

# MAX SCHELER'S PHENOMENOLOGY OF MORAL ACTION

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**Abstract:** Scheler's phenomenology of action begins with an inquiry into the nature of conation (*Streben*), and attempts to exhibit the process by which an initially undirected urge is first given content by values and representations, which condition the conscious formulation of purposes and eventual acts of will, in which action is undertaken to realize a specific value-content in a situation or thing. On this basis, Scheler argues that Kant's limitation of the moral evaluation of acting persons to the content of their will renders invisible the many levels upon which action is in fact evaluated by both agents and observers.

**Keywords:** Kant, deontology, teleology, value, goal, will, action, moral evaluation, phenomenology.

Human action is the process whereby a person is initially goaded to action by a subliminal sense of need, or urge and then passes, reflectively, emotionally, and physically, through a process whose aim is the achieving of some state of affairs in which values or disvalues are realized or destroyed. The phenomenological account of this process is of course central to ethics, which, as the moral evaluation and not the psychological explanation of behavior, does not require reference to processes and events outside of the awareness of the acting persons themselves, such as to brain events, to learned associations, or to processes in a purported unconscious mind. It will, however, presuppose and be an application of the phenomenology of the a priori structures that condition the human person and his world that were discussed elsewhere by Scheler.

**a. Conation.** All action begins with striving (*Streben*), a term translated in *Formalism* as *conation*. "Conation," Scheler writes, "here designates the most general basis of experiences that are distinct from all having of objects (representation, sensation, perception), as well as from all feeling (of feeling), etc." (*Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Value* Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973) 30, fn 24). Conation is the restless urge that awakens our attention even before we become aware of a specific object towards which it may be directed. It may be entirely undirected (a "dumb urge"), or it may move towards or away from an unobjectified external or internal state, as with an inchoate desire or fear that "rises up within us". The conation can arise from a stimulus within, as when we feel a sense of thirst even before we think that we are thirsty and desire something to drink, or from without, as when we feel the growing darkness of the room even before we think of doing something to relieve it. Conation moves, however, towards values of which the agent is antecedently although at the moment only subliminally aware. These values *begin* to give it content: That by which conations are initially differentiated is always a *value* of some kind that is felt as desirable or as positive or negative – again even *before* we give it an object, or represent to ourselves a state that ought-to-be. "The values of things are given to us prior to and independent of pictorial representations" (*Ibid.*, 294). Scheler notes that conations are the foundations of purposes, but initially no purpose is contained in the conation itself. Thus, the conation of thirst has a clear direction "toward," even if it may not yet possess a

representation of an object or a purpose (*ibid.*, 33). In this respect, conation is different from desire, which always “pictures” its object.

The value founds the *goal* of a conation: something or some state that is valuable and ought to be. Imagine a conation towards “taking a vacation from labor.” An unspecific urge towards the goal of the value of relief floats in front of the mind before imagination “fills in” the desire with specific value-states of activity that could make up the relief from work. Such a “goal” is not yet the performance of an act of will, for no ontic content that could function as a purpose has yet been posited. But in the conation a representation or picture of such relief begins to form, i.e., some imagined state of affairs. The former founds the latter, in that the choice of picture is differentiated and determined as appropriate or inappropriate to the values toward or away from which the conation moves. (*ibid.*, 34). Scheler summarizes: “The conations themselves ... are determined and differentiated by (1) their *direction*, (2) the *value-component* of their “goals,” and (3) the *picture- or meaning-content* arising from this value-content” (*ibid.*, 39).

*Purposes* are fundamentally different from goal-directed conations. Purposes involve the representation of a state of affairs, but thinking about or visualizing a thing does not necessarily involve a conation toward it, or the positing of it as a goal. (“How might a thief obtain access to this bank?”) Scheler puts the key issue as follows. “What distinguishes ‘purpose’ from a mere ‘goal’ [e.g., of thirst-quenching], which is already given ‘in’ conation itself and in its direction, is the fact that a goal-content (i.e., content already given *as a goal* in conation) is *represented* in a special act. It is only in the phenomenon of ‘withdrawing’ from conative consciousness toward representing consciousness, as well as toward representing comprehension of the goal-content given in conation, that the consciousness of purpose comes to a realization” (*ibid.*, 39-40). Conation therefore is not an *analogue* of purposeful willing; it has its origin in the biological and psychical life of persons, which is structured differently from the cognition of purposes and their willing-to-be. Note well that not all purposes lead to acts of will. Representations of purposes remain the mere objects of wishes unless the representation is also given as to-be-realized: not simply as having a specific value, but a value that the agent apprehends as demanding to be brought into existence. Only when the representation and the demand are given can there be a purpose leading to action. A goal does not yet speak to the will, and neither does its representation. Values, therefore, are not dependent upon or arise out of our purposes, they found the differentiated goals of conation, and are hence also the foundation of purposes.

**b. Moral Action.** When a person performs an action, the process is perceived as a unity of meaning or sense. It flows from an initial bodily and psychic state to conation, and then, via an apprehension of the values and facts contained by the situation in which one acts, to the performance or deed (*Handlung*). We may take the following situation as typical of a unified action that has moral content. A runaway van overturns on the street, the gas-tank is broken, and gasoline drips to the street. The driver lies unconscious in the van. A man passing by experiences an emotional arousal, a conation: Danger! That conation is not initially aimed at any specific end. It is an attunement of attention directed toward an external event; as yet, it is arousal without specific purpose. The passer-by then grasps the danger to the driver, assesses the danger to himself, rushes to the van, flings the door open adjusts his movement to the vicissitudes of the situation, and with others, carries the driver to safety.

Moral assessment, Scheler argues, requires that this action be viewed as a unified process, and not, as Kant assumed, as a synthesis of drive, intellection, will, movement, coordination, and the like. The Kantian model assimilates human behavior to that of a machine, whose mathematical laws appear to render its operation lucid; but it

submerges and makes invisible the organic unity of the action. For we cannot locate the moral value of the person in his good will alone, conceived as a free and isolated “force” in a causal process in order to insulate the moral agent from the contingencies of fate, or luck. Kant’s purposes in affirming that thesis is noble, for it establishes a kind of moral equality among persons: each is entirely responsible for what she wills; no one can be responsible for the factitious outcome of acts of will: the success or failure of the rescue attempt, even the risk involved, has no bearing on the agent’s moral worth. But Kant’s moral focus on will loses sight of the disparate values realized in the process of the moral action.

The elements in an action or deed (*Handlung*) are as follows (*ibid.*, 120). We follow Scheler and apply each element to the narrative of the rescue-scenario.

1. *The presence of the situation and the object of the deed.* A conation is directed towards some “practical value-objects” that have appeared to the agent within the range of values structuring the agent’s external milieu and his basic moral tenor. In our situation, a conation directed toward the value of the imperiled life of the driver may be prominent. The agent senses a demand upon him: “Something must be done.” The practical object in the situation is given as *resisting* or “with-standing” the will, which aims at saving the driver’s life; otherwise, no action would be needed, and a “willing to do” could not be formed. This resistance need not be physical; the mere will of another can resist us, or, in some cases, the qualities of the situation itself. The phenomenon of resistance is normally found in the following order: it is placed (1) in the object *beyond* the ego and body of the agent (a barrier stands in the way of action); (2) in the body itself (one cannot run fast or far enough); (3) in the psychic sphere (the will may be conflicted; one wishes, after all, to preserve one’s own life).

2. *The content to be realized by the deed.* Here, along with their concomitant values, a “picture” or pictures arise in the mind in which possible courses of action appear: “running away from,” or “running towards” the stricken driver.

3. *The willing of one set of compossible value-contents.* The path of the decision leads from the moral tenor, through intentions, deliberation, and resolution. The moral tenor of the agent may incline him to accept the risk to his own life of an attempt to rescue the driver. On the level of intention, he experiences the rescue of the driver’s life as an ought-to-be that founds his purpose. He then deliberates as to how to effect the rescue, and resolves to take one course of action. Of course he cannot propose to act counter to his moral self, and his deliberation is limited by the sense of his own capacity for action, that is, his knowledge of what he is capable of doing (*ibid.*, 128). Thus if this passer-by is disposed to assist the trapped driver, he could only imagine himself performing a rescue that is within the range of his power. He might imagine himself running to the rescue, but not flying there. Scheler emphasizes that this experience of capacity or incapacity is an immediate sense, and is *not* dependent upon one’s past successes or failures in conducting a rescue in situations similar to this one. It is simple and unique, like the sense of being alive, which is not simply a piece of knowledge, nor is it made up of such states as vitality or weariness. The state of “being able” cannot be improved by exercise and practice; it determines rather what activities we will practice and develop, and how we will do it.

4. *The class of activities directed toward the lived body leading to movement of the members (the “willing-to-do”).* Here is the beginning of physical movement required by the resolution to effect the rescue. The agent moves beyond mere intention (a wish that the driver be saved, that she “ought to be” saved) and decision to engage in the values carried by the situation. Willing itself, writes Scheler, “is a conation in which a content to be realized is given. ... [It is] a willing to *do* something.” Note that the will-to-do is a willing of an action to *do* something – not the willing of its *outcome*, which may be

beyond the agent's control. Of course, if she is wise, she "calculates" her chances of achieving a given outcome, but she wills the *action* in the hope that it will have that outcome.

5. *The states of sensation and feelings present during the execution of the selected action.* The transition from a willing-to-do to the action takes place across feelings and sensations, such as the bodily movement of the agent, or his sense of strength or weakness. We *immediately* (i.e., non-mediate, *unvermittelt*) sense the effectiveness of our resolution upon our body. "There is an *efficacy* of willing that acts on our lived body and *issues forth into movement*" (*ibid.*, 130). The kinematic sensations and visceral events direct or specify the impulses that are contained within the intention; they may change as the action proceeds. These states have moral relevance: the passer-by may desire to come to the rescue and may imagine a course of action, but feel reluctant; alternatively, he may be overly fearful, triumphant, selfless, or foolish.

6. *The experienced realization of the content (the "performance").* The object for the sake of which the action was initiated is joined with the content of the will-to-do: the trapped driver is or is not reached, grasped, and pulled free, as the intention of the will-to-do. The realization is that of success or failure of the action, or the rescue could be frustrated by something unforeseen; the passer-by could, e.g., trip and fall before he accomplishes anything.

7. *The states and feelings posited by the content realized.* Joy or sadness, satisfaction or regret. Note that the *effects* of the action do not belong to it. In our earlier example, the attempt at saving the driver may succeed or fail. However, if the *agent* survives, his feeling of success or failure in what he tried to accomplish belongs to the action. We tend in fact to admire an agent who, in such circumstances, would belittle his role in the success of his action, or be aggrieved at his failure. Such evaluations are directed at the moral values borne by the agent, not at his success or failure, which outside observers would simply welcome or regret. Those observers would of course rejoice at the sight of the saved driver, but that is not to evaluate the rescuer.

**c. Conclusions.** The teleologist in morals, who proclaims that the action was good because the man was saved, is simply untrue to the values we feel and the judgments we in fact make when we perceive the action. The deontologist who says merely that the action was good because the agent's will was good offers an inadequate account of the agent's moral worth; she leaves out morally relevant value-material. If this phenomenology of action is correct, material value-ethics is able to argue that the moral worth of the action is not located in the formal intention of the agent alone (respect for the moral law, the sense of obligation to help a person in distress), but also that it is not dependent upon the success or failure of the action. The moral value is found in the *person*, who acts *throughout* the execution of the action as described. Of course, the central feature of the unified act is described in point 3, in which the value of the content possibly present in the situation (the life of the driver as a value) is *willed to be*. It originates in the basic moral tenor of the agent, from which his conation leans toward the realization of some content that he apprehends as valuable. Point 4 elevates action above a mere wish that things be a certain way: In wishes a material value-content is no doubt given (I wish there were no hungry people), but there is no resolution to do something to realize that wish; it does not terminate in action.

What are the moral implications of Scheler's characterization of an action as a unity? Of course there are phenomenally distinct parts that are given with the action, and, in the action we have taken as a model, there may be other factors, indeed random and incomplete ones, such as the agent's hesitation, his sense of fear, self-questioning (why get involved?), which may not in themselves dissolve the unity of the act. We must keep in mind that the unity Scheler is speaking of is a unity of *sense* or *meaning*

possessed by the action when we think of it as a whole. His insistence upon this point derives from his fear that if we divided the action into a chain of events, where one part of it is the act of will that “causes” the action, then the action could not bear any moral value, for the will alone would bear it; all else would be a causal outcome of the act of will given favorable circumstances. The moral philosopher would then be forced to choose between a deontological and a teleological ethics: the act is good either because the will was good or because the outcome was good. But for material value-ethics, as long as the rescuer is engaged in the act, he bears moral merit or demerit throughout it, until events pass “out of his hands” to where he no longer has effective control.

In our moral assessment of a person we normally ask ourselves: What values are present in her action? What situation is she attempting to bring about? Is his action free and purposive? And the judgment we make will note that we experienced upon her person determination, skill, and fortitude, and a basic moral tenor that made it possible for her to discern in acts of feeling the positive values that she willed to realize. We sense the moral worthiness of this rescuer as he carries out his deed; we look upon what he accomplished by the deed, even if its outcome is failure. In sum then, the agent seeking to rescue the trapped driver does not will that she be saved, for that is impossible. Rather he wills to perform an action aimed at saving her, whose values, purpose, and technique he grasps and visualizes before or as he moves towards the driver. His moral merit or demerit lies in the values functional in his person that condition his moral attitudes, his fortitude of will, and his response to the outcome of his action.