

Benulal Dhar

**The Central Themes of Material Ethics
Values, Experience, and Person**

agenda

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Preface

The philosophy of Kant occupies an esteemed and admirable place in the history of philosophy for its depth, profundity and inherent greatness of its ideas. This philosophy is studied and pursued by academic philosophers and students alike all over the world since its genesis more than two centuries ago. And in this process a vast body of literature on Kant has proliferated till the present-day. In comparison, the studies and literatures on challenging the Kantian viewpoint and consequently developing an anti-thesis to it are scant and meagre in volumes. Among Kant's posteriors in Germany, Max Scheler puts forward a powerful and pervasive critique of his philosophy, in general and of his ethics, in particular. He also develops a theory of ethics, which can be characterized as material ethics that addresses itself to the material contents of moral experience. These material contents are value-essences which are experienced by the *acts* of feeling rather than by the *states* of feeling.

The material ethics does not restrict itself to the analysis of the being of values and their experience but seeks to capture the being of person in his moral dimension as the 'bearer' of values. In order to pave the way for dealing with these three central themes, Scheler puts forward sharp and pointed criticisms against the major issues of formal ethics, such as imperativism, rationalism, apriorism and personhood. In his effort to accomplish these tasks, Scheler has articulated a methodological ground on the basis of unorthodox interpretation of Husserl's phenomenological ideas. Thus, in Scheler's *magnum opus* on ethics, three philosophical interests coincide: phenomenology, Kantianism and value-ethics. We shall study these three dimensions of material ethics in the following pages with detailed elaboration of the last-mentioned one.

The present study primarily focuses on the three problems, namely, (i) What is a value? (ii) How values are experienced? and (iii) What constitute the nature of moral person? We shall deal with these three questions in chapters V, VI and VII respectively. Further, in order to have a sympathetic understanding of these issues of material ethics, the problems of material ethics have been fore-grounded against the ethical formalism in chapter IV. Chapter III is a prelude to the study of material ethics, which brings out some insights from Moore and Scheler as they deal with various ethical issues with the help of colour-word. Moreover, in order to analyze the central themes of material ethics, on the one hand and to sharpen the

critical focus on the ethical formalism on the other, we shall undertake a detailed study of Scheler's version of phenomenology in chapter II.

In an effort to enter into the spirit of Scheler's non-formal ethics I have made detailed study of Scheler's version of phenomenology on the one hand and analyzed the critical relationship of material ethics with Kant's ethical formalism, on the other. Phenomenology provides the crucial method and direction, and the Kantianism works as the springboard for sympathetic understanding of Scheler's material ethics. Towards this end a few relevant portions (without much alteration) have been used from my earlier book, namely, *Phenomenological Ethics: An Introduction*.

I have incurred many debts while writing this book. I have been pursuing the study of three continental philosophers, namely, Immanuel Kant, Max Scheler and Nicolai Hartmann for over two decades. During this period I have had occasion to interact with a large number of scholars and experts in the area during my visit to Germany as also in India. Naturally it would be impossible for me to express my grateful thanks to each one of them individually. At the out set, I am reminded of my teacher Professor Ranjan K. Ghosh, formerly Director, Indian Council of Philosophical Research and Head, Department of Philosophy, North Bengal University, who not only awakened and sharpened my interest in phenomenology but also guided my early studies. It is his personal example as an erudite philosopher and creative thinker that always inspires me to carry on intellectual persuasions. I am grateful to my teachers Professor Pabitra K. Roy, Professor Raghunath Ghosh and Professor (Mrs.) Manjulika Ghosh for their encouragement and kind support. I cherish the vivid memories of Professor Klaus Hartmann and his students, Philosophisches Seminar, Tuebingen University, Germany, who took great pains to help me get access to phenomenological texts. I also greatly benefited from the correspondence with Professor Eugene Kelly, Social Sciences Department, New York Institute of Technology, U.S.A. I express my grateful thanks to Professor Philip Blosser, Lenoir-Rhyne College, North Carolina, U.S.A., who was kind enough to send me his book entitled *Scheler's Critique of Kant's Ethics*. This book has greatly helped me understand the critical relationship between Kant and Scheler. Above all, it was Professor Manfred S. Frings, one of the foremost scholars of Scheler, who was not only kind enough to send me his comprehensive book entitled *The Mind of Max Scheler*, but also provided me directions and suggestions to carry on the study of Scheler. I am extremely grateful to him.

I thank Dr N. S. Das, the principal, Sukanta Mahavidyalaya and all my colleagues there for their constructive help and friendly support. My friends Ashis Tarafdar, Md. Aziz Ahmed, Karabi Das and Kajal Biswas deserve my thanks for various reasons. I am also thankful to Dr Bernhard Schneeberger of Agenda Verlag (Germany) for taking keen interest in the work and the execution of its publication.

Last but not the least, I thank my wife, Rekha, for her affectionate help, utmost care and unswerving support in all matters. The puzzling look on the faces of my two dear children, Rajarshi and Shreosee, at what I read and write, always helps me sustain my intellectual life.

Benulal Dhar

For
My Father-in-law
Shri Bishnupada Biswas
Who stood by me, always

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Chapter I

Introduction

Ethics was and remained the axis for Scheler's philosophizing. It was to provide not only pious formal generalities but principles that could guide the individual in concrete situations. On this point he took issue with Nicolai Hartmann, who wanted to keep ethics out of the battles of the day. Yet this did not blind Scheler to the historical and sociological relativities, which he studied with increasing seriousness. The values of personality were for Scheler the supreme ones, superior to all impersonal values. For this reason Scheler even came to label his position as ethical personalism.¹

This passage, written by Herbert Spiegelberg in his book *The Phenomenological Movement*, pinpoints the central issues and concerns of material ethics. The task of material ethics is not to prescribe formal laws but to provide principles that would guide the humans in concrete situations. These principles are values that are non-formal in nature. These material values are fundamental data of morality. It is the emotional insight into values that functions as the definite guide for actual conduct. Values are perceptually relative, in the sense that each age intuits values through its unique perspective that yields certain constellation of values and not the entire field of values. Yet values are absolute. The material ethics culminates in placing the value of person above the values of real things or actual conduct, for which it is designated as ethical personalism.

The material ethics is an anti-thesis to the ethical formalism, and this is evident from the very title *Formalism in Ethics and Non-formal Ethics of Values* given to his *magnum opus* on ethics by Max Scheler. In this title, the term 'non-formal' is identical with the term 'material' that pertains to 'content'. The latter refers to 'value-content' and is an antonym of the formal. The term 'material' here involves explicit reference to the Kantian dichotomy of the formal and the material. Thus the use of 'non-formal' or 'material' is *contextual*, in the sense that this ethics is developed in relation to the Kantian formalism. What is referred to by Scheler as 'material' has been conceived by him in the Kantian terms, that is, against the formal elements of experience.

The material ethics represents a radical departure from the ethical formalism of which Kant's ethics is a paradigm expression. Whereas the ethical formalism explicates the

formal elements of moral experience, the material ethics addresses itself to the material contents of that experience. That is to say, the formal elements of the ethical formalism are the moral law or the Categorical Imperative, and the material contents of material ethics refer to values. Further, whereas the ethical formalism has an immense faith on man's rational faculty, which issues forth the moral commandment, the material ethics posits an emotional faculty in man, which apprehends values. Moreover, while the notion of person in formal ethics coincides with the rational person, the being of person in material ethics is the form of consciousness and is the foundation of all intentional acts. Although the material ethics contrasts with the ethical formalism on these major issues, yet many peripheral points of the latter have been preserved within the ambit of material ethics. Scheler agrees to concede the Kantian demand that morality must be grounded on unconditional *a priori* principles. He rejects the ethics that rests on anticipated realization of finite good or end. Though Scheler provides primacy to values but this is not at the cost of curtailing role of moral imperatives in ethics. As for Scheler, moral laws or imperatives originate from the insight into values.

II. A Sketch of Scheler's Intellectual life

Max Scheler was born in Munich, Germany on August 22, 1874. He was a son of Jewish mother and of a Protestant father. But he adopted the religion of neither and was baptized into Catholicism in the adolescent. Later near the end of his life, he abandoned Catholicism in favour of philosophy to serve as his guide. In his fifty-six years of his life, he led an academic life involving four universities, wrote thirteen volumes worth books and numerous treatises, lectured throughout Europe, got married thrice and had children.

After the completion of high school education, he began his university career in 1893, which was far from certain and regular. Though he initially enrolled in the faculty of medicine at the University of Munich, but he did not attend the classes. After one year he moved to the University of Berlin and enrolled there for his second year to study philosophy and sociology with Wilhelm Dilthey and Georg Simmel. Apart from intellectually stimulating lectures of these two thinkers, he found nothing attractive and interesting in Berlin. Also was to his disliking the atmosphere of Berlin, which awoke him to the ills of modern industrial society. He then moved to Jena University in 1895 at the age of twenty-one and finished his studies in philosophy by obtaining a Ph.D degree under