, Scheler does not think that the phenomenological priority of felt value entails that values are ontologically independent of the nature or existence of a being, but he

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 255–256.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

²² *Ibid.*, 261.

²³ *Ibid.*, 17.

thinks this does imply that “axiology occupies an independent realm of inquiry with its own grounding independent of metaphysics” and that ethics cannot be ultimately based upon the nature or existence of something.²⁴ So, Scheler’s point about the ontological independence of values must be understood as analogous to the more common distinction between the essence and existence of a being. For Scheler, neither the existence, essence, or value of a being can subsist on its own; nevertheless, because each is comprehended in a different way, each must be treated as fundamental or irreducible modes of being.

We can see most clearly Scheler’s application of this ontological point as it pertains to his examination of the foundations of ethics. Scheler argues in *Formalism in Ethics and Non-formal Ethics of Value* that because the value of a good is given phenomenologically prior to the particular properties that make a particular good what it is, (i.e., its nature), values, themselves, are not subject to historic shifts in the evaluation of properties of things.²⁵ His ontological distinction between the value and the nature of a thing allows Scheler to explain how an objective hierarchy of values comprehended in feeling may serve as a basis for ethics even though the presentational contents of goods change across time.

A second implication of the phenomenological priority of value-feeling has to do with its epistemic role. Scheler maintains on the basis of this priority that value-feeling serves a heuristic function guiding one toward, or disclosing, the nature of a being. As Scheler argues in his essay “*Ordo Amoris*,” the objects and goods present in an individual’s environment and worldview are circumscribed by the values apprehended by that individual.²⁶ What lies beyond the range of these values cannot be brought to attention. This general point Scheler takes to be true of one’s environment, the objects of perception within one’s environment, one’s natural worldview, and any considered metaphysic.²⁷

The significance of this epistemological implication is considerable and its influence can be felt throughout Scheler’s work. For example, Scheler maintains that paradigm shifts in the natural sciences,²⁸ linguistic developments in children and entire people groups,²⁹ and advances in self-under-

²⁴ Max Scheler, *The Constitution of the Human Being: From the Posthumous Works, Volumes 11 and 12*, trans. John Cutting (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2008), 67.

²⁵ Scheler, *Formalism*, 309–317.

²⁶ Max Scheler, “*Ordo Amoris*,” trans. David Lachterman, in *Selected Philosophical Essays* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 100.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 111; Scheler, *Constitution*, 67.

²⁸ Max Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man*, trans. Bernard Noble (New York: Harper, 1961), 111.

²⁹ Scheler, *Formalism*, 259.

standing,³⁰ are all guided and enabled by prior feelings of value or changes in the order of valuation (the order of preference between values).³¹

A final implication has to do with the moral conditions for knowledge. Arguing that certain moral dispositions or virtues are necessary for apprehending value, Scheler combines this ethical assumption with the previous point about the heuristic function of value-feeling. On this basis, Scheler argues that there are specific moral conditions for obtaining metaphysical knowledge.³²

Three Difficulties With Scheler's Account

Scheler's claim about the phenomenological priority of certain types of feelings to acts of presentation and the cases he cites in support of this claim deserve careful examination, since they serve as the primary support for three central elements of his philosophy; elements which are both radical and intriguing. In what follows, I shall identify three difficulties with Scheler's account: first, a question about Scheler's interpretation of the cases he cites, and second, a question about the support these cases actually give to his epistemological point about the heuristic function of value-feeling. I shall close with a third question about the adequacy of a purely phenomenological approach to these cases.

In all of the cases that Scheler mentions the contents of the objects towards which feelings are directed are not completely empty or obscured: the distressing man is a man and the beautiful poem is given as a poem. While Scheler is correct to point out that one cannot apprehend specifically what makes the man distressing or what makes the poem beautiful, in all of these cases there is still some presented content of the object given. For this reason, one might argue that Husserl is right about the foundation of all felt objects upon presented objects.

In Scheler's defense, one might argue that it is not sufficient that just any presentational content is given, since only relevant contents may serve as the foundation for further acts. This seems to be true for other founded acts like willing or desiring. Perhaps, one could desire another person without comprehending the actual respect in which that person is desired. But in such

³⁰ Max Scheler, "The Idols of Self-Knowledge," trans. David Lachterman, in *Selected Philosophical Essays* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 75–77.

³¹ Scheler, "Idols of Self-Knowledge," 83

³² "Now when the data-precedence of value over being is taken in conjunction with the earlier principle, whereby the (self-evident) perception of values in turn postulates a 'moral condition' (and the less relative the values, the more forcefully this applies), it follows that access to the *absolute entity* is itself *indirectly* dependent on this 'moral condition,'" Scheler, *On the Eternal*, 88.

cases the adequacy with which one apprehends the object of desire tracks the adequacy with which one apprehends the presented contents upon which the object of desire is founded. By contrast, in the cases above, the value-qualities seem to be given with adequacy that far surpasses and lacks any clear connection to the adequacy with which the presented contents of the object are given.

One might also argue that in these cases the presentational content that is given serves as a sufficient cue to remind one of the complete contents which merit such feelings. Yet, it is unlikely that this accounts for the feelings described in all of these cases. For example, the person striving to realize a goal or project may be doing something that she has no memory of doing before. In addition, Scheler suggests that *what* needs to be done to realize the goal may change dramatically over the course of the project even if the guiding value-quality does not.³³ Finally, while Scheler admits that obscure and irrelevant features of a situation may serve as symbols or reminders of some value, he maintains that they only do so in virtue of other non-derivative felt experiences of value.³⁴

Besides questions about Scheler's interpretation of these cases, we should also take note of a question about the epistemological implication that Scheler draws from his interpretation of these cases. For we may understand the phenomenological priority of feeling in two senses: First, feelings are phenomenologically prior to an act of presentation in the negative sense of not being founded upon an act of presentation. This first sense is what seems to be supported by the cases discussed by Scheler. In these cases, the contents of presentation are missing or obscured, yet this does not seem to have any effect on the clarity of our feeling and the value towards which it is directed. When it comes to the epistemological point about the heuristic function of feeling, Scheler seems to rely upon a second, more positive, sense of phenomenological priority, since he maintains that acts of value-feeling are necessarily prior conditions for the execution of all presentational acts.³⁵ Scheler does not always distinguish between these two senses of phenomenological priority and often immediately shifts to the second sense, once having established the first by appeal to the cases discussed previously.³⁶ If all that the cases support is the phenomenological priority of value-feeling in the negative sense, then Scheler needs additional evidence in order to make his epistemological point about the heuristic function of value-feeling.

Scheler's work on the emotions has not received much attention in contemporary emotion theory. One reason for this is the methodological gap

³³ Scheler, *Formalism*, 195–196.

³⁴ See *ibid.*, 256–257.

³⁵ Scheler, "Ordo Amoris," 100–101.

³⁶ See Scheler, *Constitution*, 65–67; *On the Eternal in Man*, 88.

that exists between Scheler's phenomenological approach and more scientifically oriented approaches to the emotions. Many contemporary emotion theorists would criticize Scheler's exclusive focus upon what is given to consciousness, since many conscious experiences are conditioned by physiological events not consciously given.

One might be able to offer a causal explanation of the cases Scheler refers to, rooted in the non-given neurological and environmental conditions for such cases to occur. Jenefer Robinson's process view of emotion seems especially amenable to this task. In *Deeper Than Reason: Emotion and Its Role in Literature, Music, and Art*, she argues that neurological evidence supports the view that affective appraisals of what is vitally relevant in one's environment take place chronologically prior to the behaviors, subjective feelings, beliefs, and perceptions also associated with a given emotion.³⁷ Such an account may help to explain the strange cases that so interest Scheler in which feelings associated with some value-quality are consciously experienced without accompanying beliefs or sense perceptions. Robinson agrees with Scheler that the emotions serve to convey to us what is of value and importance. Yet, it seems that she would explain the cases that are important to Scheler differently. On her view, feelings may be meaningfully experienced without a conscious awareness of what elicits the feelings, because the feelings may become part of a neurological process that follows more primitive and immediate neurological pathways than those required for higher presentative acts of the mind.

This final difficulty has to do with fundamental differences about the correct starting points for a philosophical inquiry into the meaningfulness of the emotions. Whether Scheler's phenomenological approach or a more scientifically-based approach best accounts for these experiences is a question that I must leave open for further examination in the future.

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³⁷ Jenefer Robinson, *Deeper Than Reason: Emotion and Its Role in Literature, Music, and Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 57–61.