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## Max Scheler's Two Approaches to Philosophy of Culture

### Abstract:

Max Scheler seems to present two distinct approaches to philosophy of culture. In the early period of his *Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik* and “Ordo Amoris,” he describes cultures as being defined by their distinct order of value preferencings. In his later period of his “Probleme einer Soziologie des Wissens,” however, Scheler explains the dynamics of culture in terms of the interaction of what he calls “real” and “ideal sociological factors,” rooted in various drives (*Triebe*) and spirit (*Geist*), respectively. These approaches are fully compatible and complementary, the former describing culture’s vertical structure and the latter, its horizontal structure. Together these two approaches offer a comprehensive philosophy of culture, deserving greater attention.

### Keywords:

Max Scheler, philosophy of culture, values, axiology, *ordo amoris*, ethos, sociology of knowledge, real and ideal sociological factors

German phenomenologist Max Scheler seems to present two distinct philosophies of culture.<sup>1</sup> In the early period of his *Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik*<sup>2</sup> he describes cultures as being defined by their distinct *ethos*, *ordo amoris*, or order of values. In his later period of “Probleme einer Soziologie des Wissens,”<sup>3</sup> however, Scheler accounts for the dynamics of culture in terms of the interaction of what he calls “real” and “ideal sociological factors,” rooted in various drives (*Triebe*) and spirit (*Geist*), respectively.

The aim of this essay is to show the complementarity of these two theories of culture, by explaining the relationship between “ethos,” on the one hand, and real and ideal sociological factors, on the other, and how together they offer a highly comprehensive understanding of cultural life. While Scheler's description of the dynamic interaction among real and ideal sociological factors accounts for cultures' horizontal structures, “ethos,” manifesting varying amplitudes of spirit, describes cultures' vertical structures, that is, their order of value-preferences, or *ordo amoris*.

### Culture as Dynamic Interaction of Real and Ideal Sociological Factors

Fundamental to Scheler's metaphysics – or what he alternately calls his “metabiology” – is his notion of a single, becoming life-energy (*Alleben* or *Lebensdrang*). For him all of nature is alive, and the distinction between living and non-living beings is relative and not absolute.<sup>4</sup> Spirit, in turn, is a potency within the impulse of life itself, and this longing within *Lebensdrang* for its own increasing spiritualization is what Scheler calls “*eros*.”<sup>5</sup> Spirit is the capacity of life to exceed itself, its capacity to project, like a cone of light from an automobile headlight its own possibilities ahead of itself as embodied “phantasmic images” (*Körperbilder*). “*This image*,” Scheler writes, “*we never have*, but it is intended in every sensory intuition. It is the product of phantasy working in the impulsion (*Drang*) from which it is continuously produced... These images are ‘ideal’ ... they are objective appearances, manifestations of the forces residing within the impulse that ‘express’ and ‘represent’ themselves in them.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, “Eternally the life-impulse struggles toward ideas,” and spirit guides (*leiten*) and directs (*lenken*) the life-impulse toward its highest possibilities, ultimately toward God.<sup>7</sup> With the aid of American pragmatism's notion of “functionalization,” Scheler describes how ideas are functionalized by the practical activities of the life-impulse and thereby brought into being.<sup>8</sup>

Life-impulse manifests itself in three primary drives: procreative, power, and nutritive. These drives always operate interdependently with spirit, as a potency within life-impulse, and hence the relationship between life and spirit is no dualism. The drives empower spirit, and without them spirit would be utterly impotent. Reciprocally, without spirit the drives are blind, without direction, and ineffectual.

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1) This essay is a significantly corrected and substantially revised and expanded version of a previous paper, published as “‘Ethos,’ Its Relationship to Real and Ideal Sociological Factors in Scheler's Philosophy of Culture.” In particular, that article was incorrect in its interpretation of Scheler's notion of “*Alleben*” and hence of his understanding of the relationship between “*Lebensdrang*” and “*Geist*.” I hope to have corrected my mistakes in this article. This article appears here in its present form for the first time.

2) Scheler, *Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik; Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Value*.

3) In Scheler, *Die Wissensformen und die Gesellschaft; Problems of a Sociology of Knowledge*.

4) Scheler, *Schriften aus dem Nachlass II: Erkenntnislehre und Metaphysik*, 157, 181, 185ff. See also Frings, *The Mind of Max Scheler*, 282–85.

5) Scheler, *Schriften aus dem Nachlass III: Philosophische Anthropologie*, 234–38. See also Frings, *Mind of Max Scheler*, 281, 288–89.

6) Scheler, *Nachlass II*, 132, emphases in the original. See also Scheler, “Idealism and Realism,” in *Selected Philosophical Essays*, 344; Frings, *Mind of Max Scheler*, 236–39; and Frings, *Philosophy of Prediction and Capitalism*, 50–51.

7) Scheler, *Nachlass III*, 133.

8) Scheler, *Nachlass II*, 119–20; Frings, *Mind of Max Scheler*, 269–70; and Frings, *Philosophy of Prediction*, 66–86.

The drives, in turn, are the roots of the three real sociological factors, the three primary social institutions – family, politics, and economy, respectively – wherein human life has organized itself throughout history. History, for Scheler, is to be understood not only as a process of temporal successions, effected by the mind, but more fundamentally as pre-temporal phase-laws, which are not to be confused with any sort of “laws of history,” such as the dialectic between ruling and rising classes. Neither are these phase-laws linear nor progressive. Rather, they are similar to vertical phase motions in nature, as in wave theory, whereby each phase corresponds roughly to the life of a culture, race, nation, tribe, and so forth, manifesting varying spiritual amplitudes. The most important aspect of the phase laws is the pre-temporal shift in the predominance of the three primary drives. (We say “pre-temporal” because history is a function of these shifts and not vice versa.)

The respective dominance of each drive manifests itself over large stretches of historical time, or eras. In the earliest period of human history – prehistoric time and the age of myth – Scheler postulates, the procreative drive dominated over the other two drives, preserving the blood-ties unifying genealogical groups. Later, predominance shifted to the power drive, as reflected in the rise of power-based groups – “power politics” and the “organizational mind.”<sup>9</sup> In his vision of the coming “World-Age of Adjustment,”<sup>10</sup> Scheler prophesied that humanity was presently in the midst of a shift to the predominance of the nutritive drive and an “Age of Economy,” as evidenced by the already-then growing concerns over food shortages and the economizing of natural resources.

While the real sociological factors are rooted in the drives, spirit manifests itself culturally in ideal sociological factors – art, science, law, philosophy, religion – and acts upon its own laws. Just as the drives and spirit operate interdependently generally, so do sociological real and ideal factors operate interdependently within the lives of cultures. The sociological real factors empower the ideal factors, and without the former, the latter are impotent and lack any creative power of their own – they bring about no consequences in human history. As Scheler describes, “The ‘*fatalité modifiable*’ of the history of real factors does not at all determine the positive *meaning content* of the works of spirit, though it does hinder, release, delay, or hasten the development of the works and the *realization* of this meaning content. To use an image, in a certain way it opens and closes the sluices of the spiritual stream.”<sup>11</sup> Reciprocally, without the guidance and direction of the sociological ideal factors, the real factors act blindly, chaotically, and ineffectually.

Highly influential on Scheler’s understanding of the interrelationship of real and ideal sociological factors, were the studies of Max Weber in the sociology of religion. In his most famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber shows, for example, how, contrary to the claims of Karl Marx, (ideal) religious factors conditioned certain (real) economic changes, namely, the rise of capitalism and the bourgeoisie, at least as much as (real) economic factors conditioned changes in religion, namely, the rise of Protestantism. That work, Weber claims, traces “the influence of certain religious ideas on the development of an economic spirit, or the *ethos* of an economic system.”<sup>12</sup> “But,” he concludes,

It is, of course, not my aim to substitute for a one-sided materialistic and equally one-sided spiritualistic causal interpretation of culture and history. Each is equally possible, but each, if it does not serve as the preparation, but as the conclusion of an investigation, accomplishes equally little in the interest of historical truth.<sup>13</sup>

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9) Scheler, *Wissensformen*, 42–44; *Sociology*, 56–57.

10) Scheler, “Der Mensch im Weltalter des Ausgleichs”; “Man in the Era of Adjustment,” 94–128.

11) Scheler, *Wissensformen*, 41; *Sociology*, 54.

12) Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 27.

13) *Ibid.*, 183.

Scheler's philosophy of culture, as presented in his *Sociology of Knowledge*, is, I believe, in full accord with such a conclusion.

When real and ideal sociological factors are effectively synchronized with each other, peaks of civilization appear. For example, the concentration of economic resources and political power in religious vision built the great cathedrals of the Middle Ages. When real and ideal sociological factors disengage from one another, ideas fall castrated to the wayside of history, failing to address the real, vital needs and concerns of the time. Art, science, philosophy, and religion talk only to themselves – art for art's sake, science for science's sake, philosophy for philosophy's sake – degenerating into dilettantism. They fail to guide and direct morally blood-groups, politics, and economy, which seem to run away under their own impulses: civilization is on the wane.<sup>14</sup>

A comprehensive theory of culture, then, according to Scheler, must establish those laws that: 1) describe generally the “effective interdependence” of real and ideal sociological factors, including both their manifestations in objective history and their subjective roots in drives and spirit, and 2) unify a) the relations among the three main drive-based sociological real factors, namely, family, politics, and economy, b) the relationships among the various spirit-based, ideal sociological factors, such as philosophy, art, science, law, and religion, and c) the relations between specific real sociological factors and specific ideal sociological factors.<sup>15</sup>

We now turn to Scheler's notion of “ethos” to see its interconnection with his theory of real and ideal sociological factors, which we here have only briefly summarized.

### Ethos: Culture's Axiological, Vertical Structure

The impulse of life expresses itself not only horizontally in shifts among the drives, but also vertically as a tendency manifesting increasing amplitudes of spirit, ultimately a longing for Holiness, ultimacy, God, and this longing for higher orders of being is what Scheler understands by “love.” “Love,” Scheler tells us, “is the tendency, or, as it may be, the act that seeks to lead something in the direction of the perfection of the value proper to it – and succeeds when no obstacles are present.”<sup>16</sup>

In his *Ethics*, Scheler delineates the hierarchical order of values, for which he is best known, referring to it with Blaise Pascal's terms, “*ordre du coeur*” and “*logique du Coeur*”:<sup>17</sup> “Throughout Pascal's works,” Scheler writes, “we find an idea that he calls *ordre du coeur* or *logique du coeur*; it runs through them like a golden thread. He says, ‘Le coeur a ses raisons.’ To him this means that there is an eternal and absolute lawfulness of feeling, loving, and hating, which is as absolute as that of pure logic, but which is not reducible to intellectual lawfulness.”<sup>18</sup> From lowest to highest, these value-spheres are those of the pleasurable, the useful, the vital, the spiritual (*geistig*) – cultural values, including Truth, Beauty, and Justice – and the Holy. Each value-sphere represents a certain quantum of spirit actualized in the flow of life, the increasing domination of spirit over the impulse of life.

This order or logic of the heart, Scheler later terms the “*ordo amoris*” in an essay by that name. In “*Ordo Amoris*” Scheler distinguishes two meanings of that term. On the one hand, there is an objective, normative *ordo amoris*, which is the essential, vertical order of the cosmos: it is “the core of the world order taken as a divine

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14) Scheler, *Wissensformen*, 41; *Sociology*, 55.

15) Scheler, *Wissensformen*, 20–23; *Sociology*, 36–39.

16) Scheler, “*Ordo Amoris*,” 355, and in Lachterman, *Selected Philosophical Essays*, 109.

17) Scheler, *Ethics*, 63.

18) *Ibid.*, 254

order... From the primal atom and the grain of sand to God, this realm [of love] is *one* realm.<sup>19</sup> The *ordo amoris* is the single, eternal, objective Logos within and directing *Alleben*, the universal impulse of life.

The eternal, objective *ordo amoris*, however, is manifested only imperfectly in human life and world history. Thus, in contrast to the ideal, objective, normative *ordo amoris* stands the “purely factual and descriptive” *ordo amoris* of any individual or social group, which Scheler terms the “ethos” of that individual or group and of which he says:

Whether I am investigating the innermost essence of an individual, an historical era, a family, a people, a nation, or any other socio-historical group, I will know and understand it most profoundly when I have discerned the system of its concrete value-assessments and value-preferences, whatever organization this system has. I call this system the *ethos* of any subject.<sup>20</sup>

As it is with individual persons, a culture’s order of value-preferences, too, its ethos, is its single-most defining feature. What is it willing to sacrifice for what? What does it value above all else? For what does it deem worthy to sacrifice one’s life? The ethos of an individual or group is that subject’s own concrete ordering of values, its system of value-preferences and the fundamental structure by which an individual or group orders its experiences of the world and moral lives.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, since one’s *ordo amoris* constitutes the fundamental structure by which all choices are made, both conscious and preconscious, it is the most central fact of any individual or collective life and is, therefore, not itself subject to choice. We do not choose our values, but rather certain values and their order of preferences, so to speak, choose us. We find ourselves, both as individuals and as groups, in the world already rooted in and oriented toward certain values and their accompanying goods, and in a particular order of preferences among values, according to which we organize all the particulars of our experiences and make all things accountable. “Ethos” thus designates that quantum of spirit actually present in the life of a given subject, and while there might be brief deviations from it – movements of spiritual greatness and weakness – each subject gravitates back to its own value-sphere. Shifts in subjects’ ethos occur only rarely and over time, for example, spiritual conversions of individuals and shifts in values that mark major eras in the history of cultures. Scheler’s description of what he calls here our “value-fatedness” is very pointed:

Man is encased, as though in a shell, in the particular ranking of the simplest values and value-qualities ... of his *ordo amoris*, values which have not yet been shaped into things and goods. He carries this shell along with him wherever he goes and cannot escape from it no matter how quickly he runs. He perceives the world and himself through the windows of this shell and perceives no more of the world, of himself, or of anything else besides what these windows show him... . The structure and total content of each man’s environment, which is ultimately organized according to its value structure, does not wander or change, even though he himself wanders further and further in space. It is simply filled out anew with certain individual things.<sup>22</sup>

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19) Scheler, *Nachlass I*, 356–57; *Essays*, 110, 112.

20) Scheler, *Nachlass I*, 347; *Essays*, 98–99.

21) Scheler, *Nachlass I*, 357; *Essays*, 111.

22) Scheler, *Nachlass I*, 348; *Essays*, 100.

What remains for human free choice is the selection of object- and act-contents appropriate to one's ethos, but never the value-spheres, which they fill and manifest.

Each individual or social group finds itself called by or encased in a particular order of values, which dictates its preferences and acts. "Destiny" designates the ethos of an individual, "the place which belongs to this one subject in the plan of the world's salvation,"<sup>23</sup> and one finds that he or she cannot do otherwise, for example, Martin Luther: "Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise." By contrast, one's fate is the unfolding of the absolute, eternal *ordo amoris* in one's cultural history, and it thus structures the social milieu in which one finds oneself. As with Luther, too, the destiny of an individual sometimes conflicts with his or her fate, and such is tragic. "A tragic relation exists," Scheler writes, "where we see individuals, even whole peoples, whose fate itself forces them to act against their destiny, where we see people who do not 'fit in,' not only with the contingent and momentary content of their milieu, but with the very [value-]structure of that milieu," namely, its ethos.<sup>24</sup> For example, Antigone found herself in a cultural milieu whose ethos placed obedience to the state above all other loyalties, including familial ones – her fate – while her destiny called her to bury and thereby honor her brother, in defiance of the state. Such a condition constituted her tragedy.

Moreover, insofar as a subject's ethos, or factual *ordo amoris*, dictates all of that subject's perceptions, preferences, judgements, and actions, it constitutes the single-most important fact about that subject, and when we gain insight into the *ordo amoris* of an individual or a social group, we gain the single-most profound knowledge of that subject. Scheler writes: "*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 a crystal. He sees through him as far as one possibly can."<sup>25</sup>

The absolute *ordo amoris* objectively discloses itself in the tension between it and one's own factual *ordo amoris*. It reveals itself positively in feelings of moral rightness when the latter is in accord with it. For example, our feelings of admiration and approbation for those who risk or sacrifice their lives for spiritual values, such as Truth or Justice, in the cases of Socrates and Martin Luther King, Jr., respectively, for example, reveals those spiritual values as higher than those of (biological) life and hence as worthy of such sacrifice. It reveals itself negatively in such feelings as moral disgust, indignation, anger, outrage, shame, and pity. For example, if one has sacrificed one's health for pleasure or for what is useful, such as money, subsequent feelings of regret, embarrassment, shame, guilt, or disgust for having done so, disclose life-values to be higher than those of pleasure or usefulness – that health ought not to be sacrificed for pleasure or money. Indeed, the most profound insights into the objective *ordo amoris* come when we fail to do as we ought, and all our efforts to justify that failure bite on granite: therein such an order presents itself as "objective," as resistant to our (subjective) desires and efforts to believe otherwise. Such is a second occasion of human tragedy.

### Defining Cultures in Terms of the Interaction of Ethos and Sociological Real and Ideal Factors

Although, as Scheler says, a culture's ethos is its single-most defining feature, we saw above that a comprehensive understanding of culture requires also an understanding of the interaction among drive-based, sociological real factors and spirit-based, sociological ideal factors, which guide and direct the real factors. To those points I now add that a proper understanding of culture also requires an account of how the ethos, as an order of values informing and structuring the ideal factors as they guide and direct the real ones, interacts with the drive-based real factors. As indicated, the factual *ordo amoris* constituting a culture's ethos is the manifesta-

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23) Scheler, *Nachlass I*, 351; *Essays*, 103–04.

24) Scheler, *Nachlass I*, 354–55; *Essays*, 108. Emphasis in the original.

25) Scheler, *Nachlass I*, 348; *Essays*, 100. Emphasis in the original.

tion of a certain quantum of spirit, insofar as higher values express greater degrees of spirit's guidance and direction of *Lebensdrang*. Thus, the drives and the sociological real factors based in them express themselves in qualitatively different ways in relation to different values and the ethe informed by those values. In relation to higher values, the drives undergo increasing degrees of spiritualization.

In another article I have outlined the spiritualization of the power drive, that is, how that drive manifests itself qualitatively differently in relation to different values.<sup>26</sup> First, in relationship to lower values, power is identified increasingly with force, whereas within higher values, it becomes increasingly the absence of force, for example, the power of love expressed by Jesus or Ghandi. Within lower values, power expresses itself as power over others, while in higher values it is an empowerment of others. Third, with respect to lower values, power is centered in a controlling ego, whereas within higher values it expresses itself through reciprocal bonds of friendship and solidarity and is of the community, rather than the individual.

We might similarly postulate the spiritualization of the nutritional and procreative drives, as the bases for economy and family, respectively. For example, within lower values, economy expresses itself as self-interested, hedonistic pleasure and consumeristic acquisitiveness, while in higher values it manifests itself through generosity and gestures of thanksgiving.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, present-day American culture can be described as one wherein economy dominates the other two sociological real factors and is guided and directed predominantly by values of utility, what Scheler terms the "industrial ethos,"<sup>28</sup> bearing a strong resemblance to what Weber terms "the spirit of capitalism."

## Conclusion

Scheler's comprehensive philosophy of culture, combining his theory of sociological real and ideal factors with his notion of "ethos," effectively avoids many of the shortcomings that he saw in the sociological theories of his day.

- 1) It avoids all one-side accounts of culture in terms of either real or ideal factors exclusively, that is, all materialisms and idealisms.
- 2) It rejects all attempts to reduce all real sociological factors to only one such factor, as in capitalistic or Marxist economisms.
- 3) It abandons as fatuous idealism those descriptions of social institutions that lack any reference to the fundamental human drives that make them possible: for Scheler all sociological theories must be anchored in a philosophical anthropology, which must include a theory of human drives, as well as a theory of spirit. Human institutions do not fall from heaven, as many sociological theories imply, but rather, they grow from such drives, guided and directed by spirit-based ideal sociological factors.
- 4) Most importantly, Scheler well understood that not only do cultures move forward according to the phase-motion laws governing the drive-based, real sociological factors, guided and directed by the ideal factors, namely, that cultures have a horizontal structure, a history, but also that cultures have a fundamentally hierarchical, or vertical, structure of value-preferences, constituting their ethe. Values are not mere cultural-historical accidents. Rather, a culture's ordering of values, its factual *ordo amoris*, or ethos, is its essential core, the heart of that culture, governing all its other aspects, and to grasp that *ordo amoris* is to gain the single-most profound insight into that culture.

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26) Stickers, "Persons and Power: Max Scheler and Michel Foucault on the Spiritualization of Power," 51–59.

27) I have described the contrast between economies of acquisition and those of thanksgiving in "Economies of Scarcity and Acquisition, Economies of Gift and Thanksgiving: Lessons from Cultural Anthropology," 214–28.

28) Scheler, "Das Ressentiment im Aufbau der Moralen," 137; Coser, ed., *Ressentiment*, 162.

Thus, because of their combined understandings of the dynamic interactions among these horizontal and vertical structures of socio-historical groups, Scheler's theories of culture – of ideal and real sociological factors, on the one hand, and of “ethos,” on the other – provide a monumental contribution to the philosophy of culture.



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